

**Monday November 30th**

**Matthew 8:5-13**

The Centurion in this story was probably an officer under the authority of Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and son of Herod the Great. He is an unusually humane officer, showing compassion and concern for a servant who is paralysed. In the Roman Empire slaves did not matter, their status was sub-human. It was of no importance whether they suffered or were in pain. As Aristotle once wrote, a slave is a "living tool" and no better or worse than an inanimate tool. He addresses Jesus as "Lord" which implies that Jesus has the power to help him. The Greek of the reply of Jesus could be read in this way: "How shall I, a Jew, come and heal him in the home of a Gentile?". There are no examples in the Gospels of Jesus entering the house of a non-Jew, but here he is clearly willing to do so. The Centurion understands the problems this would create and asks that Jesus cure by his word without having to come to his home. If he can exercise his authority as a military commander and have people respond to his word of command, so Jesus too should be able to command the sickness to go and it would obey him. This is the level of faith to which Jesus responds and which produces the healing of the servant.

One part of the shock of this story is the promise that is given to the Gentiles. The traditional Jewish teaching was that "the dwelling places of Gentiles are unclean", yet here is the Son of Man willing to risk being exposed to the danger of breaking the teachings of the Scribes. More than that, Jesus makes the prediction that there will be many Gentiles coming from the four corners of the earth to sit at the table in heaven with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Jews looked forward to this feast in heaven but would never contemplate the possibility of there being Gentiles there as well. Entrance into God's Kingdom was no longer via membership of a single nation. It was not enough to simply be a Jew. The passport to the Kingdom was faith. Salvation was open to all who came to God in their need and who were prepared to live in faith doing as God demanded. They are the credentials of the disciple — lives of faith. This means that Christian life is assessed, not just by baptism, but by how a person then goes about putting into practice the demands of the Gospel. Baptism is a once in a lifetime event, but the invitation to faith is something that requires a daily response in all the events in our lives.

*Prayer* Loving Father, when we are in doubt and uncertain about events in our lives, help us to turn to you in faith as did the Centurion to Jesus, knowing that you have the power to heal.

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## **BIBLE STUDIES NOVEMBER 2009**

**+ Michael Hough  
with Fr Robert Newton**



## LANTERN SERIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Sunday November 29th**

*Advent Sunday*

**Luke 21:25-36**

Luke begins this section with images that were typical of his time. There is almost a reversal of the creation process, with the sun, stars and moon losing their light and power and a growing worldwide chaos that follows on from that. There are floods and tidal waves, storms and all kinds of natural disasters which will lead the peoples of the earth to a state of desperation. People will not be killed, for they will die of fear! Then, in the midst of all that distress, the Son of Man, who is the risen and glorified Christ, will return, riding on a cloud (a reference to Daniel 7:13). This returning Christ comes as judge and the gatherer of the righteous. It is because of this that the righteous should not be people filled with fear (as those of verse 26). They will see all this happening and stand expectantly and hope filled, for they are faithful disciples and they understand what is happening. The parable of the fig tree (vs 29-33) is meant to reassure them that just as God is in charge of the seasonal cycle of the fruit trees, so he remains Lord of time and history. When they see the end unfolding they will remember that it was all predicted by Jesus.

This is a wonderfully powerful image painted by Luke for his community. We need to remind ourselves that he is writing to a Christian community that is under stress. The Jewish wars had seen the end of Jerusalem and the Temple and in a number of places persecutions had already begun of those who called themselves disciples of Jesus. It was not easy to be a Christian and the way ahead was uncertain. We can therefore imagine the impact this vision might have had on those who had begun to doubt. In the darkness of the collapse of the world there is a moment of light, a light which grows and spreads and makes itself known as the risen Christ. He is there on a cloud, **in the midst of the chaos**, and in a very real way, ruling over the chaos. That was their experience of God. He was not some distant saviour who ruled from a distant heaven, but is there in the midst of the chaos and confusion that is so often a part of human living. Once we die to ourselves and through prayer and life in the Christian community allow God to move freely in our lives, then we can find him coming to us as though on a cloud, filled with glory and power and we find that we are no longer afraid. Let circumstances rage as they want, for we know that through it all, and beyond the struggles of the present, God is at work bringing all things to his desired ending.

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, open our eyes to your presence in our lives, that we may know you are with us in all things, giving us peace and hope in all that we do.

**Saturday November 28th**

**Luke 21:34-36**

This short text brings to an end the teachings of Jesus on the end of the world and he ends appropriately with an encouragement to be vigilant and waiting in prayer. It is intended to be a guide to the disciples as they prepare for the coming of the day of the Son of Man. It is unique to Luke though there are some similarities to the themes of Mark 13:33-37 and possibly Matthew 25:13, 31-46. Jesus teaches that those who want to be his followers and who are attuned to his teachings must not allow the way they live to become burdened or distracted by drunkenness, by a giving in to sensual living or the pursuit of material possessions. That is not the way to prepare for the end. No one knows when that day will come but they do know that it will suddenly appear and there will not be an opportunity to make preparations. People will be caught up in those days like an animal in the hunter's snare. If they wish to survive the ordeal they need to be people of prayer who live such a life that they will not be found wanting when they stand for judgement before the Son of Man.

One of the emphases that we find in Luke is his concentration on the "today" element of Christian discipleship. He has had to deal with the reality of the puzzlement of the early Christians that had arisen over the delay to the return of Jesus. The first generation Church lived in expectation of this early return and an end to the world and much of Paul is peppered with what this means for Christian living. Luke, however, shows a desire to shift the emphasis to what the sayings of Jesus meant for guiding the way of life of his own generation. This is evident from the use he makes of the word "today" (4:21; 5:26; 19:5, 9; 23:43) and words like "daily" (9:23; 11:3; 16:19; 19:47). This is an important focus, for Luke understands Jesus to be an inspiration, guide and source of grace for the Christian as he or she lives out their lives in a Church under stress. The Gospel becomes a guideline for daily living. Being a disciple and living according to the teachings of Jesus helps us to live out each and every day and to come to an appreciation of the meaning of each and every event in our lives. It is a way of life, a way of being authentically human. The end of the world is a reality as is the return of Jesus in glory, but we need meditate on it only as an aid to how we live today and for today. The Gospel prepares us not only for eternal life but also for living in the world.

***Prayer***

Lord God our heavenly Father, the whole of creation rests in your hands and it is for you to determine the time of its ending. Help us, through the grace and power of your Holy Spirit to live each moment as if it were our last.

**Sunday November 1st**

*All Saints*

**Matthew 5:1-12a**

When Jesus sees the crowd, he sees before him people who must be challenged to enter into the Kingdom of his Father. It is not just the disciples who must be saved. The gifts of God are meant for everyone. By having Jesus go to the mountain to preach this message of life in the Kingdom, Matthew is clearly making links between Moses and Jesus and between the journey of the people of Israel to Canaan and that of the new people of God out of slavery into freedom in the Kingdom. We see Jesus begin his ministry with this teaching on the mountain top and he will end his ministry at his Ascension once more on the top of the mountain. This time he will be sending out his disciples to take this teaching and to proclaim it to peoples all over the world. As the old covenant was made on a mountain, so this new covenant will also revolve around the mountain: the mount of the Beatitudes, the mount of Calvary and the mount of the Ascension (commissioning). Jesus has the crowd sit down at his feet, a device used by Matthew to present Jesus as the new teacher in the line of Moses and that he has come to present to the people a message and teaching from God. The rest of the Gospel will explain in detail the message that he brings.

