

**Tuesday March 2nd**

**Matthew 23:1-12**

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

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

*Prayer*

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



# **BIBLE STUDIES**

## **FEBRUARY 2010**

**+ 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)

### Monday March 1st

### Luke 6:36-38

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

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

#### *Prayer*

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

## **Sunday February 28th**

## **Luke 9:28b-36**

To understand properly this section it needs to be read from at least verse 18, for the teaching on discipleship provides the background to the whole story. For Luke, the transfiguration takes place while Jesus is praying (as does the heavenly appearance at his baptism — 3:21-22). Why are Moses and Elijah present? It could be that they represent the Law and the Prophets who have ascended to heaven, or figures who were to return just prior to the end of the world. Peter's suggestion about the tents is wrong for two reasons. The first is that he seems to want to capture and almost institutionalize the glory of God. The second is that he places Jesus on an equal footing with Moses and Elijah. The voice from heaven clears up both of these pictures by claiming Jesus as the Son of God and by telling them that the proper relationship to him is one of hearing him. They were not to try and put him into a tent but to listen to what he had to say and obey him. Jesus discusses his coming Passion and death with the heavenly figures, thus making it clear that they are to be understood within the context of his glory that is now revealed and as something that is a part of a divine plan. It will come about as no surprise and will not simply be something that evil men have achieved. God has allowed it to happen. By linking Jesus here with Moses and Elijah Luke is making it clear that he sees Jesus as a prophet and no mere prophet among prophets. He is the prophet foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15.

It is quite significant that Peter wants to build a shelter for Jesus, Moses and Elijah and stay up there on the mountain with them. When we think of the difficulties and dangers that face them down in Galilee, the chances of being rejected and put to death, the thought of staying up there on the top of the mountain becomes very attractive indeed. Of course they would have been blessed by that kind of arrangement for they were there with Jesus. But it was the Father who squashed that line of thinking. Jesus was sent for everyone and the only reason for calling the Disciples was so that the Gospel could be taken out — out into Galilee where so many problems were to be found. We are no different. We are not called to be Church so that we can spend most of our time worrying about ourselves and looking after our Christian brothers and sisters. We are called to go out and take the Gospel message to those who do not know Jesus and avoid the temptation to lock him away in our churches, our creeds and religion. Our call is to take him out into the Galilees of today.

### ***Prayer***

Lord God almighty, speak to us through your Holy Spirit so that we might be renewed in enthusiasm for proclaiming the Gospel.

## **Monday February 1st**

## **Mark 5:1-20**

This story of the possessed man is an important one in Mark's Gospel and it is worth highlighting certain key points. The description of the man who is possessed is extensive because Mark is pinpointing what happens when a man's life is taken over by a power other than God. This is not how he wants us to be living but it is the ultimate consequence of the abandonment of God. The man's life is in ruins and he is despised and rejected by his community. When challenged the demon gives his name as Legion, perhaps because he was many in number or perhaps because he was trying to give the impression that he was all-powerful. But for the people of the time knowing someone's name meant having power over them and so it is the first step in an exorcism. The demon says he knows the name of Jesus which he suggests makes it impossible for Jesus to control him. In reply Jesus demands the name of the demon. The climax of the story is when the demons are sent into the pigs which are then drowned. The real meaning of this part of the story is uncertain but probably it is meant to show that the ultimate desire of Satan is the destruction of man. This is thwarted by Jesus but the demons' goal is then carried out by the death of the swine. The certain end brought about by sin is death but it is an end which can be changed by an encounter with Jesus. The recognition by people outside of Jewish circles will become more central to Mark's plot from 7:24 onward.

Calvin saw in this story an attempt by Mark to show the contrast between the condition of the possessed man and man who is made in the image of God. Thus this tragic figure represents all men and women who are caught up in the demands and suffering of temptation and sin and a world which is ruled over by drives and passions other than those of God. In Calvin's words we "...wander about naked, torn and disfigured till he restores us to soundness of mind". Sin and sinful ways change who we are as individuals and as a community and that change has consequences with which we have to live. The call is to return to Jesus and live lives of faithful discipleship. Jesus does have the power to restore us to be the individuals and communities God wants us to be. While Calvin may have been a little pessimistic, his overall challenge is for us to examine just what it is that directs our lives.

### ***Prayer***

Lord Jesus, remove from our lives all that leads us away from you and those tendencies, weaknesses and sins which cause us so much anguish and pain. Restore us to our lives of discipleship so that we may know your many blessings.



**Friday February 26th**

**Matthew 5:20-26**

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

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

*Prayer*

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

**Wednesday February 3rd**

**Mark 6:1-6**

Mark's Church community was facing a time of persecution and difficulty and part of the reason for his writing the Gospel is to reassure them and to strengthen their faith and hope. In this story we have the disciples following Jesus to his home town as it is important that they now experience what he is to go through. There they see him rejected because the people there could not look through his "ordinariness". How could he possibly be doing these things, because he is just the son of a carpenter and the illegitimate son of Mary (at that time no Jew was called the son of his mother except as an insult of this kind). Closed to the possibility of God working in unique ways they rejected the divine Son of God. Note that Mark does not say they stopped him from working miracles. He still cured a few sick but the point was made. Miracles are the result of a faith inspired acceptance of God working in the way he wants to work but God will always continue to call and invite faith responses. In putting this story here Mark seems to be putting a timely warning in place. People have seen evil spirits, illnesses, the forces of nature and even death crumble before the power of Jesus. Mark now redresses what may seem a feeling that there is nothing that can resist the march of the Kingdom. But we see here that the biggest obstacle to the Gospel is the inability of people to rise to the challenge to repent and believe. They are caught up in the certainty of their own understanding of the ways of God.

