

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.



BIBLE STUDIES JULY 2010

+ Michael Hough
with **Fr Robert Newton**



LANTERN SERIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monday 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.

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.

Thursday July 1st

Matthew 9:1-8

This story flows on from the previous one, linked to it by the opening words "and then getting into a boat". The theology of the first story is meant to flow into this story. The equivalent of this story is to be found in Mark 2:1-12 where the paralytic is lowered down through a hole in the roof. The key message is that Jesus is the Son of Man who came among the people with the power to forgive sins. This power he passed on to his Church (which was probably a part of the reason for this miracle story being preserved). In most other healing stories in the Gospels we see that the cure of the illness comes after some expression of faith. Here we have not a physical cure but a spiritual healing taking place in response to the faith of the people. For this to happen the needy person needs to believe that Jesus has the power to forgive sins and is willing to acknowledge their need for forgiveness and their willingness to live differently. This is a part of the salvation brought by Jesus and was an important part of the faith of the early communities (Acts 10:43; Acts 26:18; Luke 7:49ff). (This was a widespread Jewish tradition: "A sick man does not recover from his sickness until all his sins are forgiven him, as it is written" — Rabbi Alexandri, Babylonian Talmud.) Holistic therapies today would agree with the understanding of Jesus that peace contributes greatly to good health.

One interesting note is found in the last verse, where the crowds give glory to God because he "has given such authority to men". Who are these men? Clearly Matthew has in mind the Son of Man but also, as he writes from the setting of his own community of faith, the Church. After his resurrection Jesus commissioned the Disciples to carry on his work of evangelization throughout the world. In repeating this story from the life of Christ we find reassurance that as baptized disciples we share in the Lord's saving works. As he brought forgiveness (reconciliation) and healing to the needy people of his time, so we are sent to be agents of that same reconciliation and healing. In the light of this story, we can see our role in the world as being one of the ways in which God can allow his blessings to flow to those in need of his mercy and love. That is part of why he called us to be disciples...so that others may know that God is offering them salvation. Of course that means that we will first of all have to have ourselves experienced that same healing and forgiveness.

Prayer

Father, we come to you as people in need of your mercy and your healing. We are weak and have failed in many ways. In the name of Jesus our Risen Lord we come to you that having been forgiven we may forgive others their failings and sins.

Friday July 2nd

*Visitation of the
Blessed Virgin Mary*

Luke 1:39-56

Luke uses this story to tie together the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. Mary is declared "blessed" not because of who she was but because of the "fruit of your womb" and because of her faith. Her blessing comes from Jesus and her response to the call by God and that is where the focus of the text remains. Mary's song is a magnificent Christian prayer that is in many ways in the same form as many of the Psalms and presents a picture of discipleship that will be picked up in the rest of the Gospel. The theology runs like this: God is good because he is concerned about his people and he is a Saviour (setting people free from their sins, limitations and weaknesses). The greatness of any person only comes about because of what God does in them and we know that God wants to do great things through people. God is merciful. He does not judge according to what the sins of a person deserve but bases judgement on his love for his children. He is also powerful. Not only did he create the universe but he has been moving it forward to his ordained goal, raising up prophets and holy men and women who would be his instruments in creation. People can look around the world and see the rich and the powerful going their own way and exploiting the poor, the needy and the weak, but God will bring judgement on them. People should not be deceived into thinking God is without power.

Both Matthew and Luke go to some lengths to ensure that those who read and hear their Gospel message understand that Mary was a nobody in the world in which she lived. She was a young unmarried woman whose only claim to fame was that she was part of a family line which went back to Abraham and David. She understood that and paradoxically it is in her poverty and in her powerlessness that is to be found her strength. It is only when we are like Mary, willing to acknowledge our need of salvation, that God is able to do great things in and through us. It is only when we begin to feel that while we may want God we do not need him, that our lives begin to struggle. Luke begins his Gospel with that message and as it unfolds we shall see the same theme repeated over and over again. Faith is an invitation to believe in God, an invitation that requires a response involving the whole of our lives. Once we live as needy people, God is able to work his salvation and set up his Kingdom of Peace and Joy.

Prayer

Hail Mary full of Grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Father, may we be open to your calling as was Mary the mother of your Son and respond with the same willingness.

Saturday August 31st

Matthew 14:1-12

Jesus had explained in the parables that the Word of God will meet with resistance in the wider world. His own ministry was opposed by the Scribes and the Pharisees, some of the crowds were hostile and unwilling to respond and his own town rejected him. It is in this context that Matthew introduces this story (in a different setting in Mark [Mk 6:14ff]). He also has Herod initiating the rumour that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life while Luke (Lk 9:7ff) and Mark see it coming to Herod from the crowds. Herod's problem was not so much that he married a relative but that he cast out his first wife to take Herodias, the wife of his half-brother who was still living. John's main enemy was not Herod. It was Herodias who hated him, presumably because he was a threat to her position, especially if, as we read in Mark, John had the ear of Herod. One cannot help but notice that in the accounts Herodias resembles Jezebel and there are similarities between Herod and Ahab the king of Israel (1 Kings chapters 19-21). What was happening to the prophet John and to Jesus was just a continuation of the rejection of those sent by God from the beginning. John is also presented as a prophet in that he proclaims the judgement of God on the behaviour of the people. In God's name he proclaims: "It is not lawful" and it is for his testimony that he is martyred. Jesus too came to proclaim the Kingdom of God and because of his faithfulness he too was killed.

This short story reminds us of one of the uncomfortable aspects of our discipleship. There is a cost. If we are going to enter into life in the Kingdom of God then we are going to have to not only "sell all that we have" so that we can obtain the treasure, but also daily take up our cross and follow after Jesus. Some things will have to change if we are truly to live in that Kingdom. But the bigger worry is that our faithfulness will at times antagonize others and the world around us. There will be times when it is embarrassing and difficult to stand up and confess our faith. People will rejoice to see the Church struggle and will delight in its failings and weaknesses. At those times (perhaps that is where we are now?) we need to keep our eyes on Christ who is our strength and our comfort. When all goes crazy around us he is there as our rock and is the guarantee of the success of our discipleship.

Prayer

All-powerful God, being a disciple of your Son is not easy and makes many demands on our time, our resources and our energies. Strengthen us in our faithfulness and may we never allow difficulties and problems to weaken our discipleship.

Friday July 30th

Matthew 13:54-58

Matthew relates this text to the parables on the Kingdom while Mark (Mk 6:1ff) and Luke (Lk 4:16ff) have it in different settings. It is Luke's account that tells us that "his own country" is the town of Nazareth and this in turn helps us to realize the purpose of the proverb in Matthew verse 57. Matthew tells us that Jesus went about both proclaiming the Gospel and teaching the message of the Kingdom. Like all Rabbis he was invited to teach in the Synagogue on the Sabbath day where we see from Luke 4:16-30 he taught them how the hopes of the prophets were being fulfilled in his ministry. Matthew tells us the people of Nazareth were amazed and excited by what he was saying and were clearly impressed by the authority with which he ministered. He was filled with "wisdom" and performed "mighty works". Despite all this his own townsfolk would not accept him. They lacked faith and so Jesus did not perform any miracles there. Interesting to note that Matthew has changed the words of Mark. He writes that Jesus "did not perform any mighty works there". Mark on the other hand says that Jesus "could not perform any miracles". By calling him the son of the carpenter they are trying to highlight his humble origins. If Jesus was from an aristocratic family and was wealthy, the suggestion is that he would have had more of an audience. But a carpenter's son? He could not possibly be the Son of God.

Ogden Nash once wrote a ditty that said "How odd of God, to choose the Jews". We used it for elocution lessons but there is a ring of truth about it. The story of the Old Testament shows us what a difficult and self-opinionated group of people the Jews were. Time and time again they rebelled and refused to follow the demands of the covenant. They were never a nation of consequence and the only time they had any real power was when the mighty nations of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon were in decline. Yet they were God's chosen ones. The same can be noted of all the flawed people he has chosen down through time to be the leaders of his people and his disciples. Clearly God sees things in a very different way from the way we do and assesses people differently to the assessment of the world. That should be a great consolation for all of us. If God can use the people of Israel as his instruments of salvation he can surely use us to bring about his purposes, whatever our failings.

Prayer

Loving Lord, we thank you that despite our sins and our failings you call us to be your children. Help us to be ever open to what it is you want us to be doing and give us the strength to persevere whatever the costs and difficulties.

Saturday July 3rd

Matthew 9:14-17

The Jews had only one binding fast and that was for the Feast of the Day of Atonement. They did, however, observe numerous devotional fasts that were meant to bring them closer to God and to help them live out more faithfully their covenant lives. Major celebrations, like weddings, removed any obligation to fast and dispensed the people from certain religious observances. What Jesus does here is draw a parallel between the wedding guests and the disciples. In Jewish tradition there was an expectation of an end time marriage (at the end of time) between Israel and Yahweh in which there would be a Messiah-King (some thought that Solomon would return in this role). For the early Christians this text most likely brought to mind the image of the Church as the bride and Christ as the bridegroom. This becomes clearer when Jesus goes on to talk about the bridegroom being taken away from them (the crucifixion). The point could be that the old is finished and the new must completely replace it. Others see it as a parable that warns against the dangers of inappropriate action which could lead to loss of life in the Kingdom. This would mean that the parable is calling the disciples to repentance as the Kingdom is drawing near. There is no time for continuing on with actions that are spiritually meaningless and perhaps even destructive of discipleship.

Discipleship is about renewal of life, about constantly seeking to leave behind the things that keep us from God and taking up the things that open us more and more to his life and love. It should be always new, and hard as it is, it will mean that as we grow in our faith we leave behind more and more things of our old lives. That is hard and the temptation is to remain solid and unchanging in the way we live out our faith. At the age of sixty there is little difference in the way we live out our life with God to what it was like when we were twenty. Yet so much in our lives and in the world has changed. Now is the time when we are called to stop and think about this call to allow God to renew us, a time when we prepare to take the risks we need to take to allow God to take us forward and speak to us anew. A Church that does not seek new ways of listening and new ways of proclaiming the faith is doomed to be ineffective and powerless. What makes growth possible is our understanding that the Church's mission is not its own, but comes from God and that it is God who will bring it to a successful conclusion. It is not our Church.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, give us the courage we need to be open to your calling and willing to change the things in our lives that need to be changed for the sake of the Gospel.

Sunday July 4th

Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

Fr Robert Newton

In the Gospel from Luke, we continue to follow Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. But for now, the apparent destination of the trip has receded to the background. Something else has caught our attention. For one thing, Jesus' message of announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God is being met with increasing curiosity. There is growing hostility to what Jesus has to say and, at the same time, an increasing acceptance of his message. For this reason, the mission of Jesus and the twelve must be enlarged. The scope of Jesus' work must be broadened. More workers must be recruited to get the good news out. So Jesus decides to appoint seventy to share in the job. Jesus sent these new missionaries in pairs to the very places he himself intended to go. He didn't just turn them loose and say, "Now sink or swim! Go find your own mission field". Nor does Jesus sugar-coat the job. Jesus wants his disciples to know what they're getting into. So much so, that in some ways it's a rather bleak picture that he paints for them. "The harvest is plentiful." That is, the time is ripe — but there's a catch — "but the labourers are few". And those that do respond to the call need to know that at times the work can be fraught with danger: "See, I am sending you like lambs into the midst of wolves".

He does give them some advice, though, about how they are to go about it. They are to travel light. "No purse, no bag, no sandals." They are not to take anything that could hold them back. They are on an urgent mission. "And greet no one on the road." In other words, let nothing distract you from the mission. When the seventy return, they are ecstatic about what they have been able to accomplish. They have been successful beyond their wildest expectations. "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'" When Jesus hears what they have to say, he takes this as a sign that God is having his way in the world. Satan is finally getting his due. And if these seventy think that they are successful now, it will be nothing compared with what they are going to experience later on. They will accomplish more than they may think or believe. Most readers of these Scriptures from Luke do not think Jesus really meant for us to become snake killers. Some have tried that, of course. However, this is a symbolic way to indicate that the power of evil is being overcome through the mission of Jesus on earth, now as well as back then.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the example of your saints throughout the ages who have brought the Good News to all the world.

Thursday July 29th

Matthew 13:47-53

As we have already seen in the earlier parables, the Kingdom of God is not here compared to a net. The comparison is with a "net which was being thrown into the sea". It is the same kind of dynamic vision that Jesus had used earlier. Right at the opening of the parable we see that the action is successful. The net gathers up all kinds of fish. It is not concentrating on a single variety of fish, which for the audience would clearly mean the people of Israel. Gentiles too are caught up in the netting. The fishing only comes to an end when the net is full and when that point is reached it is pulled up onto the beach. Then a sorting takes place on the sand. The good fish are placed into containers and taken away to the market to be sold and the inedible fish are thrown away. The Church is shown here in a very mixed state where the good and the bad will continue on together until the final sorting. In the final sorting it is interesting to note that the word fish is not used. It is quite possible that in the sorting they found creatures and things that were not fish but which were still good and usable. The net makes no distinctions and neither does the Kingdom. It catches up all kinds of people in an often unexpected way.

When we read the Gospels it is clear that the band of Apostles was not perfect. Jesus chose Judas who betrayed him and they were led by Peter who denied him and abandoned him. Yet Jesus kept both of them among his closest followers. Judas himself left and committed suicide. He was not rejected. Peter repented and returned and continued on as a disciple. This is the way of discipleship and is certainly the way of the Church. It never has been a 'safe house' for saints. It has always been more of a hospice for sinners and it would be true to say that sometimes it is difficult to tell the saints from the sinners! One of the great failings of the Christian community is that many of us want to do the sorting out ourselves. We cast judgement, we condemn, we criticize, we fail to respect, to love, to care for, to reach out to, because we have decided that these others are sinners or perhaps not even "fish". We can delight in the mercy and compassion of God in that he allows us to share his life but we find ourselves less merciful and compassionate in passing that welcome on to others. There is the sting in the tail and the challenge.

Prayer

All-merciful God, we thank you that you love us as we are and that you do not cut us off from your life because of our sins. Help us by your grace to continue to struggle to be perfect and to share your mercy and compassion with those in need.

Wednesday July 28th

Matthew 13:44-46

Both of these parables refer to the “kingdom of heaven”. Let us direct our analysis to a different level and remind ourselves of what we mean by the Kingdom of God. We are used to the idea of a Kingdom as a nation or a geographical and political unit which is ruled over by a King (or a Queen). While that is the origin of the biblical concept what Jesus had in mind was something more dynamic. The Kingdom of God is not a place. It is not heaven or the dwelling place of God. When the Bible talks about the Kingdom of God it is talking about the mighty reign of God in the world. It is the action of God being God and how he carries out his divine work in creation. The Kingdom of God refers to the act of God ruling over all that he has made. The Kingdom of God exists wherever God is allowed to come in and be King. It is where he is welcomed as the ruler and the one who provides the direction and impetus for life. A political kingdom is set up by the imposition of laws and regulations that must be obeyed. This is not so with the Kingdom of God. God invites people to accept life in his Kingdom. It is a free unearned gift and at its most basic level is simply a share in the life of God. The fruits of the Kingdom are those things that come about when God is at the centre of a person’s life and is the power and light behind all they do. Such people will experience peace, joy, love, fellowship, happiness, forgiveness and more. These things come with God. They are a part of who he is and what he does. With this understanding we can then begin to see why Jesus put such an emphasis on things like the Kingdom being sown in people’s lives, of having to grow, of choices having to be made about living in the Kingdom and rejecting other kingdoms, of opposition that will spring up and about how the Kingdom grows mysteriously by its own power. All this happens because God is King. This means that those who seek to be disciples are called to serve the King and not seek to become kings themselves.

The Church is not the same as the Kingdom, though we hope that the Church is a part of the Kingdom of God. The Church may be imperfect and limited but the Kingdom is the life of God to which there are no limits. Our Faith finds its focus there in the Kingdom but to enjoy its blessings the onus is on us to respond to God’s call, repent and enter into his life.

Prayer

Almighty God our Heavenly King, we acknowledge you as the source and ruler of our life. Keep us in your care; show us the way we should walk and enable us so to proclaim the blessings of life in you that others will find their way to the Kingdom.

Monday July 5th

Matthew 9:18-26

Jesus is walking through the crowd when he is touched by the woman and she is cured immediately in what is almost a magical manner. People would come to him so that they might be healed by touching just the fringe of his cloak (Matt 14:36; Mk 6:56). We later on see a similar thing in Acts 5:15 and Acts 19:12 where an automatic power is attributed to the shadow of Peter and the cloak of Paul. These accounts bring out the power that Jesus had from the Father and which is handed on to the Church. Here the healing is attributed to the faith of the woman and in Matthew’s theology this is the work of salvation. Her act is a prayer to which Jesus responds. Mark has more detail in his version (Mk 5:21ff) noting that the woman had been to many doctors to find healing but nothing worked. Her situation was desperate and she came to Jesus in despair. The faith of the “ruler” in Matthew is highlighted because the daughter is already dead (in Mark she is only sick). This faith is important because it makes it possible for people to view life through different eyes. The people at the house think that the girl is dead. For those who have faith, she is merely asleep. This is important for the Church because the same demands will be made when Jesus is laid in the tomb. For those who believe, he is merely asleep and the grave cannot hold him. Jesus is Lord of both the living and the dead.

This story is also found in both Mark and Luke (Lk 8:40ff) indicating that it was seen as important for the early Church. It clearly touched a nerve and spoke of common experiences. People know what it is like to be overcome by the circumstances of their life. There are many things that affect our lives but we have little control over them. That is where faith comes in. Jesus offers salvation to those who are content to allow him into their “house” and who are prepared to see death as a state of “being asleep”. But that is an enormous demand. The woman with the loss of blood had to believe it was worth the effort of finding Jesus. It was difficult because she would have been unwelcome in the crowd as she was ritually unclean and would make them impure. She took the risk. She did what was needed to give her life a chance of being changed. The man brought Jesus into his house (life) and he and his daughter were changed forever. That is the same offer that is available for us. If we are willing to act.

Prayer

Lord God, Father of life, we ask you to come into our lives and ease the burdens that we bear. Strengthen us so that we can do what we need to allow you to fill us with your blessings.

Tuesday July 6th

Matthew 9:32-38

This is the second story of the cure of a demoniac and the healing of a blind and dumb demoniac will be repeated again in 12:22ff. Normally an exorcism in Judaism was accompanied by a long and complicated ritual and the swiftness and authority of this particular casting out seemed to have greatly impressed the crowds. This miracle brings to an end the collection of miracles seen throughout chapters eight and nine. According to Jewish traditions there were ten miracles during the Exodus event and ten wonders done in the Sanctuary. This is probably a part of the background to the collection put together by Matthew in this section. This would again present Jesus as the new Moses. The whole section ends as it began, with the crowd expressing its amazement. After the resurrection Jesus sends his disciples out to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world and he gives "all authority in heaven and earth" to them and this is the authority seen in action here (28:18; 28:20). The Father gave his authority to the Son and the Son passes it on to the disciples.

For all the Gospel writers the coming of the Messiah was the sign of the beginning of the end time. They lived in a world that was under the power and influence of Satan and before the Kingdom of God could be established, Satan had to have his power taken away. This is why there are so many accounts of exorcisms in the Gospels. These present the mission of Jesus in its clearest focus for he overcomes not just illness but the powers that bind the human body and the human spirit. The people of the time did not distinguish clearly between physical illness and spirit possessions and it is not necessary to do this to understand the message of the Gospel. It is about being set free. It is about allowing Jesus to bring salvation into the life of the believer but before this is possible we must first of all acknowledge that we have need of salvation. We begin by acknowledging our sinfulness and the limits to our freedom and life. Then we come to Jesus. We do this in the words of Scripture, in the sacraments of the Church, in prayer and in taking part in the life of the Christian community. It is in these that we find that we are able to overcome the "demonic forces" (in whatever form they take in our lives) that stop us from being free.

Prayer Father, you led your people Israel out of Egypt into the freedom of the land of Canaan. We ask you to set us free from all that holds us back in our discipleship and in our lives in the world that we may praise you and faithfully serve you.

Tuesday July 27th

Matthew 13:36-43

Here we have another explanation of a parable, whether it is from Jesus or is provided by the early Church does not matter. The explanation offered here is in two parts. The first is in verses 36-39 and provides us with a straight explanation of the various elements of the parable: the sower, the field, the good seed, the weeds, the enemy, the harvest and the reapers. The second part is in verses 40-43 and here we seem to have something of what is called an apocalyptic revelation. The word "apocalypse" means a revelation and in the Bible they are always about what will happen leading up to and during the last days of creation. These are found in the first three Gospels and were common in the Jewish traditions as well. The last book of the New Testament is rightly called the Apocalypse of St John and is about the eventual fate of creation. Here in Matthew we find the key elements of such visions: the good are separated off from the evil ones when the Son of Man comes with his angels, a judgement is carried out and each goes off to their determined fates. What is a surprise in the explanation is that the field is equated with the world. In Matthew's Gospel there is a clear emphasis on Israel and the Good News being proclaimed to the Jews (15:24). Here we see the seed being sown beyond the borders of the People of God to include Gentiles as well as Jews. Matthew is aware that they are seeds being planted and that they have a lot of growing yet to be done.

When Jesus ends the explanation of the parable he commands "He who has ears, let him hear". What is it we are supposed to hear? We know the answer to this from the message of the rest of the Gospel. Matthew is not the slightest bit interested in just growing. It is not enough for wheat to grow. What is vital in Matthew's understanding of discipleship is the bearing of fruit. There is no room for excuses in these parables. The seed is good, though the soil may be limited and be filled with obstacles and there is also competition for the nutrients, but that does not affect the goodness of the seed. If people are not listening to the Gospel today it does not mean that it is no longer relevant. The problem is not with the seed, it rests with the garden. We need to keep this firmly in our minds. If people are not responding to the Word of God then we need to be looking at the garden and the obstacles that need to be removed (in our own lives and that of the Church) so that it can take root and grow.

Prayer Merciful Lord, like the mustard seed of the parable you grow within us and provide us with shelter and protection from all that would harm us. Lead us to repent and come to you.

Monday July 26th

Matthew 13:31-35

The parable of the mustard seed is found in Matthew, Mark and Luke as well as in writings not in our New Testament. The point of comparison is not with the seed. The text says that the Kingdom of God is like a man taking a mustard seed and planting it in his field. The seed itself is simply a seed and while it says something about the Kingdom, for Matthew it is much more important to put an emphasis on the action of planting and growing. The smallness of the seed stands in contrast to the enormity of the eventual tree. Not only is the tree large but it also provides the birds of the air with shelter and safety (and presumably food in the form of insects and seeds). With the parable of the yeast we have a similar image of action. The comparison is not with yeast. That could be kept in a jar on the shelf in the house and so would remain useless. The Kingdom is compared with yeast that is taken by the woman and mixed in with the bread dough. When yeast is taken and worked into the dough then the whole mixture is transformed. So it is with the Kingdom of God. Like the parable of the mustard seed we have a small beginning and a large end product. In this way both illustrate the power of the Kingdom of God. From another vantage point both of these bring to mind the resurrection of Jesus. He was buried in the tomb (the seed is buried in the soil of the garden and the yeast in the dough) and rising from the dead transformed the whole of creation. What is not clear with both the seed and the yeast is how it works. It remains a mystery. The only thing that is certain is that once they are buried they begin to work away and to transform the garden and the mixture.

There is a great consolation in these parables. We are often tempted to measure things in terms of size. We feel that we are living through a major period of decline and wonder about the future. These parables remind us that the future is in God's hands and is guaranteed. We know from the other parables that there will be obstacles and difficulties but that the power of the Kingdom is not to be found in we its children. The power of the Kingdom is to be found in God. It is God who chooses the garden (and the ingredients of the bowl) and it is through his power that the Kingdom takes root and mysteriously grows. Our calling is to work on being united with God and allow him to work his salvation in his way. It is filled with power, but it needs to be nurtured in the right environment.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, at times we worry about the life of your Church and are tempted to doubt and even despair. Remind us always of your powerful presence which guides our way.

Wednesday July 7th

Matthew 10:1-7

Jesus has now bound the strong man (Satan) and now he is going to start the work of plundering his kingdom. In Mark's account of the call the only power given to the disciples is authority over the unclean spirits (Mk 6:7), a ministry that we see here has already been started by Jesus. Here in Matthew their ministry is modelled more closely on that of Jesus who went about casting out demons but also healing and performing many miracles. What is unusual in this call is seeing that in verse one they are called the "twelve disciples" and in verse two the "twelve apostles". The word "apostle" comes from a Greek word which means "to send". The word apostle then comes from this initial call making them the ones who were sent. Their mission then is not their own but is a continuation of the mission of Jesus. He calls them. He sends them and, in the biblical tradition, it is Jesus who will make their mission a success. Matthew is the only Gospel writer who puts the word "first" before Peter which fits into his own theological picture and the position he has given to Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16:13ff).

A Rabbi's disciple was a different person to the disciple of Jesus. For the young Jewish man seeking to serve God as a Rabbi the journey began with a search for a Rabbi who would accept him into his school. There would then follow many long years of study during which the young student would seek to absorb as much teaching as possible. His end goal would be to leave the school and gain enough status to in time begin his own school. This is not the way of Jesus. No one can be a disciple unless they are first of all called by God. Discipleship is an unearned gift. We do not choose God, he chooses us. Discipleship is a lifelong struggle in which the one called seeks to come closer and closer to the Master. It is not simply a matter of learning or being taught, though they are parts of it. A disciple is one who is united with Christ. And look at the ones called by Jesus here! They are sinners, tax collectors, political activists, fishermen and each one of them will eventually abandon him and betray him. Yet they are still disciples and apostles. Therein lies our own hope. We are no different and the great consolation is that God chose us and called us...weak though we are...and it is the same Jesus Christ who will make it possible for us to succeed. Our task is to work on coming closer to him. The rest is his problem!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for choosing us and calling us to be your disciples in the world and to proclaim the Good News of your Kingdom. Help us in our unworthiness.

Thursday July 8th

Matthew 10:7-15

The disciples are sent out to proclaim that the Kingdom of heaven is near (like John the Baptist [3:2] and Jesus himself [4:17]). As a sign of the truth of their message they will perform wonderful miracles. These are important because of the Jewish understanding of the time of the Messiah. It would be a time when the sick would be cured and the dead raised to life. Matthew's community believed it was living in the end time and so these signs would be expected because the Kingdom of God is made known in both word and action. As we saw with Jesus, the casting out of demons is a sign of the collapse of the power of Satan's reign. The disciples have received their commission without charge, that is, they did not earn their calling and so they had to carry out their work without expectation of earthly rewards. They are to put into practice the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and travel lightly. In doing this they will have no option but to trust in the generosity and mercy of God who called them. By travelling lightly it will be apparent to all that they are disciples of God and not self-serving preachers. It will also show that the success of their mission depends on God's will and not their own prowess.

Shaking the dust off our feet when we return home is not an expression that is common in Australia, yet for the Palestinian Jew it was familiar. Any Jew returning to the Holy Land would pause and remove the dust from the pagan lands as a gesture of leaving behind all that was seen as unworthy and unclean. This was done in the marketplaces as well to make sure that the dust of the Gentiles did not cling to the robes and return to the house with them. Here it serves as a timely warning that there will be opposition to the message. People will not like hearing the message of Jesus. Individuals and communities (even the broader society) will reject the Gospel and those who seek to live it and proclaim it. That is very much the situation in our modern Australian society where simply being a Christian can attract a great deal of criticism and mockery. Our task is to persevere. While we are called to preach to all peoples, Jesus does not say they will listen! We find contentment in being faithful and in the Truth of the Gospel we proclaim. The measure of Christianity is not one that can be expressed in numbers. Sometimes the Church has been at its strongest in the midst of persecution. That is a comfort.

Prayer

Loving Father, there are times when living out our callings is difficult and we are tempted to water them down or abandon them. In the midst of persecution and trouble, keep our eyes firmly fixed on you and comfort us by your eternal truth.

Sunday July 25th

St James

Matthew 20:20-28

This story is not found in Luke. In Matthew the request is made by the mother of the disciples, while in Mark it is made by the men themselves (Mk 10:35ff). This seems to fit in with Matthew's tendency to water down the failings of the apostles. Mark has the request focussed on sitting with Jesus in his "glory" while here it's to sit on the right and left of Jesus in his Kingdom. Both James and John seem to have been relatives of Jesus and it is reasonable for them to expect to have precedence among the Twelve. In his answer Jesus points the two towards the cross (drink the cup) for that is the only way to the Kingdom. It is not clear what Jesus means by his prophecy that "you will drink my cup". James was put to death by Herod (Acts 12:2) but it seems that while John suffered persecution (Acts 5:40) and exile (Rev 1:9) he was not martyred. It is possible that what Matthew had in mind was that as disciples they would have to follow the way of the cross, as had Jesus the master. A violent death was always a possibility, but as we have seen, taking up one's cross was a daily activity. Jesus ends by reminding the disciples that he had come to save men through sacrifice and not to distribute rewards. The rewards are to be found in being disciples and not in material compensation or gifts of power.

It is easy to shake our heads in wonder at the nerve of these two men (though we can probably understand the thinking of their mum). When we think about it a bit we might find that it is a common attitude. How often have we heard (or perhaps thought ourselves) the line "why is this happening to me?". There is often an expectation that God is in some kind of debt to people who worship him all their lives. What is the point of praying every day if nothing changes? What is the point of being a part of the life of the Church if we still get sick, suffer all kinds of difficulties and if we see the same old evils and problems in the world. Jesus in some ways answers this question. God is worshipped because he is God. We worship God because we are his creatures and we are in need of his love and graces. He also says that what is promised by life in the Kingdom is a life of Peace, happiness and wholeness. We are blessed by the very fact of our discipleship. God is already doing great things for us and is transforming us as individuals. The world does not change because of the sins of people who refuse to acknowledge God's Kingship.

Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for sharing your life with us and for bringing us into your Kingdom. We pray that we may offer you praise and give you the honour you deserve in all we do.

Saturday July 24th

Matthew 13:24-30

This is another parable about the Kingdom, answering the question: "What is the Kingdom of God like?". As we have seen with the parable of the Sower, the actual point of comparison is not immediately clear. It involves the sowing, the seed and the garden and the life of the Kingdom involves a bit of all these. Here we have two kinds of seeds, the good seeds and the weeds. The darnel was probably a weed called cheat, which was a troublesome weed in the grain fields that looked like wheat. The disciples are presented as the good seeds and the Pharisees and the Scribes (and all unbelievers) as the weeds. These bad seeds are sown by the Evil One and not by God. All farmers leave weeds and crops in the field and so it is with God. The Church, the Synagogue and the persecutors will exist side by side until the end. God will not be removing them. This follows on from the teaching in 12:33 about the good fruit and the bad fruit and the good trees and bad trees (and also 15:13ff). Matthew provides the explanation of the parable in terms of the end of the world. At the end the wicked and the righteous will be separated and each go to their deserved reward or punishment. But it will be on the last day. There would have been people in Matthew's Church who waited impatiently for the coming of the Lord and with it the destruction of those who opposed the work of the Gospel.

How does Jesus present the work of the Church in the face of the great opposition that was present in his time and after his resurrection? It comes as something of a surprise to hear him say "No. Leave it where it is". The wheat is to get on with the business of growing and producing fruit and on taking from the soil all the nutrients it needs to grow well. There is no benefit to be obtained from trying to root out the weeds. Such an approach runs the danger of disturbing and harming the good plants and in any case would be unsuccessful. It is impossible to rid the garden of every weed. They will always be present. The Church is no different. It is a waste of time to try and remove its opponents. The Church should be focussing on its calling and mission. Then it will grow stronger and more fruitful and the "weeds" will eventually die. It is the work of God to decide on the fate of weeds and we should find some comfort in knowing that in the end they will cease to exist. Having opponents is not helpful but will be a reality until the end of time.

Prayer

Merciful God, help us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on you and not become distracted by the difficulties and problems of the world in which we live, for with you is our strength.

Friday July 9th

Matthew 10:16-23

This is a powerful statement of the mission of the Church. The apostles here are presented as being in the forefront of a peaceful invasion into a world dominated by evil and violence. Their only protection will be that given by the Spirit of God and their fate will be the same as the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:7ff). They bring peace but their message will divide and create consternation because of the demands it makes. In the cross of Jesus the world would be judged and saved and the disciples would share the same fate as their master. The image of the vulnerable sheep among wolves is meant to show how they will appear to be unprotected and as defenceless as sheep. The picture now is not so much the fate of the individual disciples proclaiming the Gospel in Galilee but the Church after the resurrection (around 70AD) facing the terrors of Roman and Jewish persecution. This is why they need to be crafty as they go about their business, avoiding whatever will unnecessarily provoke their adversaries. This does not mean they are to compromise their teachings, but that there is no point in falling into traps. They must be innocent so that the world is not distracted by their wrongdoing. If Christians are guilty of crimes then the overall message will be lost because people will be busy concentrating on the crimes and miss the important message.

At first glance this is not much of a recruitment pamphlet! The road of discipleship is a difficult one and the calling of the disciple one that brings with it all manner of hardships and struggles. That is powerfully evident throughout this section. But there is something else that is threaded through this teaching and we would do well to meditate on its message. Throughout we see that the disciple is modelled on Jesus. As with Jesus, so with the disciple. That is clear in the reference to the cross. But the cross was not the end for Jesus. It was but a step on the way to resurrection, ascension and enthronement at the right hand of God. These too are a part of what is promised to those disciples who persevere. Jesus' suffering and death brought salvation and those who believe and follow after him will be able to share that salvation with the world through their own sufferings. We do not suffer in vain. Suffering is not without meaning. Suffering is never good but it can be a means of helping to transform the world when it is placed at the foot of the cross.

Prayer

All-merciful God, your Son Jesus suffered and died for us so that we might know your saving presence in our lives. May we persevere in doing what is necessary to share that salvation with others that all peoples may know your healing presence.

Saturday July 10th

Matthew 10:24-33

Verse 24 seems to suppose that the disciples already know that Jesus will suffer persecution for the sake of the Kingdom of his Father. What Jesus is doing here is not so much to compare the disciple to the teacher, but he is more interested in identifying the fate of the master with that of the servant. Both are destined to suffer. Jesus is put to death in establishing the Kingdom among men and the disciples will be put to death for preaching that Kingdom. The link word in this section is "fear" (verses 26, 28, 31). This is a special kind of fear. It means that temptation that comes to Christians when they are called to profess their faith. When faced with opposition (or persecution) they may be tempted to keep silent. The Gospel is meant to be brought to the attention of the world. The possibility of death is no excuse because while they may be able to take away a person's life they cannot rob them of true life which is God's to give. Life unfolds under the ever watchful eye of this same God. If the providential care of God extends to sparrows and the hairs on a person's head then what is the point of fearing what might happen.

Many of us live under the shadow of what might be coming in the future. This is what the Gospel would call faithless fear. It is healthy to fear and given our human weaknesses and vulnerability it is a state of being that is with us from cradle to grave. This is not what the Gospel has in mind here. Matthew wants to warn his community about things that may stop them from preaching the Gospel. It may be embarrassing, or awkward, or draw attention to ourselves to admit to being a disciple. It may mean that we open ourselves up to ridicule or abuse if we maintain a teaching of Jesus when the world in which we live wants to move in the opposite direction. We see this today when at times the press seems to delight in finding weaknesses in the life of Christians. The world wants to allow all kinds of ways of living and some of them are quite simply contrary to the teachings of Jesus. The temptation is to say nothing, to get on with our prayers and worship and synods and keep our heads down. That is the fear Jesus condemns. We need to trust God and have faith in his desire and ability to care for us whatever the consequences of our actions for the sake of the Gospel. Faith and hope dispel fears before they have a chance to cripple us.

Prayer

Father, it is all too easy for us to sit back and be a kind of anonymous Christian living out our faith in private. Reassure us with your grace and your power that we can at all times and in all places profess your Name by what we do and say.

Friday July 23rd

Matthew 13:18-23

In both Mark and Matthew we find Jesus giving explanations of the parable of the Sower. Scholars argue whether this comes from Jesus or is an example of the way the early Church understood and handled the teachings of their master. The explanation we have here provides us with a good picture of the situation that these early communities must have faced. The major problems were those of persecution and the wealth, comfort and excesses of the society of that time. It is quite reasonable to presume that Jesus would have been able to foresee these problems and built some guidelines and warnings into his teachings. Matthew sees the seed as the Word of God (Mark is a little confusing because in his account the seed is the word but it is also those who hear the word [Mk 4:13-20]). Matthew presents Jesus as saying that those who heard the preaching and teaching are a mixed lot. Some of the hearers are like rocky soil, some like the soil of the path and some are surrounded and choked by weeds. As the seed sometimes falls on soil that is not suitable, so the word of God is received in different ways by different people. It is not understood and received by everyone. There is nothing wrong with the seed being sown. The problem exists in what is done to it and with it.

One of the great things about this parable is that there is an underlying understanding that the word, like the seeds, has a mysterious power within. No one knows how the seeds grow. It is a mystery. We all know of trees and grass and plants that seem to hang on in situations which seem incapable of sustaining life. The Word is the same. It does not force itself onto the hearers. It has to be received but once it has been proclaimed it has a power of its own. No garden is perfect in its reception. No garden accepts all the seeds fully and perfectly and is free of weeds and unwanted plants that choke the good plants we want to keep. Yet through it all the seeds keep on growing. That is our hope and our consolation. Yes, we are imperfect in how we take up the Word of God. We do fail to absorb it and make it a part of who we are. We know that our lives contain rocks and hard ground which restricts the Word from taking us over and most of us toy with things that use up our time, our resources and our energies and limit what we have available for God to use. Yet his promise is clear, if we continue to open ourselves up to his grace he will work at changing us, rocks and all.

Prayer

Father, we have often failed to listen to your word and to repent and change our lives. Help us to remove the obstacles that limit your power within us and be open to your calling.

Thursday July 22nd

St Mary Magdalen

John 20:1-18

All our Gospels mention that the women gathered at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning though John only speaks of Mary Magdalen. It is an unusual detail and none of the other Gospels tell us that Jesus and Mary met. She was not someone who held a position of importance in the community and her only claim to fame was that she had served the Lord. One would have quite reasonably expected Jesus to meet first of all with one of the Disciples or Mary his mother. An important feature of all the Gospels is the fact that the tomb was empty. This was a part of the way the evangelists used to proclaim the message that the whole of creation, physical and spiritual, is transformed by the resurrection of Jesus. It is no mere theological concept. We can presume that the women came to the tomb to complete the work begun by Nicodemus. The hour was late and there were many spices involved in preparing the body for burial and as the Sabbath was near they would not have been able to complete the process. Mary's first thought was that the enemies of Jesus had stolen the body. Her first thought was not that he had risen as he said. That she went first of all to Peter also suggests that even though he had earlier denied Jesus, he was still considered to have a position of leadership and authority in the band of disciples.

All our Gospels are written not just to record what happened but to also provide the Church with an insight into the meaning of what happened. Two insights are worth meditating on. The first is that the risen Lord appeared first of all to sinners and those who had betrayed him. This is the hope that is given to all sinners. Betraying Christ and failing in discipleship is not enough to isolate us from God's saving mercy and love. Mary the sinner who had had seven devils in her and Peter the fallen leader of the band of Apostles were the first to celebrate the resurrection. If Jesus can do that to them after what they did, then he is there for us whatever our own failings. The second theological insight is that the tomb was empty. Some modern theologians would like to deny a physical resurrection but that is the only sort that makes any sense. Jesus physically rose and with that act transformed the whole of our lives as human beings. If the resurrection was only spiritual then our hope is only spiritual. An empty tomb means all that we do as human beings is now transformed by the saving power of Christ and an arena of grace.

Prayer

Loving Father, you have shown your love for us in so many ways, but most powerfully in the death and resurrection of your Son. May we celebrate that gift in all we do and say.

Sunday July 11th

Luke 10:25-37

Fr Robert Newton

This Good Samaritan is not only good; he's amazing! "Good" is not a good enough word for it. Not only is he the least likely one to offer help, but somehow — we call it by the grace of God — this man had learned to rise above his restrictive upbringing and see that some things were not as simple as he had thought they were. This was a real person lying there in the ditch; someone who needed help. We face the same dilemmas every day, don't we? With many issues from birth to death and before and beyond. