

Wednesday September 30th

Luke 9:57-62

We now see Luke presenting three sayings of Jesus which are instructions or warnings on discipleship. Anyone who is going to associate themselves with the mission of Jesus needs to keep in mind that there are going to be costs involved in following him. Traditional loyalties and demands will be challenged and their faithfulness will challenge former relationships. The first approach is one filled with enthusiasm, an excitement which is tempered by the revelation that the Son of Man lives as a homeless wanderer. He has no shelter, no family and none of the securities that go with a "normal" home. We then see a disciple who is called by Jesus but who is not yet ready to follow the Master. His reasons for waiting are valid and in the Hebrew culture important. Burying the dead was seen to be a serious obligation but in the matter of the Kingdom of God the tasks of discipleship must take precedence, even over family obligations. The third example spontaneously comes to Jesus in a manner which resembles the call of Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21). The prophet is given permission to say good-bye to his father, but this is not the case with Jesus. The work of the Kingdom can allow for no distractions. The way Luke describes discipleship here is not so much as an imitation of Christ but as a union with Christ in his own mission.

How easy it is for those who seek to be disciples to find reasons for not living lives of committed discipleship. There are all kinds of excuses that find their way into our lives, that eat away at our commitment. This is what Luke is working against here, the compromising disciple. In the example given by Jesus, we have the story of the man wanting to bury his dead father. If that cannot be a reason for putting off following Jesus then where do we stand with excuses like: too busy, too many other things on, I need to meet other obligations first, no one does that any more, I do not like the priest, the service is too boring, all they want is my money, there are too many hypocrites in Church, and so on. Here we have Jesus heading along the road to his death and he is faced with people who are keen to follow...when it is convenient. What is it that Saint Augustine of Canterbury is supposed to have said: "Lord call me...but not yet". If Jesus, knowing what was going to happen to him if he continued along the way he was going, remained faithful, why do we so easily give way to compromises in our service?

Prayer Ever faithful God, we thank you that despite our sinful ways you continue to call us and to offer us your blessings. Strengthen us that we may serve you in all life's circumstances.



BIBLE STUDIES SEPTEMBER 2009

**+ Michael Hough
with Fr Peter Yeats**



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

Tuesday September 29th

*St Michael
and All Angels*

John 1:35-51

John the Baptist repeated his witness in front of two of his disciples and they leave John and follow Jesus. Others are then quickly added to this group. Jesus is presented as knowing all about them, their past and their future. There is a promise given to Nathaniel that he will see heaven opened and, above the Son of Man, the angels ascending and descending. This is reminiscent of the Old Testament story of Jacob where he sees the staircase going from ground to heaven and a constant procession of beings moving up and down. This seems to be presented by John as being one of the roles of Jesus. He will provide a vital link between people and the divine life of heaven. By taking away the sins of those who are repentant, heaven is open. There seem to be few links between the calling of the apostles in John and the other Gospels. The way John presents the call is slightly different. Jesus does not call these men to be disciples. They are called by people who already believe in him as the Messiah. Others have become "missionaries" passing on the message. When these people have gone out to "recruit", John has them make some clear theological statements about who Jesus is, which is important here at the opening of the Gospel, for John will go on to give examples of what this theology means. These disciples are shown as moving from Judaism (verse 47) and from being followers of John the Baptist (verse 35) to become followers of Jesus. In this way Jesus is shown to be the fulfilment of what Judaism was meant to be doing and also of what John the Baptist was preaching. They are not yet believers. They are shown to be enquirers in whom some spark was ignited by Jesus.

One of the insights John offers in his account is that we do not see the disciples leaving behind their boats, their nets and their families. What they have to leave behind are the beliefs that give meaning and hope to their lives. Instead of trusting in their former religious beliefs, they now have to turn whole-heartedly to Jesus. Jesus is not a messiah who will work side by side with other important "messiahs". It is either Jesus who gives meaning to the disciples, who gives hope, healing, peace, love, forgiveness and more, or it is some other thing or things. That is the heart of discipleship for ourselves as well. God has to be the foundation of our lives. We have to choose and then follow him but not compromise.

Prayer

Loving Father, we thank you that in Jesus your Son we are caught up into the life of the Holy Trinity. As we rejoice in the blessing of that life, may we so live and act that others in the world around us may come to know your love for them.

Monday September 28th

Luke 9:46-50

This story and the comments about the exorcist (9:49-50) come at the end of the ministry of Jesus in Galilee. They both teach about the kinds of qualities that are needed by disciples. This episode is meant to reflect life in the Christian community. When Jesus uses the child as an example he wants to show what Christian greatness is like. The truly great leader in the Christian community is the one who can consider himself to be like the most insignificant and the weakest member. This is a reflection of the way that Jesus understands his own ministry. He was sent by the Father but associated with the lowliest people at that time, in society. If the disciples are to take on the benefits of leadership they must be prepared to make themselves like the least. After all, he came from God but took on human nature, he became one of us, so that all peoples might know God's blessing. The disciples had difficulty in understanding the message and this is why they could not accept that someone from outside their group could cast out demons in the name of Jesus. They are called to be open and tolerant.

The disciples seem to have found themselves in a position where they feel that they are the only ones who have a role to play in the Kingdom. Because they are following Jesus around and are The Twelve, they have special rights, privileges and powers. Imagine their surprise when someone else comes along and uses the name of Jesus to cast out demons: How dare they! There was a certain arrogance about the Twelve that is sometimes hard to accept and as we have seen was something of a frustration to Jesus. But it is a very human weakness, this tendency to see our Christian faith as giving us some kind of moral or spiritual superiority. Jesus does not exclude anyone and encourages his disciples to be open to the possibility that God is working through people who are "not one with us". It is incredibly arrogant for us to draw up some kind of mental check list against which we are prepared to measure a person's faith and commitment to the Gospel. This is not the way of the disciple. We are called to be "little children" when it comes to matters of faith, prepared to allow God to work things out his own way. The key thing is that people are freed from evil. If God can achieve that freedom through someone doing things differently to the way we do them, then we should be pleased and not despise them in their differences.

Prayer

Loving Father, we are sinful yet you have made us little less than gods. Help us to be servants of your people, rather than seeking to rule over them in arrogance and self-serving power.

Tuesday September 1st

Luke 4:31-37

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

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

Prayer

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

Wednesday September 2nd

Luke 4:38-44

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

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

Prayer

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

Sunday September 27th

Mark 9:38-48

This is the only time when John acts on his own and it does not create a very good image. He seems to have missed the message of the story prior to this one, that discipleship is about being the least of all; being like little children. John complains that outsiders were using the name of Jesus to cast out demons. These people were not "followers" (in Greek the phrase "not one of us" would read "who does not follow with us"). How ironic that is, as if somehow they were the ideal models for others to follow! The Jesus of Matthew's Gospel says that "those who are not with me are against me" (Matt 12:30) allowing for no middle ground. We find Mark in this text presenting a more inclusive and welcoming definition. For Matthew the key point is how people see and understand Jesus. For Mark the intention is to make it clear that discipleship is not about belonging to some kind of special group. Verse 41 makes it clear that there will be those who will form a wide category of sympathisers who may not be a part of the official followers.

John's focus seems to be more on the setting up of an "in" group, an authorised circle of followers who have some kind of privileged relationship with the Lord and who can decide who can and who cannot reap the blessings of the Kingdom. They are annoyed because this exorcist is presuming to act in a way that should only be the privilege of one of the Twelve! Is he worried that somehow he will be losing some of his status or position in the community? What is his problem? This is not the way of Jesus but it can often sound sadly familiar of the Church down through the ages. Parish communities in particular can seem to be closed to outsiders, more concerned about their own internal concerns than the needs of the wider world. The bulk of their energies and resources can end up being spent on strengthening and preserving the parish community rather than on spreading the word out in the wider community. It can also be a community that is judgemental of the world, seeing it as being sinful, selfish and guilty of all kinds of failures. That is not the way of Jesus. He came for all men and women, saints as well as sinners and the only reason for having a community of disciples is so that everyone can come to know his love, his healing and share life in his Kingdom. The community of faith needs to be seen as being a place of renewal and refreshment for sinners as much as a home for saints.

Prayer

Father, forgive us for our sins of exclusiveness, for leaving people out of the community of your love and for seeing some people as being unworthy of your forgiveness and mercy.

Saturday September 26th

Luke 9:43-45

This prediction of Jesus regarding his coming death comes in response to the reaction of the crowd to his cure of the epileptic (9:37ff). It is written to stand in contrast to what is going to eventually take place. Jesus has shown compassion and love for the boy suffering from epilepsy and freed him from the chains of the evil that was destroying him. Then, in the next breath, he acknowledges that he will allow himself to be taken by evil men and will be at their mercy. The people around him are filled with wonder but the disciples are told that the path of the Messiah is a road that will lead to his suffering and crucifixion. It is no surprise that the disciples are unable to understand what he is saying. We would be safe in presuming that they thought that the people might want to make him their leader and King after seeing the wonders he performed. Death as a condemned man made no sense at all. It is only after the resurrection that it will all be revealed and made clear. Another point that Luke wants to emphasise and bring out, is that the gathered crowd are filled with a sense of amazement at what Jesus had done but this is not the same as faith. Faith is about hearing the Word (or seeing the Word in action) and acting upon what is heard. Unlike the other predictions, there is no specific mention of his death and no comment on the resurrection.

This story stands in contrast to the earlier professions of faith. It seems that the disciples are able to see Jesus as the Messiah (Christ) when there are marvels being performed and great things happening. However, when things start to go wrong and do not unfold as they want them to, then they begin to doubt. They cannot possibly understand how Jesus could be the Christ if he was going to be handed over to the power of men. They are guilty of that very human sin of putting limitations on God. They are thinking of God in human terms. If they had been given the responsibility of setting the agenda for a Messiah, then they would undoubtedly do it differently. But then that would not be salvation, just a variation on any other human action. How could Jesus allow this to happen? In the Greek it is clear that the one who is handing Jesus over "into the hands of men" is God. That is why Jesus does not fear and remains confident in his ministry. He believes that God remains in control even as the world may seem to be swinging out of control. That is the real measure of faith, when we can go on believing, and living out lives of faithful discipleship, even when we feel that our lives have become shrouded in darkness.

Prayer

All-powerful God, help us always to hear your voice calling us that we may live lives that remain rich in your peace and hope.

Thursday September 3rd

Luke 5:1-11

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

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

Prayer

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

Friday September 4th

Luke 5:33-39

The Scribes and Pharisees are the ones raising the question about fasting. There was only one prescribed fast in the Jewish Law and that was on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29). However, fasting was encouraged at times of mourning, times of disaster and so on. During the Exile, when there was no Temple for sacrifice, fasting became more important than ever as a sacrifice acceptable to God. However, over time the outward appearances and forms took on great importance and this is why the prophets were so strong in their condemnation on the ways of fasting. They proclaimed that true fasting consisted not in abstaining from food and drink but in the renunciation of sin (Zech 7:5ff). But it continued and by the time of Jesus the Pharisees and others fasted twice a week (Lk 18:12), an activity accompanied by much ceremony and hypocrisy. This is the first hint we have from Jesus as to his coming death, though it is not developed here. The problem with the old wineskins is that they have reached the end of their elasticity, having been stretched to their limits. New wine is still fermenting and will stretch the old skins. New skins will stretch to accommodate the fermenting brew. The Kingdom is the same. It demands a whole new way of living.

Jesus is using two examples of common, daily events: the repair of clothing and the brewing of wine. It is foolish to destroy a new piece of cloth by ripping some off to repair an old piece of clothing. In this way, the person would lose two garments. In the light of what he is saying about fasting, it would appear that Jesus is warning the disciples about the need to leave certain ways of thinking and living behind when they take up the invitation to discipleship. The more we grow into the life of the Kingdom the more we have to repent and turn away from old ways of living. If we try and live as disciples and at the same time live lives of which the world approves, then we end up finding little peace and fulfilment. One of the big changes was the shift in focus. The fast is something that individual believers did. What Jesus has on offer is a salvation that comes about through union with him. He saves. People do not save themselves and so the whole thrust of discipleship is once again focussed on the spiritual lives of those who seek to follow Jesus. Fasting needs to be done out of love for God, not because it will build love.

Prayer

Loving Father, in your Son we are invited to share more fully in your life and to know the peace and joy of your Kingdom. Help us to put away the old ways of sin that we may faithfully serve you.

Friday September 25th

Luke 9:18-22

The profession of Peter follows on from the feeding of the five thousand and just prior to the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and partially in answer to the question raised by Herod (9:7-9). Jesus was identified as the Messiah as early as the infancy stories (2:11). When Peter calls Jesus "the Christ" it is clearly in a pre-resurrection understanding. The main point for Luke is that Jesus the Messiah has a special relationship to the Father. As we shall see in the following verses, it is this relationship with God that will make it possible for him to go to his suffering and death filled with hope and confidence. The Jewish sense of "Christ" is that he is the one sent by God in the way David was sent by Yahweh. It is in this sense that he is the Messiah, Saviour and Lord of all. When we think of Peter the Jew this is no surprise. He has witnessed Jesus preaching the Good News of the coming of the Kingdom, seen his miracles and watched as he healed the sick and cast out demons. Jesus was, as Luke says in Acts 1:6, the one who was sent to "restore the Kingdom of Israel". This title "Christ" came to be used by the early Church as the most commonly used word for addressing Jesus. It was on the cross (Acts 2:36) that Jesus was made both Lord and Messiah (Christ).