This story is followed by the call and mission of the Twelve and they are clearly related. Unbelief and rejection are going to be the conditions in which the Christian mission is going to be carried out. As the Messiah was rejected so the disciples will be rejected and the message they proclaim will fall on deaf and at times hostile ears. This is why a personal faith that is deep and enlivening is so important because it helps us to live lives of discipleship when so many around reject what we hold as sacred and when it seems that the Church is coming to an end. It has always been like this. One of the comforts that we have from this story is that even when the entire town rejected Jesus, he could still heal a few people. In the end, faith will have its own way if only we persist. What matters is not what the world thinks and does, but how we respond to the Gospel.

*Prayer*

Heavenly Father, enliven your grace within us that we may always find your Son at work in all we do and in all that happens to us. May we be ever open to him working within us in new ways and seek to share his life and his grace with others by the way we live.

## Thursday February 4th

## Mark 6:7-13

Mark has been leading up to this point for some time: the call to be fishers of men (1:17), the call of Levi (2:14) and then the call of the Twelve with a specific ministry in mind (3:13). Here Jesus has authorized them to be his delegates in the world, which is important in the world at that time for they considered the person who was sent to be the same as the person who sent him. As they are on the mission of Jesus the demands that they take nothing with them are essential for it is now God's responsibility to provide all that they need to fulfil their mission. They are to go out trusting in the God who called them just as the people of Israel had to trust that God would feed them and guide them on their journey during the Exodus. But God's protection did not mean they would be universally accepted. They would have to face rejection, just as the master had endured it. The shaking off of the dust was a pious custom performed by Jews returning from pagan lands. They would carefully remove all the dust from their clothes and in doing so proclaim that they were leaving behind the pagan ways and the judgement that would fall on them. In rejecting the message proclaimed by the disciples, the villages were aligning themselves with those people who were opposed to the Gospel. In rejecting the Twelve they would be rejecting Jesus and in accepting the Twelve they would be hearing God's own voice in them.

The Gospel message was never meant to be for the salvation of the individual person. It is a message of hope for all peoples and those who responded to it undertook to share it with others. All Christians are therefore called to be missionaries, people who are sent out to live the Gospel in such a way that the people with whom they work and among whom they live can come to know the goodness and mercy of God. Mother Therese once told me that when I die and appear at the gates of heaven, St Peter will not be interested in what I had or had not done. He will ask one question: "Who have you brought with you?". That is not a bad summary of what it means to be a disciple. One of the key words in all the Gospels is the word that means "go out". The only reason Jesus had for calling the Twelve and for gathering disciples was so that they could be sent out to share the message. That is the mark of a true Church. If it is not missionary, then it is not Church.

### *Prayer*

Lord God, we thank you for our baptismal calling and for the gifts with which you fill our lives. May we be ever open to your Spirit that at all times our lives can give a clear witness to your loving presence among all people.

## Thursday February 25th

## Matthew 7:7-12

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

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

### *Prayer*

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

**Wednesday February 24th**

*St Matthias*

**John 15:9-17**

The section begins with Jesus linking his own ministry and relationship with the Father to that of the disciples. The Father loved him and sent him out into the world and it is this same love that is passed on to the disciples. This love is clearly defined in the following verse as being the fulfilment of the commandments of Jesus. We do not have these commandments spelt out in John in the same way that we find them in the other Gospels. The commandments of Jesus are collected in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7) and its equivalent in Luke chapter 6. The commandments of the Father are not the ten commandments of the Old Testament, but the willingness of the Son to humble himself and "pitch his tent" among men. It is important for the disciples to understand their new relationship with the Father, because it means that they will be sharing in the Joy of the Kingdom of God. It is a time long hoped for by pious Jews and long spoken about by the prophets of old. All that they had spoken about is now possible in Jesus and so it is right that the disciples are filled with joy. John now goes on to further define this commandment of Jesus, summing it up (in a way not unlike some of the Pauline summaries of the Law) in the commandment of Love. This is not some gushy emotional feeling, but a love that is best summed up by a willingness to lay down one's life for another person. This is what Jesus is about to do at the end of the supper (this scene is taken from the Last Supper address to his disciples), lay down his life for sinners, and is what he expects his disciples to do after he has returned to the Father.

The sting in this story is at the end where Jesus tells his disciples that they were chosen by him for a specific role — to go out and to bear fruit. Being a disciple is not about gaining eternal salvation for oneself, or about living in the blessings of the Kingdom. Both of those things are a part of the picture. The reason God calls people to a life of discipleship is so that they can go out into the world and bear fruit, a way of saying, bring to others the blessings of the Kingdom of God. What kind of fruit are we called to bear? The answer is again in the Sermon on the Mount. The kind of world that is described there is to be built by the lifestyles of believers. It is our responsibility to actively set about making those things a reality. It can be worrying to read through the Beatitudes and to ask ourselves just how many of these are we making happen in our world.

***Prayer***

Father and life-giver, we thank you for our callings to be disciples. Make us truly faithful in living out our vocations.

**Friday February 5th**

**Mark 6:14-29**

Herod Antipas (a son of Herod the Great) was the ruler of Galilee between 4BC and 39AD. He was totally insensitive to Jewish sensibilities, marrying Herodias and then building his capital on the site of an old cemetery. Jesus did not begin his ministry in Galilee until after the death of John and so people would not have known much about him. John was seen as a prophet like the prophets of old and was then killed. Jesus appears and to the people it must have seemed that John had risen from the dead and that Jesus was the anointed end time prophet for whom they had been waiting. The Elijah reference goes back to John who spoke of "one who is to come" and again goes back to Old Testament expectations. Herod's own concern arose from the belief that just before judgement is carried out the dead will rise again and so it is with great fear that he sees in Jesus a resurrected John. The story of the death of John seems to bring with it a hint of what is going to happen to the "second John". If the religious and political leaders were unable to cope with the person and ministry of John, they were never going to be able to accept Jesus and he hints that his disciples may well face the same threat.

