

Tuesday April 6th

John 20:11-18

The story begins with the word “but” or “meanwhile”. The disciples had come and found the tomb empty and had gone home still in doubt, in fear, with their faith shaken and still anxious about what was going on. BUT, Mary stayed on. Tradition has always held that verse 14 suggests the angels made some gesture towards Jesus and she turned and looked at him. She looked but did not recognize, leaving us with the question “why?”. Jesus questions her about weeping and then asks a guiding question: “Who do you seek?”. The question is not “What do you seek?”. She had presumably been looking for a body and found a living person, which perhaps explains the confusion. Perhaps harking back to the story of the Good Shepherd who knows the names of his sheep and whose sheep know his voice, he simply calls her name and she turns in response and calls him “Rabboni” which is an unusual usage of a word which is often used to address God. When he tells her not to cling to him he may be simply making it clear that things have changed and that they could not return to the old life. He had Risen to a new life and Mary along with the disciples were also called to live in a new relationship with him, a relationship that involved him at his Father’s right hand.

It is significant that while the disciples went to the tomb to see what the enemies had done to the body of Jesus, it was to the infamous sinner that he made his first appearance. John highlights this point by use of the word “but” suggesting that we meditate on why she stayed. What was the gift for which she was searching and hoping. What was it that enabled her to see something the disciples failed to observe? The Fathers of the Church wrote that it was because she was aware of her need for Christ and because she understood the greatness of the healing and forgiveness she had received at his hand that she stayed and searched for more. She did not allow her grief nor the desperate nature of her sorrow and sense of loss to remove hope, and her fear of what may lie ahead did not stop her from searching for her Lord. It seemed to have been her need that kept her there and that need helped focus her actions. Christ appears in various ways to those who search, who through meditation and prayer give him a chance to call them by name. But first we have to need him.

Prayer

Loving Father, stir up within our hearts a true hunger for union with your Son Jesus. Help us to know always our need for the grace and life which he brings and to so shape our daily living that there is always an opportunity to listen to him call us.



BIBLE STUDIES

MARCH 2010

+ Michael Hough



LANTERN SERIES

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

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

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

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

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

The Lantern Series is an initiative of the Diocese of Ballarat. These studies are also available at the start of each month at the diocesan web page at www.ballaratanglican.org.au

Monday April 5th

Matthew 28:8-15

Matthew's Gospel is the only one of the Synoptic Gospels that reports this appearance of the risen Christ to the women. The same applies to the stories of the stealing of the body. It is here that we can see Matthew's editorial purpose which is directed against the Jewish leaders. It is apparent that the Jews were circulating rumours about the body being stolen by the soldiers to counter the Christian stories of the resurrection. We need to remember that at the time of his writing Matthew's community (which was Jewish in origin) was facing problems ending up with them being thrown out of the Synagogues. By questioning the fact of the resurrection and planting doubt in the minds of new believers the Jews were clearly creating difficulties for Matthew. Hence this story. It was a cunning plot because grave robbing was a problem at the time as soldiers would plunder graves and steal what they could. It was vital that the priests debunk the idea of a resurrection.

How comforting were those words of Jesus to the women! Here they are, feeling abandoned and lost with their whole world falling apart and suddenly Jesus appears in front of them and says "do not be afraid". But it is addressed to more than just those women. It applies also to Matthew's suffering community. They must have been wondering just where they would go from there and how they would survive the persecution and misery. They also wondered about their faith and just what Jesus was going to do for them now. Here is the answer, an answer that is eternal and applicable in all situations. "Do not be afraid". Why not? Because I am here. Death could not hold me in its power and the grave was but a resting spot on my obedient service of my Father. If all that is true, then whatever problems the women faced in Jerusalem, or Matthew's community struggled with in Antioch, were minor challenges for the Risen Christ. The Early Church had a clear image of the Risen Christ seated on a throne at the right hand of the Father. It was a picture that reminded them that he was ruling, continuing to spread the Kingdom and bringing Light and Life to the world. It shows a belief in an active participation by Christ in the daily lives of believers. It does not say that the Jews will no longer persecute them, or that life will be easy. He does say that they can find peace in the midst of whatever darkness overtakes them.

Prayer

Father, your Son came and brought to us your gift of Peace, a Peace that is possible no matter what problems overtake us. Help us to find that Peace and share it with others.