What was it that made it possible for Peter and the disciples to make this statement of faith? They heard the same things Herod did and stood by and watched the same healings that the Pharisees saw. It may have something to do with the linking of this story to the raising of the daughter of Jairus and the feeding of the five thousand. The latter story being, in Jewish terms, a foretaste of the banquet that God will provide for his people on the last day. They stand in contrast to Herod and to the leaders of the Jewish people. A part of the answer to the question must be found in the fact that Peter and the Twelve were the ones who had left all they had and followed Jesus. They had made a commitment to him and to the demands of the Kingdom and so were following him in faith. It is clear that they did not fully understand the full meaning of what Jesus was saying and doing, but they were prepared to make him the centre of their lives. It is only from a position of commitment and faith that it is possible to comprehend the nature of the ministry of Jesus. This is why Herod could not understand and could not experience the gifts of the Kingdom.

Prayer

Almighty God, you are the One who gives our lives meaning and purpose and who walks with us as we serve you. May we be ever confident and faithful in lives of discipleship.

Thursday September 24th

Luke 9:7-9

Luke now builds on the foundation he has been putting into place and throughout the rest of the chapter moves on to the presentation of pictures as to the character and identity of Jesus. Once he has done this, he will then move into the section that will lead Jesus to Jerusalem and his death. The question that is important is the one where Herod says: "who is this about whom I hear such talk?". He is the ruler of Galilee and so his question comes with some authority behind it. It is the question that will now be addressed in the forthcoming chapter. A part of the answer given by Luke can be found in the persons that are linked to Jesus' name. We see him being evaluated in the light of Elijah and the prophets, making him a prophet of God. There was an expectation of the return of Elijah on a fiery chariot (from Malachi 3:1) who would come to refine the world of sin and evil in preparation for the final establishment of the Kingdom. In Luke 7:24-30 John the Baptist is equated with Elijah thus making Jesus the one for whom John (Elijah) was preparing the way. Jesus is also presented in the Gospels as the one who fulfils the prophecies of the Old Testament in Isaiah, with the blind seeing, the deaf hearing and the lame walking.

The question of Herod is a repeat of the question that was asked by the Apostles in the calming of the storm (8:25). They have seen Jesus perform mighty works and heard him cast out demons with authority. They have also listened to his preaching and teaching and have come to know him as the Lord. Herod sees all these same things and he wonders and his reflections show that he is trying to understand Jesus from the point of view of his Jewish religion. But with Jesus it does not work. Jesus does not fit comfortably into our own expectations and has not come to bring salvation in the ways that we want. There are many things that we want but Jesus goes beyond that to meet our inner and most basic needs. The other thing about Herod is that Luke notes that he had heard "all that was happening" but still came up with the wrong understanding of Jesus. Why would we be any different? Is it possible that we too have misunderstood the mission that we have been given? Is it possible that we are being called to move in a new direction, with new challenges, but we insist on living with "old ears", living as we always have? The challenge of the Gospel is to be ever new to what it is that God wants us to be doing with our gifts and this requires that we listen to him.

Prayer

25

Father in Heaven, you reveal yourself in many ways in our daily life. Remove our blindness that we may hear you and respond.

Saturday September 5th

Luke 6:1-5

We know from Deuteronomy 23:25 that it was lawful to pick corn from the fields of others. The problem here was the interpretation of the laws on work. The Pharisees are interpreting the picking and rubbing of the corn as being the same as harvesting and threshing, both of which were forbidden on the Sabbath. One of the problems for the people of the time of Jesus was that the teachers of the Law had come up with hundreds of smaller directions that were meant to spell out what observing the Sabbath Laws meant. It had become a sterile observance and this is the approach of which Jesus was so critical. Eating food is necessary to stay alive and this is what the disciples were doing. David's conduct did not in any way denigrate the Law. The Law is there to give glory to God and is to be consecrated to God and cannot be reduced to the observance of man-made laws. What is the authority for Jesus' proclamation? He claims to be greater than David and in making this claim he is making himself out to be the Messiah. He does not claim that it is not necessary to observe the Sabbath. What he is saying is that he has the power to give an authoritative interpretation of what the Sabbath means. There is a very interesting alternative manuscript (which does not have much standing among scholars) which adds to this verse: "On the same day, seeing a man working on the Sabbath day, he said to him: 'Friend, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not know, you are accursed as a breaker of the Law' ".

Ritual of any kind can so easily become meaningless and even harmful. When we look around the Church, so many of our struggles reach a focal point in ritual of some kind. We can be on the side which rejects one form of a ritual or with another group which insists that a particular ritual is an essential part of the life of the Church. Both are wrong! As we see here, Jesus preaches about rituals being pointers to a deeper revelation and not Truth in themselves. If they lead people to God then they are blessed. If they replace God then they are accursed. This does not just apply to our liturgical life, or our ways of worship. It applies to just about every walk of Christian life and morality. Life in the Church can be sterile or it can be dynamic, it can be life-giving or destructive of life. The way to avoid this is to make sure that in our lives of faith we are Christ-centred and not centred on the man-made expressions of our faith.

Prayer

6

All-powerful God, we worship you as Lord of all and come before you as your humble servants; guide us so that we can faithfully serve you as you seek to be served.

Sunday September 6th

Mark 7:31-37

Fr Peter Yeats

This passage begins with a bit of a problem, or at least what could be a poser to Bible scholars. Why would Jesus make a journey from Tyre to Galilee, *via Sidon*? It is as though someone in Australia went from Melbourne to Adelaide via Darwin (without the distance). Some scholars suggest that saying Sidon was an error; others say that it is correct, and that the journey was a long one; Jesus wanted to have some peace before the storm that is to come. What is clear is that Jesus does often retreat into Gentile territory when he needs to recharge and find a little quiet. We today seem to have lost the desire to go on retreat – to a quiet place for prayer and reflection – probably because we cannot fit it into our busy lives. Jesus saw retreats as being so essential that he re-ordered his life to make them possible! On his return to Jewish territory, Jesus is immediately (a very common word in the Gospel of Mark!) brought a man to cure – a man deaf and with a speech impediment. This he does by putting saliva on the man's tongue (saliva was thought to have great healing qualities) and touching his ears and then saying the word "ephphatha" – 'be opened'. It is an interesting word; why 'be opened' and not 'be healed'? It is possible that once again Jesus is trying to make a point, is trying to give some teaching by the miracles that he performs. Miracles are 'Signs of the Kingdom' – in other words, they are not just done for their own sake, but so that something can be known about the way God rules. As we read about the miracles, our first question should not be "Is this possible?" but rather, "What does this teach us?"

In this example, there may be at least two things for us to ponder:

- 1) That disease is not a part of the Kingdom; God wants wholeness.
- 2) That while being cured is important, it is not the most important thing: being open to hear the Word of God is – and to speak about it!

As happens so often in Mark's Gospel, the man is ordered to tell no-one – something he fails to do! Why the secrecy? Probably because Jesus knew that people would want to see more magic, more party tricks, rather than hear the Good News. He wanted people to hear his teaching and follow, not just follow so that they could see another miracle. Like the deaf man, we too have to be open to what God says. Sometimes, this will take peace and quiet, away from the busyness of life. And sometimes we might need to allow God to act on us so that we are open to his word.