One thing that is clear from all the Gospels is the uncertainty about the identity of Jesus. There was so much expected of God and people were eagerly looking forward to God stepping in and acting that it seems strange that they could not see in Jesus the promised Messiah. Perhaps it was because they had narrowed down their expectations to such a degree that when God revealed himself in a way different to these expectations they could not see him. They knew how God should act, how he should save them, how he should be acting in their lives. But when God came in his own way, at his own time doing things as he wanted, they could not see and accept. That is a huge problem throughout the Gospels. Even though Jesus preached with authority, drove out demons and healed the sick, he was not their idea of a messiah and so they kept on searching. This is a real danger for all believers to be looking for a messiah who will suit us and our needs. Herod would not accept a messiah who demanded he change his way of living. We face similar temptations today.

***Prayer***

Lord God, take away the blindness that makes us want to force you to conform to our expectations. Help us to be ever open to your presence that we may allow you to be God as you seek to be God, rather than making you into a God of our own shaping. May we be ever grateful and seek to share your love with others.

**Saturday February 6th**

**Mark 6:30-34**

This is the only place in Mark where the Twelve are called Apostles and it is an appropriate title because the Greek word means "those who were sent out". They went out and have now returned to Jesus. Jesus takes them to a "lonely place". This is more than just a place where there are no people. In the Bible God had regularly provided his people with rest in the wilderness. This is the theme of the Exodus where God refreshed his people in the desert. This is both the promise and hope of each generation and now with Jesus we find the "new Moses" leading the "new people of God" into the wilderness to be fed by God. The preaching of Isaiah and Jeremiah are both peppered with promises of this "rest within the wilderness" and that is what we have here. What more could the disciples search for? They are with the Messiah, together in a community and fed and nourished by God. This meal stands in contrast to the meal in the palace of Herod and continues to highlight the great differences between "the world" into which the disciples have been sent and the ways of the Kingdom which are built on humble service. The problem for them is to live in such a way that it is clear that their feeding depends on God's love and not on their own worthiness.

The mission of the disciples could not have been an easy one. True, they were able to preach the Gospel and perform some miracles but there would also have been a fair amount of opposition. They would have been rejected in some towns and there would have been some who would have been keen to take the line of Herod and see them follow John to an untimely death. It is never easy living out a life of discipleship especially when they had to depend only on God for their needs. Being faithful is easy when there are few demands and all goes smoothly. The real test is when more and more is asked of us and when we are pressed to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel. This is why we need time with Jesus in the wilderness. We need to be able to "retreat" into times of prayer each day so that we can find divine reassurance and comfort, so that we can be fed with grace and receive from God the help and encouragement that we need.

*Prayer*

Heavenly Father, as you led your people Israel out into the desert where you fed them, cared for them and led them to their new home in Canaan, be with us as we take up our calls to serve the Gospel. Reveal to us your presence in our lives that we may always live in hope, be comforted by faith and know your love.

**Tuesday February 23rd**

**Matthew 6:7-15**

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

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

*Prayer*

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

**Monday February 22nd**

**Matthew 25:31-46**

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

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

***Prayer***

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

**Sunday February 7th**

**Luke 5:1-11**

*Fr Robert Newton*

Sometimes we fail to remember that Jesus' calling of the disciples was a calling to a second career. Lives were firmly established, families had deep roots, and all of a sudden here comes this preacher, Jesus, and he turns things upside-down. Think about Simon Peter. Simon Peter probably had parents that needed care. We know that his wife had a mother with a history of illness. What about the children? They probably came bounding in from school asking, "Where is Daddy?". "He's gone again! He's out running around the countryside with that itinerant preacher." Think about Simon's wife. She fell in love and married a successful fisherman, and all of a sudden, she's the apostle's wife. No wonder people are tempted not to respond fully to the call of Christ which is given to each of us. Why become vulnerable to an experience that could change your very life? Why become vulnerable to an experience that could affect the way you spend your time, energy, and money? Why be vulnerable to an experience that will cause you to reorder your priorities? Why listen to the call of God? It is one thing hearing the call of God, but it's a breathtaking experience accepting the call of God.

It was a breathtaking experience for Simon Peter. He had been fishing all night and had not caught a single fish. Jesus said, "Go back, put your net out". Jesus was telling them to do that during the daytime! You can just imagine Simon Peter nudging one of his friends and saying, "Can you believe this? We're professional fishermen, and he is a carpenter". Simon Peter responded, "Nevertheless, if you say so, Master, that's what I will do". He did what Jesus told him to do and lo and behold, he caught more fish than he had ever seen before! He got his friends to help load both boats until they were ready to sink. That was a miraculous experience and it happened in the ordinary experiences of life. God does that. Notice that Jesus did not reject Simon. Jesus already knew that Simon was unworthy, but that had nothing to do with it whatsoever. What made the difference was that Simon became aware of his unworthiness. It was Simon's awareness of his unworthiness that equipped him for service, not the fact that he was a sinner or not a sinner, not the fact that he had great gifts or that he was an emotional person. Simon's awareness of his own unworthiness equipped him to be a servant and that drove him to his knees as a sinner lifted up and as a servant of the Christ.

***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, may we have the courage to respond to your call and see that your miraculous presence is amongst us, even in the ordinary day to day mundane parts of our lives.