One of the important things about the teaching is the repetition of the word "bless". The best translation would go something like: "God blesses those who...". This is important because the whole idea of blessedness comes from an understanding that it is something that God will do to a person if they live in a particular way. Blessing is not something that can be earned or built up by human behaviour. It comes about because a person is united with God. These teachings are saying that if you live in this way, then you will find that you have left behind your old ways of sin and have united yourself to God. Because you are united with God you will find that there are certain blessings that will find their way into your life. The list of things that come about from union with God are really quite exciting: such people will live in the Kingdom and so find comfort when they need it, inherit the earth, be satisfied in all that they do, see God, become children of God (with all the protections, support and the rights of inheritance that go with it) and know what it is to be loved by God. But they have to live in the way set out by Jesus.

***Prayer***

Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ. Help us by your grace to live according to his teachings that we may know the blessings of your Kingdom.

**Monday November 2nd**

*All Souls*

**Luke 14:7-14**

This section is addressed to the leaders of the Pharisees of verse 3 and we see Jesus offering indirect advice to his disciples on the way they are to relate to other people. He admonishes them not to go seeking the places of prestige. He says that real honour comes not from what they can do for themselves but from what others bestow on them. The Greek of this (verse 10) is in a form that is used to indicate an action of God. The person is passive before God and simply opens themselves up to whatever it is God wants to do to/for them. God will humble the ones who exalt themselves and exalt the ones who humble themselves. The attitude of the Christian disciples should be humility, not status-seeking. He then addresses himself to the host. Jesus contrasts the different kinds of people that can be invited: four who could recompense the host for the invitation and four who are unable to offer anything. Real love, for Jesus, never takes recompense into account because generosity will find its reward at the resurrection. When the disciples reach out in love they do so trusting in God to judge them for their actions rather than expecting the recipient of their love to repay them. Verses 12-14 fit into the general theme of Luke's understanding of material possessions and concern for the poor.

The Feast of All Souls is the day when the Church gathers to pray for those who are truly powerless to alter their condition — those who have died. They rest in the mercy of God. They truly are the poor ones who depend on the love not just of God, but also of those who are still living in faith. The Church is a Communion of Saints made up of those who have died as well as those who are still living on earth and we the living have a responsibility to pray for our brothers and sisters who have died. As early as 211AD Tertullian was commending annual prayers for the departed, especially in the Eucharist. We know from the Bible (2 Maccabees 12:38-46 and 2 Timothy 1:16-18) that trust and hope in God leads the faithful to pray that the souls of those loved ones who have died may receive a merciful judgement from a God of love. We know also from Paul in the letter to the Romans that nothing can separate us from the love of God, a state that includes death (Romans 8:31-39). We pray today in the hope that others will remember us before God when it is our turn to stand for judgement. Before the throne.

*Prayer*

Eternal rest grant to them, O Lord, and let your perpetual light shine upon them. May their souls, and the souls of all the faithful departed, rest in peace and rise again in glory.

**Friday November 27th**

**Luke 21:29-33**

This parable is put here in Luke's Gospel as a kind of commentary on the teachings of Jesus about the end. The parable is found in Mark 13:28ff. The image is clear. When the people see a fig tree covered in leaves and blossoms, they know that it will soon be time to harvest the fruit. So too when people see "these things" happening, they will know that the end has come. He then goes further. The end is "imminent", making this message relevant for those of "this generation". The teaching is a major one for the early communities. They believed that the Son of Man would be coming at any time and they lived in expectation of that return. Most of the teachings of Paul and those found in the other epistles need to be read with the understanding that the world was about to end. Discipleship was then a way of life for a short period of time. The people of "this generation" would live to see the end, that is how close it was! He ends with the saying about the sky and the earth passing away before his words pass away, to highlight the importance of what he is saying. It is not something that can be taken lightly and the disciples need to keep that in mind when planning their lives. The people believed that God, as creator of the world, could and would, bring it to an end in his own time.

The end is nigh! We all know those funny cartoons and sketches that depict a man walking around with a sandwich board predicting the end of the world. And we laugh. No one seriously thinks about the end. It is something that is too far off in the future. With our modern sensibilities we move that kind of teaching to the fringes of our Christian faith. If he has not returned after two thousand years, he is unlikely to return later on today or come back tomorrow. But of course there is no biblical support for that view. And anyway, it is embarrassing! The whole point for Luke is that his community should be living in expectation of the imminent return of Jesus. Whether or not he returns tomorrow has nothing to do with the message. It is as valid now as it was on the lips of Jesus. We are called to be living as if the end were tomorrow. That is the key point. If Jesus were to return this evening after dinner, how confident would we be of our judgement? That is the message. This passage should act as a call to repentance and renewal. It demands that we go out and live in such a way that the Gospel is evident in all that we think, do and say.

*Prayer*

Heavenly Father, we know that the time will one day come when our lives will come to an end and we will stand for judgement before your throne. Help us to live today as if we were coming before you tomorrow.

## Thursday November 26th

## Luke 21:20-28

In this section of his teachings, Jesus focusses his words on the city of Jerusalem itself and his picture is not all that encouraging. He is talking about the "end". The city will be surrounded by camps of enemies and there will be no escaping for anyone who stays in the city. In verse 22 he quotes Hosea 9:7 when he speaks of it being a "time of vengeance" and it helps us understand how he sees the coming events. For Hosea, the end of the city was a result of their sins and a judgement on their actions. They have brought the destruction on themselves. The city will be destroyed and its inhabitants put to the sword. Those who survive the killings will be taken off to be slaves and the city and nation will be put under the rule of foreigners. The reference to the misery of the nursing mothers highlights the depth of the horror. It is likely that in writing up this section of the Gospel, Luke has before him clear images of the end of the city and the historical events have shaped what he has written. The writings of Josephus on the fall of Jerusalem paint a picture that point to the accuracy of what Luke has said. Through it all Luke has in mind his own theology of the saving works of God. The end of the city can only be understood as being a part of that divine activity. The actual purposes may not be clear, but for Luke it is important that his community sees it in this way. Remember that when we talk about Jerusalem and the Temple, we are talking about the signs of God's love for his people.

If we read through this section as a complete section, we come to verse 27 and are jolted by the message of hope. The city is falling, there is death, pain, suffering and fear. The physical world around them is also in "distress" and what are the faithful doing: they look up and see the Son of Man coming to them on a cloud. This is a clear allusion to Daniel 7:13 and the message here is the same as it was in Daniel. Faith provides hope **in the midst** of anxiety, suffering and fear. When the Son of Man comes, he does not put the sun, moon and stars back into the sky. He does not chase away the Romans, and bring the people back into the rebuilt city of Jerusalem. He comes to them in their perilous situation and it is Jesus "amidst the suffering" who offers hope. He is never a distant God who locks himself away in heaven and watches on without love or compassion. He is a God who rolls up his sleeves and engages with his people, giving them hope when all else fails.

*Prayer* Almighty and merciful Lord, come to us in the midst of all those things that fill us with despair, worry and pain, that we may know that in all things you are God without end.

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## Tuesday November 3rd

## Luke 14:15-24

The setting for this story is the same as the previous one: a table on the Sabbath day. The point is clear: those who say no to the master's summons to come to the dinner, which is now prepared, will never taste of it. He stresses the seriousness of the preaching and he is seeking to elicit from them an acceptance of the Kingdom and not a rejection. Those who are excluded from the feast have only themselves to blame. God will not drag the unwilling into it against their will. The parable also makes it clear that an unwillingness to enter the Kingdom now, will mean that later on they will be excluded from the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When the original guests refuse to respond positively (the contemporaries of Jesus, especially the leaders of the Jews) the invitation goes out to others. There are two groups: those of Israel (into the streets and lanes of the towns) who are probably considered to be less worthy than the Pharisees and then those outside of Israel, the Gentiles (into the highways and the hedgerows which are outside of the towns). This is not against all Jews but specifically against the Pharisees (14:1, 3) for the servant is sent out to bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame from the streets and lanes of the towns. The Kingdom and its feast is for all who are poor, powerless and in need. In Luke's understanding, no one can enter the Kingdom without the invitation of God and no one can remain outside of the Kingdom, except by his own deliberate choice. A man or a woman are unable to save themselves, but they are able to damn themselves.