Prayer

7

Father, may we hear your voice today; may your Kingdom come into our lives.

Wednesday September 23rd

Luke 9:1-6

We have seen Jesus performing miracles in the previous section and having completed those works, he now sends out the Twelve to continue on what he has been doing. This is important in Luke's theology for later on in the book of Acts, he will present the Church as continuing the work that was initiated in the lifetime of Jesus. Luke changes the account that is found in Mark (Mk 6:7) by giving the Twelve responsibility for preaching the Kingdom. Traditionally there are five sections to this passage:

- (a) the giving of power and authority to the Twelve
- (b) the command to preach and to heal
- (c) the rules about where to stay
- (d) the rules about the journey
- (e) the rules about what happens when the Word is rejected.

As they go about their ministry they are to take nothing with them that would slow them down or that would distract them from their ministry. The reasons underlying these demands are to be found in the need to be totally dependent on God. It is God's mission and the disciples need to keep in mind that the success of the mission will depend, not on their skills and abilities but on their ability to allow God to guide and strengthen them. When they are given "power and authority" the same words are used as those that describe the ministry of Jesus making it clear that the Twelve share in the same divine power.

The Twelve are given three tasks. They are to preach the Kingdom, free men and women from the power of demonic forces and heal their illnesses. This shows us how Luke understands the work of the Kingdom and the work of the Church. It is not just about the spiritual lives of believers. Faith must lead people out into the world to perform works of charity. It is no use the Church thinking that it only has responsibility for things religious. All areas of human life and community living must come under the light of the Gospel. This is why the Church must become involved in what is happening and why it must speak out on a whole range of issues. Topics like stem cell research, abortion, IVF technology, refugees, poverty, gambling and the like all come under the responsibility of the disciple. Many in the world, as we often see in the press, think that the Church should not be so vocal in matters of human relationships. Jesus thought otherwise.

Prayer

24

Loving Father, your Son Jesus Christ proclaimed your message of the Kingdom, and so we have come to know your healing power in our lives. As we take this message out into the world, keep us filled with confidence by your presence.

Tuesday September 22nd

Luke 8:19-21

This is the last in this section of teaching on the Word of God. Listening to the Word of God and acting on it are the two qualities that make people a part of the family of Jesus. There is a relationship with Jesus that is far deeper and more profound than any blood relationship could be. When Luke says "hear the Word of God" he has in mind a form of listening that is found throughout the Old Testament. It means more than an external hearing. Hearing is always related to salvation and the way that a person shows that they have heard the Word is by repenting. If a person was to hear God speaking, they would change their way of living. This kind of hearing always involves the reception of grace from God by which a person is enabled to repent. Hearing then is the acceptance of the will of God and is a part of the gift of faith. In verse 21 the hearing and acting are a part of the one response. It is not possible to hear the Word of God unless it is lived out in the life of the disciple. Luke is also aware of the double meaning of "Word". Jesus is 'The Word of God' and he went about preaching 'The Word'.

Luke's version of this meeting of Jesus and his family is different to that of Matthew and Mark (Matt 12:46ff; Mk 3:31ff). For Luke, Jesus' mother and his brothers are models of discipleship. A literal translation of the Greek text would read something like this: "As for my mother and my brothers, they are the ones who listen to my voice and act on it". We are encouraged to act in the same way. He presents his mother and his brothers as the first to respond. Their closeness to him is through their faith response, not because of their blood ties. His mother Mary is the prime example of someone who heard God speaking. She responded to the Word and became the mother of the Son of God. Her response was the model response: "Let it be to me according to your will". He says that a person becomes a part of his spiritual family when they choose to respond to his invitation to believe in him and make the Gospel message the foundation of their lives. This is what his mother had done. A good way of assessing how we would fit into the message of this text is to ask ourselves where we can see the evidence of our faith in the way we live. This is something we should do each night when we confess our failings and ask God to bless all we have done during the day. Faith without action is not true faith.

Prayer Father in Heaven, we thank you for being a God of revelation and for revealing your love through Jesus your Son. Strengthen us to respond in all we do in our lives.

Monday September 7th

Luke 6:6-11

In the opening story of this chapter Jesus set out the broader picture of the meaning of the Sabbath. Now he is giving a teaching on the kinds of things that are required on the Sabbath. From the beginning, Luke shows the Jewish leaders as plotting and planning to bring the work of Jesus to an end. Their hatred for him means that they cannot be open to what God is working for them. Again we find that the Jewish teaching is clear. They were permitted to apply medical treatment to a sick person only in cases of serious medical conditions. For them, this meant life threatening illnesses. The man described here is not in such a category. He has a withered arm and presumably has had one for a long time, though it would obviously appear that such an impediment would limit his ability to go about full and normal human activities. What Jesus does is an act of charity, of love and of compassion for this child of God. In doing this he is not putting aside the laws of God, though he may well be breaking some human interpretation of those laws.

A quotation that is often ascribed to Edmund Burke: "It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph", brings out the kind of thing that Jesus seems to have in mind here. For the Christian it is not enough to merely avoid doing evil. Discipleship is not about avoiding sin. It is about doing good. That does not mean that we can do what we like. The doing of good will inevitably mean the avoidance of wrongdoing but this is a consequence of a particular way of life and not the goal. For the Jewish leaders it was the other way around. They had so many laws spelling out the way they were to live so that they avoided the breaking of the laws of God that they lost sight of the original reason for the Law. Jesus came along and while he did not preach a breaking of the Law, he did preach the primacy of Love. Disciples were expected to go out and "do" what Jesus commanded them to do. Believing in Jesus is nowhere near enough and is meant to be a springboard into a way of life that goes about putting into action the teachings of the Master. This is central to Luke's way of thinking. To do nothing when faced with someone in need is to sin and for Jesus the only alternative to doing good is the doing of evil. That places an enormous task before us, as individuals, as communities of faith, whether they be families, parishes, diocese, or the universal Church and has always been the impetus behind mission.

Prayer Loving God, we thank you that in your love for us you have provided for our every need and sent us numerous blessings and graces. May we reach out and share these with others.

Tuesday September 8th

Luke 6:12-19

As Jesus prepares to choose the ones who will form his inner group of Twelve, he went up into the hills to pray. The mountain is the place of God's presence (eg Sinai, Jerusalem) and by praying to God Luke seems to be implying that God's blessing is upon the ones chosen. This has some links with John's understanding (Jn 17:6) that these are the ones whom the Father had given to Jesus. Luke keeps a distinction between disciples and "The Twelve" with the Twelve being chosen from among the wider group of disciples. Matthew, Mark, Luke and the Acts of the Apostles all provide lists of the Twelve and there is some variation among them. For Luke, these men were to be his eyewitnesses and the ones he would send out to preach and teach. After they have been chosen and named he takes them down to the bottom of the mountain where he is met by a large gathering of disciples and an even bigger crowd. These people had come to **hear** him and to be healed. They came not just from the neighbouring areas but from all Judea (including from Jerusalem) as well as from the pagan towns of Tyre and Sidon. They were not coming out of mere curiosity but because they were looking for something and Jesus seemed to be providing the answers. This listening sets the tone for the sermon which is about to be proclaimed. "Listening" is important in Luke's overall theology and is what precedes action.