## **Monday February 8th**

## **Mark 6:53-56**

This short text should be read within its setting. We have seen Jesus rejected and misunderstood by a whole range of people. His home town of Nazareth rejected him. Herod killed the Baptist who announced his arrival and then could not see in him God's Messiah. The disciples who were called and chosen by him panicked in the boat when the storm came up because their faith was not enough. Then there were the Pharisees who were already at odds with him and who are about to be further condemned. Those who you would think were in a position to know better could not recognize him...but the crowds of poor and needy people did. The outcasts of society, those who were seen as rejected by God, came to him in faith. Jesus will say later that it was for the sinner that he was sent and only those who know their need and humble themselves will know life in the Kingdom. The series of miracles around the lake, which began in 6:31, now concludes on its western beaches. Unlike the people around the town of Nazareth, the people in this area are clearly people of faith and come to Jesus believing in his ability to cure them. The results are spectacular and many people are cured of all that ailed them. It is important for Mark's message that Jesus is presented as the one sent by God to those in need.

It is amazing just how often this theme comes up in the Bible. We see time and time again people unwilling to allow God to be God in the way he wants to be God. We see them thinking that they can organize things better than God can. It was the sin of Adam and Eve and we see it thrown up against Jesus. It is so easy to move God to the periphery of our lives, to give him the "leftovers" of our time, our energies and our resources. This is partly because it is all too easy to think that we can run our own lives and manage on our own. We have an understanding of God that we have conveniently created ourselves. One that will not mind if we allow other things to control our decision making and our lives. The Gospel command is different. The model for us here are the poor and needy who are content to just allow the shadow of Jesus to pass over them. It is only in need that we can find God's grace and life at work in us. Otherwise we are on our own.

### ***Prayer***

Almighty God, we acknowledge you as Lord of all in our lives and pray that we can humble ourselves so that all that we do, all that we think and all that we say may be under the guidance and light of your grace. Help us to be humble enough to realize our need for you.

## **Sunday February 21st**

## **Luke 4:1-13**

The passage opens up with a number of clear and important references to key points in the Old Testament. Jesus' ancestry has been traced back to Adam and having established his credentials in the first three chapters, Luke now has him going out to work (3:23). His ministry, like that of the prophets of old, begins under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He is "full of the Spirit" and "led by the Spirit" and so clearly all that will follow in the Gospel is under divine patronage. Like the story of Israel of old, the story of the new Israel (the Church), begins in the desert. It was during the Exodus that Israel came to know Yahweh as God and there in the desert entered into a covenant with him. Luke (like the other Gospel writers) uses this link with Moses to help his congregation understand what Jesus is doing. This link with the Exodus is made stronger by the reference to the forty days. There in the desert he did battle with the devil. This encounter is important for Luke's theology (as the story in Mark 3:20-27 shows). Before Jesus is able to carry out his mission he must first of all overcome the power of Satan. In fact, the rest of the Gospel is all about how Jesus enables believers to break free. In him, the defeat of Satan is guaranteed. There are three temptations. The first (stones to bread) was to take control of his own life and not rely on the Father to feed him. The second was a temptation to see someone else other than his Father as God and the third (jumping off the Temple) was a temptation to try and force God's hand, forcing him to do what Jesus wanted. But Jesus rejected all three and Satan "departed", though not finally (4:13).

The third temptation is one worth pondering. What Satan is really saying is that Jesus is the Son of God. He has become a man in obedience to his Father's will. The question he asks is "Now, what does the Father do for you in return?". It is a subtle suggestion that somehow God now owes something to Jesus. Surely Jesus has done enough and he deserves some recognition by God! Satan is asking him to tempt God. If God was really God then he would prove it to Jesus, thus reassuring him that he was on the right track. How often that is a temptation in Christian thinking and prayer. We think of all of the things that we have done in our lives of discipleship and believe that God will shower blessings upon us. Jesus reminds us that the reward for serving God is to be able to serve God. God does not have to prove anything to us.

### ***Prayer***

Father in heaven, we thank you for calling us to be your disciples. Help us to serve you faithfully and generously and to seek no reward other than the joy of serving you.

## **Saturday February 20th**

## **Luke 5:27-32**

In Judaism the sinner was someone who was cut off from God and isolated from their community. As sin made them unclean and this could be passed on to others, they were not welcome in the communities of the pious. In order to make themselves clean again they had to go through the processes set out in the law, offering the necessary sacrifices and enduring the rites of purification. It was a shock then when Jesus went out and called public sinners to be his disciples. He proclaimed by word and deed that he had come to save sinners, not to condemn them. St Paul says it so well, that Jesus died for us "while we were sinners". Prior to this, freedom from sin depended on the Law and how closely it was observed. Now salvation comes directly from God through Jesus and sin does not isolate people from God's love and mercy. Through union with Jesus (symbolized by his eating with sinners) salvation is gained. The approach of the Pharisees was based on Leviticus 10:10 "You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean". From this position came their idea of salvation by separation. Jesus came along, and in episodes like this, proclaimed a message of salvation by association. He mixed with sinners and in the mixing brought salvation.

Important in this story are the words of Jesus that he had come to call sinners "to repentance". The gift of salvation, of forgiveness, and of a place in the Kingdom of God were no more than invitations. They were free offers by God but it is up to the individual believer to take the steps necessary to make them realities in their lives. Jesus comes to sinners, but for them to enjoy the blessings he offers they must first of all repent. That word means more than just saying "sorry". In its biblical setting it means a reversal in the way we are living, a turning around of our lives. The choice and responsibility rests with the believer. Levi understood this and so he "left everything and followed Jesus". There is a cost and those who wish to be disciples must make choices in their lives. Some things will have to be left out and life cannot go on as normal. Lent is the time when we re-evaluate our response to this invitation from God. We need to begin by acknowledging that we are failing, that there are areas that need to be renewed, and then go out and take the necessary action. Will we?

### ***Prayer***

Merciful Father, forgive our sins and failings and set us free from all that stops us from committing our lives to your service. May our works of penance open us to your merciful love and help renew our lives of faith.