Sunday April 4th

Easter Day

Luke 24:13-35

This story of the Emmaus appearance is filled with important notes from Luke’s overall theology. The disciples’ journey to Emmaus, like much in the Gospel, takes place “along the road” thus presenting the ministry of the disciples as a journey. During that journey Christ appears to them, but they fail to recognize him. This is not because of Satan’s activities but because of their human inability to believe fully in the power of God. It is only after they are instructed in the faith that the blindness is removed and then only in the breaking of bread. This act becomes important in Luke’s second book, the Acts of the Apostles. From now on Christ will be present to his assembled disciples, not visibly (after the Ascension), but in the breaking of the bread. The disciples themselves are convinced that Jesus is a prophet “mighty in deed and word” whom they had hoped would deliver Israel. Jesus appears and teaches them about a suffering Messiah about whom Moses and the Prophets had spoken and who was made manifest in him. The teaching burns like a fire within them and after recognizing him in the ‘bread breaking’ they return to Jerusalem and proclaim that the Lord is Risen.

The question that we cannot ignore is why the disciples could not recognize Jesus. They surely knew him well, would have recognized him only a matter of a few weeks prior to this event. What has changed? The way Luke puts it, the real problem is that they could not believe that Jesus had risen. It is clear that they thought the Jewish leaders had won, that evil had destroyed their Lord and so they were fleeing the scene. This has been a major problem for the disciples and for all believers down through time. For God, all things are possible. We tend to judge things in human terms (as did the disciples) so that problems we cannot cope with end up problems that are impossible for God. Difficulties, hardships, challenges and threats that for us are overwhelming are for God no more than a blip on his screen and it is this we have trouble accepting. This is Luke’s way of highlighting this fact: if the Father can raise the Son from the darkness of the grave, easing us from our personal darknesses is no great challenge for him. But again, such blessing is an invitation to which we need to respond.

Prayer

Loving Father, as you raised your Son from death to life and promised new life to those who die in him, as we celebrate this gift of Easter, renew us and lead us forward into lives of faithful discipleship.

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.

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.

Saturday April 3rd

Easter Eve

Luke 24:1-12

The first day of the week was the day after the Sabbath. The body of Jesus had not yet been anointed, only laid in the cloths. Upon arriving at the tomb they found the stone had been rolled away and Luke notes in a simple but powerful manner: "they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus". To make sure that the evidence is clear he repeats "they went in" so that they could see for themselves. There is no doubt. He was not in the tomb. But they did not immediately believe in the resurrection. They were there puzzling over it. Their anxiety was eased by the appearance of the two heavenly figures. The language used by Luke is similar to the language he uses at the transfiguration where the two figures are Elijah and Moses. On the mountain they spoke with Jesus about the exodus he was to complete in Jerusalem (9:30) and now Luke has them with him as this mission is completed. They rebuke the women because they could not believe, seeking the living among the dead. We are then told why the body is missing: he has been raised. Luke, in a distinctive way, then points the women back to the earlier prophecies of Jesus that he would rise. This should come as no surprise for people of faith.

In this story we encounter the essence of our Christian religion and Christian faith. Everything flows out of this. In recent decades there has been much comment on whether or not the tomb was empty and whether or not Jesus rose bodily from the dead. For Luke this is not something to be questioned. Jesus rose. His body was not there. This is important for Luke and it is important for us. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is part of the hope that we have. He overcame bodily death, human dying and the grave that holds all men and women in its grasp. If he did not rise, then where is our hope? The two figures in white that stand there talking with the women, speak also to us. They rebuked those first witnesses because they insisted on trying to think about something spiritual and mystical in human terms. The body is gone, it must have been stolen! That kind of thinking is to limit God to human logic. But why would we want to limit God to acting only in ways that we understand? God is God and if he wishes to bring us salvation through his Son's death on the cross and by raising him on the third day, then so he will, and so he did, and so he does. We should give thanks that God is in no way restricted to acting only in ways that make sense to we his creatures!

Prayer

Father in Heaven, we thank you for the gift of the resurrection of your Son for in his rising from the dead so we too have hope in rising again in your love and mercy.