There are a couple of notes that warrant further reflection. The first is the witness that Jesus gives to prayer. Here he is, about to make a huge decision that will impact on the future of the Christian community after his resurrection, and what does he do first of all? He turns to the Father in prayer. And this is no short "please" and "thank you". He spends the whole night in prayer. Only after having consulted the Father and sought his comfort and guidance, does he go ahead and make his choices. If Jesus feels the need to be with the Father as he carries out his mission, how much greater is our own need for divine guidance! Yet, so often, we make these decisions without recourse to divine grace. The second point is the reassurance that we have that God chooses to use disciples to continue the work of the Kingdom in the world. This group of Twelve are imperfect (there is even a traitor among them) yet they are the ones God picked for the work of the Church. They could only manage this huge task while they relied on God. We are no different. That is our hope.

Prayer

Almighty God, heavenly Father, we thank you that through your Son Jesus Christ you have called us and gifted us to go out and proclaim your Kingdom. Strengthen us in our mission.

Monday September 21st

St Matthew

Matthew 9:9-13

There are three parts to this story: the calling of the tax collector (v 9), the controversy over eating with sinners (vs 10-12) and the short saying on the importance of mercy (v 13). It is important for Matthew's theology that there are only twelve disciples for they are the models for the later Christian community. Consequently there is something of a problem with the final list of the names of the Twelve with some references giving the name of the tax collector as being Levi (see Mk 2:14 and Lk 5:27). Luke 5:29 makes it clear that the meal mentioned here is given by the newly converted Matthew and thus would explain why there are so many tax collectors and sinners present. These men were the ones who collected the Roman tolls and were widely despised because of their dishonesty. We also know from Matthew 15:2 that the Pharisees were concerned that Jesus and his disciples were eating their meals without first following the ritual prescriptions of washing their hands. When Jesus answers their criticisms he presents himself as being a kind of physician of the soul, someone who seeks out those who are morally ill. This is something that the Rabbis would have considered to be improper for a leader.

Jesus proclaims that he has come to those who have been classed as being outcasts and sinners by the world. They have no hope. On the other hand, the righteous are to miss out on the grace of God because they are so self-sufficient they do not acknowledge that they have a need of God's healing grace. They are already "righteous". Only the needy can know God (the needy in biblical language are called the poor). He makes this clear with the radical statement, quoting Hosea 6:6, that what God wants is not good ritual but love and mercy. Mercy and love have priority over ritual obligations. Before they start looking at whether or not a person is following all the external observances demanded by the community, they should first of all look at whether or not they themselves are people of love and charity. How true this same demand is today! It is easy to give priority to those in our community who meet our religious expectations, to reach out to and care for those who perform in the appropriate Christian manner — come to church, join the right organizations, think as we think on religious matters and like the same styles of leadership, liturgy and Church that are considered as important to us. How wrong that is in the eyes of Jesus.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, through the power of your heavenly graces, make it possible for us to share with others the love, mercy and gentle patience that you show to us in our sinful condition.

Sunday September 20th

Mark 9:30-37

There are three prophecies of the Passion and our text here is the second of these. Perhaps the starting point is verse 32 where Mark says that the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying. They were too caught up in their worldly vision and human limitations in which the death of Jesus could have no place. The whole section (verses 33-50) focusses on the meaning of discipleship with the key images being those of a servant and a little child. After the first prediction (8:31ff) Mark showed the blindness of the disciples and had Jesus explaining what following him meant. Here we have the same thing. After the prediction the disciples are presented as not having understood a word he said and Jesus again goes on to explain what true following meant. The contrast between what Jesus is talking about and what the disciples are seeking could not be more extreme and this is perhaps why the disciples could not answer the question Jesus gives to them in the house. On one side we have Jesus talking about willingly going to the cross and preparing to suffer greatly, and on the other hand we have the disciples worrying about who will have the greatest status in the community. From Mark's broader perspective he is presenting the Father as accepting the humble and submissive obedience of the Son who serves his Father even to the point of death. God does not estimate a person's worth by the measurement of status and success. What is true for the Son is true for the disciple.

Jesus' teaching here is based on a long biblical heritage where the idea of serving was regularly preached by the prophets. Much of it hinges on their understanding of why Israel was called in the first place. Why did God choose Israel? He chose Israel so that the other nations of the world would come to know Yahweh as God. By looking at Israel and seeing the way the Hebrews lived and worshipped, others would come seeking to know all about their God. Israel was not called so that Israel could be blessed and so that the Jews could know God's blessings. They were servants of the plan of God. For Jesus discipleship is about the same kind of thing. The only reason God calls men and women to lives of faith is so that all nations may come to know the salvation that is theirs in and through his Son Jesus Christ. If we are not living for others then we are not Church. If we are not servants then we are far from the Kingdom of God. All we do in the Church should be as humble servants of God.

Prayer

Father, it is hard to be humble and it is hard to serve you through our serving of others. Help us to put aside all the trappings of position and power and be true servants of all.

Wednesday September 9th

Luke 6:20-26

Luke now leads us into a major section of the preaching of Jesus which in Matthew's account is the Sermon on the Mount (Matt chapters 5-7). It is usually referred to as Luke's Sermon on the Plain. Matthew's Sermon is addressed to the crowd and to the disciples of Jesus while Luke's version is meant for the disciples only. The Greek background to the word "blessed" refers to a person's inner happiness and well-being. This state comes about as a result of action taken by God and is not something achieved through human efforts. This blessedness is not a purely spiritual state but shows itself in concrete forms. The poverty he calls blessed is not the abject poverty of those who do not have material possessions. The poor here are the ones who know their littleness and their dependence on the love and mercy of God. The same applies to the hungry people. It is not so much the physical hunger about which he is speaking, but is referring to those who hunger for Truth. Those who are weeping are mourning over their own sinfulness, and having so repented turn to Christ and have their sorrow taken away. If they live in this way it is inevitable that "men" will persecute them as this has been the fate of the prophets of old and will be the fate of the Son of Man. It simply means they are living faithful lives. The so-called "woes" stand in contrast to the "blessings" and are meant to highlight the transitory nature of the pleasures and the consequences of living life according to human impulses and pressures.

What is really being presented here is an approach to life. Jesus calls into question the way people are living. He contrasts the desire to have all the things that commonsense and worldly wisdom suggest that we need to have to be fully human and fully alive, with the blessings of the Kingdom. There is no problem with wealth in itself. Jesus says the pursuit of worldly security can so easily lead to an ignoring of God and the demands of the Kingdom and that is a disaster. The major priority in our lives should be our life with God for if that is as it should be, then all our other pursuits would be kept in the right perspective. But all this depends on an understanding of human beings as being creatures who are dependant on God who is their creator and to whom they will once again return. It is too easy to take God for granted when it comes to enjoying the blessings of our lives but blame him when things go wrong.

