

Friday September 3rd

Luke 5:33-39

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

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

Prayer

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



BIBLE STUDIES AUGUST 2010

**+ Michael Hough
with Fr Peter Yeats**



LANTERN SERIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thursday September 2nd

Luke 5:1-11

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

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

Prayer

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

Wednesday September 1st

Luke 4:38-44

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

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

Prayer

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

Sunday August 1st

Luke 12:13-21

Fr Robert Newton

The incident stirring up this text is the request of someone in the crowd who asked Jesus to judge between an older brother and himself regarding an inheritance. The real problem isn’t the request which Jesus refused, but the greed lying beneath the surface of the request which Jesus addressed with a parable about a rich fool who went to hell. In Jesus’ day, the oldest brother got the inheritance when his father died. He was then expected to take care of the rest of the family. This procedure protected the family farm from being divided into such small portions that it wouldn’t do anyone any good. Apparently, the man who approached Jesus was dissatisfied with this arrangement and wanted Jesus to tell his older brother to give him his half of the inheritance. Jesus looked deeply into the heart of the man making the request. What did he see there? He saw greed and told the man, “Take care! Be on guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions”. Then Jesus drove his point home with a parable. The parable is about the temptation to succumb to the attractive distraction of devoting oneself to possessions and missing the call of God to have right priorities. The man who asked Jesus to judge between himself and his brother, and the farmer in the parable Jesus told, had the same problem. They embraced the temptation of gathering possessions out of greed.

That’s why the focus of the farmer in Jesus’ parable was so tragically dislocated. He was caught in the illusion and trappings of success. He thought he’d made it, only to discover that he had been looking in the wrong places, looking in the wrong direction, seeking the wrong things in life. At the very best, God was on the periphery of his life. Success and possessions were right in the middle. He was caught in the trap of giving his life to the attractive persuasions and distractions of this world and neglected to focus on the world to come. The pursuit of possessions is trivial when compared to the striving for and receiving of the blessings of the Kingdom of God. That’s why the rich farmer was pitiful. That’s why he was foolish. The parable of the rich, but foolish, farmer ends with a poignant reminder for all of us. At the end of life we’d like to hear God say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master”, but if, like the farmer, we set the wrong priorities we may hear these words: “You fool”.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to be ever watchful not to fall into the trap of being possessed by our possessions and measuring others by their wealth.

Monday August 2nd

Matthew 14:13-21

Upon hearing about the death of John Jesus and his disciples left the town and headed into the wilderness and many people followed them. As we have seen before, in Matthew the wilderness or desert is the place of the Exodus and where God walks with his people. He seems to have preached and healed all day and the disciples want to send the people home. These are the same ones who came to Jesus because they were in need and afraid and so it seems strange that they are now being sent off. The reason is that the disciples cannot feed them as their supply of food is too meagre. Jesus has us focus in on this point by getting them to find out what their resources were: five loaves and two fish for what must have been a crowd of around ten thousand! It is clearly not enough. Jesus asks them to bring the food to him. He blesses it. Gives it back to the disciples and they distribute it to the hungry people, who are not only filled but there are twelve baskets of scraps left over. This story is set before the Transfiguration and the prediction by Jesus of his death and the need for the disciples to follow him.

The key line in the story is where the disciples are confronted by Jesus and they acknowledge that their resources are inadequate for the task of feeding so many hungry people. And so they are. What does Jesus do? He does not multiply the fish and the loaves. There is no mention of any increase in what they have at hand. Jesus feeds them with what they have available. What is the difference? It is to be found in the words: **"Bring what you have here to me"**. Once they approach their task with a "here with me" perspective, their own limitations are removed. Now the five fish and two loaves feed the huge crowd. This is what the disciples will reflect on later after the resurrection, as they go about the task of taking the Gospel out into the nations. They are weak and sinful and there is no way they can carry out their vocations. Their resources are limited and inadequate and the problems and challenges far too large. The answer they will go back to is that line: **"Bring what you have here to me"**. That is how the Church survives and it is how we are invited to live out our lives. Our littleness is raised up and filled with grace and power if daily we bring our lives to Christ. We bring them to Christ when we pause for prayer and to listen to what it is he wants to say.

Prayer

Father, there are times when we struggle to keep going and to overcome the challenges and problems thrown up by the world. Keep our eyes firmly fixed on Christ your Son so that in him we can find strength and the power to continue to grow.

Tuesday August 31st

Luke 4:31-37

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

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

Prayer

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

Monday August 30th

Luke 4:16-30

This is an important account in Luke in that it points forward to the ministry that is to come. He is rejected here at the beginning of his ministry, just as at the end he will also suffer rejection. He goes to the Sabbath prayers at the Synagogue and, as was the custom, he was invited to comment on the text. The Bible was always read in its original language which was Hebrew. By the time of Jesus, Hebrew was no longer a spoken language and many people would not have understood much of what was being read out. An interpreter was therefore required who could not only make a translation into Aramaic but who would also comment on the passage for the congregation. His words were aimed at telling the people that the prophecies he had just read out were now being fulfilled in himself. He was the one who had been anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and sent to proclaim the Good News to the poor. In his coming God was bringing salvation to his people. The people were not well disposed to hearing this word because he was just the son of a local carpenter. This seems to have been anticipated by Jesus who reminds them that the prophet is always rejected in his own home first and so to be accepted he has to go out to others. Herein lies Luke's key point. Jesus is making it reasonably clear that if the Jews were going to reject him then he would go out to the Gentiles. Salvation was here whether or not the Jews were ready to accept it.

The rejection of Jesus in his home town is a picture of his wider rejection by the nation and the people. Luke wants us to understand this point. If Jesus was rejected in his own time, and the early Church suffered great times of persecution throughout its history, then why would we think that the Gospel message will be widely accepted and taken up today? There will always be those who accept the Gospel and always be those who will reject it, and if experience is anything to go by, the rejectors will always be larger in number than those who accept it. Its lack of popularity does not weaken its message and power. This is what Jesus is trying to say here. Salvation has come. God's mercy and love are available to all those who come to Jesus and accept him as Saviour. That is where our hope is to be found and not in packed church buildings and blossoming parish incomes.

Prayer

Ever-patient God, we thank you for the gift of your Son who came to bring us the Good News that we have been set free from the power of sin and given the gift of new life. Help us to always experience your presence in the events of our lives.

Tuesday August 3rd

Matthew 14:22-36

Matthew links this story to the feeding of the five thousand by the word "then" because he sees the two stories as flowing together. Having seen the power of Jesus they head off over the lake to a destination given to them by Jesus. They leave at dusk and by dawn they are still only half way over, due to a major storm. As dawn broke Jesus came to them, walking on the water. Importantly for Matthew, their immediate response was fear. Although they had seen him feed the crowd they found it difficult to acknowledge his presence there in the middle of the lake. Jesus' response to this was: "Do not be afraid. It is I." There was no miracle of calming the storm as that was not Jesus' purpose. The storm rages around them and Jesus offers peace. As we saw with the calming of the storm in Matthew 8:24ff the question was a matter of faith. Could they believe in Jesus when they faced a major threat to their lives? Or, was their faith limited to the times when things were going well? The desire of Peter to walk on the water continues that same theme. He wants to do the impossible and so Jesus invites him to have faith and come to him "over the water". When he sinks beneath the waves the question Jesus asks is "Man of little faith. Why did you doubt?". In the earlier story they doubted their own ability to minister to the needs of the crowd and so were invited to "bring what you have to me". Here they were invited to believe that Jesus makes it possible for them to reach their goals and to overcome all of their limitations.