Christian living is not the response of some human initiative. It is the way we respond to a God who seeks us out. God pursues us, engages us in all of the events and activities of our lives and offers us his gift of new life, healing and salvation. It is the height of arrogance to presume that God could not love us or would not want to love us because of something we may think, feel or do. God wants us to feast with him in the Kingdom, which is why he sent his only Son as our redeemer. We are the people of the highways and the hedgerows to whom the invitation has been sent and in turn it is our responsibility to extend the same invitation to those who may feel that they are beyond respectability and salvation. The Kingdom is for everyone, a gift for all that only requires an acceptance which grows out of a sense of repentance and a life of humble service.

*Prayer* Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of life you give us in your Son Jesus Christ. Help us to truly repent of our sins and hardness of heart that we may share your love with others.

4

**Wednesday November 4th**

**Luke 14:25-33**

For Jesus, entry into the Kingdom of God has conditions. It cannot happen by chance and accident. It stems from a choice freely made and a covenant faithfully lived out. It is a teaching directed to those seeking to be disciples and so is not meant as a judgement or assessment on the performance of the Pharisees (in Matthew the equivalent is found in the directions to the Twelve and is a part of their mission instructions). The demands are uncompromising: be willing to leave family ties, be prepared to face some self-denial and be ready to put aside material possessions. These are put down as serious considerations to be examined, understood and accepted prior to the life of discipleship. They are conditions of discipleship and as such are not up for negotiation or compromise. This is why martyrdom was seen as being at the pinnacle of discipleship, for such people did place their love of Jesus and faith in his promises before all else. It is in this context that we need to understand the metaphor of picking up the cross and following after Jesus. Everyone has a cross that is personal and to be found in their individual lives. This needs to be picked up in the manner of Jesus and then, and only then, can the disciple follow after Jesus. Is the point the picking up of the cross, or the following?

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus did not carry his cross to Golgotha. Simon did it for him. The point for Luke is not that this “cross” is the wooden object on which he was crucified. That cross has come to symbolize the whole of the humble and obedient service of the Son for his Father. The cross of Jesus was his ministry, his mission and his response to God. Discipleship begins with an understanding that we have a role, a mission and a ministry to carry out for God in the world. That is our cross and we are called to carry it in the same way that Jesus carried his — in obedient and humble service of God. Once we acknowledge that, we then need to follow after Jesus and that is where the real challenge is to be found. It is easy to pick it up, and then when the demands become too great, to put it down again. Following is tough and that is where the cross can be seen as the yoke of Christ about which Matthew speaks (Matt 11:29). It is the cross of Christ, taken up in faith, that makes it possible for us to then journey forward in hope and in peace, for we know that the Father, having given us our crosses will not allow us to fall under the weight.

***Prayer***

Merciful God, we thank you for our callings to discipleship and for the promise of the graces and gifts we need to live lives of service. Help us to walk faithfully in the steps of Jesus.

**Wednesday November 25th**

**Luke 21:12-19**

Jesus now goes on to offer some warning to the disciples about the price that they will have to pay if they remain faithful to the Gospel. It will be “because of my name” that the disciples will face all kinds of persecutions. The assaults will come from both Jewish and Gentile sources and they will force believers to give witness to their faith. It will force them to be open and honest about what they believe. He makes it clear that those who believe will have to make some sacrifices. But they should not be afraid because he (Jesus) would help them in their defence (Mark says that it will be the Spirit who will provide the words they need [Mk 13:11]). It is this that will help them come through the trials victoriously and this guarantee would make it possible for them to continue in their faith unafraid of what might happen. He also warns them that the persecutions will also come from among their own family members and from their friends. The hardships will include, for some, death. It seems odd that he says on the one hand that some will be put to death and then on the other that “not a hair on your head will be lost”. What he has in mind here is the continuance of what it is they have been proclaiming by their witness. The seeds of faith will not perish even if their bodies are destroyed.

This is a beautiful picture painted by Jesus. It is not so much simply a warning about the end and of all the sufferings that will come as that time approaches. What we need to keep our eyes on is the guarantee that the death of the individual believers does not mean the end of the Kingdom. Lives of faith plant seeds that will bear fruit in the time to come. The disciple may not see the fruits of their life of faith but they are there. It is Jesus who will make such sacrifice fruitful. What they are called upon to be doing is to persevere. When things become difficult and it seems that the demands are too great and the returns too small, it is easy to lose heart and give up. Remember that what Jesus has in mind here is his coming death and the eventual destruction of Jerusalem. When the disciples see all that, it is understandable that they begin to panic because it seems that things are out of control. What they need to keep in mind is that whatever the darkness of the present, their lives of faith are planting the seeds of hope for the future. God will bring life out of death and hope out of disaster. It is a matter of keeping our eyes on God.

***Prayer***

Merciful Father, the world in which we live is filled with so much hatred and evil that it is difficult at times to see your hand at work. Fill us with hope in our doubts, and faith when in fear.

## Tuesday November 24th

## Luke 21:5-11

Clearly Jesus is continuing on his Temple teaching and here we see some of his teachings about the end of the world (this is called eschatology, or the study of the Last Things). The verses 5-11 serve as an introduction to this important section of the Gospel and arise out of some comments by the disciples on the beauty of the Temple. In his reply Jesus is offering a prophecy of the end of that building. Luke has clearly taken up the teachings of Jesus and has put it together here in the light of the events of August/September 70AD when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans. One of the key ideas in all Apocalyptic writings is that God is in control. (These are called apocalyptic because they are usually visions given by God to one of his prophets or chosen people, about what is going to happen in the future and at the end of time. An apocalypse is a revelation of God.) Here we see Jesus encouraging his followers not to be afraid when they see violence and political upheavals taking place, as it is simply part of a process that must take place. There will be many false prophets and doomsayers around who will stir up all kinds of confusion, fear and doubt. But Jesus' followers are not to panic and not to fear for tomorrow.

Jesus is consistent in his teaching. He calls for faith and hope in God and in the power and desire of God to save those who seek to follow him. He notes that at the end there will be all kinds of disasters. There will be a breakdown of law and order, wars, famines, natural disasters and a general spread of violence and hatred. What the believers need to keep in mind is that God is the Almighty ruler of creation. Jesus overcame the power of Satan and in his dying and rising from the dead put all things under his feet. He never makes a promise that there will be no pain and suffering, no fear and anxiety. What he does say is that in all these things, God is still God. God is the ruler of all things, including history. He will not move in and shape it to suit the desires and likes of his children. What he will do is strengthen and grace the lives of all disciples, so that they are not destroyed by what unfolds around them. Even as the skies go dark and fall, God is King. If believers build their lives around the Gospel and use Gospel teachings to shape all that they do, then they will never be filled with despair and live without hope. They may not understand all that happens, but amidst it all, they will know Peace.

### *Prayer*

Loving Father, strengthen us in our lives in the world, that we may view what happens with the eyes of faith and know that in all things and through all things, you remain Lord of all.

