

Tuesday May 4th

John 14:27-31

We see at the start of this section Jesus offering his disciples his gift of Peace. He says it not once but twice hence stressing its importance. In Judaism of the time the word "Peace" was used as a greeting and so in some ways represented a hope: "I hope that peace comes your way". There is nothing more that they can do but hope that peace comes their way. But Jesus is using it in a different way. For him it is a gift, a reality that is theirs here and now and he is talking here about a very Hebrew understanding. For the Greeks "peace" generally meant little more than an absence of war. For the Hebrews it means all the things that flow from living in an intimate relationship with God. It is a positive statement of human living. That is, it does not simply mean that people will live without bad things happening to them. It means that they will be able to live to their full potential, be able to cope with all the difficulties that come along in a human life, live happily in community and know what it is to love and be loved, to be forgiven and to forgive. Peace changes the lives of people and of the world and that is what Jesus is giving to them: the potential to change, a powerful gift that is to be found in his very self. This is why their hearts should not be troubled. The Jews may very well crucify him now, and later on evict Christians from the synagogues and persecute them, but in the midst of all of that they can know Peace.

This gift of Peace is in some ways one of the greatest gifts that is given to those who love and obey and it is a gift that is in short supply in the world in which we seek to live out our faith. In recent times, and going on around us today, we have known and know some horrendous wars and times of violence. We hear in the press about the high levels of stress, youth suicide and a blow-out in people being treated for depression. These are precisely the kinds of human experiences that Jesus had in mind when he was speaking to his disciples. He is telling them that there is another way to live. That there is a way of resolving these tensions, divisions and hatred and this way is Jesus himself. It is the Peace of Jesus that is on offer and not some passing and transitory peace that the politicians of the world may try and put into place. To live with an absolute faith and confidence in that Peace is to live a life filled with contentment and hope. It is all there for those who love him.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, when you created the man and the woman and placed them in your garden you were present with them and they knew Peace. Restore once again that Peace in our hearts and in the lives of our community and help us to be peacemakers through Jesus Christ your Son.



BIBLE STUDIES APRIL 2010

**+ Michael Hough
with Fr Robert Newton**



LANTERN SERIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monday May 3rd

John 14:21-26

At this stage of the Passover meal the disciples must have been just about overcome with anxiety. Jesus answers their fears by reassuring them that both he and his Father will come and "make our home with them". He is going but will return and so there will not be a time when there is an absence of this divine life. But it is a life that is only available for those who love him. Loving him means listening to his words, believing in him and walking in his Light. As he has said all along in this Gospel, it comes down to a matter of choice. People can refuse to keep his Word and refuse to walk in his Way and pursue other ways of life, but those choices mean that they do not love him. Not loving him means not loving and not knowing the Father and so missing out on eternal life. The one who will make possible the transformation (from fear and anxiety to joy and peace) is the Spirit, the Advocate whom the Father will send. The Spirit will teach them and keep alive in them all the promises that Jesus made while he was carrying out his ministry. It is in this Spirit that they will be able to find hope and life.

John says some beautiful things about love. He says that love really is the foundation of everything. It begins with the Father's love for Jesus and the love of the Son for the Father. But God also loves all men and women, as does Jesus. In their turn men and women are able to love God through Jesus and through the same Jesus are able to love others. In this way, for him, the whole of creation is then caught up in this same divinely inspired love. But this is no airy fairy love, it is love that is built on obedience. One cannot say that they love God if their lives do not reflect a fulfilling of the commands that he sets out for his disciples. Those who obey him know his love. When disciples live out their lives in love and obedience they know peace and shelter in their lives. And what happens is that the more they love and the more they obey, the more they come to know God and the more God reveals himself to them in all the events of their lives. Like all relationships, it is a lifelong commitment which will be built on sacrifice and service. In chapter 14 John puts this out in a simple fashion: Fellowship and revelation of God are dependant on love and love demands the living out of a way of life that is in keeping with the teaching and example of Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Loving Father, your Son Jesus Christ loved you so much that he became man and loved us so deeply that he willingly gave his life that we may have salvation and new life. Give us the graces we need to reach out to others with that same love.

Sunday May 2nd

John 13:31-35

In verse 30 there is the moment of tragedy as Judas goes out into the night to betray the Son of Man. The comment is clear: "and it was night". Darkness had covered the earth. Having established the situation Jesus is then free to move on to the shout of triumph: "Now is the Son of Man glorified". For John the crucifixion is not a moment of defeat but an achievement of great glory and power. The sign of his love for his people is that he is willing to "be lifted up" so that all people may come to know God (3:14; 8:28). When he is lifted up he will draw all men to himself (12:32-33). Now the hour has come (12:23, 27, 31; 13:1). The Son of Man is going to be glorified by being lifted up and in the glorification of the Son the Father will also be glorified. It is through the cross that people will be able to see the glory of God for it is at Golgotha that God reveals himself. He calls his disciples his "little children" and reminds them of what he told the Jews, that he would be with them for only a short time longer and that they would search for him but not find him. The Jews could not understand that he was going to the Father but the disciples should have been able to understand. He commands them to love one another just as he has loved them. At the Last Supper he gave them an example (washing feet) and a commandment (wash the feet of others), something he repeats now. He shows his love for them by his going to the cross (the example) and he now tells them that they have to show the same love for others (the commandment). It is this love that will be the characteristic mark of being a disciple.

One of the great insights offered by this reading is the willingness of Jesus to continue to show his love for his disciples. He calls them his "little children". Like the Jews they misunderstand him, they remain ignorant of his mission and his true nature and they are continuing in their efforts to hinder his obeying of the Father. Yet despite all of this they remain his little children, in more need than ever of his love and his care. That is a great comfort to all who seek to be disciples. Despite our sins and failures, we can be sure of Christ's love for us. Having died that we might know his saving power, he is hardly likely to abandon us now because we fail. That love of his has transforming power and enables us to grow and know a lasting peace. This is why he commands us to go out and do likewise. This is so that others who are searching for hope may find it through us.

Prayer

Loving Father, in the obedience of your Son we have come to know the gift of new life and endless hope. Enliven us with your Spirit that we may take that gift and share it with others.

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.

Friday April 2nd

Good Friday

John 18:1-19:42

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.

Saturday May 1st

St Philip and St James

John 14:6-14

With verse 6 John moves on to a new topic. Thomas is concerned that Jesus has said that he will be leaving the disciples. He has told them that he is to go to the Father (cf 13:3; 16:5; 16:10; 16:17) and now he speaks of the way to God. In Psalm 27:11 the psalmist prays: "Yahweh, teach me your way", a prayer that is answered here. The way to the Father is through Jesus Christ. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews wrote of Jesus as the "new way" to enter into the presence of God. This way is Jesus himself and the idea of him being a "way" receives emphasis by its repetition (vs 4, 5, 6). Here, John has in mind that Jesus reveals the way to the Father by his preaching and teaching, but also, in a special way, he *is* the Way. In John's theology this is an alternative method of talking about Jesus redeeming men and women by his life, death and resurrection. This is the Truth to which he is referring and those who walk along that divine way will know life eternal. The timing of this is also important for John because Jesus is about to walk the way of the cross making the model for discipleship the Christ-figure hanging limply on the cross. Jesus is the Truth and his death is about to make clear the lie of the Pharisees who proclaim a way of observance of Law as the way to life. When he says Jesus is the Life, John is also aware that this living person is about to be laid, as a corpse, in a tomb for the dead. The chapter needs to be read with one eye on the crucifixion.