John introduces his story of the Passion with an extended account of what happened in the upper room with all that Jesus said and did to be read in the light of the coming crucifixion. Of the twelve chapters in this Gospel which are devoted to the ministry of Jesus nine of them are concerned with events surrounding the Passion of Jesus. In a very real way then, the whole Gospel is a Passion story. From the beginning Jesus is the Lamb of God (1:29; 1:36). This Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world and so needs to be a sacrificial lamb. He really does take away the sins of people by his death on the cross. This is why it is so central to the Gospel. When his cross is immediately before him he says "The hour has come" (12:23; 12:27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1). This clarifies again that the whole process of Jesus' ministry is one of obedience to the will of the Father and that all his actions are moving towards this one climax. Jesus had come for a purpose and that purpose can be seen on the cross. There are numerous differences between John's account and the other Gospels but it is the discussion with Pilate that stands out. It is presented as a confrontation between God and the power of the world (represented by the Roman Governor). There they talk about kingship (18:33-38) which Pilate sees in terms of power but Jesus sees in terms of Truth. It is truth that is important for John, not power. Pilate declares three times that Jesus was innocent (18:38; 19:4; 19:6) but under pressure from the Jews he used his power to crucify Jesus. Power corrupts. The Truth frees. But the Truth of the Gospel is not defeated, for Jesus rises from the grave.

John's Gospel powerfully presents Jesus as the model for disciples. He willingly becomes a humble servant of his Father and of other people. He continues in his faithfulness even when it is not felt to be politically correct and when it draws abuse, misunderstanding and even death. He was a man of power who refused to use his power for his own advancement and comfort. He preached the Truth and he lived the Truth and calls us to do the same. It is all too easy to put aside the life of 'gospel love' because it is politically expedient, difficult, inconvenient or at times embarrassing. Jesus offers us hope that beyond the harshest of circumstances or situations, a "resurrection" awaits those who persevere faithfully. The same Heavenly Father who raised him, offers us the hope of life eternal.

Prayer

Loving Father, may we be so moved by celebrating the Easter mysteries that we commit ourselves to faithfully living out the demands of discipleship, that others may know your love.

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

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

Prayer

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

Thursday March 4th

Luke 16:19-31

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

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

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

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

Prayer

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

Thursday April 1st

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-15

The public ministry of Jesus is over. His words are no longer addressed to the crowds but restricted to his disciples and those prosecuting him. The story of the washing of the feet flows on from and rounds out the great statements about the origin and destiny of the Son. He has come from God and is going to God and both journeys involve a voluntary humility. For the Son to come amongst men as a man, for the eternal Word to become flesh, is itself a supreme act of humility as was the death at Golgotha. The laying aside of his clothes and the taking up of the towel and wrapping it around his body are symbolic of the death and resurrection. It was an action performed by slaves for their masters. Here Jesus reverses the role. This meaning is made explicit when Jesus attempts to wash the feet of Peter. He protests and Jesus explains that while he does not understand its meaning now, he will later. In this way he joins this episode to that of the cleansing of the Temple and the entry into the city as a king riding on a donkey. This washing, while speaking of the death and resurrection, is also symbolic of the union of the disciples with Jesus (verse 8). The death of Jesus brings a purification to those who allow him to wash them (symbolized by the water and washing), a washing that takes place first of all at Golgotha but then later on in the life of the Church in the sacrament of baptism, in confession and in the celebration of the Eucharist. The disciples (and the Church) at the foot of the cross are washed clean by the blood and water from Christ's side.

What we have in this story is a sermon from Jesus that is acted out rather than preached. It not only shows us the nature of the authority of Jesus, that of humble service, but also provides us with an example that we are called upon to follow in our own dealings with other people. When Jesus commands the disciples to go and do the same to others, he is telling them that what must be repeated is the idea of service. No one is to suppose themselves to be better than another. No disciple is to be anything other than a servant. These are tough demands, and Lent is the perfect time for stopping and reflecting on our dealings with others. Are there people we have hurt by what we have said or done? Do we constantly clash with certain people? Are we gossips? Do we spread stories that harm others and create divisions? These are not the ways of God.

Prayer

Father, we can all too easily justify our lack of charity towards others by using arguments that you will never accept. Help us this Easter to heal what divides and hurts.