## **Tuesday February 9th**

## **Mark 7:1-13**

During the Exile the Law became the centre of Jewish religion and provided the pattern of Jewish life. When the Temple was rebuilt by Ezra the old priesthood was re-established and the priests put back into their former places of authority. But there was also a new breed of lawyers who were laymen and gradually began to grow as interpreters of the Law in opposition to the Temple priesthood. With the coming of the Greeks the priesthood became more and more corrupt and Temple sacrifice was heavily influenced by Greek ways. The Law however held its place and those interpreters of the Law who were outside the priesthood became more powerful. By the time of Jesus they were in open opposition to the priestly Sadducees. Their chief characteristic is their rigorous and rigid interpretations of the Law and their separation from the rest of the community. They were accused of building a fence around the Law, keeping people away from its life and making themselves the ones who dealt out salvation. They thus saw in Jesus someone who could undermine their position by making God accessible to anyone who was ready to repent and believe. This new chapter signals an ominous change in atmosphere in the Gospel as the teaching of Jesus moves him into a position where his views are in stark contrast with the teachings of the current religious orthodoxy. His opponents are the leaders from Jerusalem and the focal point is no longer the Sabbath observance but the laws of purity which will affect the mission to the Gentiles in a way that the Sabbath laws will not. It was important for those first Gentile Christian communities to find support for their position in the ministry of Jesus.

The problem with the Pharisees was that they substituted observance or performance for a personal relationship with God. They had reached the stage where their life with God was to be measured by their observance of the 639 traditions that they taught. This was behind the later question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17). Jesus on the other hand came and preached a law of love, of how we are to live with other people and how we are to live with God. He preached no laws apart from these. There is a danger that we can put all kinds of things between ourselves and God and never get around to entering into the kind of personal relationship that he seeks. He wants us to talk with him, to listen to him and to allow him to guide our lives.

### ***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, comfort us by revealing yourself to us in all the activities of our lives. Help us to find you and to lay our lives open to your grace and healing power.

## **Wednesday February 10th**

## **Mark 7:14-23**

The whole of the section is focussed on the theme of purity and we are made aware of a remarkable difference of approach to the question of these laws. In verses 1-13 Jesus is critical of the Scribes because they undermine the authority of the laws of the Old Testament. In verses 14-23 he himself seems to undermine one of its key provisions. In verses 1-13 Jesus' attack is directed only against the Scribal traditions and in verses 14-23 the Scribes are no longer mentioned and Jesus' criticism is directed instead against the fundamental principle of the Old Testament Law itself. The food laws of Leviticus chapters 11 and 17, and the whole concept of ritual purity which they protected, were of central importance to Jewish culture and identity. They were laws that helped to set them apart from others. In challenging these laws, Jesus is making it possible now for people from all walks of life to share a meal together. Without a change in these laws, it would have been impossible, in the Christian communities, for Jewish and Gentile Christians to share a meal together. We know from Paul that this was a major issue in his communities. Matthew, writing to a more Jewish community of Christians, does not report this story in the same way, preferring to focus instead on the washing of hands and Luke leaves it out altogether from his Gospel. Jesus purifies in a way that observance of the Law can never achieve.

This story should bring to mind many struggles and battles in our own Church. Most religious communities are instinctively conservative and tend to resist any change to fundamental traditional values (usually until there is no other option). Once we recognize the radical implications for the Jewish communal identity it is hardly surprising that there was such a violent reaction to what he was saying. What is at stake is not only who they are as the People of God (a nation set apart) but also the authority of the Law. Jesus is replacing that authority with the authority of his own teaching and person. What the Scribes had lost sight of was that these laws and provisions were not ends in themselves. They were means for helping people to come to know, love and serve Yahweh their God. What could not change was God. What could change was the way he was worshipped and glorified by his followers. We are no different today. What cannot change in the Church are the Gospel demands. What can and must change is how they are understood by each successive generation and how they are expressed in our institutional lives of faith.

### ***Prayer***

11

Father in heaven, keep us ever confident in your presence within our communities of faith, that we fear not change.

## **Friday February 19th**

## **Matthew 9:14-15**

The fasting that the disciples of John have in mind here are probably the private devotional fasts. These were common and according to one early Christian writing, (the Didache 8:1), hypocrites fast on Monday and Thursday. Christians, therefore, should fast on Wednesday and Friday! It is important to note that what is at issue here are not the major fasts associated with the Day of Atonement (cf Lev 16:29-34). Jesus does not seem to have encouraged his disciples to engage in fasting as a spiritual exercise. After the death of Jesus Christians adopted a Jewish pattern of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. Matthew is making it clear that fasting was inappropriate while Jesus was with them but after the ascension it is once again acceptable. For Matthew, the old ways are not over and the community must find ways of binding together the new and the old (9:17). The "old" for him relates to Judaism pre-70AD (the destruction of the Temple): the Hebrew Bible, Israel's history, the Temple, the land, etc. Matthew the Jew proposes the outrageous view that the best way of preserving the traditions of the past is to centre these traditions on Jesus and his teachings. As we know from the teachings in the rest of this passage (9:13), the future of the community will rest in "mercy" and not in "sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). Hence the growing conflict as this novel interpretation would have antagonized and threatened the Pharisees and the establishment settled in Jerusalem. They thought that changing the outward expression of their religion meant undermining their faith.

This is not a question about the Law. It is really a question about the relationship that the believer has with God. Jesus has already taught that he has come, not to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it (5:17-19). The Pharisees made the observance of laws the absolute measure of a person's faithfulness. Jesus is saying that the Law was given by God so that people could come into an intimate relationship with him. The Law was not an absolute. It was a gift of God for a people looking for light in their darkness. This is why the coming of Jesus fulfilled the Law. Believers no longer needed laws written on stone for they had a living link with the Father in Jesus. It is by uniting ourselves with Jesus and by living according to the way he set out that we find the Father. A measure of our faithfulness is now the role that Christ plays in our daily lives. Do we turn to him daily; read his Word and reflect upon it; assess all we do by the Gospel demands of love? That is discipleship.

### ***Prayer***

20

Lord God, we thank you for the many supports, helps and graces you have given us, especially your Son Jesus Christ.

**Thursday February 18th**

**Luke 9:22-25**

Chapter 9 in Luke’s Gospel is an important one in the presentation of the Mission of Jesus. He began with the call and sending out of the Twelve, the misunderstanding of Herod, the miracle of the loaves, Peter’s profession of faith and then today’s Gospel. All these have been piecing together the mystery of Jesus and now we hear him teaching about his mission. He is “destined” to be rejected, to suffer and to die and then God will raise him up on the third day. Nothing in the previous miracles or activities prepares the disciples for this shock. Then, to make it worse, anyone who wants to be a disciple will walk the same road of the cross. This cross-carrying is not a one off act, as Jesus demands that disciples take up their crosses “daily” and daily follow after him. It is the same message that he will repeat again at the end of the chapter and was clearly one that upset his followers. What makes it possible to escape despair from this message is the story of the Transfiguration and the cure of the demoniac which come next. If Jesus has the power that these two stories illustrate, then why would the disciples worry! In this chapter the readers are prepared for what is going to come with the crucifixion and it is a sort of antidote against panicking when they see Jesus at Golgotha. Luke is preparing for the cross by building up the faith and hope levels of his reading communities.

The cross of Jesus was not just the piece of wood on which he died. The cross was his vocation. He was called by the Father to humble himself to become a man, to allow himself to be taken and crucified and by his willing obedience, even when it meant a painful death, to bring salvation to all peoples. This is the cross that disciples are asked to take up daily. It is not all about physical suffering and dying, though that may be a part of our callings. Our daily cross is to live lives of humble submission to the will of God, to build our lives on him and his grace instead of our own will and our own desires. It is about serving God and serving our brothers and sisters, especially when it is inconvenient and difficult. And it is a daily call, something we need to do every day of our lives. Humble and obedient submission is our cross. To carry the cross, we must first of all determine what it is God wants us to be doing. Each day we need to decide what is God’s purpose for me in this situation?

***Prayer***

Loving Father, as we are called to take up the call to repent during this season of Lent, strengthen our wills that we might willingly submit ourselves more fully to your demands and serve you and others in love.

**Thursday February 11th**

**Mark 7:24-30**

It is important to read this story in the context of the whole of chapter 7. Having pushed out the boundaries relating to the laws on purity, Jesus now continues his radical reinterpretation of the will of God by reaching out to a Gentile woman. It is a story that can sometimes be read to understand Jesus as being somewhat harsh to the woman. But this would be false. A far better reading would be to understand Jesus as a kind of Devil’s Advocate encouraging the woman and teasing out her understanding of the actions of God. It is hard to overestimate the importance of this exchange as it moved Christianity out of the bounds of Jewish exclusivism into a community gathered around to share the “children’s bread”. The setting for the exorcism is in Gentile territory and Jesus is approached by a Gentile woman who asks for a cure. Any orthodox Jew would have avoided her for fear of being rendered ritually impure, but we again see Jesus breaking the usual bonds of convention by engaging in a discussion with her. We cannot soften the impact of the words of Jesus comparing the rights of Gentile “dogs” to Jewish “children”. It is softened somewhat by adding that the “children” are fed “first” implying that the “dogs” will eventually be fed. It is this that gives the woman her hope. She is content to have the “scraps” knowing that even these rejected bits of food will be more than enough for her needs. Her spoken response to Jesus moves him to carry out the exorcism, for it shows her understanding of who he is and what his mission entails. While the Jews fail to accept him, this pagan woman responds in faith.

The early Church struggled with its Jewish roots once it began to move out into Gentile communities, for the acceptance of Gentiles into the Kingdom of God was generally unheard of within Judaism. Who is in and who is out? For the Jews it was clear. Be children of the Covenant with Abraham as your Father. For Jesus it was clear: hear his words and act upon them. It is all about faith and not actions. Those who believe in him as the Messiah, the Son of God, know what it is to live in the Kingdom of God and receive the blessings of that Kingdom. This means that there is room for the sinner, for the failures, for the sick, the depressed, those living in fear, in poverty and those with nothing much to live for. They might not have much to commend them in the eyes of the world, but their faith in the love and mercy of God brings them peace and life.

***Prayer***

Loving Lord, there are times when our unworthiness seems to govern all that we do and we wonder how we can continue. In those times, reassure us by reminding us of your presence.

**Friday February 12th**

**Mark 7:31-37**

Jesus now journeys back to the non-Jewish area at the eastern edge of the Lake of Galilee (where he carried out the exorcism in 5:1-20). The story is notable, not just for its location, but also because Jesus uses saliva in the cure and we hear him speaking an Aramaic word of healing. We see, for the first and only time, a healing that is carried out by touch and a command that is given, not to a demon, but to the sick person himself. The way Mark has reported this incident brings to mind the prophecy of Isaiah 35:5-6 where we are told that "the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped...and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy". This is very much in keeping with the Jewish thinking about the end of the world. Once again we see Jesus trying to avoid public notice but having the news of the cure proclaimed throughout the district. The healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) was used by Mark as an introduction to a section dealing with the blindness of the disciples and their gradual enlightenment. Here it is possible that Mark used the account of the cure of the man who was deaf and dumb to introduce the gradual enabling of the disciples to both hear and proclaim the word of God properly. Jesus looks to heaven when he prays for the sick man, a useful device to highlight the divine dimension to what he is doing, but the key to the cure is the command: "Open up!". The effect is immediate and both the deafness and the inability to speak are cured at once. The amazement of the crowd possibly comes from the fulfilment of both of the elements of Isaiah's vision. This is what is supposed to happen when the Messiah comes to set up God's Kingdom, and they are witnessing it here. This is why it is Good News, because God has now acted to save his people.