25

## Thursday November 5th

## Luke 15:1-10

Jesus now turns from addressing the crowds to once again pointing out to the Pharisees and Scribes their failings. They are unhappy because he continues to meet with sinners and to eat with them. The next three parables have been described as being "the heart of the Third Gospel" for they bring out clearly Luke's themes of the mercy and love that God shows to sinners and announces the call of Jesus for people to repent and to turn from their sins. In this whole section of the Gospel Luke goes on to show the special love that God has for those who are on the margins of the society, those who stand condemned in the eyes of the world, and the sinners. We see this in the parables of chapter 15 but elsewhere as well. Those who are "lost" are the tax collectors and sinners of verse 1. The shepherd brings out two important points. The first is his willingness to search out the lost sheep. The second is the great joy that he shows when the sheep is found. This is how God works through the ministry of Jesus, in reaching out to the lost sinner and calling him to repent. "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save those who were lost" (19:10). It is an extraordinary picture, that of heaven rejoicing when a single lost sinner repents and returns to a life of faithfulness.

This parable, as with the other parables of chapter 15, stresses the love and compassion of the shepherd. You would think that with one hundred sheep (the number simply represents a large quantity) the shepherd would either not know that he had lost one, or would be tempted to leave it out there and hope to pick it up later. Like the poem The Hound Of Heaven, God pursues the sinner. The rejoicing upon finding the lost soul is an indication of how Luke understands the love of God for his people. This is furthered by the idea of "gladly" lifting the sheep onto the shoulders of the shepherd (not found in Matthew's version [Matt 18:12ff]). This leads to great joy in heaven and a celebratory feast with friends and neighbours. The details, if we try to tie them to a real situation, all have some problems, but it is the overall picture that Luke is trying to give to us. God loves us so much that he cannot bear the thought of us going astray, getting lost and threatened with death. Our sins do not stop that love. As the parable makes clear, it is because of our sins that God sent his Son that we might be found, and once again know his divine shelter.

### *Prayer*

Loving Father, you shepherded your people Israel and led them to the Promised Land and gave us your Son as our own Good Shepherd. Help us to allow him to shepherd us his way.

6

## **Friday November 6th**

## **Luke 16:1-8**

In this new chapter we see Luke leading us on the travel story to reflect on the appropriate use of material goods by the disciple. The opening parable is not easy to interpret and it will be easier if we do the exegesis and the application in one block. The first problem is to work out why the manager was called "dishonest". It does not say that he stole anything, just that he "squandered". He seems to have had no explanation for what he was doing and makes no attempt to provide one. Next we should note that this manager was probably the manager of a property of an absentee landlord, of which there were many in Palestine. These were trusted men who were well trained and competent and had the power to act in the name of the landlord. He would have had the right to lend out the property of the owner and to gain an income from the interest earned, but this was a practice that was open to abuse with the man on the spot not necessarily making clear just how much of a commission he was taking and how much was his own and how much should go to the owner. What is really puzzling is why the owner would praise the manager! He would not have known just how much of a commission the manager was making on the loans, but he would have known that some kind of self-serving exchanges were taking place. What the man is praised for is the cancelling of his own commission. He was not writing off the debt of the landowner (there is a technical term for such actions and they are not used here). What he has lost is his own commission. From these notes we can then see that what Luke is trying to show is how disciples should use their material possessions. His goods' commissions were used in a way that would guarantee a secure future. It is not his dishonesty that is being praised but his prudence. In the face of the disaster that was going to destroy his livelihood he acted in a manner which would enable him to survive. The Christian disciple is faced with a crisis brought on by the coming of the Kingdom of God. They need to make sure that they use their material possessions in an equally prudent manner so that they are able to respond fully to the demands of the Kingdom. It is so easy for what we have in the way of possessions, commitments, passions and the million and one things that take up our time and energy to distract us from life in the Kingdom. The prudent thing would be to manage them in such a way that we are still able to be faithful and to enjoy the blessings that are on offer from God. That would be both wise and prudent.

### ***Prayer***

Father, as our lives fill up with all kinds of things that distract us from service of the Gospel, so fill us with your graces and light that we may resist their temptations and remain faithful.

## **Monday November 23rd**

## **Luke 21:1-4**

Having cleansed the Temple, we now find Jesus the King preaching and teaching in its precincts. It is hard to work out the exact meaning of the Widow's Mite, but there are five traditional understandings: (1) The true value of a gift is not the amount given but the amount left behind (that is, how much it truly costs the giver). (2) What is important is the spirit of the gift and the giving...self-offering, self-forgetfulness, detachment, etc. (3) The true gift is to give everything that one has. (4) Pious gifts and offerings should reflect the true state of one's possessions. (5) This is a story about the thoughts of Jesus on giving. All of these are helpful but do not really have strong textual support. Jesus condemned the religious laws and customs which took precedence over human needs. He attacked the Scribes for heaping up laws on the poor and needy who ended up in dire circumstances trying to fulfil the requirements of these laws (see Mark on Corban in Mk 7:10-13 and also his teaching about curing the sick on the Sabbath Day). It is this kind of background that makes us think that perhaps this is not about Jesus praising the widow? She has given "all that she had to live on" which puts her survival at risk. How will she now feed herself? Why is she doing this? It could be that the Scribes and the Pharisees have encouraged this kind of thing to the point where she would feel guilty if she did not make her offering, even if it meant that she starved. In the prior section he was attacking the Jewish leaders for devouring the estates of widows for dubious religious reasons. With this in mind, perhaps we can read this with a sense of sorrow in the comments of Jesus. It is with sadness that he notes how much she gave.

Whatever the interpretive difficulties of the passage, what is clear is that this woman understood her giving to require a sacrifice. She was not about to throw in some loose change. That small amount of money would have hurt her and left her short of funds for her daily living. Yet she made her offering to God because she seems to have understood it as a part of her spiritual life. That is the model for Christian giving and makes us stop and reflect on just how we would evaluate our own giving of time, resources and wealth? To give as the widow gives is to have a deep and passionate faith in God and a commitment to the spread of the Good News of the Kingdom. How would we stand before God?

### ***Prayer***

Father, your love for us knows no limits, even to the sending of your Son that we may have life. Help us to show our gratitude and thanksgiving by living lives of generous sacrifice for you.

**Sunday November 22nd**    *Christ the King*    **John 18:33-37**

The Jews were unable to enter the Praetorium or they would be made ritually unclean, but they bring Jesus to Pilate to have him put to death. They claim that Jesus is an evil-doer (18:30), that he made himself the Son of God (19:7) and finally that he was making himself a king and would be a threat to the Empire. If Pilate did not act, then he would be abetting this rebellion (19:12). Pilate asks the key question: "Are you the king of the Jews?", and what follows sets up the theology of the kingship of Jesus. Jesus admits that his kingdom is not of a political kind. This removes his actions from the sphere of rebellion and sedition. The kings of this world and their followers would fight to gain their supremacy, a course of action that is not pursued by Jesus and his disciples. In the Kingdom of God, things are done differently as will be seen in the crucifixion. But Jesus does not admit that he is a king. That proclamation must come from the lips of others. He admits that the idea of the Kingdom is a good one to explain his mission (and this is the major theme of the other three Gospels) but it would be more fruitful to speak in terms of witnessing to the Truth (a major theme for John). This is why he came into the world. But this Truth is not some form of knowledge. For John, Truth is the plan of God for creation, the underlying reality that is different from the ways of the world. From the time of the birth of Jesus, reality must be measured in terms of the Kingdom of God and not by human norms.

Pilate is not presented as being evil and seems to respond to Jesus with some sympathy. However, sympathy is an inadequate attitude to have towards the Lord. It is not enough to respond to the teachings of Jesus as though they were good philosophies that were filled with practical wisdom for everyone. The response required is a life change. What is required is a personal commitment to Jesus as the Son of God and a willingness to allow him to "rule over" all areas of our lives. The true disciple cannot have certain areas which we understand to be suitable for presenting to God and other areas where we never allow God to have a chance at enlivening with his grace. This is the true danger of religion, the dividing of our lives into sacred and secular. Once we respond to the invitation to live in the Kingdom, all that we do, think and say needs to come under the blessing of God. While we hold on to some parts of our lives, to govern in our own way, we will never truly know his Peace.