Prayer

Gracious and loving Father, we thank you for the blessings which abound in our lives and ask that through your Spirit we remain ever grateful and willingly share them with others.

Thursday September 10th

Luke 6:27-38

What we have had so far in Luke's Sermon is really an introduction to the main part of what Jesus is really saying. The introduction: "But I say to you...", as it was in the case of Matthew's Sermon is a statement of the authority which lies behind this teaching. There are four commands in this verse (as well as in the next). These are: love, do good, bless and pray (only love and pray are found in Matthew [Matt 5:43ff]). The enemies are those who oppose the Kingdom and the work of the Gospel. The Greeks and the Jews had similar kinds of laws, but generally approached it from the point of view of commonsense. What Jesus does here is command his disciples to love and it is a particular form of love. They are to show a "gracious, outgoing, active interest in the welfare of those persons who are precisely antagonistic". A similar line is followed throughout these verses. The disciple is one who goes further than what could reasonably be asked. It is not about doing what everyone else does. The world may think in terms of taking someone to court, the disciple looks at forgiving and healing the rifts in the community. It presents a picture of love and compassion as forces for change within the society in which disciples live and work. When Jesus says "give to everyone who begs from you" it is an absolute command. There might be good reasons for not giving and all kinds of rationalizing but they do not apply to the disciple. They must give because of the primacy of the call to love.

One of the things that makes this section so powerful is that Jesus is not talking about avoiding things that will hurt and disrupt. He puts a much more positive angle to his teaching. Disciples must go out and be active in their loving. They need to be finding ways in which they can show the love of God to others. This is an absolute command and not an optional extra that can be done when the opportunity arises or when one has a surplus of resources. Why should we do this? The answer is to be found in verse 36: "...because your Heavenly Father is compassionate...". What is being asked here is for us to do to others what we know God has been doing to and for us. The consequences are worth noting (v 38). Loving brings blessings in "full measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over...". Luke would see the death of Jesus as the ultimate form of this love and reminds us of what his love has done in our lives.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we rejoice in your compassionate love for us. We are made in your image and likeness and you call us to share your love with others. Strengthen us with your Spirit that you may be revealed by the way we live and speak and act.

Saturday September 19th

Luke 8:4-15

With 8:4-8 a new section of Luke's Gospel commences with a focus on the Word of God. This parable comes from Mark 4:1-9 and the big difference is that while Mark has a focus on the farmer, for Luke the key thing is the sowing of the seed, a ministry that is carried out by Jesus (the farmer) and which is of such great importance to the Church of all times. As we see in the explanation in verses 11-15, the Word of God can yield a hundredfold in its crop. In the parable the crop yields its fruit despite the many obstacles and the story unfolds with problem after problem being presented. It is helpful to remember in this story that in Palestine the sowing of the seed was carried out before the ploughing of the field. The seed is cast widely by the farmer, then ploughed in to be left for the rains to come. There was no selective farming and no careful scientific sowing to make sure that every seed is planted only in those places where it has the highest chance of succeeding in growing. It grows where it lands and every corner of the garden has an opportunity of having the seed growing in it. They sow and wait for the rains to come.

In the explanation of the parable we see clearly that for Luke the mission of the Church will be carried out in all kinds of adverse and unresponsive environments. This does mean that the Word is not only to be sown when the situation is the best for growth. Christians cannot pick and choose the easiest moments for preaching the Word, for standing up for their faith and for living out the Gospel demands. Just because the world will not listen does not give Christians an excuse for keeping their ministry to their own comfortable "gardens". The seed has to get in among the thorns, run the risk of being eaten by the birds and cooked by the sun. It has to be scattered even on those well worn paths where the seed has never before had a chance of taking root. Why bother? Because the yield depends not on the farmer. The seed itself has a dynamism and a power that will guarantee results in God's own time and in God's own way. What has to happen first is that the seed has to be sown. The Gospel has to be lived. The rest is up to God. The rain will come and the seed will grow and it is at harvest time that there will be a sorting out with the crop being placed in barns and the weeds burned. The point raised by the parable is that in every life of faith there are areas of thinking and behaving which are obstacles to the Gospel taking root. These need to be removed.

Prayer

Loving Father, reassure us of your presence in our Christian lives so that we faithfully live out our lives of discipleship in good times and in bad times.

Friday September 18th

Luke 8:1-3

We see once again that for Luke it is important to show Jesus wandering around from town to town preaching the Good News. As he goes about with his mission, he takes with him the disciples and in this case the women. The whole of Galilee is shown as being exposed to what he is teaching and doing. In the next chapter this understanding is going to be built on as Jesus sends the Twelve out to carry on this same ministry of witnessing to the Kingdom. What is interesting to note is the role of the women in this work. This is different to the understanding of the Rabbis and possibly to that of John (see John 4:27). Jesus is shown as curing women, he travels with them and seems to mix freely with them and has some of them among his followers. They are presented as ministering to the needs of Jesus and the Twelve. They support this ministry from their own resources and at least one of them is married. These women will be with him at the cross (23:49) and the empty tomb (24:10). They will also appear in Acts 1:14 as being with the Twelve and Mary the mother of Jesus after the resurrection awaiting the coming of the promised Holy Spirit. They are shown throughout the Gospel and in Acts as ministering to both Jesus and the Twelve.

This is an important note in the Gospel in that it shows how Jesus breaks with the prevalent Jewish custom of the time by bringing women into the scope of his ministry. They are not among the Twelve but have a clear and distinctive ministry within the Twelve. This would have been almost unheard of at the time. Women were kept at a distance and looked upon with some suspicion because of the ease with which they could make men ritually unclean. In fact, the women Jesus encounters in the Gospel are either pagans, sinners or are sick (with illnesses that could harm him ritually). Jesus cuts straight across this understanding by reaching out to all of them with love, even going to the point of eating with them, touching them and offering them salvation. This is a part of how Luke is presenting the meaning of the incarnation, something that will later on be picked up in the Acts of the Apostles. In Christ, nothing is unclean and no one is unworthy of the love of God. It does not matter who we are or what we have done, there is a place for us in the Kingdom and ministry to be fulfilled. What now makes us whole and acceptable to God is Christ's life within.

Prayer

19

Merciful Lord, though we are unworthy you love us and you sent us your Son that we may be saved and have life. Help us to welcome all peoples and show them your healing love.

Friday September 11th

Luke 6:39-42

The disciples are called to be guides to the people but they are not to be "blind guides". They must first of all be able to see the path of Christ. They are to be the teachers of the Christian community and therefore have an extra responsibility to avoid spiritual blindness (presumably this reflects the situation in Luke's own Christian community). In the Rabbinic literature we have an interesting example of Rabbi Tarphon saying "If someone said, 'Cast out the speck from your eye', the answer would come back, 'Cast out the log from yours'".