There are lots of issues in this story. One that is worthy of reflection is the question as to why the disciples could not recognize Jesus. They had spent ages with him and knew him intimately and could presumably recognize him easily. Yet, when he came to them walking on the water they did not know him and were filled with fear. Was this lack of recognition due to the fact that he was doing something different from their expectations? If he came to them in another boat, would they have recognized him then and accepted his presence? What about us? Are there times when Jesus comes to us but we fail to recognize his call because we have already determined the way he will work in our lives? Do we miss his presence because we have limited the ways in which we will accept him? The message of this Gospel story is one that calls us to believe that Jesus is with us in all that happens. Can we find him?

Prayer

Father, we thank you for being a God who is forever revealing yourself to us and reassuring us with your presence. Help us to be ever open to what it is you want to reveal to us.

Wednesday August 4th

Matthew 15:21-28

Matthew is writing for a Jewish Christian community and this explains why there is little mention in his Gospel of any mission to the Gentiles. Matthew notes that this woman was a Canaanite. This term would ignite all the old animosities that had grown up between Israel and this most pagan of its neighbours. The worship of the gods of the Canaanites had caused so much trouble for the people before this time and these sit in the background of the exchange. It would be important for Matthew that the woman left her country to come to Jesus. The dialogue between the woman and Jesus is far more important than the miracle for it touches on a major debate of the early Church. At first Jesus refuses to respond to the woman's request and only makes a move after the request of the disciples, and her statement of faith in him as Lord. When Jesus uses the image of the "dogs" the point of comparison is not between dogs and Canaanites. What is being compared is Canaanites and Jews. He is not showing contempt for the pagans. When Jesus says that the Jews should be fed "first" it appears that he envisaged a ministry among the Gentiles for himself. The cure is granted because of the mercy of God and not because of any ethnic reason. She came to God, asked for his mercy and his love and so received the gift of salvation. This would have been good news for the Gentiles in Matthew's community and a comfort for the Jewish Christians. God's saving work is meant for all peoples.

What stands out in this story is the understanding that there were those who were "in" and those who were "out". This woman was "out" on the basis of something as simple as her nationality or ethnic origins. How easy it is to exclude people from life in the Christian community of the Church. We might not exclude them in an obvious way but there are many ways of leaving people out or making them feel less than welcome. Church organizations and groups are notorious for doing this by suggesting that its members are in some way special or "better" or more committed than those who do not join. When strangers come it is so easy to exclude them. It is also possible to continue to keep them out of groups that have been together for many, many years. This story, among other things, reminds us that in the Kingdom, all are brothers and sisters through Christ.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, we have failed in our duty of love. Around the world there are many of your children suffering and dying and yet we notice not their passing. Forgive us and teach us to love, not just in words but through acts of compassion.

Sunday August 29th

Luke 14:7-14

We can break this passage down into two different sections, vs 7-11 (his observations on the meal) and then vs 12-14 (some guidelines on meals). Jesus picks up a well known rabbinic teaching which recommends that we "stay two or three seats below your place and sit until they say to you, 'Go farther up'. It is better that they should say to you 'Go up, go up' than that they should say to you 'Go down, go down' ". The problem for Jesus is that they are seeking glory and honour for themselves. In the Kingdom of God the prime responsibility is to give honour and respect to others. If it then comes back, that is a blessing; but it should not be what is sought out and it should not be the motive for our actions. Christians should be motivated by humility. The status of a Christian comes from what God will do for them and in them. Nothing else is needed or need be sought from the world around them. After pointing out the errors of the guests Jesus then turns to the hosts, for they too are misguided. They invite the wrong people to their feasts. Instead of bringing along their friends and relatives, what they should be doing is inviting in the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. The people who are unable to find acceptance in the wider community and who are in need of love. Real love would reach out without any expectation of reward.

In the Qumran scrolls, which reflect a strict form of Judaism at the time of Jesus, there is a document that speaks of the end of the world when God will set up his Kingdom and sit down at a feast with the righteous. It makes a point of saying that those excluded from the banquet will be the "lame, the crippled, the blind along with anyone who has a permanent blemish in his flesh". Heaven is only for those who are perfect and their definition of perfect, predictably, included only those who lived according to the way that the Qumran members thought was right. Everyone else was wrong and so worthy of damnation. This way of looking at other people is soundly condemned by Jesus. Here we find that they are told to go out and to bring those outcasts into their feasts. It does not matter that they will be unable to reciprocate, for God will look after that. The Christian community should be measured by the presence of the outcasts in their midst. And by whether or not such people feel welcome among us. Can we see them there among us on Sundays? Where are they? Why do they not come to be fed by God's graces?

Prayer

Father, for the times when we have, by our attitudes and methods of preaching the Gospel, kept those who need your healing Word away from our Church, we ask your forgiveness.

Saturday August 28th

Matthew 25:14-30

This parable is also found in Luke (Lk 19:11-27) though with some differences. The man going on the journey is Jesus who was understood as the master of the servants. The treasures of the Kingdom have been entrusted by him to the disciples. Some have suggested that Jesus first directed this parable to the Scribes to whom the word of God had been committed. They had, however, abused their calling by a self-serving way of life and by neglect of this God-given gift. The servants are either good and faithful or wicked and lazy, depending on their behaviour during the master's absence. This is very much in keeping with the way Matthew saw things. For him it was vital for the Christian to be producing fruit and to be using their God-given talents for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The condemnation of the Pharisees and the Scribes was on the basis of their failure to "do" the work of God. They professed it and they believed it to be their calling, but there was no obvious produce coming out of their lives.

Jesus calls each and every one of us for a ministry he has in mind. As we were told by Jeremiah, God called us while we were still in our mothers wombs. We are all unique and all a vital part of the plan of God for the salvation of the world. It is sometimes hard to believe that and even harder to understand just what our part in God's plan may be but he most definitely has one for us. As Jesus himself points out, it does not matter whether or not we feel we have five talents, two talents or one talent. It is not the quantity that is important. Each of us is called to use our God-given gifts in our own special way. What we notice from this story is that the time comes when the master returns and demands an accounting of what he had entrusted to the servants. They were gifts given for a short period of time and were never the property of the servants. They were gifts to be used for the master's business. What is challenging and confronting about this story is that the person who had the one talent had done nothing that would suggest he was dishonest, or that he had used the talent for his own personal benefit. His sin was doing nothing. Matthew clearly suggests that doing nothing is perhaps a greater sin than breaking some of the commandments! God is not after success. He is after effort.

Prayer Merciful Father, as we reflect on the many gifts you have given to us, we offer you grateful thanks and praise. May we be so enthused with your life within, that we take the divine gifts with which we have been showered and share them with others.

Thursday August 5th

Matthew 16:13-23

There were many expectations and hopes when reflecting upon the coming of the messiah for the Hebrews. These are presented here in the reply of the disciples to Jesus. The Son of Man is going to be a prophet, a great leader or a charismatic figure like John the Baptist. Peter gives a different answer. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. For Matthew (and the situation in Mark is different [Mk 8:29]) it is a statement of the divinity of Jesus and stands in stark contrast to the faithlessness of the Pharisees in the earlier section. The reply of Jesus serves as an affirmation of what Peter had proclaimed. He says "You are Peter (*petros*) and on this (*petra*) I will build my Church". In the original Aramaic this would have been "You are *Kepha* and on this *kepha* I will build my Church". The comparison then is between Peter and the Church. The Jewish theological presentation of Isaiah 51:1-2 reads: "But when God looked on Abraham, who was to arise, he said: 'See, I have found a rock on which I can build and found the world' ". It is clear that here the parallel is between Abraham (the father of the nation of Israel) and Peter (the leader of the new Israel). However, in the rest of the New Testament the role of Peter is presented somewhat differently and it is Christ who is the cornerstone. It is possible that in saying that Peter is the rock, Jesus has in mind not the person of Peter but the proclamation of faith made by Peter. The rock on which the Church is to be built is "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God". This is one of those texts where it is difficult to separate the pastoral intent of Matthew as he seeks to address problems in his own Church community from the initial teachings of Jesus.