**Prayer**

23

Father, you rule over our lives through Christ your Son. Fill us with your grace that we may truly allow him to be our King.

**Saturday November 7th**

**Luke 16:9-15**

What follows on here are three additions to the parable of the dishonest manager which provide us with a variety of different interpretations. What these show us is how the early Church used the parable for its own moral teaching. The first, verses 8b-9, shows the children of this world to be the same as the manager. They are prudent in dealing with this world and so have something to teach the children of the light. Christian disciples need to exercise prudence in dealing with material possessions. The second, verses 10-12, speaks of responsibility and faithfulness on the part of the disciple. Faithfulness is something demanded whether the person is dealing with the major areas of life or in the little things that seem unimportant. The third addition, verse 13, does not really relate back to the parable but reflects a broad Christian attitude towards wealth. The question that it asks is: "What is going to control your life? God or mammon?". No one can serve both. One has to take the prominent position. This is not necessarily a once and for all decision, but one that will need to be made time and time again. Anyone who allows themselves to be caught up in the pursuit of money (and worldly possessions and position) becomes a slave of money (and worldly possessions and position).

It is fascinating to see how the early Christian community took the original parable of Jesus and applied it to their own times and conditions. It is clear from these additions that part of the problem for the community Luke was serving was that it was caught up in many different things and many demands were being made on their time, resources and energy. As a result the demands of the Gospel were being put into second place. After all, people have to survive don't they? Luke, through the way he has put these stories together is forcing the believers to assess their own lives and to work out just what it is that "controls" them. Whom do we serve? How do we work out our order of priorities and where does God truly come into the equation? More and more parish communities are finding out that there are enormous demands being made on people's time and resources and more often than not it is God who misses out. This is why the parable is so timely. The things of the world are not evil and there is nothing wrong with money and possessions. However, we are warned that they can quickly become gods who constantly demand more of us.

**Prayer**

8

Almighty God, you have given us many gifts with which our lives are truly blessed. Help us to use them wisely, understand that they are gifts from you and share them with others.

**Sunday November 8th**

**Mark 12:41-44**

*Fr Robert Newton*

Certainly no one in the New Testament was any more in hard times than the impoverished woman Jesus noticed as she dropped two small coins into the temple treasury box. Without a husband, she was dependent on the whims of charity. Many of us naturally picture this woman as elderly. The Gospel writer does not say that, however. She may have been a young woman with not only herself to feed, but small children as well. And if that is so, it then casts a different light on her story. Imagine what reasonable arguments might have run through her head as she debated what to do about the temple offering: "Remember you have children to think of. Charity begins at home. Besides, what difference can the pittance you have make alongside the larger gifts? Let those who can afford it give. Nobody expects you to give anyway". But the fact is, she chose to give all she had. Jesus, who saw her make her tiny offering, instantly understood the powerful significance of what she had done, and pointed her action out to his disciples as an example of real sacrifice. And notice that he said that she had contributed "all she had to live on". We might wonder how Jesus knew that, for she in no way announced it, but somehow he did. Jesus praised what she had done, but it is important to notice that Jesus did not in any way condemn the other givers for the size of their gifts; he simply made the point that the meaning of a gift is best measured by what is left after the gift is made.

In terms of money, the widow's offering was insignificant, but the devotion that motivated her gift was amazing. That kind of devotion has done more to help meet the needs of people throughout the centuries than cash alone could ever do. Let us not fool ourselves, though. Without money, a lot of truly helpful things that have been done for people could never have been accomplished. Money has a very real power about it that is able to command goods and services to be where people who need them are. But let us not be naive either. Money, even when given and administered by compassionate and devoted people, sometimes ends up lining the pockets of people who don't really need it. Money has the power to do good, but it also can buy corruption and pain. The gift the widow gave to the temple treasury was not just two small copper coins. It was a gift of devotion and faith. By giving to the temple the only money she had, she was expressing a devotion to God that was as rare then as it is now.

***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, give us the grace to not count the cost, but to give freely and value what we give and are given.

**Saturday November 21st**

**Luke 20:27-40**

The Sadducees make their first appearance in this story. This story is about a situation commonly called a levirate marriage. If a man was unable to conceive a child with his wife, his brother could have intercourse with her so that they did not go without children and heirs. Thus the situation that is presented to Jesus is one that could be understood in the culture of the times. It was important, for all kinds of legal and religious reasons, for the family line to continue and so the Law made allowances for this kind of arrangement. The problem was that the Sadducees misunderstood the relevant passages of Scripture as they related what happened after death. Jesus points out to them that the kinds of institutions that exist in this life will not exist in the next. Thus marriage is an earthly institution and not a heavenly one. Throughout the Old Testament there was uncertainty about what happened after death, though in time there was a movement towards belief in an afterlife (Dan 12:2) and the idea of a judgement after death. Josephus, a Jewish writer of the time of Jesus, says about the beliefs of the Sadducees that "as for the persistence of the soul, penalties in death's abode, and rewards, they do away with them...that the souls perish along with the bodies". The Pharisees on the other hand hold that "every soul is imperishable, but only the soul of the good passes into another body, whereas the souls of the wicked are punished with eternal penalties" (Josephus).

One gets the feeling in this story that what Jesus is trying to say to the Sadducees is not just that they are wrong, but that they ought to stop and have a look at the way they are using the Bible. He notes that they are very quick in their use of the Law to support their understanding of the levirate marriage but not so quick in their using it to understand and accept the ministry and teaching of Jesus and about immortality. In other words, they are taking the Scriptures and using them to prove their own fine theological points. They know what God says and can read the Bible to prove it! This is a huge danger for all believers (and one which we can see ever present in the approach of fundamentalists and among some evangelicals). God is never so predictable and while it may well be comforting to be able to speak of eternity in human terms and to try and direct God along ways that make sense to our human minds, we should not make the mistake of thinking that is the way it is in reality.

***Prayer***

Father, help us to allow you to be God in the way that you want to be God and to stop trying to shape you into some kind of divine spirit that makes perfect and comforting sense to us.

**Friday November 20th**

**Luke 19:45-48**

Having made his statement about the future of Jerusalem, Jesus now goes directly to the Temple. This is an important scene for Luke, as he presents Jesus the King coming into the city and taking possession of the Temple in the name of his Father. It is as King that, in a prophetic action, he drives out those who are "profaning" the Temple by their buying and selling. It would be wrong to see this as an act of the Messiah preparing for the destruction of the Temple (this seems to be the approach in the versions of the story that are found in the accounts of Mark and Matthew in their Gospels [Mk 11:15ff; Matt 21:12ff]). For Luke it is much more important that Jesus take possession of the purified Temple so that he can use it as a base for his preaching and teaching leading up to his death. The Temple as a building has no prominence in the Lucan Church. In Acts 7:48 we can note that Luke reminds his people that God does not dwell in houses made by human hands.

There were two problems in the Temple. Every Jewish male had to pay an annual tax and while many paid in their own villages, by far the bigger number went to the Temple and paid it directly. The men collecting the tax would accept only the shekel as payment. Any other currency or amount had to be changed. During the changing they would add their own costs and charges. As many of the people coming in to make their offering were poor, it was an enormous cost to them. It was against this injustice that Jesus was reacting. There was also the problem with the selling of animals. Only perfect animals were accepted for sacrifice and there were inspectors on hand to make sure that there were no blemishes. It was therefore easier to buy an animal there in the Temple as it was known to be acceptable. However, documents show us that there were enormous mark-ups on these animals and again the poor carried the burden. The righteous anger of Jesus was directed towards those who came in their simple pious way to offer sacrifice to God and were robbed by the Temple elite. These stalls were even called the Stalls of Annas (the High Priest), an indication of the level of corruption that was to be found there. The Church should not be building barriers to worship but instead finding ways of helping people to come before God in prayer and praise. The primary purpose of a church building is its role in helping people to pray. It is never an end in itself worth preserving at all costs.

***Prayer***

Father, we are children called to reach out to you in prayer and to praise your Holy Name. May we do so with pure and humble hearts leaving behind all that is unworthy and tarnished.

**Monday November 9th**

**Luke 17:1-6**

Jesus once again turns and addresses his teaching to the disciples, this time about the inevitability of sin existing within the community of faith. It is not sin that is warned against, but the fact that some believers will act in such a way that others will sin because of their actions. He probably has in mind the sin of apostasy, where some members of the community put forward ideas and beliefs that cause others to go astray. The "little ones" are the followers of Jesus who are helpless and open to exploitation. When a person does sin, the disciple is to forgive his brother or sister their wrongdoings. The theme of forgiveness is strong in Luke but until now he has spoken about forgiveness as a quality of God. Now he is making it an aspect of discipleship. The whole point of giving a rebuke is so that the person acknowledges that they have sinned and they turn and seek forgiveness. Rebukes that are aimed at punishing are not a part of what Jesus has in mind here. They are to be prepared to forgive "seven times a day" if that is what is needed. Here the number seven is meant to bring out the idea of totality. There is not meant to be a limit on it, just as there is no limit on the forgiveness on offer from Jesus.

The disciples ask for an increase in their faith so that they are able to live out the kind of lives that Jesus is demanding of them. But they are told that faith is not a matter of quantity. What they need is the right kind of faith, a genuine faith. True faith has great powers and is able to transform and change people and events. A true faith is not a matter of ideas but is something that is used to transform a person's life. The contrast is there in the image of the mustard seed size faith being able to throw a huge mulberry tree into the sea. Clearly Jesus sees that the disciples do not have the right kind of faith but reassures them that it can and will grow. That is the nature of faith. It grows by listening to the Word of God, by putting into practice the teachings of Jesus, by sharing our lives of faith within the Christian community and through the Sacraments. We never reach the stage where we have "enough" faith and so do not need to keep growing. Our faith is always enough for the moment in which we live but is calling us ever onward to new levels so that we are ready for whatever comes tomorrow. Our lives are filled with all kinds of "mulberry trees" which block out the sun and soak up the goodness from our lives. Faith in God enables us to uproot them!

***Prayer***

Lord God, strengthen our faith through the grace of your Holy Spirit that we may move forward filled with hope and confidence knowing that with you all things are possible.

## **Tuesday November 10th**

## **Luke 17:7-10**

We now have a group of four sayings which end one section of this travel story of Luke. It is a powerful message because he makes it clear that all Christian service is inadequate and that in the final analysis they are unprofitable servants. It does not matter how well they might have performed their work, they are still servants lacking in performance. He also makes it clear that the service a disciple gives to the Gospel does not guarantee salvation. Ministry and the fulfilling of baptismal promises is not the process whereby one earns a place in the Kingdom. It is demanded of those who wish to live in the Kingdom of God, but salvation remains a gift. It is something that God showers on those to whom he pleases to offer it. What is also apparent is that there is no room for human boasting. It is not possible to sit back and say "Look what I have already done!". There is always a need for more to be done and there is never a point when enough has been given. The word "unprofitable" in verse 10 means a servant who recognizes that what he has managed to do in God's service is still inadequate. In the pagan literature of the time it was a word often associated with troublesome slaves.

The parable speaks of the servant as being "unprofitable" and the presupposition is that the Christian has done all that he was supposed to do. But that should not be considered to be of special merit for that is what is expected. Further, if a Christian performs deeds that are above and beyond what is demanded, then that too is not worthy of special consideration and notice, for we can never do "enough". No matter how much we do, it is not enough. How easy it is to look at what we "do for God" and sit back and be pleased with ourselves. Recently I was told by a man that he had been faithful in the Church all his life and now he was going to sit back and leave the work to others. What he does may change with time and age, but there is still plenty to be doing for the Kingdom. The other danger is that it is so easy to get ourselves into the position where we can begin to feel that we are owed something by God. We go to church on Sunday, are active in various things in the parish and give to the collection, therefore God owes us a sign of his appreciation. Then, when things go wrong, we can so easily begin to blame God and ask where the justice is. God owes us nothing. We owe God everything.

### ***Prayer***

Merciful Lord, we acknowledge your goodness to us and all the wonderful gifts with which you have blessed our lives. In all things, make us truly grateful and eager to faithfully serve.

## **Thursday November 19th**

## **Luke 19:41-44**

We have the feeling, as we read about the progress of Jesus towards the city of Jerusalem, and his death, that the crowds are building up and becoming more and more excited. Luke has Jesus coming to the city as its King and the one who was sent to bring peace (cf 19:38). But he is also a prophet along the lines of his Old Testament ancestors who comes and proclaims judgement on a stubborn city. This passage must be linked to two other sections where Jesus comments on Jerusalem. The first is in 13:34-35 where he offers a lament over Jerusalem, and the exchange with the women while he was on the way to Golgotha (23:26-32). In the first he compares himself to a mother-hen concerned about her chicks and in the second seems to join himself to the weeping women weeping for their children. The peace he talks about in verse 42 is both an absence of war and the complete Old Testament Shalom! Peace is something that God does. When God is present there is peace (the Garden of Eden is the classical biblical picture of what peace means) and here he is, the One sent to proclaim Peace, and the City of God rejects him. The name of the city, Jeru-Salem suggests that it is the City of Peace, yet it cannot accept the King of Peace!

Jerusalem was called the City of Peace but it could not recognize the Prince of Peace in its midst. Why not? It was also the city that had killed the prophets (13:34) and had rejected the messengers of God. Why? Luke seems to put all these feelings into the emotion of Jesus as he weeps for the city. Their efforts for peace were all directed into the wrong things, avenues that would not lead to peace. They had tried the pursuit of wealth, of politics, of religious revival, of turning it into a model Greek city and then a Roman city, a city of the world, but none of it brought them peace. Luke presents Jesus as travelling along the road to Jerusalem proclaiming The Way of Peace, but it was a way that was not pleasing to them. It meant that they had to humble themselves, be open to the possibility of God leading them in ways they did not want to go; they had to live for the poor and the needy, take up their crosses and follow the way of the Lord and be people of the Beatitudes. Then there would be peace. Instead, they took the easy road and put the Prince of Peace to death and not long after that the city was destroyed. That is why Jesus wept for them and why he weeps for us.

### ***Prayer***

Loving Father, in your compassion you reach out to us to offer us your lasting gift of peace but we continually seek it in other places. Turn our hearts that we may allow you to change us.

**Wednesday November 18th**

**Luke 19:11-28**

This is the last part of the travel story of Jesus. This parable makes further comments on how a disciple should use material goods. The theme of kingship helps to prepare Luke’s readers for the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem where he will be hailed as King (19:28ff). There are two central themes. There is the message of the importance of being vigilant, waiting for the return of the master and being ready when he arrives. To this is added the notion of a judgement based on how responsible the disciple has been in the use of the master’s property. The gifts were given freely with the expectation of a return. This is similar to Matthew’s version (Matt 25:14ff), though Luke goes further. He is partially responding to the community’s expectation that the end was coming soon. The servants do not know just when the master will come back for he has gone to a “distant land”. There is, therefore, a greater need than normal to be alert, lest he come back unexpectedly. In the waiting, proper and appropriate use must be made of the gifts that have been given to the servants, for these will form the basis of the judgement.