It is sometimes difficult for the modern world to accept that Jesus did not just come to carry out an act of redemption at a point in history some two thousand years in the past. He indeed did do that, but he also came and made it possible for men and women of today to live in the effects of that action. And this is where the problem comes in. In bringing salvation he also spelt out the way in which disciples must live if they wish to enjoy the fruits of his saving love. People cannot live in the Kingdom simply by being baptized. They need to walk in the way of Christ and follow his commands and his teachings. These are to be found throughout the Gospels and can be summed up in the dual command of "love God and love your neighbour". This is a lifelong calling and those who seek to be disciples must constantly assess the level of their faithfulness and work on renewing their Christian lives.

Prayer

Loving Father, we thank you for sending your Son to us while we were still lost and searching for the way to you. Help us as we move towards the celebration of Pentecost, to be open to your Holy Spirit in whatever way he seeks to lead us.

Friday April 30th

John 14:1-6

The talk of betrayal and the departure of Jesus must have unsettled the disciples for this new section begins with a calming promise and a message that pervades the whole of the chapter. For men who had left everything to follow him, this must have come as something of a shock, especially as he also says that where he is going they cannot follow. How can their hearts not be troubled? Jesus would have known that in a few more hours their hearts would be even more profoundly disturbed as the drama of the crucifixion unfolded around them. The answer is to be found in trust. They need to trust in God and they need to continue to trust in Jesus. When he says "there are many rooms in my Father's house" he is indicating that there is far more to discipleship and eternal life than they can ever imagine and that Jesus is preparing a place for life beyond the present trouble. Whatever apparent disasters come upon them now are nowhere near the complete picture or the end. Going is not the same as forgotten, for Jesus will return and collect them so that they will be with him forever. Their trust must be in the promise that they can never really be separated from Christ and so isolated from God. With that as the guarantee and promise, they need fear nothing. Comforting words as the crucifixion approaches.

There are a number of places in the Gospels where Jesus gives the greeting and promise of "Peace" to his disciples. They all come at times when they are faced with traumas and threats and they look around and find Jesus with them. In some ways this is a picture summary of what Jesus has come to do and it is a common biblical picture: God walking with his people. There is, in John's mind, no such thing as an absence of God. Once people are able to come to an appreciation of God present within their lives and activities and in the world around them, they have hope. The next step is to live in that hope, to live with awareness that God is doing something in them as their troubles unfold. What in this present situation seems like an abandonment by God is in fact an opportunity of faith. God is always pointing forward to new possibilities, new horizons, new hope and provides the believer with the strengths they need to move on. No one need live in fear of what may or may not happen in the future.

Prayer

Lord God, your Son Jesus Christ came to us as Light and Life for the world. We pray that as we move towards the celebration of the season of Pentecost we may be strengthened and comforted by knowing his presence within our lives.

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.

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.

Thursday April 29th

John 13:16-20

Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the disciples are not to expect better treatment than Jesus himself endured. Equally, they are not to think that they are above having to perform the acts of humble service that marked his ministry (more specifically the washing of their feet). Jesus seems to be saying (verse 17 is a little vague): If you know these things and do them (following the way of the master and washing each other’s feet), then you are blessed. As with many other places in the New Testament, John insists on both hearing and doing. John introduces the note about the traitor Judas into the middle of his reflections on the meaning of the foot washing. He presents Judas as being someone who has separated himself from the community which is united in the love of Jesus. The things he has just spoken about do not apply to Judas for he has chosen to cut himself off from the fellowship. By noting that all this was done to fulfil Scripture, John is indicating that the choice of Judas was not a mistake on the part of Jesus, but was done that what was prophesied might be fulfilled. Our section ends with a powerful statement about ministry. Jesus sends the disciples out into the world to continue the work that the Father had given to him which was to bring the world to a knowledge of God. The way to know the Father was through knowing the Son. With this statement of Jesus, the way the world comes to know the Father is through the ones sent by Jesus.

There are two important aspects of this reading that need our prayerful reflection. The first is the reminder that it is always possible for a disciple to abandon Jesus. We should presume that Judas began his life as an apostle filled with enthusiasm and zeal. What was it that tempted him away and distracted him from faithful following? He must have had some weakness, some sin, some temptation that gradually replaced the spot occupied by Jesus in his life. If it could happen to Judas then it could happen to any of us. What do we need to be doing to ensure that we follow Jesus in the way he wants us to? The second important message offered to us by John is that as Christians our fundamental calling in life is to make God known. All that we do in life needs to be done in such a way that people come to know, love, and themselves serve, God. The worrying part is that the opposite is also true. It may be that the way we, as believers, live out our faith, stops people from coming to know God. That is a worry, for we are to present God to the world as did Jesus.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, in this Easter season, enliven the Spirit within us that we may reveal your love and mercy through all that we do.

Wednesday April 28th

John 12:44-50

These words of Jesus form the end of John's account of the ministry of Jesus and in some ways are a summary of his words. Its message is simple: there is an intimate union between the Father and the Son and to know one is to know the other and to trust one is to trust the other. God is characteristically referred to as "he that sent" and not by name. In verse 46 when Jesus says "I have come as the light" it is an emphatic "I". A better translation might be "I by myself and no other have come as light...". The Greek for "come" is also in the sense of coming and remaining as light. The reason for his coming is to end the control that darkness might have over the lives of individual believers which is the biblical way of talking about salvation. He came to deliver the world from darkness and so has not come as a judge, and does not need to, for those who reject him and choose other paths are judging themselves. Notice that "the world" is mentioned twice indicating an emphasis by John. This is his way of highlighting the choices that people have to make. They can choose to go the way of the world in which they live which is the way that is lived out under the control of human passions, human desires and human authority, or they can choose to walk in the light. All this stands under the blessing of God because everything Jesus has said and done has its origins in the one who sent him.

One of the powerful messages of this section is the idea that the light which is Christ has come into the world and forever works at lightening all that is darkness. It is not an historical event that remains in the past, but an historical event which continues to enlighten the lives of all who come to Jesus. Our humanity is forever changed because the Son of God took on our humanity when he became man. It means that we are different as individuals and that all other people are sanctified as well. That is an exciting insight because it means that the light is in the world, our world, right now. We do not have to ask God to send light, or to allow his light to shine on our particular patch of darkness, for he is already doing it. What our prayer needs to be is one which asks God to help us to see the light, to allow his light to illumine our darkness, to give us the graces we need to be able to walk in that light. Sometimes it can seem as if the darkness is winning and that it is impenetrable. Our story today tells us that Jesus the light is shining now and always.

Prayer

Almighty God and Father of all, we ask that you help us to remove from our eyes those things which stop us from finding your light shining into our lives and to help us walk in that light.

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.