Wednesday March 31st

Matthew 26:14-25

The thirty pieces of silver is in accord with what Exodus 21:32 sets out as the fixed price for the life of a slave. The betrayal by Judas in Matthew is set out as a contrast to the act of love that went just before it, when Mary anointed the feet of Jesus, heedless of the high cost of the oil. Now Judas betrays the Son of Man for a handful of coins. In Matthew Judas is not described as the one who betrayed Jesus (though this is Luke’s phrase in Lk 6:16). Rather he is called the one who delivered Jesus up. This is in keeping with Matthew’s theology which sees the death of Jesus not as the product of human actions but as something that happened according to the will of God. Only Luke has Satan as the instigator of the whole of the Passion drama (Lk 4:13). With Judas, and thus Satan, gone, the disciples then sat down to share the Passover meal with Jesus. The symbolic importance of this event is clear. The Passover was the Jewish celebration that called to mind the mercy of God when the angel of death passed over the children of the Hebrews and the first born male children of the Egyptians were killed. This was the beginning of their journey to freedom and new life in Canaan. Jesus in the Gospels is presented as the new Paschal Lamb whose blood is shed so that all men and women could be set free and be offered new life. This is why Matthew moves from the feast of the Passover to Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist where the bread and the wine are the new Passover offerings. He moves from the Passover meal to Golgotha thus making clear the meaning of the crucifixion. The death, like the Exodus, is a movement from slavery to freedom.

The celebration of the Mass has always been the key to the life of the Church. Right from the beginning Christians would gather in small groups to break the bread in remembrance of the actions of Jesus. Each time this is done those celebrating are, in a sacramental way, taken to the foot of the cross. This is the great gift of Christ and we share in it and make it real each time we join with others in the sacrifice. At Mass we gather humbly in faith, receive the gift of the forgiveness of sins, are strengthened and enlightened by the Word of God proclaimed to us, offer God prayer for the needs of the Church and the world, bring gifts symbolizing our lives to the altar, join with the universal Church in offering thanks, share in a communion and take all those gifts out into the wider community.

Prayer Merciful God, we thank you for the liberating and strengthening gift of your Son in the Eucharist. May we come to your altar more frequently and in humility for the sake of the world.

Friday March 5th

Matthew 21:33-46

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

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

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

Saturday March 6th

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

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

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

Prayer

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

Tuesday March 30th

John 13:21-38

In this short section John reminds the readers that despite their callings there was unfaithfulness among the Twelve. They were reclining at the Passover meal and Jesus announced the treachery that was to follow at the hands of Judas. When Jesus gave Judas the piece of bread we are told that Satan entered him. This was a decisive moment in the Gospel and it seems that this was a moment of choice for Judas. He could accept the bread and repent (which was a traditional sign of a special friendship) or he could accept the bread and continue with his betrayal. His choice is made and at that moment he is taken over by Satan. John, making clear that corrupt human motives and aspirations are not driving the events, has Jesus command Judas to go about his work quickly. Even though he is now in Satan's hands, he still obeys the Christ. When he goes out darkness falls. He is cut off from the Light and so walks in darkness. It is now a clash between darkness and light. The section (verses 31-35) is in many ways an interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus. These are the actions that show us what love is. The traitor is now gone and the glorification of the Son has begun. It began with the act of betrayal but what evil might see as victory is in fact a glorification of the Son and so a glorification of the Father. All this takes place on the wood of the cross for it is there that the love of God is made so painfully clear. Jesus sheds his blood to save mankind. When Satan enters into Judas it appears that the prince of darkness is "winning", that he is in charge. This appearance will continue through the cross which will then become a tree of life.

This section is important for all of us and gives great hope to believers. As Christians reflect on the horror of the death of Jesus on the cross they are invited to see in it not death, but life. It matters not how dark a moment may appear, how hopeless a situation may seem to have become, for God can and will bring a glorious victory for those who remain faithful and who believe. Jesus offers to all of us a way of handling suffering and loss, doubt and uncertainty. If God can turn such a terrible death into new life, then working with our problems is going to pose few difficulties for him. Why should God do this? Not because we have deserved it, but because he loves us and nothing can take away this love. As at creation God overcame the darkness, so in Christ we have hope of a new creation.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for the forgiveness, life and hope that you give us in your Son Jesus Christ. As we continue on our journey towards Golgotha may we find in the cross a promise of great hope in our moments of darkness and pain.