Christian disciples have been entrusted with the “secrets of the Kingdom” (8:10). These are free gifts and graces that have been given to them for a purpose. At the end, they will be judged according to how they have used these gifts for the work of the Gospel. The sin of the third man was that he took a minimalist line in his understanding of what it meant to be a believer. He did nothing. He did not go out and waste the money (sin). He simply kept it for himself and therein lies the problem. It is always easier to understand our Christian faith as being something that changes our own lives but the parable tells us that faith is a call to go out and share the gifts of God with others. The purpose of the gifts was not to enhance the life of the receiver. They are meant for the benefit of others. When God reveals himself to us, it is so that we may share that revelation with others. As we experience the love of God, his mercy, his forgiveness, healing and so on, we are called to show mercy to others, to forgive them the wrongs they have done to us, to offer healing and so with all the other gifts God gives to us. We receive them to share them. If we fail to share them then we are failing in our duties. We sin.

***Prayer***

Almighty God, we rejoice in the many wonderful gifts that you have given to us, especially for the gift of your Son Jesus. As our lives are enriched with the blessings of his presence, may we live in a way that others may come to know him.

**Wednesday November 11th**

**Luke 17:11-19**

We now enter a new section of Luke’s travel account as we can see from the opening line where we are told that Jesus is making his way towards Jerusalem. This section runs to the end of 18:14 and is theologically showing us Jesus on his way to the city where God will be fulfilling his promises and bringing salvation to all nations. This story is found only in Luke and shows Jesus using his mighty power to benefit people who are under the control of an evil power and as a result are cut off from the wider community. He frees them from their illness and makes it possible for them to return to normal life among their families and friends. As the story unfolds we can see a number of contrasts being presented to us. The gratitude and the ingratitude, the Samaritan with the Jews and the faith that came out of the miracle for the one man and the lack of faith by the nine Jews. Some have called this story the “Thankful Samaritan” because the main point is not the miracle of healing but the faith that it created in the Samaritan. When he realizes that he has been healed he turns back to Jesus (repents) and falls down on his knees and gives thanks. For Luke that is the result of his eyes being opened. He knows what has happened to him and it is for that insight that he gives thanks. The healing then is incidental. What makes it even more compelling is that it is the Samaritan (an outcast and heretic for the Jews) who has his eyes opened while the Jews go on unmindful of the true miracle offered to them and so are shown as missing out on the gift of salvation.

It is hard for us to imagine what that group represented in the society. They were the worst of the worst and lived on the fringes of the towns and cities depending on scraps and charity to survive. When they come to Jesus they pray for a cure, but it does not happen immediately. As they went along the road the leprosy was cured. It was in their faith response to the command of Jesus that they found healing. But how hard would that have been to begin walking to see the priests, with the leprosy still scarring their skin? It would have been easier if their disease was taken away, and with a clean skin they went off to see the priests to be pronounced clean. That is the true test of faith, to believe and to act on those beliefs, to trust Jesus to the point where we can get on with our lives believing that the future rests in God’s capable and loving hands. Our seeing should not always depend on seeing the results we seek.

***Prayer***

Father, our lives are so blessed by your generous love yet we so often fail in our duty of thankfulness, taking you and your gifts for granted. Help us show our thanks by living faithful lives.

**Thursday November 12th**

**Luke 17:20-25**

This passage is again Lucan, with no counterpart being found in the other Gospels, though it is found in the Gospel of Thomas which is not a part of our New Testament collection. So far in Luke's Gospel we have heard of the Kingdom of God in the "Our Father" (11:2), as something that could be seen (9:27), as something that has "drawn near" (10:9, 11) and as a gift that has already overtaken his followers (11:20). These all help to provide the background for the questioning of the Pharisees. They were concerned about when the Kingdom would come and in his reply he tells them that they have misunderstood the nature of God's Kingdom. It cannot be understood by observable signs. They should not be looking for signs and places, for the Kingdom is "among you". Just what that means is a little unclear. It could mean that the Kingdom is in Jesus, "in your midst" in his preaching, teaching and miracle working. Or it could mean that the Kingdom is within their grasp. It is not hidden, but for those with eyes of faith and a desire to search for the truth, it can be found.

This reading always makes me sit back and wonder just what it was that the Pharisees were seeking? The Greek word "sign" suggests a quite flamboyant expression of the power and strength of God. It would have to be quite spectacular though, because so far when Jesus performed his miracles, the Pharisees said that his power came from his links with Satan! But that is what they wanted, something so overwhelming that they would be left with no alternative but faith. Jesus has already promised them only the sign of Jonah which was the great miracle of the conversions of the Babylonians. There is the sign we are given. Sins can be forgiven. People can be healed of their hatred, their bitterness, their anger and their sins. They can begin again. They can repent and turn away from an old way of life, becoming new once more. That is the miracle of salvation that is a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God. How easy it is to have our faith depending on God doing something for us (or something bad not happening to us). Yet before our eyes we have the greatest of all miracles: God loves us, even though we are sinners! Others may turn their back and withdraw their friendship. But not God.

*Prayer*

Loving and generous God and Father of us all, we thank you for inviting us to share in a life of faith and for showering us with your blessings, even though we so often sin and prove ourselves to be unworthy. Be for us a light of hope so that in all that happens we remain comforted by your presence.

**Tuesday November 17th**

**Luke 19:1-10**

We see Jesus responding to the initiative of Zacchaeus and invites himself into the little man's house. The picture painted by Luke is significant. Jesus does not go to one of the ordinary citizens' houses, but to a tax collector's house. He does not go to the house of a righteous person but to the house of a notorious sinner. This, of course, would make Jesus unclean and that too is part of what Luke wants us to note. He is a rich man and we can presume that the bulk of his wealth came from his work as a tax collector and so was tainted. A key statement of Jesus was that "this man too is a son of Abraham". If a notorious sinner like Zacchaeus can find salvation, there is hope for everyone. He was lost, but has been sought out by Jesus and his life turned around. This last verse sums up the whole of the ministry of Jesus: The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost. This is a fulfilment of the prophecy that we find in the prophet Ezekiel 34:16. There God speaks of himself as the shepherd who would seek out Israel, his flock, who had been scattered among the nations of the world. Here we see a son of Abraham lost in sin who is now saved.

The thing that strikes me about the story of Zacchaeus is what stopped him from seeing the Lord was not really his sight. That simply made it a little more difficult. It was the large crowd that stood between him and Jesus that blocked his way. He could not walk through the crowd because he was a tax collector and a sinner and they would, more than likely, beat him up. He wanted to see Jesus. He wanted to find out more about him but was unable to come near to him and so was forced to climb a tree. What strikes me is that in some ways it is a picture of some aspects of the Church. Far too often what keeps people out of the Church is not the message of the Gospel but the disciples who are the ones who are supposed to be preaching and living out its message. We can be the "crowd" standing between those seeking Jesus and the Lord himself. It can be our way of living, our way of worshipping; the way we respond to the stranger, the sinner, the outcast; the requirements we insist on and our not so bright history as faith communities which keep people away. That is a sad comment and a call to all of us to reflect on how we live out our lives of faith and on what we can do not to be an impediment to another's faith journey.

*Prayer*

Merciful Judge and Father, we ask your forgiveness for the times that we have kept people from knowing Christ Jesus by things we have said and done and things we have failed to do.