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.

Tuesday April 27th

John 10:22-30

For John, Jesus is the fulfilment of all that the Feast of Dedication stood for. It began on the 25th of Kislev which would be during November and December on our calendar and went for eight days. It was winter and the cold darkness of that season provides some of the background to his message. It was started in 165BC by Judas Maccabeus to commemorate the re-consecration of the Temple. The Greek of the question asked by the Jews is notoriously difficult to translate. It has something of the idea of: "Why are you being such a pain to us! Tell us straight. Are you the Christ?". This is no friendly inquiry by a friendly crowd. They are trying to pin him down and are doing so in a most aggressive manner. In some ways they highlight John's concern in writing the Gospel — to present Jesus as the Messiah. One can also discern in the language used a hint of contempt. The request "If **you** are the Messiah..." has within it the idea that such a notion would be absurd, that there was nothing of the glory of the Messiah that they had come to eagerly anticipate. In a way this question had already been answered when Jesus told them that the sheep recognize him as the Shepherd and listen to his voice. The Jews do not recognize his voice and so are not able to acknowledge him as their messiah. He repeats again that his concern is "eternal life" and therefore many of the political hopes of the Pharisees will not be met by him. He offers something of a more lasting nature.

The story is set against the backdrop of the Feast and places Jesus in the role of the purificator of the new Temple of God. Not only does he come to purify, but he takes the place of the Temple. As with the woman of Samaria (chapter 4) we know that the Father can be worshipped in spirit and in truth in Jesus. A place of worship is only a place for coming together around the centre of our worship, which is Jesus himself. Of course when we look at our Christian communities it is all too easy to see how these places of worship can take over the life of the community so that they end up becoming more important than the person with whom they are supposed to be uniting us. Jesus brings new life, not just to our places of worship, but to all aspects of our lives of faith. In the midst of the winter darkness that can arise in all of us, he comes as light, new life and the promise of things to come. The Pharisees wanted him to do something to change the world but could not see that **he himself was the something** and that apart from him, no more was needed.

Prayer

Merciful God, help us in Christ your Son to purify our lives and as we celebrate the Easter joy, to rededicate ourselves to you.

Monday April 26th

St Mark

Mark 16:15-20

Mark's risen Lord spells out the nature of the Church in a very precise and succinct manner: "Go out" he says and "proclaim". When people respond to the message they are then to "baptize" but if people will not believe then they are to "condemn" them. Harsh words indeed but in the setting of the time they made great sense. Here we can see the early Church in action as it baptizes new members into its family indicating the important role that this sacrament has had. This follows on from the command to "go out" and to "make disciples" indicating that this is now the role of all who are baptized. They are to pass on the Good News to those who are still in the darkness. This Good News is, as we saw at the start of the Gospel, both the message of Jesus and Jesus himself. There are two things that make this ministry possible. One is the resurrection which introduces our section (v 14) and the other is to be found in verse 19. We read there that at the ascension Jesus was taken from them and seated on the right hand of the Father. The right side is the side of authority and special privilege and by seating Jesus there it is making it clear that he is ruling over the Church and the world. He is the one who will make all this come about. He is the guarantee of success because he is reigning.

The things that a missionary can do are quite amazing: safely pick up snakes, drink deadly poison, speak in tongues and more. Surely that is not the kind of thing we expect with baptism? It is not, but it does, in a most colourful way, bring out the point that there will be obstacles in the way and there will be forces, people and events which will not only oppose the Gospel message, but make life difficult for those who set out to proclaim the Gospel. Missionaries may even die. The solution to those extreme situations is the same as for the milder form of opposition with which we are liable to be faced today and that solution is God. If we believe that Christ is ruling at God's right hand, then why should we worry about the future of the Church and the future of our own lives and families? The sure foundation is that it all somehow rests in God's hands and is under his care. The difficulties and challenges will then wash over us to be resolved by him...in his time. Our task is clear: believe and be baptized (meaning not just go through the ceremony once as a child, but live out on a daily basis the commitments of baptism), so that God has a chance to carry our yokes and burdens.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, in your great love for us you sent us your Son as our Redeemer and Saviour. Teach us how to live so that we allow him to bear the burdens of our lives of faith.

Wednesday April 7th

Luke 24:13-35

This is a revelatory story where the risen Christ is only gradually made manifest to the disciples. Their human limitations initially stopped them from seeing who he was and it is only after instruction that this veil is removed. Understanding comes not from looking at him but in the breaking of the bread. Importantly for Luke it is also a story that puts the resurrection in terms of the fulfilment of Scripture. They knew he was a prophet (verse 19) who was mighty in deed and word but they failed to understand the truth of that belief. The risen Jesus teaches them that all the words of the prophets were fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus. He is a prophet, the suffering Messiah spoken about by Moses and the Prophets. This is Luke's proof-from-prophecy theology. His Gospel began by talking about all of the things that were fulfilled among them (1:1) and now at the end of his work he sets the whole of the Old Testament as pointing to the coming of Jesus (for those who read it with faith). The account is also a eucharistic story. Luke takes up the image of the breaking of the bread again in Acts, making it clear that after the ascension Jesus will be recognizable among them in this action.

It is a wonderful story of the journey of discipleship. In fear they head out of Jerusalem and their meeting with Jesus makes it clear that they have a "head knowledge" of who Jesus is and what has happened. But this does not change their lives as they continue to run away from their problems in Jerusalem. It is only during the conversation with the risen Jesus as they walk along the road that their hearts are stirred up and they feel a new life within them. This feeling is brought to its highpoint during the breaking of the bread when they are then empowered to act on their faith. Having recognized Jesus in that most sacred of actions they turn around and return to Jerusalem. The city has not changed and is still the place where their enemies are to be found and where those who killed their Lord are in power. The reason for their running away is to be found in the city, yet it is back to their fears that they return. What has changed? They have encountered the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread and understand that he is still very much with them though in a different way than before. Discipleship is not about believing in God but about living out our faith every day.

Prayer

All-powerful Father, remove the limitations that stop us from seeing your Son alive and active within us. Through the truths that you offer us in the Scriptures, the support of the community.

Thursday April 8th

Luke 24:35-48

This third appearance of the risen Christ takes place within the centre of the Christian community (a small house church) which Luke paints as being characterized by bewilderment, astonishment, unbelief and fear. This section (through to verse 52) is one complete and united story which reaches its highpoint in verse 52 when they finally recognize Jesus and worship him. Like the earlier stories it helps set out Luke's theology of the resurrection. The disciples are huddled in fear even though they had heard stories of the risen Lord. Jesus' offer to them is the gift of peace suggesting as he does that the cause of their anxiety is not so much the Jews but their lack of faith. Once they see that it is truly the Lord they are at peace even though they struggled to understand. Clearly it was important for Luke to show that Jesus was risen because he has the disciples being asked to bring him some fish which he proceeds to eat in front of them. As in the Emmaus story Jesus brings them to a position of faith through his teaching as he explains the scriptures from the Law to the Prophets showing that Jesus is the fulfilment of all they had awaited and prayed for. It is only when he has appeared to them, eaten with them, filled them with the Spirit, that they were able (verse 52) to finally believe and go back to Jerusalem full of joy (instead of fear). For Luke this Joy is one of the gifts of salvation and a consequence of grace.

Biblical Shalom is the state that is created when a person lives in close union with God. The model that is used is the garden of Eden at the end of creation where God, the man and the woman walk around together in the cool of the evening. That is the shalom that sin destroys and which is once again made possible in Christ. This shalom is not an absence of pain, difficulties or suffering. It is a state that is possible in the midst of all of these, and in some ways, despite all of these. This peace is not something we can create or build. It is something that happens when God is present in the life of the believer. Jerusalem did not change after the resurrection. For the Christians it grew to be more of a threat to their lives and well-being so it was not the change in the Jews that gave the disciples peace. The peace came about because they were at last able to believe that the Lord had truly risen from the grave and was their hope. It no longer really mattered what happened in Jerusalem. That is our hope as well and is a gift that comes from God through our union with Christ.

Prayer

Lord God, be our peace and our consolation as we seek to live our faith in the midst of a world that is at times hostile and indifferent. Help us to build our hopes on you alone.

Sunday April 25th

John 10:22-30

The Feast of the Dedication was a Feast celebrating the rededication of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus after he recaptured the city of Jerusalem from Antiochus IV (164BC, see 1 Maccabees 2:1-4:35). He tore down the statues to pagan gods, stripped out all of the altar area and the decorations and rebuilt and refurbished the Temple. It was then rededicated on the twenty-fifth day of Chislev, 164BC, an event that has been commemorated annually since then. It was celebrated so that the nation might remember the protection that God had provided for them and served as a call to faithfulness to the covenant. They were warned of the dangers of apostasy, of what happens to their nation when the people wander away in the pursuit of foreign gods. The people of Israel had blasphemed the God of Israel and suffered the consequences. That is the setting for John's story today. Jesus is in the Temple grounds and the leaders of the people are questioning his authority to speak in the way he does. His reply is that he and the Father are one, and to listen to the Son is to listen to the Father. Equally, to reject the Son is to reject the Father for "the Father and I are one" (10:30). God cares for his people, as he always has, and now he has handed over the people of Israel to Jesus for his care (10:29). Those who hear the voice of Jesus will follow him and have life. Those who refuse to hear Jesus, will see him as no more than a man (10:33) and so reject him, to their peril. The fact that this takes place on the Feast of Dedication provides an indication as to how John sees this unfolding – destruction (remember that this was written after the Romans had destroyed the Temple).

This reading is a tough one. Through the conflict between Jesus and the leaders of the people we can see where the Gospel sets out the path of discipleship. For John, we who wish to be disciples have to make a choice. We live according to the expectations and ways of the world in which we live, or we live out our lives according to the demands of the Gospel. There will be times when what the Gospel says leads to us facing ridicule, opposition and possibly even persecution. That is the price that is demanded of all disciples, just as Jesus paid the price on the cross. To compromise the Gospel values because they are no longer thought to be relevant or acceptable is to court disaster. To persist with Kingdom values and teachings in the face of opposition is to grow in strength.

Prayer

Merciful God, your Son Jesus Christ went to the cross in obedience to your will. Strengthen us in times of difficulty and hardship that we may remain ever faithful to your Gospel.

Saturday April 24th

John 6:60-69

This was all too much for some of the disciples and other bystanders who felt insecure with the thought of union with Christ replacing what they saw as the certainty of the Law. The meaning of verse 62 is uncertain but possibly refers to the crucifixion. If they are having problems over this teaching of Jesus, how are they going to manage when they see the Son of Man lifted up on the cross? That goes against all human values and sense of meaning. He then goes on to contrast the life which comes from the Spirit and the emptiness which comes from the flesh. This contrast is meant to take us back to the ideas that we had in chapter 3 with Jesus telling Nicodemus that he had to be born "from above". This is the contrast that our present chapter has in mind. To live fully demands that people live their lives shaped by heavenly ideals and the heavenly teachings. When they view the world and what happens around them from this perspective their world changes. To live according to the ideals and expectations of the world (flesh) is to court disaster and disappointment. It is in the words of Jesus that the Spirit (and life) is to be found.

This is sometimes a difficult message to accept. It is possible to attempt to see some things from a God-perspective but there are other things that we can think have nothing to do with God or feel that they are not the kind of things in which God is liable to show interest. The world around us is full of areas of life, particularly with those things that relate to moral behaviour, which are claimed as belonging to the individual and so are areas where religion has no input. From a Gospel point of view that is nonsense. The Gospel would maintain that the problems in the world today arise from the fact that most things are judged from the human perspective and God is ignored. It is equally possible for Christians to keep God isolated in limited areas of their lives. God is good when we are going to Church or involved in some Church activity but for the other ninety percent of the time he has no role to play in what we are doing. The call of this chapter is to work on orientating our daily living and family living so that it is carried out with a "from above" perspective and John provides us with the way this is done. It happens through a personal relationship with Christ and the closer and more personal this relationship is, the more our lives will be filled with the blessings of God's Kingdom.

Prayer

Loving God, you sent us your Son Jesus Christ to be the Way for us to be taken up into your love. Strengthen us in our endeavours as we seek to live in your righteousness.

Friday April 9th

John 21:1-14

As with other appearance stories we again have the problem of those who know the Lord well, being unable to recognize him. There are also the elements of fear and vulnerability which were powerful enough to cause the disciples to have locked themselves away in a room (20:19). Peter provides the leadership here and in a scene reminiscent of the calling of the disciples (Lk 5:1-11) they fish all night but catch nothing. A new element is introduced into the story with the command of Jesus to "cast your net on the other side". This seems to be a part of what made it possible for them to think that it may be the Lord and Peter rushes to the beach (how he got there is not clear but again the earlier story of walking on water comes to mind). The contrast is made between the fruits of their fishing on their own where they caught no fish and the net-breaking volume of fish they caught in obedience to the command of Jesus. As with other traditional appearance stories, Jesus eats with them and they "...knew quite well it was the Lord". There are many suggestions as to the significance of the number 153 but its importance is simply that it was an enormous number of fish yet despite the volume the net did not break. It was far more than they could ever eat (reminiscent of the feeding of the 5000 with the huge amount of food left over after they all had eaten).

When the disciples are out fishing because they decide it is a good thing to do and because Peter suggests it, they catch nothing. Despite all their skills and knowledge they end up with nothing. When they respond to the command of Jesus to continue fishing, the waters that had produced no fish suddenly teemed with them. They were still fishing in exactly the same place as the net was only moved to the other side of the boat so the only change was that now they were doing what they normally did, only this time under the direction of Jesus. They had been locked away because they were frightened of the Jews (20:19) but the solution to their fear was not to be found in their own initiative. When they went back to their old haunts, took up their own way of life and went about their normal living with the command of Christ in their hearts what was empty was now more than full, it was overflowing with gifts. That is the promise that goes with discipleship. It is Jesus that makes a difference and obedience to him that enables our lives to be grace filled.