Monday March 29th

John 12:1-11

Importantly John links this story of the anointing with the raising of Lazarus and the intention of the Jews to put Jesus to death. Like the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, where this story is also recorded (Mk 14:3-9; Matt 26:6-13), what John has in mind is the coming crucifixion. We have the themes of both death and resurrection providing the background against which the events at Bethany were written. He has moved this story so that it takes place before the Palm Sunday event so that when Jesus finally enters Jerusalem it is with the death and resurrection in mind. He enters as the anointed and triumphant Messiah whose death is undertaken so that the sins of all peoples may be forgiven. He arrives in the city on the Sabbath before the last Passover he is to share with his disciples, though in John this is a very different celebration, for Jesus is going to be the true Paschal lamb. When Mary anoints the feet of Jesus it has the symbolic function of her anointing the whole of his body for she sees him as the resurrection and the life, and this before he had died. It is a reinterpretation of death for she knows that Jesus "lives and shall never die" and "though he dies yet shall he live" (11:25-26). This is the same kind of imagery and message that John uses when he speaks of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus runs into some criticism that the money should be used for the poor instead of for anointing his body. John rejects this criticism and puts forward a theology of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God who has come to save all men and women from their sins. Care for the poor has its place, but so does due recognition of God. To have a faith community that has wonderful social outreach but little time for worship and praise of God is a community that is failing in its duties. God must be given a prime place within the life of the Church and of individual believers. Both of these are basic elements of the Christian faith and it would be a betrayal of the Son of God to ignore the opportunities for respectful worship. This is something that is easy to lose sight of in our modern world, where worship, contemplation and meditation are so foreign. All the things we do in the parish are fruitless unless they flow from a life of intimate union with God. That is why Jesus came and that is what he offers us and it is a union he initiates and sustains. It is not dependent on our worthiness.

Prayer

Almighty Father, we acknowledge you as God and offer you worship and praise. Lead us through this great week of Easter, that as we die with Christ we may rise again with him and live new lives, free of sin and filled with your Joy.

Sunday March 7th

John 4:5-42

This is a story filled with unanswered questions that are worth pondering. Why did Jesus travel through the Samaritan region? These people were to be avoided at all costs as they were considered to be unclean. It was something no pious Jew would contemplate. Why did the woman draw water from that well when she had better water nearer home? Perhaps it was because she was a notorious sinner and she avoided contact with other women. The big surprise is not so much that Jesus asked a woman for water, as that was a woman's job, but rather that he would use the utensils of a Samaritan as that would make him ritually unclean. At that time, living water was understood as water that flowed as opposed to water that was held in some container. It was used to purify what was unclean and took away defilement, making acceptable worshippers out of sinners. Jesus is not this living water (in 7:38ff it is explained as being the Holy Spirit though it could also refer to the message and teachings that Jesus brings from God). What Jesus does is make this living water available. The encounter ends with Jesus proclaiming what true worship is all about. It is not about being in the right place with the right customs and rituals, but about worshipping "in spirit and truth", that is where the whole of a person's life reflects an attitude of worship of God. All that they do comes together in harmony and acknowledges their debt to God.

In this story we again see the attitude of Jesus towards the sinner: he goes to them and offers them life, accepting them as they are. We also see how the Samaritan woman was able to change through her willingness to enter into a dialogue with Jesus. She moved from hostile, to sceptical, to being ashamed and finally to healing and to being able to go out and proclaim who he was to others. The change came through the living water that Jesus offered, the same living water that he offers to us. Lent is the time when we are called to be open to the possibilities of renewal and to give ourselves time to allow Jesus to make that renewal a reality.

Prayer

Lord God, show to us your loving mercy this Lent so that we are ever filled with confidence in coming to you. And that we can be so filled with grace that we can put into our lives those things that we need to be doing that we may be more faithful to our baptismal callings, through Christ our Lord.