The image that Jesus uses is intentionally powerful and brings out what Jesus wants very clearly. Remember that Luke is using this teaching of Jesus to address needs in his own community. He knows how easy it is for people to be critical and judgemental of others. What he is putting forward is an understanding of membership of the Christian community that rests on an honest self-appraisal of a person's position before God. It is only when we can acknowledge our own failures, sins and limitations that we will be in a position to be able to understand and help others. This is not about making moral judgements about the conduct of others. It does not mean that we cannot stand in judgement of the actions of someone and say "That is wrong". There is a great deal of pressure in the world, especially in the press, for people to make faith a personal and private thing. Many encourage the Church to "mind your own business" as if somehow the morality of an act depended on the thinking and the conscience of the person acting. The Church has a responsibility to speak out and pronounce moral judgements on what is happening in the world, but she has to do so aware that she speaks as a family which is itself made up of sinners. The Church also speaks from a position of loving the person who is sinning, whatever the sin, and offering to them the mercy and healing of God himself. Christians are not better or worse than anyone else and in our dealings with one another, and in some ways more especially with those outside the Church, we have to avoid any kind of suggestion that we are acting from a position of moral superiority. If we fail in this way, then the words of Jesus come crashing back in our ears: "Hypocrite!". In Hebrew thought as well as that of the Greeks, this word meant the "pretender" or "the one who is only acting a part".

Prayer

12

All-merciful Father, we come to you acknowledging our own imperfections and our sins, conscious that in your love for us you will welcome us and offer us your divine healing. May we in turn reach out to others with the same sense of love.

Saturday September 12th

Luke 6:43-49

The teaching of the disciples continues. No one is able to lead a person to good behaviour just through criticism. A person will be looked at in the light of how they live and act. Their deeds will speak first of all and this will bear witness to the true inner self. It is no use pretending that we are good, if the evil of our lives will be seen in what we are doing. The false teachers and false prophets are like bad fruit. This story is found in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 7:16-20) though Luke has added verse 45 (see Matt 12:33-35 for his version). The point is that just as it would be sheer folly to go looking among thorns and prickles for some edible fruit, so it would be pointless expecting to find good fruit being produced by someone who has evil in their heart. Clearing up the heart is the best way to ensure that good fruit is being produced. This story clearly follows on from the teaching before it and paints a picture of the heart as being a kind of treasury or storehouse for good and for evil. In the book of Sirach we have a saying which is somewhat similar: "As the fruit of the tree reveals the skill of its grower, so the expression of a man's thought reveals his character". What is observed on the outside is an indication of what is to be found on the inside. When Jesus refers to the heart, he is, in Hebrew fashion, talking about what is going on in the person's mind. The heart is where the thinking, planning and the implementation is carried out.

There are a couple of useful points of reflection. The first is that there seems to be an acceptance on the part of Jesus that we are to produce fruit that is good. Our discipleship is meant to be something that flows out into actions and we could even go so far as to say that without there being edible fruit, there is a questionable discipleship. That is a worry. Fruit, of course, is not for the tree. The fruit is for people to eat or to feed the birds and animals who live on the tree. Faith is not just a gift for the believer. It is meant to bring the fruits of the Kingdom to others who interact with the disciple. The second point that Jesus makes so well is that if we wish our "performance" to improve, we must begin with our hearts. We must grow in our own personal lives of faith and in our own levels of faithfulness before we can expect the Church to grow and to become more effective. This will include the pruning of the parts of lives that are rotten (sin) through confession, reconciliation and penance.

Prayer

Our Father in Heaven, forgive us our sins and strengthen the faith that we have. Make us ever aware of your presence in our lives and clear witnesses of your love and power.

Thursday September 17th

Luke 7:36-50

The story is clear in its message. Repentance, the forgiveness of sins and in the end, salvation has come to a notorious sinner. This has come about because of the faith and love that she has shown to Jesus. She receives forgiveness because of the love that she shows. It is also possible to read the story in such a way as to mean that the woman has already experienced forgiveness by God and she comes and acts the way she does towards Jesus as a sign of the joy that she has from being forgiven of her sins. Jesus is shown as defending the sinful woman against the criticism of the Pharisees who would keep their distance lest her sins make them unclean. He is also clearly showing a link between having one's sins forgiven and expressing this salvation through acts of love. This story shows two theological themes that are important for Luke: salvation and peace. It is because she has had her sins forgiven by Jesus that she is saved and a consequence of this salvation is the great gift of Peace Jesus brings from the Father.

The Roman Empire of the time of the Gospel enjoyed what was called the Pax Augusta, the peace that was brought about through the rule of the Roman Emperor. In Luke, the peace offered by Jesus stands in contrast to this political stability. Luke has in mind the Old Testament concept of "Shalom" which is a God-given gift. "Shalom" does not mean an absence of war or violence, it brings about images of harmony, order, security, patience and love. This is the Peace that would be brought about by the Messiah and was something passionately prayed for by the Hebrews (see Isa 48:18; Ezek 34:25-29; Ps 29:11; Jer 16:5). This peace, for Luke, was only available through Jesus Christ (Acts 10:36). We see in our story here how peace works. It cannot be established by human means, through human ways. When the Pharisees observe this sinner they cast her out, keep her at bay, judge her, find her wanting and acknowledge that she is not as good as they are. Such actions, common in our communities, will never bring about peace. Jesus brings about peace in the life of the woman by offering her forgiveness. Even though she was a sinner, he allowed her to touch him (thus risking being defiled) to remind her that she was loved. By acting in this manner, Jesus brought to that woman a lasting peace. True Peace can only be obtained through forgiving hearts and unconditional love.

Prayer

God of Shalom, we thank you for the gift of Peace and Life that you give to your faithful people. Help us by your grace to reach out to all people with your forgiving love.

Wednesday September 16th

Luke 7:31-35

In this short passage Luke continues to explore the nature of the relationship between the ministry of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus. He offers an observation on the way that the people of the time view Jesus and his activities. There are two groups of children sitting in the marketplace. They seem to be sulking and refusing to play at either the wedding or the funeral. They do not seem to know what they want. If the message is good (a wedding) they refuse to dance. If the message is harsh and filled with sorrow (a funeral) they were refusing to cry and show any sorrow. This is applied to the ministries of John and Jesus. John appeared as an ascetic, living in the desert and abstaining from food and drink. This asceticism was seen as being unreasonable by the people and the demands too harsh. Jesus came along and he lived a normal life. He was not an ascetic and he proclaimed a Kingdom that was made manifest in the ordinary daily lives of people. The Jewish leaders found this unacceptable as well because it was "too ordinary". It is helpful to read this in the light of Deuteronomy 21:20 which provides a broader view of the message. This is then further explained by the comments that the problem was that he was a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

In this story Wisdom is made into a person who sends out messengers into the world who are rejected by "this generation". It is rejected because it is crazy, impossible and demanding too much of people. It is a message that inconveniences and challenges the world, that breaks down individualism and which makes the disciple and believer stand out as being different. That is why "the world" sits back and mocks and laughs and at times persecutes the servants of Wisdom. Luke here is reassuring his Church that the message of Jesus may not be wise in the manner of the world, but it is Truth, and Truth is not always welcome. This is very much the case in our own time, where being a Christian can easily be an embarrassment and make demands on us that are nonsensical to the rest of the people in our community. This is one reason why there is a decline in Christian observance: the price is too high for some, the sacrifice too great. For others, the consequences of not believing in the Gospel message are painful, as can be seen in our societies. But discipleship demands a commitment of faith and a close relationship with God. Without it we will wilt and fail.

Prayer

All-wise Father, source of Goodness and Truth, we ask that through the graces we receive from your Holy Spirit, we may be able to know what it is you want us to be doing in our lives.

Sunday September 13th

Mark 8:27-38

Here we move into a journey sequence as Jesus covers the hundred or so miles to Jerusalem. The main question being tackled by the disciples is the one of "Who is Jesus?". Slowly and painfully they battle to understand Jesus, a struggle that began in Mark from the moment they left their nets to follow him. They are shown as going through a series of highs and lows, from recognition of Jesus as the Son of God to their abandoning him and misunderstanding his mission and person. The miracles and exorcisms are all signs and his teachings make it clear that there is something "special" about him. We, the readers of the Gospel, have the advantage of having it set out for us by Mark (1:1-13), something that the disciples do not have. We journey with them in their struggle of faith. 8:27-30 is central to the Gospel, with all actions up until this point helping to illuminate the answer of Peter. From this point onwards the narrative will move towards the fulfilment of Jesus' ministry as Messiah on the cross. It is clear that the people of the time understood that Jesus was different and that there was something holy about him. But that is not enough. Jesus is more. He is the Messiah, though it is only in 8:31-33 that the extraordinary nature of that messianic ministry is brought out. In Peter's reply the title "Christ" appears for the first time since 1:1 (though it is clear that many of the demons driven out by Jesus know who he is and have to be silenced) for it is only brought out into the open now by Peter. Throughout the Gospel, Mark presents those who should know that Jesus is the Christ as travelling along a journey of revelation and discovery.

It is often hard to appreciate that Jesus was not sent to be a messiah who fits neatly into our expectations. We are not sure just what kind of messiah the apostles wanted, but we do know they were not happy with a dead one and so they argued with him (8:32-33). What is behind this is the very human quality of believing that we know better than God. It is the same sentiment that led Adam to eat of the tree expressly forbidden of him by God. Adam thought he knew better and ended up out of the garden. Peter could not see how God could bring salvation by the death of Jesus. It just did not make sense to him and so could not happen. Jesus, in a not too gentle a manner, says to him to "let go and let God be the kind of God he wants to be in our lives". God is quite capable of bringing times of light and salvation out of even those that appear to be the darkest and most hopeless. But it has to be his way and not ours.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, strengthen our faith so that we resist the temptations to shape our religion into one of our own making. Help us to follow and serve you in the manner you want.

Monday September 14th

Luke 7:1-10

Luke now moves on to a series of stories which will focus in on the kinds of receptions that Jesus received. There is a long tradition that links this story with the story found in John 4:46-53. The key to the story is to be found in the faith of the Centurion, a Gentile. In some ways it has clear links with the story of the cure of the Canaanite woman's daughter which is not to be found in Luke (Matthew 15:21ff). We can see this in the words of Jesus "not even in Israel have I found faith like this". There are a number of important parts to this story. The Jewish elders tell Jesus that the Centurion "deserves" some help while the Centurion himself says that he is "unworthy". These two statements are put to Jesus and stand in contrast to the observations of the Lord. The criterion that is required before healing can take place is that of faith. The worthiness or unworthiness of the Centurion has nothing to do with the actions of Jesus. We can presume that "worthiness" for the Jewish elders would have meant an assessment according to the Law (he seems to have been a "God-fearer" [Acts 10:2]), and unworthiness for the Roman soldier would have been because he was a Gentile. Jesus saw things differently.

Jesus was presented as going to the house of the Centurion to heal the child, an action that would have rendered him "unclean". The soldier would have known this and acknowledges that he is unworthy to have Jesus pay this price, hence the request for healing by Word. It suggests that what Jesus saw before him was not a Gentile, but a wounded human being, someone in need of salvation. He reaches out to him in his pain and his suffering and offers comfort and consolation. The elders, when they present him to Jesus, try to justify why Jesus should help — because he is good to the Synagogue. But that means nothing to Jesus. He sees someone in need of God's mercy. This in turn is the message that is given to all disciples and this is what all believers are called to "do" to others and is the meaning of "pick up your cross". When we see other people, whom do we see before us? Do we see a child of God? Someone for whom Jesus died on the cross? Our brother or sister in Christ? A child of God to whom we owe love, respect, forgiveness and compassion. How easy it is to see "Gentiles" (particularly if they are a pain and a nuisance) and dismiss them, forget them or ignore them. This is not the way of Jesus here.

Prayer

Loving Father, we are created in your own image and likeness and Jesus came and shared our humanity, thus blessing all people on earth. Help us to love and forgive others as you do.

Tuesday September 15th

Luke 7:11-17

By placing this story here in his Gospel, Luke is able to continue to paint a picture of the power and authority of Jesus. He has already healed at a distance by the power of his Word, and now we will see that this power extends also into the realms of the dead, as he raises someone who has been prepared for burial. In 7:22, in reply to questions by the disciples of John the Baptist, Jesus will say that "the dead are being raised to life". Luke is illustrating this with the story of the son of the widow of Nain (and again in 8:40-56). There are many links to the story of the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath by Elijah (1 Kings 17:8-24). In verse 15 and again in verse 16 there are clear signs that Luke is using the prophetic story to present Jesus as Elijah come back to life, which was one of the great expectations of the Messiah. Jesus is clearly more powerful as he raises the child with a Word while Elijah had to act three times before the restoration to life was achieved. One interesting note here is that there is no mention of faith being involved. He does not check to see if the woman believes nor is he responding to a specific request by the woman or her family. He raises the son because of his compassion on seeing the widow taking her only son for burial. The people respond to this by acknowledging Jesus as "a great prophet" who has appeared among them. God has listened to the cries of his people and responded.

This story is written in such a way as to make clear the depth of sorrow on the part of the woman and the hopelessness of her situation. The boy is the "only son" of the widow and so would be her sole means of support. His death leaves open the whole question of her own survival and well-being and not just her grief. The boy is not asleep but dead and we are made aware of this by the description of the funeral bier and the funeral procession heading off out of town to the cemetery. You could not find a more desperate situation; nor could we imagine anything more hopeless. And it is into this kind of picture that Jesus walks and he responds, not to her faith, but to her sorrow. He has power over life and death, and he who will be raised from the grave on the third day, now raises the dead boy from the grave. In doing so he presents himself as the-one-who-gives-life. What he did for that woman is an offer to all of us. He offers us hope and light in the most desperate and darkest of our human situations, not because we are worthy, but because he loves us.

Prayer

Lord and Father of life, we thank you for the gifts that you have given to us and we pray that through the power of your graces we can use them fully that others may know your love.