Blindness and deafness are both qualities that Mark attributes to the disciples of Jesus. Throughout most of the Gospel they struggle to believe in Jesus as the promised Messiah, despite witnessing the great signs and wonders he performed. It is a sad characteristic of discipleship that those who have received much are so easily overcome by doubts and fears. Mark makes it clear that, in times of anxiety, when we are unable to see clearly the way forward (the blind man at Bethsaida) or are unable to hear God speaking to us in the events that are unfolding around us, we need to "come to Jesus" (or bring our brothers and sisters, who are struggling, to Jesus), for he is the one who can enlighten our lives.

***Prayer***

Father, down through history you have spoken to your people, revealing to them your will, your love and mercy. Help us, that we may hear your voice in all that happens in our lives.

**Wednesday February 17th**

**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18**

*Ash Wednesday*

This section illustrates what Jesus means when he says that the righteousness of the disciples is to exceed that of the Pharisees. The examples that he uses are those of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. The reward of the Father will depend on a truly righteous attitude (see 6:4; 6:6; 6:18). While they are to be lights to the world (5:14) they are not to be doing things so that they receive the acclaim of the world. Any light that they have must shine on God and be done for his glory and not for the glory of the disciple. What is under attack by Jesus is their attitude. When they give alms (not **if** they give) it is to be done secretly so that when the person on the receiving end of the act of mercy gives thanks he thanks God and praises God and not the person giving. The Pharisees, by their public displays, are robbing God of what is due to him. Disciples do not need praise to keep them going in their love of neighbour and service of God. They should not need thanksgiving. God will reward them in his own time and in his own way. There is nothing wrong with giving alms. In fact, it is essential to discipleship. But Jesus pointed out the dangers when it becomes an end in itself instead of an expression of love.

This is another tough demand by Jesus for it is hard to go on loving when we receive little or nothing in return. It is even harder to go on loving and forgiving when we receive abuse in return. The only way to be able to walk along the path of discipleship is to keep our eyes firmly set on Christ. It is only by living the demands of the Beatitudes (5:1-10) that we can hope to avoid a self-centred style of Christian living. The world around us places a great deal of emphasis on appearances and what it considers to be marks of success. Jesus warns that disciples can go along this road and receive the applause of others but they should not then expect "rewards" from God. The word that is translated "reward" means "restore" and brings with it a sense of the cost of this sacrifice to be repaid by God himself. What we give up by acting in secret will be rewarded many times over by God if we do it for him and not for ourselves. The other side of this teaching is the real presumption by Jesus that the disciples will give alms. Faith is not something that takes place in the hearts and minds of believers, it is something that is given so that the world may know God's love. It is a faith that must flow over into acts of love and a life of sacrifice.

***Prayer***

Loving Father, your Son Jesus showed us that discipleship would mean a life of sacrifice. Strengthen us so that we can put aside our own desire for recognition and praise and do all things so that glory and honour is given to you.

## **Tuesday February 16th**

## **Mark 8:14-21**

This is a somewhat confusing little account but it is important because it sets the stage for Jesus undertaking the “re-education” of the disciples. There can be no excuse for them missing the point of the miracles of Jesus. Why should they be worried about being short of bread when they have Jesus with them. This is not the first time they have been caught short of food. With the large crowd to feed they had only five loaves and two fish but managed to feed everybody. If they were to understand what the miracle of the loaves and the other signs that had been performed said about Jesus they would not be worried about not having enough bread to eat. Surely, after all they had been involved in, they would understand the significance of the one performing these signs. This section draws to an end with a somewhat sombre note: even with the gift of divine enlightenment, understanding has still not been produced in the hearts of the disciples. The high point of this lack of understanding will be their abandonment of Jesus at Golgotha. It is hard to work out just where the metaphor of the yeast fits into the section as the yeast and the warning against the Pharisees and Herod plays only an indirect part in Mark’s message here.

Jesus uses strong language here in condemning the lack of spiritual awareness on the part of the disciples. They function well on a physical level (their eyes see and their ears hear) but are closed to the much more significant spiritual dimension to life. Here they are hungry, and instead of casting their minds back to what Jesus had done for the five thousand and having faith in what he will do for them, they begin to worry about it. They were also probably starting to blame whoever it was who forgot it and wonder how they will solve their dilemma. While they were worrying about their stomachs they had with them the Prince of Life, the Messiah who had cast out demons, raised the dead and cured those who were ill. Somehow, they had lost their spiritual perspective. This is why they were to panic later on at Golgotha. All they could see was their great hope dying painfully on the cross. They dared not have hope in the face of apparent disaster. If they were going to worry about a shortage of bread, the risk of death would worry them more. Mark’s answer is simple: Jesus is there with them. It is not that Jesus will take away their problem, but if they walk into it with Jesus, then they know there is hope for the future.

### ***Prayer***

Loving God, through all the stages of our lives we are faced with problems and are tempted to flee before them. Strengthen us by making us aware of your saving presence.

## **Saturday February 13th**

## **Mark 8:1-10**

The geography of Mark is (typically) a little obscure but given the wording used and the setting in his Gospel, this second feeding miracle takes place as a part of the ministry of Jesus among the Gentiles. He has had an exorcism, a healing and a nature miracle all extending the mission of the Messiah of Israel for the benefit of the Gentiles. It ties in well with the discussion that Jesus held with the Syrophenician woman about allowing the “dogs” to share in the “children’s” bread. This perhaps explains some of the differences to the first feeding miracle: fewer people, fed with more loaves and a “few small fish” and there was less food left over. For Mark, there was clearly a difference between the feeding of the people of Israel and the feeding of the Gentiles. Importantly though, the Gentiles are fed. When Mark begins the chapter with the words “and now, once again” he is encouraging readers to go back to the earlier story of the feeding. These people have come to Jesus as a direct result of the cure of the deaf man, even though he had requested that the crowd remain silent. In non-Jewish areas, his popularity and fame was spreading. In this story of the feeding Mark uses the word “eucharist” (give thanks) which perhaps suggests that Mark has in mind some link to the Last Supper and the breaking of the bread of the early Church. As Jesus fed the crowd who came to him in need, so he feeds those who follow him as disciples.

One of the oddities of this story is that the disciples find it difficult to believe that they could feed this many people from their own resources. It was not all that long ago that they had been present when Jesus fed more people with fewer resources. They seem incapable of understanding that there is a different dimension to the ministry of Jesus, a problem that Mark is going to stress throughout the chapter (cf 8:17-21). Perhaps this is the power of Jesus’ question: “Do you have any bread?”. It is slightly ironic as they have been through this situation before. What is the problem with the disciples? Why is it that the disciples can know all about the power of Jesus and yet still think that there are areas of their lives, and situations in which they find themselves, over which Jesus has no power? Again it is possible that Mark is writing from his own experiences of discipleship within his own community, where he ministers to people who struggle with challenges they should be bringing to Jesus in prayer. After all, his yoke is easy and his burden light.

### ***Prayer***

Loving Father, we give thanks to you for all the times that you have fed us when we have been hungry. We thank you for the foods of love, of mercy, of forgiveness and discipleship.

## **Sunday February 14th**

### **Luke 6:17-26**

*Fr Robert Newton*

In our Gospel for today, Jesus is talking about people who are half-persons becoming whole persons. Jesus is talking about people who don't understand life. They just don't get it, but Jesus says that they can get life. It started as most everything starts in the Gospel of Luke, with Jesus in prayer. Verse 12 says that Jesus spent all night on the mountainside praying trying to ascertain his Father's will. As he came down from the mountain the crowds closed in around him and Jesus stopped and said, "Wait!" And he uttered these words, "Blessed are you who hunger, blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who cry, blessed are you when people exclude you, and blessed are you who jump for joy when people reject you". And then he said, "Woe to those who are rich, woe to those who are well fed, woe to those who laugh, and woe to those whom everyone speaks well of". These words shocked them. They looked at each other and said, "What in the world is he talking about? He has just turned our entire world upside-down. What could he mean by all of this?".

What does he mean? Does he mean that God hates the rich or that God hates the so-called blessed of our society? Of course not! God loves everyone! What he may be saying is that if our lives are centred around our possessions and the pleasing of ourselves by our resources, we may already have our reward. The word "reward" here means "paid in full". Isn't it ironic that in a day in which we supposedly have the strongest economy in years, there is a yearning in the heart and soul of the Australian people for spirituality? It is as if the entire nation is saying, "There's got to be more!". Perhaps Jesus is saying that if our lives are centred around only that which pleases us then we have all that's coming. Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much is required". Which I am pleased to see has been chosen by our Grammar School as the words you see as you enter the theatre doors of the new magnificent Wendouree Performing Arts Centre. So often we forget that everything we have been given, life itself, our possessions, our resources and our finances are given to us by God as a gift to be given to others. We are just a channel through which our energies and resources are funnelled to others. That is the purpose of the Church. The Church is to give us structure and discipline so that we may not only be ministered unto but we can minister and give our talents, resources and gifts to others making their lives better.

### ***Prayer***

Heavenly Father, let us give thanks for the many gifts that you give us and the strength to see that much is required of those to whom much has been given.

## **Monday February 15th**

### **Mark 8:11-13**

This section (8:11-21) moves the disciples away from Galilee and brings to an end the first section of the Gospel. From 8:27-29 there will be a whole new direction as Peter makes his profession of faith. In preparation for that decisive moment Mark now sums up some key ideas in his story so far and introduces the theme of the "re-education" of the disciples. The opposition to Jesus seems to come from the local Galilean Pharisees who were conscious of their roles as guardians of religious orthodoxy and practice in the area. They were perhaps threatened by the growing popularity and influence of this new teacher and were trying to "put him in his place" by insisting on checking out his credentials and qualifications. When they insist on a "sign from heaven" from Jesus, they are not interested in yet another miracle, though it is hard to imagine what more they could want! Perhaps it was just that they had not personally witnessed any of these miracles and were unwilling to accept the word of others. In 3:22 we saw that the Pharisees had accepted that he could perform exorcisms, but attributed the power to demonic rather than heavenly power. This expectation of divine authorization has strong biblical and Jewish roots. It is found in the story of Moses (Ex 4:1-9; Ex 4:29-31; Ex 7:8-22; etc). The problem here is that Jesus suspects that these Jewish leaders are not really after a justifying sign from heaven, but have ulterior motives behind their request.

What is interesting in this story is the reaction of Jesus, who gives a "sigh that comes straight from the heart". This is an indication of his distress over the unresponsiveness of "this generation". They continue to ask for signs when all around them are glowing signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. We can see here a Jesus who is passionately caught up with the needs of the people he has come to serve. He is hurt at being rejected, a hurt that is not directed at himself but at the loss by the people. They are the ones missing out on the blessings of the Kingdom. What he does from this point on is to focus his attentions on a smaller group of people, his disciples. He wants them to come alive with the Good News so that they can then go out and enliven the world with the same Good News. This is the way it is today. God is not going to change the world, but he will enable it to happen through the ministry of believers who live the Gospel in such a way that others are attracted to it.

### ***Prayer***

Merciful Father, you want the world to come to a knowledge of your Truth and your Life. Strengthen us, so that by joyfully living the Good News, all peoples might know salvation.