Monday March 8th

Luke 4:24-30

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

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

Prayer

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

Sunday March 28th

Palm Sunday

Luke 23:1-49

Luke moves quickly to the trial before the Sanhedrin, a group which is meant to represent the Jewish religious leadership. He is charged with being the Messiah, though he himself never used the title for himself. He was called Messiah by the people (19:38). The irony is clear. The people and the leaders claim him to be the Messiah, and he was, though he himself never put himself forward in that way. The trial uses it in its political sense, as a rival to Caesar. Luke presents the trial (verse 5) as a farce where evidence was fabricated to show Jesus as a troublemaker who led the people astray with his false teaching. He was sentenced to death and taken to Golgotha to be crucified. Each of the Gospel writers tells the story in different ways, though the central details are the same. They show the crucifixion as the fulfilment of Scripture and therefore the will of God. Jesus, in proclaiming "Father, forgive them", puts into action the demands of the Our Father. Luke has the ordinary people watching on silently with only the leaders mocking him. His final words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me", a quotation from Psalm 30:6 which is a song of quiet confidence in the saving power of God. In this darkest of moments he entrusts his life and future into the Father's care.

At the very end of his life, Jesus continues the work of salvation. One of the thieves crucified with him mocked him and the other repented and was given the gift of salvation...today you will be with me in paradise. That simple gift sums up the meaning of what is happening there on the rocky rise on the outskirts of the city. It is about salvation given to those who repent and place their trust in God. His place in the plan of God is proclaimed by those who mock him: the leaders of the Jews call him the Messiah of God. The soldiers call him the king of the Jews. The criminal sees him as the Messiah. They were all true but because they were unrepentant they could not see it as the truth. But the point of reflection is to be found in the comment which says "come down from the cross and save yourself". The opposite was true but they could not see it. It was in his dying that he offered salvation. They could only see salvation in terms of surviving, in living in things continuing as they had in the past. He stayed there on the cross, sacrificing himself, that others may have life. The one person who repented, the criminal, is offered eternal life. And that is an offering to all who seek to be disciples.

Prayer

My God, My God, we place our lives in your hands, full of hope that as we continue with our struggles to be disciples of your Son Jesus Christ, you will bless us with your life and love.

Saturday March 27th

John 11:45-57

In the Gospel we now focus more specifically on the impending death of Jesus and are made very much aware of the human dimensions behind that death. The raising of Lazarus led some to faith in Jesus and others to betray him. John laces this section with irony as Caiaphas the High Priest (the persecution of Jesus now moves from the Pharisees to the priests) spells out his perception of Jesus. He gives the meaning of Jesus' coming death: "It is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed". He uses this as an excuse for the crucifixion when in fact it is exactly what Jesus is doing, not just for the nation of Israel but for all peoples. This gathering of the Sanhedrin was not the official meeting. What it represents is an informal gathering of like-minded priests who wanted to address what they saw as a problem for the nation. It was therefore personal and not something that (at this stage) represented the Jewish people. What we have seen so far in the Gospel is a slow and inevitable movement towards this point. For John this would be a slow unfolding of the plan of God for the salvation of all.

There is a strong sense of tragedy in this final story before the crucifixion. We have a group of priests getting together on their own to plan the death of Jesus. The tragedy is evident in that here we have men who believe, who strive to live the law and who would rather die than abandon their God, but are still planning to kill the Son of God. It is a salutary warning about the dangers of not being open to what God is saying. They have had their life with God well set out and the processes for finding out what God wants equally well established. Because they were not going to allow God to do something as radical as establish a new covenant they killed the very messiah for whom they had been waiting. They were clearly threatened. They were also anxious about what changes would mean for them and the kinds of things they would have to give up. There was also a question about power. If they went the way of Jesus they would have less power and less authority and that worried them. This is no isolated sin but is something that remains a real danger to all who seek to be disciples. The sad thing is that for the sake of their own prejudices and their own views, they were prepared to put to death the Son of God. That is a frightening thought for all believers.

Prayer

Lord God, keep us open to your will and so filled with hope that we are able to let go of the things that stop us from allowing the Kingdom of God to be alive in our lives, and help us work towards that hope flowing out to other people.