## **Monday November 16th**

## **Luke 18:35-43**

Jesus comes nearer to the goal of his journey. As he comes close to Jericho he cures a man's blindness, a miracle which provides the backdrop for praise to be given to God (is this the same man as Bartimaeus in the Gospel of Mark — Mk 10:46?). This is the fourth of the miracle stories in Luke's travel account, and the last (13:10-17; 14:1-6; 17:11-19). The power of Jesus flows out to set someone free from a physical ailment. The man can see again because of his faith. He "sees" Jesus as the Son of David and acknowledges that he has the power to bring about a cure. We can see links in this story to the account of the ten lepers and the prayer of the rich man in Hades to Abraham in 16:24. There was nothing Abraham could do to help, but Jesus is able to cure the blind man. In Luke's terms it is more than a cure. The man is set free and is now able to go back into the world and live a normal life. This is what proves that Jesus is indeed the Son of David proclaimed by the sick man. We have just seen that the Twelve were unable to understand what Jesus was saying in his prediction of the Passion (they were blind) but here is a man who is physically blind but able to profess his faith in Jesus. It is also helpful for Luke to have Jesus proclaimed as the Son of David. He will soon enter Jerusalem for his trial and death and the crowds will sing out "Hosanna to the Son of David", a messianic figure who has the power to cure the blind. Whatever happens in that city will be happening to a powerful figure under the direction of God. They should not therefore be afraid when things seem to be going wrong.

What is important in the background to this section is the blindness of the Twelve. They were unable to accept Jesus as the promised one of God. This despite the fact that they had seen the many miracles and signs worked by Jesus. Why is that? According to the Gospel writers, it is because they were not prepared to put aside their own expectations and to allow God to work salvation in his own ways. The blind man on the other hand was prepared to simply act in faith and hope. He acknowledged his need and allowed Jesus to do to him as he thought best. One frightening aspect of the story is the thought that it is quite possible for those who think of themselves as being faithful disciples to in fact be failing to listen to the Lord in their lives.

### *Prayer*

Father, your grace and power is alive in our lives at all times and in all situations. Help us to overcome our blindness and our doubts so that we can acknowledge your presence and allow you to achieve what it is you want to do through us.

## **Friday November 13th**

## **Luke 17:26-37**

We now see Luke talking about the Son of Man and not the Kingdom of God. He compares the days of the Son of Man to the days of Noah and the days of Lot to introduce the theme of vigilance to the teaching. The people are warned about the dangers of indifference and of treating matters relating to the last day in a light-hearted way. Because the people of the time of Noah were not worried about the rain, and treated the threat of a flood with indifference, did not stop them from being washed away and drowned. The people of Sodom were too busy with other things to be concerned about the possibility of judgement, and as they partied on the fire came down from heaven and destroyed them all. So it will be with the coming of the Son of Man. People will treat it with an indifference that will lead to their destruction and death. When the end comes it will come suddenly, and there will be no time to go into the house and retrieve one's valuables. On that day it will not matter what people try to do to influence the outcome. Any human attempts to find salvation will be in vain. It will all be at the discretion of God. In the background for Luke is the delay in the return of Jesus. The early Church communities expected him to return "imminently" and this expectation coloured much of their church life. Luke, in the way he writes up this story, is trying to keep his community vigilant in the face of the delay.

The difficult message is found in verse 33. "Whoever tries to save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will gain it." What this seems to be suggesting is that there is nothing that we can do which will help us to gain salvation or cause us to lose eternal life. Either way, it is a gift from God. This is a big turn around from the theology most of us were brought up on where we were told that sin can damn us. In this story Jesus places salvation back into the hands of his Father. It is at the discretion of God. He is the judge and he will do it on his terms. What we are called to do is to live lives of faithfulness, not because we fear the fires of hell, but because that is the thing we need to do to be fully human, fully alive and faithful to our baptismal callings. It makes our judgement of the lives of others a risky and precarious business. We might see the sins they do and wonder how God could give them eternal life. But he judges with different eyes and with merciful and loving intent. That is a source of peace for all of us.

### *Prayer*

Merciful God, your ways are beyond our knowing and our understanding, but we trust in your generous love. In all that happens, help us to confidently leave our lives in your hands.

## **Saturday November 14th**

## **Luke 18:1-8**

If we were to just look at the parable (verses 2-6) we would come to the conclusion that it is not about a dishonest judge, but about the persistent woman. The introduction and the conclusion expand it beyond this initial sense so that we have the image of the woman praying and the judge judging. If a dishonest judge will listen to the persistent prayers of the poor woman, then how much more will the just judge listen to those who come to him and persist in placing their needs before him. Clearly God is being presented as standing in contrast to the judge. The unjust judge spends ages putting off his judgement but not so with God. In verse 8 we are told that he will "make haste" to help those who come to him in need. The second half of verse 8 also adds another theme, that of faith. We saw in verse 1 that Jesus was introducing the need for Christians to pray always, an activity that depends on the faith life of the person. It is because they believe that God wants to listen to their prayers that they come before him, confident of a hearing and of action. The implication is that if the disciples do not learn to pray always, then when the Son of Man returns, he will not find faith on the earth. Again, in the light of the perceived delay in the return of Jesus, we can sense that Luke is trying to keep his community focussed. Just because the end has not come is not a reason to give up on prayer and preparedness.

There is a sense in which this parable seems to be suggesting that the woman was able to receive a judgement because she "nagged" the judge to the point where he responded to shut her up. Are we then saying that our approach to God is the same? If we "storm heaven" with our prayers, presenting God with our needs day and night, then he will eventually hear us and grant us our wishes. Experience of life tells us that this is not how it works in reality. We can join with others in praying for a particular need and wonder when God will hear us. A literal translation of the Greek used of the woman is "lest by coming, she in the end give me a black eye"! That is not the approach we need for God. The point of the parable is the consistency and persistence in faith; not for the sake of getting what we ask for, but because persisting in prayer is persisting in acknowledging that we are limited and needy people and our heavenly Father is Lord of all things. With that faith we will be filled with peace whatever the result of our prayers.

### ***Prayer***

Loving Father, we come before you as people in need and ask for your blessing on our lives. Open our eyes and hearts that we may experience this blessing in all that happens to us.

## **Sunday November 15th**

## **Mark 13:24-32**

Jesus continues his answer to the question raised by the disciples in verse 4 and has moved on from talking about the future of the Temple and the nation to talk about the end of the world and the return of the Son of Man. When the last day comes the sufferings of the earlier times will be ended. The world described in verses 24 and 25 is in an horrendous state but in the midst of the horror comes the power of God. The Son of Man is shown as being in a position of authority, even over the powers of the universe. He uses the clouds as his chariots (Ps 104:3; Isa 19:1) and his glory shines in a world that has been plunged into darkness. When he comes, he comes with an army of angels who are at his command, for it is the Son who sends them out into the world to gather people together. The vision presented by Jesus appears to be one of horror and dread but for the faithful there is a message of hope, which the parable of the fig tree brings out in verses 28-32. The word of God lasts forever and so the faithful can be assured that whatever happens around them, God remains in control.

We should note that Mark has placed this story at the close of the public ministry of Jesus, just a couple of days before the crucifixion. There are two pictures presented: the city of Jerusalem is on its way to destruction and the Son of Man is to die on the cross, giving the disciples very good reasons for being filled with despair. What hope do they have? None...except the Son of Man himself. It is a great picture, there in the darkness, as the stars fall, the sun goes dark and the world they know falls apart, Jesus rides through the midst of the chaos in power and glory. That is not meant to be a distant hope but an experience of the graces that true faith brings. Mark is writing for a Church that is going through a time of suffering and persecution and is telling them where they should look for faith, hope and light. If they spend their time dwelling on the difficulties they will be overwhelmed. If they keep their eyes of faith on the Son of Man who is present with them – in the midst of the suffering – then they will not be defeated. The person of faith is only overcome when we doubt and when we try to battle on alone. The words of Christ will never pass away and he promised to "be with you always, even to the ends of the world". That is our hope and it is realized through our life of prayer and faithful obedience to the ways of the Kingdom of God.

### ***Prayer***

Almighty God, creator of heaven and of earth, in times of trial and difficulty, help us to turn to you in faith and hope, that we may overcome all our trials and temptations.