Prayer

Loving Father, when we are exhausting ourselves in fruitless searches for peace and satisfaction in our lives, open our ears that we may hear you calling to us and give us the courage we need to go back to our empty places and allow you to fill them.

Saturday April 10th

Mark 16:9-15

This was not originally a part of Mark's Gospel and possibly dates from the second century. It was, presumably, an independent story that had been circulating in the community and was later added to Mark as this Gospel had no appearance stories of its own. This addition (vs 9-20) takes up some of the issues which were important for the early community and up to verse 16 is a kind of catechetical summary: Jesus rose on the first day of the week. He appeared first of all to the notorious sinner Mary who passed on the news to the disciples who failed to believe her word. He appeared to two disciples who were walking along the road (Emmaus?) who also brought back the message and were also disbelieved. He finally appeared to the Eleven during a meal. As is found in other stories of the resurrection (cf 1 Cor ch 15) the Church placed a great emphasis on the appearances of the risen Lord. Believers can have confidence in the fact of the resurrection because Jesus was seen walking, talking and eating after Easter Sunday morning. This was no theological concept but was a living reality and it was only human stubbornness that stopped faith.

Some things do not change in the Gospel. As we saw throughout Lent many people failed to believe in Jesus (including the disciples) because he was not meeting their expectations. He was moving in new and unexpected ways. Who would have ever thought of a Messiah dying on a cross and being buried in the earth? This is where they struggled in believing in the "unbelievable", that God was not limited by human imagination. The whole of Mark's Gospel is a race towards Golgotha with the resurrection taking a mere eight verses. In this he reflects much of the human experience of the Church he served. It is in the cross that everything else makes sense. The cross calls us to humble living, to a willingness to lay aside our own lives and obediently serve the Father. The cross loudly proclaims the power of God for not even death could stop his work of salvation. The consequences of sin in our lives: emptiness, suffering, darkness, fear, anxiety, hopelessness, isolation, being disliked and even hated are all transformed by the cross. We can live through all those things and emerge filled with joy, peace and hope because we know that Golgotha is not the end but merely a step along the path of the humble ministry of Jesus and those who walk with him and die with him shall also know new life in him both now and in the life to come.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, in the darkest moments of our lives, at those times when we feel weakest and most discouraged, show us the healing presence of your risen and glorified Son.

Friday April 23rd

John 6:52-59

The links of this section to the sacrament of the Eucharist are strong and would have found a ready place in the early community. However, the sacramental side is secondary. The key is, as we have seen, that it is a person's union with Jesus Christ which leads to eternal life and there are numerous ways of achieving this union. The necessity of such a union is made clear by Jesus' use of the negative in a statement form: "Truly and most certainly I am saying to you...if you do not eat...". If they want life (in the world to come and full life in the present age) then they need Christ. If they do not come to Christ and live in him then they will perish (meaning lose out on eternal life and not able to live fully in the present). The notion of "abiding with" is repeated in different ways throughout the passage indicating its importance for John and providing the reader with an insight into what John was saying. With verse 57 Jesus comes back again to his sense of mission. The Son lives for the Father and to do the Father's will and has no life apart from the Father. This in turn is the model for discipleship. As it is between the Son and the Father, so it must be between the disciple and the Master. We conclude with being brought back to the parallel between the manna and the bread that is Christ. The manna was great and helped them get to Canaan, but those who ate it are dead. Manna had no impact on their eternal life. Those who eat of the flesh of Christ will not only complete their journeys but will live forever.

One of the great fears of the Hebrews was their uncertainty about their standing before God. Had they failed and thus faced judgement or had God shown his mercy and forgiven them? This helps to explain the great sacrificial system and the myriad of laws that had sprung up, all of which were aimed at helping them live perfectly and so gain God's blessing and eternal life. But of course it did not work. They could never quite manage to keep all the laws. This is why today's Gospel is so full of hope. It reminds us that our perfection is the perfection which Christ will bring about in us. Our vocation is to unite ourselves as fully as we can with Christ and leave the rest to him. Like the ancient Hebrews, we cannot do what is necessary to attain perfection. What we can do is work at being more and more faithfully at one with Christ, removing from our lives the things that keep him at a distance and taking on the things that help to place him at the centre of all we do.

Prayer

Father, as we eat the body of your Son and drink of his blood in the sacrament of the Eucharist, may we be strengthened and drawn more fully into life with you.

Thursday April 22nd

John 6:44-51

John spells out his picture of faith. He sees human beings as wanting to feel independent, thinking that they can come to God entirely of their own volition. Jesus begins by saying that this is impossible. Coming to God depends on being called by God and being able to respond to that call. Our journey to Jesus is a part of the divine plan. He backs up this belief by quoting Isaiah 54:13 and Jeremiah 31:34. People thought they could learn about God and live in the presence of God through the Law, but now the time has come when God will teach them directly — in their hearts. In verse 47 we have the same indication of the importance of what Jesus is saying with “Truly, truly I say to you...”. Jesus’ concern is with life and how people are to obtain it and not with his own person. He solemnly announces that the way to this life is faith...he who believes in me. He presents this simply by stating in verse 48 that “I am the Bread of Life”. The contrast is made with their fathers who ate manna and died. It was clearly not a bread of eternal life! In contrast, the bread which is Jesus himself offers a life from which there is no death. This bread is not of earthly origin but has a heavenly origin and needs to be taken up into the inner life of the believer (eaten).

This whole section was clearly of great importance for the early Church, especially with its celebration of the Eucharist. Christ was the bread of life and commanded believers to “take and eat” in memory of him. This explains why the Mass has always been so central in the life of the Christian community because in its celebration we are invited to partake of a way of living that is not possible by any efforts of our own. In it we hear the call of God, repent of our sins, recall the great saving acts of salvation that are found in the Scriptures, place before almighty God our thanksgiving and our needs and join in a true and intimate communion with Jesus and with other believers. This is all found in chapter 6 of John. It is about a leaving behind and a coming to and a sense of our need of food for our journeys. And the real beauty of what John has written here is that he says this is what the Father had in mind all along. That God wants to feed us. He wants us to have life. He sent his Son to become man so that this grace and life would be a possibility in all aspects of our human living.

Prayer Compassionate Lord, we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ and for the gift of life that comes through our union with him. Help us to put aside those ways of thinking and acting that stop us from coming to him seeking that gift of life.

Sunday April 11th

John 20:19-31

This story is very similar to the appearance of Jesus to the disciples after the story of Emmaus (Lk 24:36ff). He comes and stands in their midst even though the door is locked to keep the Jews out. Whatever the changes that took place at the resurrection, for John it is clear that a couple of locked doors are not enough to hinder Jesus’ movements. Jesus greets them with the words “Peace be with you”. This is probably more directed towards their earlier abandonment of him than to their fear of the Jews. They may well have anticipated a rebuke from him but instead were offered the gift of peace. Like all greetings of peace it is related to the creation story and this event takes place on the first day of the week, the day in which God created light and overcame darkness. In the words of Jesus we find the often repeated theme of John: the Father sent the Son and the mission that the disciples have comes from the mission of the Son. As he was successful so they too will be successful through their links with Jesus. Having commissioned them he now fills them with the power they need to fulfil their ministries, breathing onto them the Holy Spirit (which for John is the same as the Pentecost event). The creation overtones are obvious. God breathed his breath into the clay and it became a living thing. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into the disciples and they take on a new life with a new role in the new creation.

This is a powerful story in that it is the first time that Jesus has been together with his disciples since the Last Supper. In the meantime they had abandoned him, denied him and turned their back on three years of shared ministry. No wonder they were frightened when he appeared among them! But the message he brings is one of great compassion, understanding and mercy. He offers them forgiveness. It matters not how dismally they had failed, they were forgiven and even more importantly, offered a whole new ministry with new gifts and promises. In this brief encounter we have the meaning of Easter made clear. Our sins are forgiven in Christ. We can begin again (and again and again) if we are humble enough to acknowledge our failings and our need of healing. When Jesus breathed the Spirit into them (and so into us) it was not a once off offering. We are continuously empowered with that divine Spirit and it is the Spirit which makes Peace possible, our healing a reality, and our life and ministries in the world successful.

Prayer Merciful Father, help us to know your forgiveness in our lives and to allow you to heal all our weaknesses and limitations. Show us how to share this forgiveness with others.

Monday April 12th

John 3:1-8

From the opening of the Gospel John has been concerned about revealing Jesus as the Word made Flesh who came among us so that men and women could have eternal life. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have seen the Law as the way to salvation and Jesus presents to him a radical new direction. He says that a reinterpretation of the Law is not enough nor even a different understanding of Judaism. What is called for is a rebirth (this is demanded three times — verses 3, 5, 7). The key concept is in the statement “unless a man is born from above he cannot see the Kingdom of God”. The whole of the Gospel is written from an “above” perspective. Jesus tries to teach the people about the meaning of life, a meaning which is tied up with God who represents the “above” of life. Human life, human activity and human destiny can only be properly understood when viewed in the light of God and the Truth which has been revealed by God in the Scriptures. Nicodemus is called to move away from the idea that he can change his life by trying to be more faithful to observing the Law but to look at living a whole new life that is on offer in Jesus. It is not just a new programme of living or a new philosophy. It is a whole new way of living and thinking.

At the last Lambeth Conference there was an African liturgy which told us over and over again to “bring it to the cross of Christ”. It was a beautiful liturgy and one which would have received the approval of John for it was encouraging the faithful to view everything in their lives from the point of view of God. When they are happy, sad, uncertain, afraid, sick, dying and everything else that inevitably finds its way into human living, they should bring it to God and view it from the point of view of all that God has said, done and promised. It is by trying to gain this “from above” perspective that we can not only manage our lives in a more positive way but we can know great Peace and Joy. This of course does not come naturally but has to be built into our daily living. Time needs to be put aside to allow the light of God to shine into those areas that struggle with the darkness. If we are faithful in our prayer times, in our reading of Scripture and in our life in the Church then God has a chance to give us the new life we seek. Like Nicodemus we are unable to do anything about changing the world through our own efforts. However, God can and does change it through us.

Prayer

Loving God, we bring to you our lives and our hopes, knowing that in you we can find the graces and strengths we need to change our lives and to share that life with others.

Wednesday April 21st

John 6:35-40

The opening line here is Jesus’ reply to their demands. Using terminology from the burning bush of the Exodus, Jesus says that **I AM** the bread of life. What he is offering is not earthly bread but a share in divine life which is possible only through him. There are seven of these **I AM** sayings in the Gospel and they all bring out this same point. He is what is necessary to have eternal life. This “bread of life” is available to those who “come to me” (v 35). This “coming to Christ” is found in 6:37; 6:44; 6:45; 6:65 and has the sense of becoming aware of their need for this food which is himself. It is not a spatial thing as the crowd has already come to him. It is here that Jesus makes the offer of feeding the people. As verse 36 shows, the opposite is also possible, for people can see Jesus and not believe. But those who do come will never be turned away. In the Greek this is emphatic: Those who come to me (in need) I shall never, never, never turn away. The reason for this is that God his Father had sent him to feed the people of God (defined as those who come to Jesus in need and in faith) and he and the Father are One.

By linking Jesus to the image of bread John is saying that he is an indispensable part of life. Bread for the Hebrews of that time was a staple and it would be eaten on most days. It is also a key concept because bread was the food that God himself provided for the Hebrews on their journey to the Promised Land. It is all a way of saying that Jesus is not some peripheral part of our lives but is of the essence of our daily living. We hunger for many things and Jesus (meaning here the person of Jesus as well as his teachings) needs to be a part of the solution if it is to be a solution that brings lasting peace. And the other key part of this is that Jesus makes it abundantly clear that if anyone wants to have this bread then we need to come to him. Life in the Kingdom of God is an invitation and a free gift and that is what is so exciting about faith. What “comes to” also implies is that we must also “go from” an old way of life and living. It suggests a life that will include repentance, sorrow, a desire to amend our lives and to go about sorting out the consequences of our sinful actions. That is not easy and is why Jesus is our bread for this journey. But first we need to be able to accept and acknowledge our need for this kind of bread.

Prayer

Almighty God, you led your people out of slavery in Egypt and sustained them on their journey through the desert to the land of Canaan. Be with us on our journeys of discipleship, giving us the strength we need and directing us in the way to go.

Tuesday April 20th

John 6:30-35

Part of the background to this story is the Jewish expectation that the Messiah would come and renew the miracle of the manna in the desert during the Exodus. They tried to make him king so that they could have the blessings of constant food. Jesus however tries to turn their thinking to "the true bread" and the "bread of God" which is the "bread of life". The people bring up the question of the manna from heaven and set that up as the kind of sign they want Jesus to perform before they will believe. They make it clear that if they **see** something extraordinary then they will **believe**. This is the process as they see it. Jesus on the other hand is talking about faith and is asking them to reflect upon what they have already seen and heard (which was a parallel of the manna miracle). At the beginning of verse 32 he says "Truly, truly..." indicating that what is to follow is of special importance. He notes that the bread did not come from Moses, it came from God (which is the true meaning of the quote from scripture that they use). Secondly he notes that the manna was not heavenly bread. It was earthly bread that came from heaven and because it was earthly it would not last forever. They could eat one day and be hungry the next. For John, Jesus is the bread from heaven that God his Father continually offers to them and which is the true need of their heart. This is far more important than earthly bread because it gives life eternal and those who eat will never be hungry again.

The Jews had a tradition that linked bread with the Law. This is helpful in reading this story because what it highlights is the way the Jews were looking at salvation. Salvation was to be found through the Law. God gave it to Moses (from heaven) and the Jews were to obey it. It was what made them a people, it gave them purpose, direction and hope. Now Jesus is being presented as the new and true bread/law from heaven. The Father has sent the Son to do for us, in a more perfect way, what the Law was meant to do for the Hebrews. In this context eating the bread to be strengthened for the journey means taking in the teachings of Jesus so that we are able to continue on our journeys of discipleship. This does not depend on material "feeding" or the accumulation of the "things" of the world around us. It depends on faith and it is there that we find the difficulty. The way the crowds wanted to go was not about faith but rather about human desires.

Prayer Merciful God, we ask your forgiveness for the times when we have been unwilling to commit ourselves to discipleship because of our failures in faith. Lord, strengthen our faith.

Tuesday April 13th

John 3:7-15

This reading is set in the context of Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus the Pharisee where he is gently rebuking him for his inability to open himself up to the ways of God. Why should he be surprised when he is taught that he needed to be born again from above? The Greek word for "born again" also means "from above" and the best translation would use both of these phrases. He needs to be born of water (the physical realm) and the spirit (the heavenly realm). A single birth is not enough. To be born just of the flesh leaves the person at risk of being under the control of the drives and passions of the created universe, particularly human passions. When Nicodemus questions the credentials of Jesus and asks where he obtained the authority to speak in the way he is, Jesus replies, "Amen, amen, I say to you...". This is a literary device used by John to indicate that he is moving into an important statement and theology (3:3, 5, 11). These different sections are all to be seen as forming a part of the one single spiritual teaching of Jesus. When Jesus says "I say to you" he is making it clear that his authority is to be found in who he is and in his origins. He is the one who has come from heaven to earth. No one else has done that and so no one else has authority to speak of heavenly things. His authority is in his position as the Son of Man, the Son of the heavenly Father. What follows on from that statement is that his words are therefore to be believed, trusted and acted upon.

Being "born again" has been used by some small churches and Christian sects to justify the idea of a second baptism, usually by immersion. This is such a terrible reading of the Gospel. What John is trying to show his people is that there are two ways of living out our lives. The first way is what he calls the way of flesh. People living by this way plan their lives and assess all that they do and all that happens around them according to human values and the ways of the world. This is a path that leads to confusion, pain, suffering, loneliness and all of the ills that we find in our communities. The alternative way is to live as though we were being "born again from above". Living this way means presenting our lives, on a daily level, to God for guidance, blessing, strengthening and healing. We assess what we do according to the Gospel. We take our lives and measure them up against what the Gospel demands and seek to live from that perspective, a heavenly perspective, from above.

Prayer Loving Father, in your Son Jesus Christ we have the gift of new life. We pray that as we rejoice in the gifts of Easter, we may seek to shape our lives according to the Gospel teachings.

Wednesday April 14th

John 3:16-21

It is generally thought that with verse 16 we move from a dialogue by Jesus to a reflection by John. John sees the death of Jesus on the cross as a gift from God for the purpose of delivering mankind from the death that is the result of sin. If they do perish it is because they prefer darkness to light and so bring it on themselves. Here John notes that God loved "the world". Traditionally the Jews understood God as loving the Jews and the rest of the world was left in limbo if not condemnation. God gave the Son by sending him into the world but God also gave the Son on the cross. The cross for John shows the Father's love more than the Son's love. Because God loved mankind he gave his Son and thus he showed that true love has a cost. He also presents two options. People can either have eternal life or perish, but the choice remains theirs and theirs alone. John goes on to develop this theme further by showing that judgement is the other side of the coin from salvation. Jesus is presented in terms of judging: all judgement is given to him (5:22; 5:27) and he has come to judge (5:30; 8:16) but also not to judge (8:15). His judgement is just (5:30) and true (8:16). People are going to be judged in terms of their relationship to Jesus (5:24; 3:19) and the cross is the measure of their judgement (12:31).

All the way through John's Gospel the picture of the cross is one of healing and forgiveness. It is an offer of life and it is a part of the call to a new beginning for sinners. When he speaks of the cross it is as a sign of glory and not something that brings condemnation. Sin is not the end and God through Jesus on the cross pursues sinners so that time and time again they are offered the chance of forgiveness. Guilt is not encouraged by John. He invites believers to acknowledge their sinfulness, to understand their need for healing, to leave behind the things of the past and to begin again. They are able to get on with their lives and not spend time wondering if they have been forgiven or in continuing on with their self-judgement. All this is because God loves us. He loves us not because we have done such wonderful things and deserve that love but because of his Son, and it is in our union with Jesus that we can share in the fullness of that love. That is what he is trying to tell Nicodemus. Forget about trying to do things to earn God's love and let Christ unite us to the Father.

Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for the gift of your Son and for the love and forgiveness you give to us through his death on the cross. Help us to live as people who have been forgiven.

Monday April 19th

John 6:22-29

This is the crowd which sought to make Jesus their king and they are a little puzzled at how Jesus managed to make it across the lake. These few verses are confusing but seem to represent an attempt to provide some historical setting to the teaching that is about to unfold. When they find him they address him as Rabbi acknowledging him as a teacher, and that is what he is about to do. Before continuing he acknowledges that the motives of those seeking him are mixed. They are impressed by the signs he has worked and presumably are after more. The miracle of the loaves had for them no sign value, no deeper meaning beyond the filling of their empty bellies and Jesus suggests that this is where their motivation comes from. He also notes that this kind of bread will not last and that they will soon be hungry again.

When Calvin writes on this text he says "Just as today many would eagerly embrace the Gospel if it were empty of the bitterness of the cross and only brought carnal delights". Here is the core of the problem for Jesus and what must have been an ongoing difficulty for the community of John. We have people willing to follow Christ while they are receiving benefits. Their expectation is that Jesus somehow owes them another miracle, that having gone to all the trouble of getting out into the wilderness to be with him, he should now respond in a way that would be to their benefit. This is not the understanding of Jesus. His signs were meant to draw people to the significance of who he was and to call people to reassess their lives. This explains the importance of the word Rabbi in the story. What Jesus comes to bring is not wealth and material blessings. He has come to teach the way of the Kingdom of God and the path that people need to follow to live in that Kingdom. He has come to set out Truth, to highlight the demands and expectations of God his Father. For Jesus (and so for John) we need to approach the Son because we are searching for the Truth. This does not mean that Jesus is not interested in our difficulties and hardships but it does mean that he may well have a different perspective on our lives and on what is happening around us to the one that dominates our thinking. This is nowhere more obvious than on Golgotha. The disciples abandoned Jesus when he no longer met their expectations. The crowds abandoned him when there was no more bread. Are we any different?

Prayer

Loving Father, we so often come to you willingly expressing our needs and our demands. Through your loving care for us lead us so that we can hear you speaking and give you praise.

Sunday April 18th

John 21:1-19

Fr Robert Newton

They all knew it was the Lord. Plates were not passed and he served them, which is significant. Do you get the idea that there is more than tasty fish and wholesome bread at work here? Do you also sense that there's a lot more to it than hungry, seedy fishermen devouring a tasty meal? It has a Eucharistic dimension, doesn't it? In a way, it is a fish story and yet in another it isn't at all. For one thing Jesus, according to the text, already has the table set. Not one of the 153 fish is needed or is it? It is reminiscent of the loaves and the fishes. There is both miracle and mystery at work here. So, as we attempt to decipher the meaning, food from the hands of the Master is put before us. Man cannot live by bread alone, regardless of its freshness and delicious taste. It is in the spiritual sharing of our gifts that we are nourished and fulfilled. Our blessed Lord was always giving gifts and in doing so challenges us to do the same. His greatest gift is found in his undeniable presence, as the crucified and resurrected Lord, in the Holy Communion. While Peter and the others experience a memorable breakfast, the message is clear. He is the one who feeds us. We do not feed him. He will continue being the Christ, regardless of what we do or do not do. In our case, however, it is what he does for us that enables us to live the Christian life.

It was only after breakfast that the Lord posed his trio of questions to Peter. The blessed event of both material and spiritual food had happened. Jesus had a plan, didn't he? The focus was now on his main man. The fellow whose track record was subject to criticism was now on the spot. We note it was one-on-one, with the others simply watching and listening. We get the feeling the Lord wanted to have everything in place before he ascended into heaven. So, he kept pressing the issue and Peter must have felt the heat. Three consecutive times the questions were asked. There was no breathing space, so to speak, as the text presented a trilogy which will forever be imprinted in our Christian consciences. Peter was to love his Lord, tend his sheep, and feed his sheep. The recipient of the inquiries seemed to grow weary and, in impatience or hurt feelings, attempted to remind the Lord that he knew everything. It was a classic scene for all our spiritual ancestors and will remain so for us and for all future generations. It is as simple and as challenging as that for us as Christians to live up to that charge given by Jesus to Peter.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to be mindful of our Christian duty to love you and to serve you through our service and care of others.

Thursday April 15th

John 3:31-36

This section begins with a further reference to coming from "above". This is the big difference between Jesus and all the other prophets, including John the Baptist. It is because he is from "above" that he is not teaching theories that are open for discussion. He is teaching what he knows and so is teaching the Truth. He has seen and heard these things from "above" and he gives witness to this. The sad thing is that this witness is not accepted. The sadness comes about because this witness of Jesus is reliable because he is speaking about things he has himself seen. The Son has the fullness of the Spirit from the Father and as the Spirit is the bearer of life he also has the fullness of life in him. It is this he brings to offer to those who choose to believe. As we have seen earlier in the chapter, this life represents an invitation. Those who believe in the Son, meaning those who believe in him as the divine Son of God and the Messiah, will have that life. Those who refuse to believe will find themselves caught up in the anger of God.

This is a difficult section in the Gospel and needs a great deal of thought and prayer to sort it out. There is a different way of living for disciples and it can be called the heavenly way. Men and women are called to live out their lives under the influence of heavenly Truth. The best example of this is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7. Life cannot be compartmentalized into spiritual and non-spiritual. For the person of faith, the incarnation means that every part of our life is an opportunity for grace, where we can come to know God's love and mercy a little more deeply and a little more personally. Disciples bring to bear on their earthly lives the influence of heaven and so have the chance of helping to change the world and to show the world the possibilities of a new life. This is all possible because of Jesus and not because of observance of laws. That is the exciting part for us today. When we look around and see the variety of pain and suffering, the despair, deprivation and slavery that takes over the lives of so many people, we know that we have a solution because we look at these things from an "above" perspective. We can put it all into God's hands with confidence knowing that the Father who brought life from the cross wants to do the same for us.

Prayer

Almighty God, we move forward in our lives filled with hope and confidence no matter what we face in our lives, because our trust is in the cross of your Son Jesus Christ. Help us as we seek to witness to this gift to a world in need.

Friday April 16th

John 6:1-15

This is the one miracle, apart from the resurrection, that is recorded in all four Gospels and so is clearly of significance for the early Church. John's account has information that is not found in the Synoptics: the proximity of the Passover, the bread as barley loaves, the reason for gathering up the fragments, the effects on the people and Jesus' dismissal of the disciples and of people in general. Eating and drinking is widely used in the Old Testament. It is a sign of prosperity and was used as a sign of the blessings that the people would receive in the Promised Land. It is also associated with communing with God (Ex 24:11). Eating and drinking were also reminders of what God did for the people of Israel during their time in the wilderness with manna and water from the rock and the great expectation for the last day is being able to sit down at a meal with God. This is the background against which this sign of Jesus is to be read.

This story begins with a picture of the people who were to be fed. They are the ones who were so impressed by the signs he was giving when he cured the sick that they followed him all over the hill country. The Greek text writes this to mean that they constantly followed him everywhere as he cured the sick. These are not people who think that Jesus is just a good idea but who get out on the road to be with him and listen to his words. They have made a commitment. These are the ones who are fed. Those who dismissed Jesus and refused to listen to his words stayed at home and missed out. It is interesting too when we note that the miracle of the loaves is no multiplication. They are fed with five barley loaves and two fish, a volume of food which is simply not enough to feed so many hungry people. What's more, this food is in the care of a small boy. There is the picture of the Church and of each individual believer. The task facing the Church and the challenges before every believer are enormous and so often the resources at hand seem inadequate. Not so, says Jesus. In him and through him the little that we have is more than enough even though at times it may seem that we are about to be overwhelmed or the Church about to vanish into insignificance. The key is to focus in on what "true food" is and to avoid the simple "junk food" solutions that the world tends to offer. We have seen Jesus presented as the Truth and his ways are Truth and the more we are united with him the more he is able to feed us.

Prayer All-powerful Lord, we thank you for the many gifts you have given to us in and through your Son. Lead us and help us so that we are able to recognize them and use them for your good.

Saturday April 17th

John 6:16-21

The lake is not an enormous body of water and it is possible to see in some detail features on the opposite bank. This suggests that John wrote the story understanding that they could see their objective. They set out confident that they could reach their goal. We can also presume that the boat was familiar to them and that the fishermen in their midst would have been confident in their ability to reach their destination whatever the weather and other circumstances. However they soon faced the dual obstacles of wind and waves which threatened their travel. Into this situation comes Jesus walking on top of the water. All the Gospels that have this story record the same features: the disciples are filled with fear and think that he is a ghost and Jesus calms them down with the greeting: "It is I. Do not be afraid". The response is a calming of the sea and a quietening of the wind and they are able to complete their journey.

Presumably this miracle story was so popular in the early Church because it spoke to them of Christian living. At times life is like a journey over the water. We know where we are to go and the goal is often clear but we are pushed off course or held back by a wide variety of "winds" and "stormy seas". So often skills, strengths and assets are of no avail and we feel at times like we are drowning or at the least unable to make any progress towards our goal. This is how Jesus is presented by the gospel writers. He does not stand on the beach and shout out instructions but walks to us and stands with us in the midst of the storm. And what does he offer when he reaches the disciples in their fear? The gift of Peace. He does not promise that the storm will be taken away and in John's account there is no mention of a calming. What is promised is that they can make it to the end of their journey and reach their objective. Peace is to be found with Jesus in the midst of the storm. That is the great gift. Experience shows us that storms are a part of life and part of the power of Jesus' person and ministry is that he provides his disciples with a way of continuing, of growing and of moving forward despite the storms. We are also left with a lingering and worrying question: "Why could they not recognize Jesus?". This was someone they knew well, having spent so long wandering around with him and sitting at his feet. It is worrying because it means that we too can miss Christ when he comes to us with his offering of Peace.

Prayer Lord God, as we face the storms of life keep our eyes firmly fixed in hope on the goals of the Kingdom that you have set for us and through all that happens fill us with your gift of Peace.