What is clear in this is that there were many misunderstandings about who Jesus was. People saw what he did, heard what he said and then made their decisions. But they were so often wrong. Some wanted to take him off and make him King, others wanted to take him out and stone him. The disciples themselves regularly misunderstood Jesus. Part of the reason for this was that he failed to meet their expectations and their hopes and dreams. They kept demanding that he fit in with what they wanted and how they thought but he kept doing what his Father wanted. That is why his death was such a shock. That was not what they expected and they struggled to believe when things were going "wrong".

Prayer Almighty God, Jesus your Son is the rock on which we can build our lives and the sure foundation of a life of hope. Help us to allow him to come as he wants and not as we want him to be.

Friday August 6th

*The Transfiguration of
Our Lord Jesus Christ*

Luke 9:28b-36

Fr Robert Newton

He took three disciples with him. The leader, of course, was Simon Peter. It is interesting to just imagine in our minds, guided by the Holy Spirit, what this meant to Simon Peter. At first glance, it seemed to mean very little because he was asleep. Now imagine this, God has brought from heaven both Elijah and Moses, the two greatest historical personages of the Old Testament, symbolic of the Law and the prophets. Elijah and Moses have been raised from the dead and the disciples are asleep. Are these disciples dullards or what? They missed it completely. "As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning", and just as this situation was about to be over, Simon woke up and, realising what was going on, responded in his usual over-emotional way and says, "Lord, this is great, this is fantastic. We ought to put up three tabernacles to commemorate what has happened here!". Simon is the perfect example of the person who, when he doesn't know what to say, still speaks. Even Luke comments. Look at verse 33. Luke said that Peter knew not what he was saying. It's just Simon babbling again — open mouth, insert foot. We cannot confine God. We cannot freeze-dry life until we can come back and own it again.

When the cloud appears, Simon is afraid. Moses, Elijah, a cloud, and suddenly there's the voice of God: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him". I would have been afraid. The disciples are just there and have no idea whatsoever what is going on, and they are told to keep it to themselves. First, they didn't understand it and second, it would be of special significance to them later. What did it mean to God? Why did God do this? Why did God bring Moses and Elijah back from heaven and put them upon earth to go through this experience? I don't know, but maybe God in some way is like us. Is there anything more satisfying to a parent than to see your child whom you have prayed for and nourished and loved to be on their own and accomplishing exactly what you equipped them to do? Could God have been sharing some of those heavenly, parental feelings here? Very possibly, God is also realising what a tremendous risk he has taken. He put his reputation on the line in Jesus. God said to an entire world, "If you want to know what I am like, look at Jesus". God risked his reputation on Jesus of Nazareth, and don't think for one minute Jesus did not have the choice to do otherwise, or else the temptations would have no meaning. In every situation, Jesus did exactly what the Father wanted him to do. No wonder God was proud.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son and pray that his life and experience in us will transfigure our own lives.

Friday August 27th

Matthew 25:1-13

We now have a further parable on vigilance and while we find it only in Matthew there are themes that Luke picks up in his own Gospel (see Luke 12:35ff; 13:25). While most of the parables use familiar sights from the area of Palestine, this parable of the maidens has some difficulties associated with it. There is no bride present. The bridegroom arrives at an odd hour. They have lamps with them making it appear as though they were expecting some delay. Matthew even pushes the story to the point where we are to believe that the stores will stay open all night! But these are not major problems for the interpreter, as we understand that Matthew is only using those points that are necessary to bring out his message. He uses this parable of Jesus to warn the people to remain ever vigilant, even when the parousia is delayed. We can presume that the bride is not mentioned because Jesus is the spouse and the bridesmaids are the Christians awaiting the second coming. Some are prepared and others are negligent. The lamps represent the fire of their callings and that will see them through the darkness of the end times. This flame, for Matthew, would be that way of life that is presented in the Sermon on the Mount. The keeping of those instructions would be the equivalent of keeping their lamps burning.

The Kingdom of God in this parable is not being compared to the maidens. It is being compared to the wedding feast. There is an invitation, an expectation of the coming of the bridegroom, a festive celebration and the bringing of gifts. This is how we should view life in the Kingdom of God. It is not something that hinders our lives, or makes them more difficult or seeks to hold us back or stop us from being fully human and fully alive. It is about helping us to discover what true joy is all about, and how to be truly human and truly alive. This story tells us about foolish and wise maidens and back in the Sermon Jesus told us about the foolish man and the wise man. The wise man was the one who built his life on the teachings and example of Jesus. Nothing could destroy him. The wise maiden is the one who fills her lamps with the fruits of her life of service of the Gospel. Such a way of living never leaves her high and dry and when the bridegroom does come, she is able to find her way into the festivities.

Prayer

Loving Lord, there are many times when we fill our lives with hopes and dreams that are no more than fantasy and follow roads that never lead to lasting peace. Show us the way to life in your Kingdom that we may know true and lasting joy.

Thursday August 26th

Matthew 24:37-51

The Hebrews used the 'age of Noah' as a type of faithless and sinful generation which stood under the judgement of God. Matthew shapes the story to bring out the point that as no one knew when the flood was coming in the time of Noah, so nobody knows the time of the return of the Son of Man. He does not focus on the sins of that generation but is more interested in noting that the people were eating and drinking right to the end. They were consumed with the importance of their bodily needs, and with survival. He points out that if people do not repent and change then they too will be eating and drinking as the Son returns. The Christians are exhorted to avoid living irresponsible lives while they await the return of the Son of Man in glory. What they are supposed to be doing is serving others (v 45), fulfilling the ministry given to them by Jesus and walking the path he walked. Those found serving when the master returns will be blessed by God and be found worthy of entering into the Kingdom. According to Jewish custom and the example of the Exodus story, salvation would take place on a Passover night which is possibly what Matthew has in mind here. The next three parables will further develop this theme of being prepared and being on watch, both important theological points in Matthew.

It is not too often that we think about the end of the world. Our sense of history is such that we can so easily forget that one day this world will end. All people will be called into judgement and there will be a separation of sheep and goats, with the goats going to their eternal punishment and the sheep to their eternal reward. For the early Church it was a matter of vital interest and it shaped most of the writing of the New Testament. Imagine how you would live if you knew for sure that the end of the world would take place sometime over the next ten days! I am sure that all of us would change our ways of thinking and acting to reflect that imminent end. The Church was no different, for they expected the end within days of Pentecost and eagerly looked forward to its coming. As time has moved on, however, the urgency has become less and less and we seem to have become certain that it will not be in our own lifetimes. But it may well be. Matthew is exhorting his people to be living as if it were tomorrow, as if today were our last day on earth.

Prayer

Almighty God, our bodies and our place here on earth are not our final homes and one day we will stand before you to be judged. Help us to repent today and turn from our sins that with hope we may be ever ready to welcome our end.

Saturday August 7th

Matthew 17:14-20

In the first three Gospels this cure takes place immediately after the story of the Transfiguration. Epileptic fits were understood in the ancient world as consequences of demonic forces (some ascribed it to the impact of the moon on a person, hence the word "lunatic"). Clearly the power of God over that of Satan is an important part of the Gospel. Jesus had already shown himself to be victorious in the story of his temptation in chapter 4. Jesus is the Son of God in name but also in reality and before him the forces of evil cannot exist and cannot continue to imprison God's people. The boy's father addresses him in language that is liturgical "Lord have mercy" and in a posture (kneeling) that suggests humility and a willingness to place himself in the hands of Jesus further acknowledging him as divine. The disciples were unable to either cure the boy or drive out the demon. This is not because they do not have the power (at least potentially) but because they are unwilling to have faith. To believe would be to unite themselves with God and so to be caught up in his divine power. Faith the size of a mustard seed is faith that is planted in the hearts of the believers and which will grow and bear fruit. The miracle of moving the mountain is possible once the journey of faith begins. For Matthew it is not the result of a life of faith but is there for all who allow the seed of faith to be planted within them by God.

Of course the disciples could not expel the demon and could not cure the sick boy. Who are they to dare to presume that they could manage these great signs! Remember the story of the feeding of the five thousand? In that story we saw that the disciples could not feed the large crowd because their resources were too small. What made their meagre supplies of food adequate for the task was that they brought the little that they had "to me". By bringing them to Jesus they were suddenly enough. We have the same words here. At the end of verse 17 Jesus, in a tone that suggests exasperation, tells the disciples to "bring the boy here to me", and it is "here with me" that the miracle happens. There is the central meaning of our Christian living. True and powerful discipleship is only possible "here with me". It is by living with Jesus at the centre of our lives that life changes. Working away at a distance will only bring frustration and disillusionment.

Prayer

Merciful God, with much of our lives we struggle to find peace and know true happiness. Help us to keep Jesus at the centre of all that we do so that through him we may know and experience the gifts that you want us to have.

Sunday August 8th

Luke 12:32-48

Fr Robert Newton

We have a series of warnings to the disciples to be on the alert for an impending emergency — the coming of the Son of Man; like loyal servants keeping an all-night vigil in case their master should return from the protracted festivities of a wedding, they must be sure that the decisive moment does not catch them napping. When the crucifixion had become a distant memory, the parables of watchfulness remained a strong theme in Luke's Gospel alongside the Passion and Jesus' teachings. It was a reminder to the disciples and the Early Church in its turn that bearing witness to the Risen Christ would be costly and require faithfulness and preparedness. For those who had been given much, much would be required. Jesus' answer to Peter reminds the disciples that they need not speculate about dates as long as they remain loyal and dutiful servants. The clear implication of the text is that Jesus himself would not return immediately but that there would be an interval of waiting and serving. To be watchful and stewards of Christ's household until he should return reminds the faithful that this waiting must not lead to any corruption in the disciples' stewardship.

These words of Jesus related to us by Luke have as much relevance to us today as they would have had to those first disciples. To be watchful and prepared and to administer our communities of faith in a circumspect manner are for Christians the basic requirement of what it means to be Church. The question we may ask is, do we meet these requirements or are we complacent in our faith and in our attention to the affairs of Christ's household (the Church)? What is clear today, more than ever, is the critical need to keep our own house in order at a personal faith level and at the level of the body corporate, the Body of Christ, the Church. Have we allowed our times to diminish and dilute Christ's teachings and how they are to apply to our lives and our faith communities? Have we let Christ's household become dim and dusty? Christ's warnings of the punishment of those who fail to be vigilant reflected in Luke's narrative cannot be ignored or explained away. Like many passages in the Gospels we are presented with the seeming paradox of Christ the compassionate and Christ the judge. Neither image can be ignored or placed in preference. The tension of these two images is meant for us to wrestle with.

Prayer

Dear Father in Heaven, we ask you to help strengthen our resolve to be your faithful servants that we may be prepared for your coming into our lives when we least expect it.

Wednesday August 25th

Matthew 23:27-32

Again we see Jesus on the attack against the Pharisees and he uses some very powerful images. It was not unusual to see tombs located along the side of a road and over a period of time they would become grubby and dirty so that they would not have been easy to distinguish. The Jewish purity laws forbade the touching of tombs. It could make a person unclean and unable to take part in Temple celebrations and so when major feasts were coming up, these tombs were whitewashed to make them stand out to avoid accidental contact. Hence the image painted by Jesus. On the outside these tombs looked quite pretty and clean but inside there was nothing but bones. The Pharisees were like that. On the outside it appeared as if they were religious men who faithfully kept the laws of God. But on the inside they were filled with sin. The sins Jesus had in mind were the sins of pride, of arrogance, of the abuse of power, of self-centredness, sins that he lists in verses 29-36. Jesus presents the history of Israel as the history of the murder of the men of God. He says that if the Pharisees were alive in the days of their fathers, they too would have been killing the prophets. He chooses the example of Cain killing Abel because that is the first book of the Bible and the story of the murder of Zecharias (2 Chron 24:20-22) from the Book of Chronicles which in the Hebrew Scriptures is the last book of the Bible. So he says, from the beginning of time until the present, the slaughter goes on and now, of course, as we see in verse 32, Jesus is on his way to his death in Jerusalem at the hands of these very same leaders.

How is it that such religiously motivated men could do such harm to the Kingdom of God? They were not evil men. Their movement was one that was conceived in a passionate love for God and his saving works. If we look back through history we can see equally painful examples of men and women doing exactly the same evil deeds in God's name. Is it that easy to get the Gospel message wrong? What was the primary sin of the Pharisees? In their pursuit of pure religion they lost their view of faith. In fact, religion and religious observances ended up becoming more important than what God was telling them to do and their life in the community of faith. Love is always more important than observance and listening to God more important than telling him what he should be doing.

Prayer

All-powerful God, keep us from a self-centred religion where the most important thing is our own religious life and guide us with your graces that we may share your love with others.

Tuesday August 24th

St Bartholomew

John 1:45-51

Fr Peter Yeats

The first obvious question about this reading, on this particular day, is: what on earth has it got to do with Bartholomew? The answer is that there has always been a long tradition within the Church linking Bartholomew with Nathanael, that they are one and the same person. This is not as odd as it sounds; often different names are used for the same person: Simon/Cephas/Peter; Saul/Paul.

First of all, note how the witnessing to Jesus takes place. First of all, a few verses before this, Andrew follows; he goes to his brother Peter and tells him. Later, Jesus finds Philip who, in turn, goes to Nathanael. Witnessing to Jesus is about going to others, and asking them to come and see.

Nathanael’s reaction is interesting; first of all his comment about “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” is an indication of small-town rivalry, as much around then as it is today! But then Jesus actually speaks to him, commenting on his character; Nathanael asks how Jesus knows him, as they have never met, and Jesus makes the odd statement “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Nathanael’s reaction to this is incredible: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” What brought about this change?

One possible explanation is that, for Jews, the phrase “sitting under a fig tree” means to pray in silence: so if Jesus knew about this before he met Nathanael, then he must have heard Nathanael; and, of course, only one person hears silent prayer – God! This must have been a real shock for Nathanael. Jesus goes on to say that he will see even greater things.

We all encounter Jesus in different ways; sometimes through others, sometimes with an abrupt call. But as with the first disciples, and especially Nathanael, our encounter with Jesus must in some way change us and change our lives. Do others see the change in us, and want to know more, or do we keep our relationship with God so secret that others think that we are just like them? To each of us Jesus says “Come, follow me”, and each of us has to make that decision. Whatever we choose, our decision will affect our lives, and our eternity.

Prayer

Father, like your servant Bartholomew, may we hear you call and be willing to follow; when we follow, may we never look back.

Monday August 9th

Matthew 17:22-27

This section begins with the second of the prophecies of the Passion and the title “Son of Man” which it uses can be understood in a number of ways. In its Aramaic form it could be read to say “God will deliver up the man to men”. This places the whole story of the Passion into the hands of God. It was something that took place with the permission of God and which could not have happened unless his Father allowed it to happen. It was a part of salvation history and not a consequence of men taking power into their own hands. This was an important point for Matthew to highlight because once handed over, Jesus would end up in what seemed to be the ultimate of prisons — the grave. It is because God was never out of control that this grave was not his final home: “...and he will be raised on the third day”. The other message in the way this prophecy is put together is to be found in its link with the story of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (Isa 53:6-12). It is no wonder that the disciples were “distressed”. In other prophecies they argued with him, but here they are silent. This is possibly because what Matthew wants as the focus is the approaching death of Jesus. It remains a frightening possibility, especially as in other places he has also told them that they were to follow him.

This whole section is about the power and authority of Jesus. For the Jews, the Temple and the city of Jerusalem were the two all-powerful signs of God’s love for them. If these were to be destroyed then the nation itself would be lost. They were therefore reassuring sources of comfort and strength. Then along comes Jesus and offers the people a new link with God, one that was personal and human. He came offering forgiveness of sins (something that was achieved through the sacrificial system) and life in the Kingdom (something the Prophets looked forward to with hope). He was short circuiting what was seen as the normal way of having a relationship with God and to talk of being raised from the dead gave this a new potency and promise and we can understand why the message was so popular after Pentecost. That same power is there for all believers who are prepared to put aside those things in which they normally seek comfort, reassurance, confidence and hope and turn once more to Christ. The Temple and its sacrificial system was destroyed and it is only Christ who goes on until the end of time. There is hope.

Prayer

Merciful and loving Father, reassure us that in all that happens you are with us as Lord of creation so that we can always move forward full of confidence and hope, sheltered in your strength.

Tuesday August 10th

Matthew 18:1-14

There now follow five teachings of Jesus for the community of believers. In Matthew the term "disciples" means the Twelve and not the wider group of followers. Having said this, it is also important to understand that Matthew sees the Twelve as a kind of prototype of the Church. This is clear in this section, so that what Jesus says to the Twelve he is addressing to those who are represented by the Twelve — i.e. the members of the Church. Matthew is also gentler on them than is Mark. In that Gospel they are soundly upbraided by Jesus for their self-centredness. In his reply in Matthew the child represents a natural and spontaneous humility and a sense of unimportance and this is the mark of the disciple. If a person wishes to live in the Kingdom and enjoy its graces and blessings, then they first of all have to receive it. The only way to receive the Kingdom is through a life of humility, through accepting that they are people who are in need of the Kingdom. A disciple must feel that he needs to be redeemed, that he is weak and sinful and that he cannot be at peace without God. It is only then that the disciple is rightly disposed to receiving God's blessing.

This is no new teaching. There is a rabbinical saying that states: "He who makes himself small in this world for the sake of the Torah will be great in the world to come; he who makes himself a slave in this world for the sake of the Torah shall be free in the world to come". This is most surely one of the hardest struggles of discipleship. It grows out of an understanding of sin as being a purely selfish attitude on the part of the individual. It is so hard to let go of control of our destiny. It is almost impossible to live and love as God wants us to live and love for we spontaneously look to defending ourselves, our own views, our own feelings, and ultimately our own lives. What Jesus suggests here is a radical path of trust and hope. The temptation is for us to focus on things other than God, to respond to our burdens, the complications and difficulties in life by taking positive steps to resolve them. The first step should be to pause, to do nothing except deepen our relationship with God. Prayer and meditation are the powerful tools of the disciple, for such a response acknowledges their weakness and powerlessness and their confidence and trust in God. And the history of the Church shows it works!

Prayer

Loving Father, we acknowledge before you our need of your strength and your love. Keep us ever in your presence and may we bring all that we do before you in prayer.

Monday August 23rd

Matthew 23:13-22

This section 23:13-36 has a new audience — the Pharisees. Many of these sayings bear the marks of the anti-synagogue sentiments of the early Church and possibly reflect the struggles facing Matthew's community. The Pharisees were great missionaries and set about making proselytes, converting pagans to Judaism and then imposing on them all their interpretations of the Law. They could not possibly observe all these restrictions and so were converted to their own damnation! Jesus goes on to condemn them for thinking the gold on the plates used in the Temple was more important than the Temple itself. They forgot that it was the Temple that gave the plates their significance in the first place. These same Pharisees were very strict in their interpretation of the tax laws that demanded tribute from the people but lax in the demands of some of the far more important moral demands (vs 23-24). This is brought out most clearly in the hyperbole: the observant Jews would filter a glass of wine or water to make sure that no insects found their way into the drink. Should the observant Jew inadvertently swallow it he would make himself unclean. But these same religious leaders would swallow camels! Jesus wonders why they are so blind. He commands that before they begin to look at the activities of others, they should first of all look at and clean up their own way of living.

Here we see Jesus tackling one of the major areas of weakness in the Church. How often do we come across situations where one person or a group of people within the parish community makes some kind of judgement on others within the Church? How often have we as individual believers cast judgement on others or made assessments of their behaviour and ways of living? The message of Jesus here is similar to the teachings: "let whoever is without sin cast the first stone" and "before you take the splinter out of your brother's eye, take first the plank out of your own". This is not something that relates only to Pharisees, it is directed to all believers and acts as a warning lest we become like those Jewish leaders of old. We are often criticised by those outside of the Church as being hypocrites and sometimes there is some truth in what they say. We should be a family where the worst of sinners may find a home and be helped to repent and come to know God's loving mercy.

Prayer

Merciful God, we ask your forgiveness for the times when we have judged others and found them wanting. Help us to acknowledge our own sinfulness and need of forgiveness and to help others to know your merciful love.

Sunday August 22nd

Luke 13:22-30

Fr Peter Yeats

The person who asks the question at the start of this reading must have got a bit of a shock on hearing Jesus' answer. To even ask such a question seems to imply that the questioner is looking for affirmation, a positive response. "Yes, only a few will be saved, but don't worry, you will be one of them, because you are a Jew, the chosen people of God." It's always nice to bask in the self-satisfaction of being 'ok' especially when others are not! But this is not the answer that Jesus gives; he speaks to the crowd: "Strive to enter through the narrow door...". The word 'strive' in Greek is 'agonizomai' from which our word 'agony' comes. It is also not just a one off event, it is something that has to be continued in, continual striving. One can almost hear the reaction to what Jesus says. "But we are Jews, we are born Jews; that is all we need. Are you saying that we have to do something as well?". And, of course, Jesus' answer is not that they should just 'do' something but that they should act with an intensity which is almost agony! The idea of the 'narrow door' reminds Jesus' hearers that entry into the Kingdom is not easy; just as fitting into last year's clothes means physical discipline, so getting through the narrow gate means spiritual discipline. The image of knocking on the door and being refused entry would have hit hard for people who believed that because they were in the right community they were righteous. Jesus goes even further when he talks about people from all points of the compass coming into the Kingdom; this is a reference to the Gentiles, those outside the Covenant. What Jesus says is that there will be those welcomed by God whom the righteous, religious people would never dream of welcoming! "But", wail the people, "we heard you teach; we ate with you; how can we be rejected?". The answer is that for them there is no excuse for not doing and being full disciples of Jesus; they actually heard what he had to say, and experienced him. But hearing is not the same as doing; God calls people to act not to just sit and listen.

It is always worth being reminded of the image of the banquet which runs through Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God. How often do we see our faith as being a bit dour, a bit serious; service of God becomes like a burden that we have to grin and bear. In history the idea of fun has not come easy to Christians. Yet, so often, Jesus describes the Rule of God as being like a party, something to be enjoyed, to look forward to. The thing that has to always be remembered is that the host of the party invites whomever he wishes; nobody should assume that they know who is or is not invited.

Prayer

Father, I thank you that you want me to come to the feast of your Kingdom; give me the strength to be a true and active disciple of your Son, so that I may become what you wish.

Wednesday August 11th

Matthew 18:15-20

What Jesus did for the sinners is presented as being what is demanded of all disciples when they face members of the Christian community who have wandered away from life in the Kingdom. Jesus goes on to present a step by step process for reconciliation. It is worthwhile comparing Matthew's presentation with what Luke has to say in his account (Lk 17:3) which is short and sharp. Matthew seems to follow the Jewish guides (Lev 19:17). Matthew differs from Leviticus in that the Old Testament text is interested in bringing the sin out into the open, while Matthew is working on winning back the sinner through helping him to confront his sinful ways. The Church does not rebuke or condemn but works on being an avenue of healing and reconciliation. This leads Matthew to the central part of the passage which is about binding and loosing. This is addressed to the Twelve and the promise here is directed towards an authority that is given to them as leaders of the community, a power they share through their union with Peter. To Peter the keys of the Kingdom may have been given but all the disciples were called to be fishers of men (Matt 4:19; Mk 1:17). This is an important point because it makes clear that the authority of the apostles comes directly from Christ himself. Peter may be the first of the Twelve, but they too are empowered by Christ for their missions. What we see here is a collegial understanding of the exercise of authority in the Church.

The subject Matthew deals with here is one of the great treasures of the Church — the forgiveness of sins. Sin is destructive of human life, both for the individuals directly involved and for the wider community. Sin can so easily lead to feelings of guilt, unworthiness and failure. It can destroy hope and confidence and so many people are left with the uncertainty of how they can pick themselves up and start again. What Jesus is offering is forgiveness and healing and an invitation to begin again. Sins can be forgiven. A line can be drawn under the failures of the past and we can start afresh. How many times? Seventy times seven times. That is, as many times as we have the desire to repent and renew our lives. Of course it means that we have to do something the world finds difficult — we have to acknowledge that we are sinners in need of healing, and how hard is that! But once we do, peace and overwhelming joy are ours.

Prayer

All-merciful God, many are the times we have failed and have sinned against you and against our brothers and our sisters and the thought of these failures can rob us of peace. Remind us at all times of the forgiveness offered to us in Christ Jesus.

Thursday August 12th

Matthew 18:21-35

The idea of debt is part of the message of the parable and it is clear that we can exchange the word "sin" for "debt". When we see the amount of the debt involved we can be a little shocked. To make the point abundantly clear, the man comes to the King owing what would be the equivalent of ten to fifteen million dollars. Clearly it is not a real number but is large enough to highlight the impossibility of it ever being repaid. When we add to this the idea of selling off the man's wife, children and all his possessions, we are made even more aware of the absolute incapacity of the servant to settle his accounts. The response of the King (God) shows him to be rich in patience, forbearance and mercy. When the servant confesses his inability to pay, the King is "moved with pity". In the Bible, it is this pity which arises out of God's tender love for his people and which then leads to the blessing of his people. It is this same pity which drives Jesus towards the miracles he performs to relieve the suffering of their burdens in life (9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). The key phrase in the parable is to be found in verse 35: "from your heart". This is another way of talking about repentance. Life in the Kingdom is not about obedience to laws (or The Law for Matthew's Hebrew community) but about a faith-directed way of life. The heart is where Jeremiah (Jer 31:31) said the new covenant would be written. It would not be on stone (external).

This parable presents to us an insight into the nature of God. His divine mercy has been made real in an historical event — Jesus the Son of God. Men and women will now be judged, not according to the Laws of the old covenant, as proclaimed by the Pharisees, but **solely** by their inner desire to love, to forgive and so show the divine quality of love. Jesus is God's great act of mercy towards us. We do not deserve to be forgiven, we have not earned salvation. These gifts come to us freely from the love of God who sees us as his children. Christians must be defined by the mercy they show to others. The servant coming before the King with his massive debt represents each and every believer. We come saddled with enormous debts and an obvious inability to pay. He asks the King for patience and promises to repay, but it is an impossibility. He cannot redeem himself. His problem was that he refused to go out and to show this same quality of mercy to others and it is for this he is condemned. He condemns himself.

Prayer

Merciful God, in your great love for us you sent us your Son Jesus to free us from sin and to share with us your gift of peace and life eternal. Help us to share this with others.

Saturday August 21st

Matthew 23:1-12

Fr Robert Newton

Jesus spends considerable time in these twelve verses discussing our penchant for wanting to keep up appearances. We sit on Moses' seat (v 2). We make our phylacteries broad and their fringes long (v 5). We sit in the place of honour at Church affairs (v 6). But is there any reality behind all this showmanship, this pageantry? Next, Jesus points out the dichotomy between showing off and humility. In verse 5, he speaks of the deeds we do to be seen by men. In verse 12, he talks of how we "exalt" ourselves. Such spiritual peacocks we can become! Geoffrey Chaucer, writing in *The Canterbury Tales*, observed that preachers and roosters have a lot in common. They are both given to strutting and preening themselves in public and crowing about the same hour each day! Oh, how self-important we can become — like Shakespeare's character in *Twelfth Night* who shouts, "I am Sir Andrew Augercheek. And when I speak let no dog bark!".

Jesus reminds us that only God is great. The rest of us are just equals. In verse 8, he says, "You are all brothers". And in verses 11 and 12, twice he mentions humility. Next, Jesus talks about our focus. Is our focus upon ourselves? Or is our focus upon others? There are two ways to walk into a room. I can walk in saying, "Here I am!". Or I can walk in with the attitude, "There you are!". Many people in today's world are "church shopping". They consider themselves spiritual consumers out in the world's "spiritual market place" bargain hunting for the things of Christ. They walk into a church saying, "Here I am! Court me! Entertain me! Meet my needs! Or I won't be back!". Some of us are addicted to the process. We love being singled out, pursued. We thrive on the new and being in control — "Maybe I will. Maybe I won't." Jesus discussed this type of "Here I am!" person in the text. "They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger." They are here to "be seen" (v 5), but not to commit and serve. They crave the "place of honour" but not the basin and towel of washing dirty feet. Such is Jesus' servant leadership. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." In his example of leadership Jesus warned us of the gulf between what we say and what we do, between pompousness and humility, between being me-focussed and you-focussed.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, teach us the way to serve and not to count the cost, to glory only in the cross of Jesus Christ, to be you-focussed and not me-focussed.

Friday August 20th

Matthew 22:34-40

Once again, we can trace Matthew's intent by comparing his version with the earlier account found in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 12:28ff). Matthew seems to be using this in his controversial struggles with the Pharisees. They come to "test" Jesus after having come together to plan their attack (similar to Psalm 2:2). Matthew also changes the question from "which commandment is the first of all" to "which is the greatest commandment in the Law?". While the Gospels all have slight variations in their quoting of the law in Deuteronomy 6:5 they all have the same thrust. What is involved is that the loving and following of God involves all aspects of a person's life. It is not enough to worship him in word if actions speak of different values and ways of looking at the world. This is what "with all your heart" means in Hebrew thought, for the heart stands for all the faculties of man's inner self. In verse 38 Matthew repeats that this is the greatest of the commandments, which is in contrast with the teaching of the Rabbis which saw all the precepts of the law as having the same value. Only Matthew introduces the second commandment in the way he does "and the second is like it" suggesting that for him the love of God is expressed in the love of a person for another. Matthew also makes the point by adding "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets". While the Hebrew scholars would stress the importance of loving one's neighbour, only here do we find the two linked together where the one is measured by the other.

It is interesting to read through the Jewish Rabbi Hillel who wrote around the time of the Christ. He expressed this teaching in a negative way: "What you do not like being done to you, do not do to your fellow; this is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary. Go and learn". This is not the way that Jesus understood the divine command. He turns it around and puts it into a positive light. Believers must go out and **do** acts of love. He makes it clear that if people are not loving their neighbour then they cannot be loving God. Loving others (that is, taking initiatives to go out and love) is what loving God is all about. This of course is why the Church has always had missions, missionaries and charities, why it started hospitals, orphanages and soup kitchens. Why we **must** visit the sick, worry about AIDS victims overseas, refugees and the stranger up the road.

Prayer

Merciful Father, you show your love to us in so many ways and often we take this love for granted. May we live lives of gratitude and thanksgiving and share this love with others.

Friday August 13th

Matthew 19:3-12

This is the tenth section of Matthew's Gospel and it begins with the ominous words: "when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan". This is the beginning of the journey towards Jerusalem and his death. The path here would take him through Perea, thus avoiding the area of Samaria. From now on we will see Jesus, not teaching the crowds (as he did in parables), but healing their sick. This is the second time the question of divorce has been raised (5:31-32) though the teaching is the same. What is new is that here we have an exception clause (found only here in the Gospels): adultery. The issue is raised by the Pharisees and by adding "for any cause" to their question we can understand their motives. Rabbi Shammai allowed divorce only in the case of serious misconduct while Rabbi Hillel was more liberal, allowing divorce for at times the most trivial of reasons (burning the evening meal!). In reply Jesus affirms the strict interpretation of the biblical material: no divorce. The exception clause, "for adultery" is Matthew's addition to the original teachings and we can presume that he is responding to a pastoral concern within his own community. The Greek word (porneia) is not the one usually used for adultery, rather it is used in rabbinical writings to refer to incestuous unions (Hebrew zenut which is applied to illicit marital unions between people who are too closely related for marriage). This would suggest that Jesus is not really making any exceptions to his call for the permanence of marriage for such unions would not represent valid marriages.

Jesus' teaching on marriage logically flows on from his other teachings on human relationships. We are to love and respect others and at the heart of our unions is God who is love. This is what makes our relationships work, when we can look out at others and see God looking back. We are all made in the image and likeness of God and each of us carries within us the blessings of the incarnation. This was made clear when Jesus told his disciples that "whatever you do to the least of these little ones of mine, you do to me". Christ is the one who makes a loving relationship a union that is life-giving and sacred. Christ is the one who makes it possible for both of the individuals to overcome their limitations and failures. The best tool for a successful and happy marriage is a shared and dynamic life of faith.

Prayer

Father, we thank you that we are made in your image and likeness. As we go about our lives of faith in the world, teach us to see your presence and your life within those people with whom we live and work, that we may love them as you do.

Saturday August 14th

Matthew 19:13-15

Children are again mentioned here though in a different way from earlier teachings on children. The problem here relates to those who are brought to Jesus for his blessing. We can presume that the disciples were cross because they thought that his time was too precious to be wasting it on small children. Jesus makes it clear that his ministry is for anyone who comes to him or is brought to him and this includes the little ones as well as the needy. What Jesus does is lay hands on them and pray a blessing over them. This was a Jewish tradition. On the eve of the day of atonement, parents in Jerusalem would have their children fast and would then bring them to the Scribes that they might be blessed and have prayers said for them. In this text Jesus is looking at children within the context of a family. He refers to the importance of disciples being sons of the Father in heaven. It has the same sense of meaning as calling God "*Abba*" (daddy). It acknowledges the need to accept the gift of the Kingdom of God as a powerful gift that can transform a person's life. The disciple comes to God confident that he will receive all the things he needs for his present life and for his eternal life. It is people like this who inherit the Kingdom of heaven.

What is amazing in this story is the attitude of the disciples. Although they knew Jesus so well they presumed that there were people or classes of people for whom he had no time. They had decided that Jesus had more important and pressing matters on his hands and could not be bothered by something as unimportant as the blessing of children. But Jesus had other thoughts in his mind and "rebuked" the disciples. This is a very strong word and highlights his message that nothing and no one is insignificant in his eyes. All that we do in our lives and all that happens to us is significant for Jesus and important to him. This was the way of the Father in heaven, for whom not even a single hair of our heads goes unnumbered. While that is a wonderfully comforting message for us it is also a revelation that we need to apply to other people as well. In the eyes of God there are no "in" groups and outsiders. All people are his children and he wishes to bless each and every one of them. Given that they are so precious to him, in our dealings with others we need to respond to them in the same way that Jesus did, with love, consideration and respect.

Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you that despite our limitations and sins you love us and you continue to care for us. Strengthen us that we may reach out and share that love with others.

Thursday August 19th

Matthew 22:1-14

This parable continues on with the theme of the rejection of those who were called first. It needs to be read in parallel with the parable in Luke 14:15-24. There we see the list of excuses offered by the guests. They come from Deuteronomy 20:5-7 and relate the reasons that excuse men from taking part in a Holy War. Matthew's parable has the same call of urgency as the nation confronted with a Holy War. There is a sense of urgency in his teaching as the Kingdom is at hand. Responses are urgently required. Matthew adds to the parable the account of the killing of the servants and the anger of the king as he responds by sending an army to destroy the murderers. Luke's version is gentler as he sends his servants out into the streets to invite in the poor and crippled. The point for Matthew is that he is writing for a Church that is struggling under persecution and he takes a parable of Jesus and uses it to reassure his community. The Romans invaded the land and destroyed Jerusalem, the Temple and the Jewish leaders. Those first called represent the people of Israel (Proverbs 9:1-6) who were invited by the disciples to enjoy life in the Kingdom. The experience of the early Church was that many of these missionaries were persecuted and put to death by the Jews who rejected Jesus and he is reassuring them that if they remain faithful God will bless them.

The wedding garment is important though it is a new parable added by Matthew to the parable of the feast. In the East, when the king gave a feast for a wedding, he would provide suitable clothing to those who wanted them. We can now understand why the man without the garment was so harshly treated. He had chosen not to take advantage of the offered clothing. He had no excuse to explain why he was not properly attired and so is bound and thrown out. The wedding garment in Matthew stands for "good works" and "good fruits". It is easy to get to the point where we are no longer conscious of discipleship as being a call to produce "good fruit". Faith does not mean that we simply avoid doing wrong things. It is a call and an invitation to go out and to "do" the works of the Kingdom. These are found in the "Sermon on the Mount". One of the things that is worrying is the severity of the judgement that is passed on the man who tries to enter the Kingdom without such works.

Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for calling us to be your disciples and to live in your Kingdom. We pray that we may be so filled with your graces and your strengths that we may go out and live the Gospel we profess.

Wednesday August 18th

Matthew 20:1-16a

This parable is only found in Matthew and offers a range of meditations to those who spend a bit of time on it. The use of the vineyard suggests that Jesus has Israel in mind (Isa 5:1). The denarius was worth about twenty cents and was a day's pay (Tob 5:15). The hiring of labour began at 6am which meant that those who were taken on at 5pm only had an hour's work. As most farms were a little way out of town, by the time they walked to their place of work there would have been almost no time to work. Clearly the householder was not interested in just paying for work done or those coming last would have received almost nothing. He hired them not because he needed their labour, he hired them because he wanted to help them by giving them work and so an income. He saw them in the market square with nothing to do and felt sorry for them. Being hired meant receiving work as well as receiving wages and both, at least for last workers, is clearly a gift. Jesus has in mind the Pharisees and their attitudes. For them salvation came as a result of "doing work". They kept the Law and added a whole range of other laws to direct the lives of the people and provided that people kept those commandments they would receive salvation. Israel is presented in this light. They were the first people of God and yet here we have the Gentiles receiving the same blessings as the Jews. How is that possible? The parable tells us that salvation is something God offers to all people because he loves them, and not because they earn it by their works.

This parable picks up on a number of difficulties for those seeking to live lives of discipleship. It is easy to get to the point where we expect God to act towards us in ways that reward us for the good things we have done. We can pray, so that God will give to us the things we seek. We can keep the commandments, so that we will have eternal life. On the other side it is hard not to wonder about God's thinking when those who serve him still have problems and difficulties in their lives. Why doesn't God "pay" or reward us with a good life and give us many blessings when we obey and keep his commandments? This is the kind of thinking behind the first workers' demands and it is rejected by Jesus. God is generous and we are in his debt. He offers us life and the blessings of the Kingdom simply because he loves us and not because he is impressed with the life that we lead.

Prayer

Father, you fill our lives with the fruits of your generous love. Make us ever mindful that all we have comes from you and that we remain ever in your debt.

Sunday August 15th

Luke 12:49-53

Fr Robert Newton

The imagery that Jesus uses here has a long history. In the Old Testament we frequently read of men passing through the fire of testing and judgement or overwhelmed in a sea of troubles (Ps 66:12; Ps 69:2-3; Isa 43:2). But baptism is not an Old Testament word. In using it, to describe his own death, Jesus was consciously echoing the teaching of John the Baptist. John had prophesied the coming of one who would baptize with the fire of divine judgement: however it had never occurred to him that the Messiah might be the first to undergo that baptism. Jewish inter-testamental literature was full of descriptions of the terrible events that would overwhelm the world as a prelude to the establishment of God's Kingdom: but there had never been any suggestion that the Messiah must pass through the deep waters. The Prophet Micah had depicted the break up of family life as one of the symptoms of Israel's fall into sinfulness which called for punishment. However the Prophet would have been astonished to be told that God would deliberately bring about such a state of affairs in the working out of his purpose. This text gives us a rare glimpse into the inner mind of Jesus and reveals an agonising mixture of impatience and reluctance. Convinced that God's redemptive plan requires him to bring upon the earth the fiery baptism of judgement, not by inflicting it upon others first, but by undergoing it himself, creates this tension implicit in the text.

At first glance, our Gospel appears to compound the problem of the divided family. Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three...". That doesn't seem to be a way to focus on good family relationships! It gets worse: "They will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law". It seems at first glance that this fire Jesus advocates is all about destruction and division. In fact, one of the primary purposes of fire is to cleanse and purify, not destroy. Divisions may come, but God's first purpose in sending fire to families is to cleanse and purify people's lives and relationships, through the challenge of the Gospel and the example of his only Son Jesus.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, may the power and fire of your love enkindle in our hearts a desire to set things right and be in the right relationship with you and our neighbours.

Monday August 16th

Matthew 19:16-22

Once again we find that Matthew has significantly changed the Marcan text of this story (Mk 10:17ff) and it is in the changes that we can see the direction of Matthew's theological intent. The commandments that are listed are those that relate to social obligations. We presume that this is because it is in this area that the young man has difficulties. Matthew adds the command "you shall love your neighbour as yourself". He does this because in his theology the Law is fulfilled through love of neighbour (7:12; 22:39). Once this is accepted it is easier then to demand that he go and sell all that he has and give it to the poor. This is why in verse 21 Matthew has added the young man's question "What more do I lack?", to which Jesus replies, "If you want to be perfect...". We can see, in this call of the young man, echoes of the call of the Twelve. Like them he has been invited to abandon his present way of life and join with Jesus in his ministry. Peter and the others left their boats and nets, Matthew left his tax collector's table and all of them left family and their usual ways of living for the sake of the Gospel. So it is with the rich young man. The obvious difference is that he is unable to take up the challenge that Christ presents to him. In the Gospel this way of renunciation is the way of the Cross and is essential to the life of discipleship. He goes away sorrowful, emotions that were very different to the enthusiasm he felt at the opening of the encounter.

When Luke uses this story (Lk 18:18ff) the young man asks Jesus what he must do to "inherit" eternal life which brings out the meaning more powerfully. There is nothing anyone can do to "inherit" something. An inheritance comes about because of something over which we have no control: we are born! We do not earn an inheritance, it comes to us unearned. And such is the Kingdom of God. We can do nothing to earn salvation. It comes to us as a free and unearned gift from God. What we can do is grow in our relationship with God and place ourselves into his hands. It is by living our lives out in the love of God (and we do this by following the teachings of Jesus) that we find that the Kingdom of God envelopes us. It is not a reward for good living but the consequence of living in God. Jesus tells the young man that it is by loving that he finds his way into the Kingdom and so into eternal life.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, through your compassionate and merciful love you offer a share in the gift of your life and your love to all those who come to you. Fill us with your grace so that we can repent of our sins and turn to you with joy filled hearts.

Tuesday August 17th

Matthew 19:23-30

It is the previous episode with the rich young man that provides Jesus with the background for the present instructions. It is hard for a rich man to take up a life of discipleship (verse 23) for how can a rich man be poor of spirit (5:3) and still enjoy the power and privilege that money brings? How can he have an undivided heart (6:24) and yet possess treasures on earth (6:19ff)? In the Book of Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus) the sage writes: "He who loves gold will not be justified and he who pursues money will be led astray by it" (Sir 31 [34]:5; cf 1 Tim 6:9). The camel and the eye of a needle are difficult to put together and there have been numerous attempts at interpreting it. Cyril of Alexandria corrects the text to read "It is easier for a sailorman's rope to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God". The camel that the parable talks of is a common knot used by sailors in their sailing vessels. If this is true then we can see why Jesus would use it in talking to his sailor-disciples. Another view was that the "Eye of the Needle" was a low door in the walls of Jerusalem that was meant only for humans to go through. This meant that they could avoid the long lines to enter the city as people brought in their animals for market. It was a low door and people had to bend low to the ground, thus making it impossible for a horse and certainly for a camel. While such an interpretation is hard to justify by archaeological evidence, it does bring out the meaning. Only a camel with his nose squashed down in the dust has any hope of entering the door. So it is with the rich person.

It is no wonder that Peter asked "Who then can be saved?". The answer was equally stunning in its simplicity: "No one". That is the whole point Jesus was making. On our own we have no hope. On our own we are too filled with pride and weakness to have any hope at all of living within the Kingdom of God. The only way in is to be like the camel — with our noses in the dust, bowed down before God, seeking his merciful love. It is not that "riches" are evil. Their real danger is that they so easily become major distractions and absorb time and energy that should be given over to God. We cannot know the gifts of the Kingdom on our own either. They are dreams we will pursue forever if we pursue them on our own. The promise that Jesus is making here is that if we place our trust, our hope and our confidence in God, he will care for us.

Prayer

Loving God, it is not easy being a disciple and we often fail to live up to our callings. Fill us with the gift of your Holy Spirit that we may know your will and have the strength to fulfil it.