Tuesday March 9th

Matthew 18:21-35

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

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

Prayer

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

Wednesday March 10th

Matthew 5:17-19

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

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

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

Friday March 26th

John 10:31-42

Significantly our text again speaks of the Jews seeking to stone Jesus. While the penalty for blasphemy was stoning to death, the Jews here are not interested in justice. They have a 'lynch law' mentality quite contrary to what the Law demands. In his explanation Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6: "*I said you are gods*". The Hebrew understanding of this was that the Law was given to them on Mount Sinai and the effect of having the Law was to, in a special way, make them a divine nation. There is no way that they would have understood this to be literally true. The divinity resided not in them but in the Law which was within them and the life of God which was the heart and soul of the Law. As it was the Law that made gods (note the small "g") so it is the life of the Father within Jesus that makes him the Son of God (capital "G"). He and the Father are One and this is where his justification is to be found. Not in his works and not in his teachings, though these are full of authority because of his divinity. This section follows on from the teachings on the Good Shepherd and helps us to see that the main concern here is with authority to speak out for the people. As the Good Shepherd who has the people entrusted to him by the Father, Jesus has the responsibility to act on their behalf, whatever the consequences he might face. The Pharisees feel that they have the main responsibility for pastoral care because they are the interpreters of the Law and so have the final word on what is the will of God.

It is God who gives life. It cannot be earned or gained by the full observance of some law or tradition, nor is it administered by some group or person. The Pharisees set themselves up as the arbiters of life and their way was to be the only way. They were an exclusive sect and those not following their ways were condemned. This has been a major sin within Christianity at all levels. Groups have seen themselves as somehow **The** way. Theological positions have insisted that their way is the only way, or the best way, and the danger has always been that those who live differently and believe differently are to be condemned. Christians can also easily view the world in that way: we are saved while they are condemned. To avoid the sin of the Pharisees we need to step back and leave judgement to God and to find ways of allowing God to work his will in a plurality of styles and a variety of ways and that is a difficult call when we have become comfortable with our religious lives.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for your patience and your compassion, that despite our arrogance and stubborn pride, you welcome us back again and again. Keep us truly repentant.

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

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

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

Prayer

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

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

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

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

Prayer

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

Thursday March 11th

Luke 11:14-23

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

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

Prayer

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

Wednesday March 24th

John 8:31-42

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

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

Prayer

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

Tuesday March 23rd

John 8:21-30

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

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

Prayer

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

Friday March 12th

Mark 12:28-34

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

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

Prayer

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

Saturday March 13th

Luke 18:9-14

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

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

Prayer

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

Monday March 22nd

John 8:12-20

This teaching of Jesus takes place at the end of the celebrations for the Feast of Tabernacles (commemorating Israel’s wandering in the Exodus). Throughout the seven days of this Feast the four golden candlesticks (menorahs) in the Temple were lit with wicks made from the worn out vestments of the priests. Under the light from these candles the celebrants danced a torch dance to the music of flutes while the Levites sang the Psalms of Ascent (psalms 120-134), one psalm on each of the fifteen steps leading down from the court of the Israelites to the Court of Women. This is the Feast that is probably referred to in Isaiah 30:29. It lasted for most of the night and was celebrated on each of the seven days. Every day of the Feast, at dawn, the priests gathered as the sun rose and made a commitment to look only towards Yahweh their God and true light. The whole Feast was a commemoration of the covenant God made with his people. In this context, the power of the words of Jesus are evident. People are living in a darkness of their own choosing and the Father has sent him to provide them with a way into light and so life. John clearly presents the person of Jesus as the source of life and it is only by “following me” that this light and life can be found.

The Pharisees and leaders of the Jewish people are quite reasonably critical of Jesus. They point out that their logic and human experience suggests to them that Jesus could not be the Son of God. They know all about him and his background and their conclusions are that he is no more than a mere man. But Jesus points to their major failing (one that was expressed in a slightly different way by Peter and the apostles): they judge according to the flesh. They look at their lives, God and the work of salvation through their own human eyes with all of their limitations and weaknesses. Jesus points out that when they are judging him they are assessing him according to their own hopes and expectations, their fears and worries, their religious institutions, customs and laws, the opinions and expectations of the people of the world in which they live and good old commonsense. When all of these are sharply applied to Jesus he comes up short and so he has to die. The Pharisees were good men who found it impossible to believe that God could offer new revelations, new directions, new commands and could come to them in the person of Jesus and believers through until today have suffered from the same sin.

Prayer

Father in heaven, strengthen our faith and our hope so that we are able to listen to what it is you are calling us to be doing and overcome the limitations to the faith that we ourselves impose.

Sunday March 21st

John 8:1-11

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

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

Prayer

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

Sunday March 14th

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

This parable picks up the theme outlined in 7:29-30. There we saw that there were two groups who responded differently to the call of Jesus to repent. There were the tax collectors and sinners and on the other side the Pharisees and Scribes. There are three parables used to teach about God's response to the "lost" ending with the loving father who feels the pain of having lost two sons. The first is lost when he is allowed to take his property and leave home and the second son is lost when he remains at home in his bitterness and alienation. The parable begins with a focus on the son who sets out to enjoy what is "his own". He is unconcerned about what his actions might do to others and in the end loses all that he has. Luke then takes us on to the father, a compassionate man who does not lose his temper at the arrogance of his son. He is shown as not even waiting for the son to return, but upon seeing him in the distance runs out to meet him. He does not even allow the son to properly deliver his speech of sorrow but quickly heaps onto him an overabundance of blessings to show his state in the family. He is given sandals, a robe, a ring and a fattened calf and the language used highlights the spiritual significance of all of this by using "dying and rising" language. We then move on to the other brother who has also been "lost" to the father. He sees himself in terms of being the father's slave and seems to have stored up a great deal of anger towards the father. He is angry because he has not even been given a goat to share with his friends while the spoiled younger son has had everything. He fails to recognize that he has a special privileged position with the father and that by coming out to him the father has shown him great love and respect.

The Pharisees are clearly the ones the elder son represents. They have stayed within the covenant and kept the commandments and cannot understand why Jesus would be more concerned about sinners than with the righteous. They saw themselves as slaves rather than as sons and refused to come into the Kingdom, preferring to stand outside and be critical of the repentant sinners who were streaming in (13:28-30). As disciples we are called today to follow the way of the younger son, to acknowledge that we have sinned, that we have caused hurt to both God and to our fellow human beings and to return to life in the family of the heavenly Father. More than all else, we are to avoid becoming like the elder son, critical and judgemental of our brothers and sisters in faith.

Prayer

Father, in our darkest moments of doubt, sin and despair, help us to find you coming out to seek us and bring us home.

Monday March 15th

John 4:43-54

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

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

Prayer

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

Saturday March 20th

John 7:39-52

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

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

Prayer

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

Friday March 19th

John 7:25-30

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

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

Prayer

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

Tuesday March 16th

John 5:1-16

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

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

Prayer

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

Wednesday March 17th

John 5:17-30

Jesus replies with a statement that says "my Father" in referring to God. This claim to an intimate and personal relationship with God was not lost on the Jews who would never make such a claim (it would always be removed from the personal by adding a phrase like 'in heaven'). Jesus points to the unceasing activity of God. Without this ongoing work of God the whole of the created universe would cease. Jesus uses it here to link what he does into the saving work of his Father. It is one and the same endeavour and it takes precedence over all other considerations. The Sabbath, which was made for man, cannot be allowed to interfere with the actions of God. The implication is that what Jesus is doing goes to the heart of what the Sabbath was trying to do for men and women of faith. It is all part of the same activity of God. He was not claiming that God was the Father of all of them, as the Jews already believed this. What he was doing was claiming a special and unique Sonship. This was blasphemy and it was for that they planned to kill him. The verses 19-30 are an exposition of this basic position and from them we have a clear picture of how John understood the person and ministry of Jesus.

John proposes here a profound theology. He has made some rather powerful claims about Jesus: greater than John the Baptist, the Messiah, the Lamb of God, the Son of God and the Son of Man. Later on he will begin the "I Am" sayings. I am the bread of life....the light of the world....the truth....the way....the life and so on. In this chapter he begins to explain what he means and does so clearly maintaining a strict monotheism. Jesus is who he is only in humble obedience to and in complete dependence on the Father. He has no independent status doing only what he sees the Father doing. It is in his obedience that we can see the activity of God at work and in his humble obedience we have a witness to the way of discipleship. The contrast with the Pharisees is great. They seek union with God through their obedience to the Torah. Jesus shows that union with God is to be found through humble submission to the Divine will. Those who will not acknowledge their need will never know God. Jesus goes on working, despite the problems with the Pharisees, knowing that his Father will see him through. One worrying sideline to this debate is the question over whether or not aspects of our religion interfere with the will of God.

Prayer

Loving Father, there are so many obstacles that we place in our lives that keep you on the periphery. Through our prayers and penances this Lent, help us to put aside our self-centred ways and come to know your strengthening presence.

Thursday March 18th

John 5:31-47

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

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

Prayer

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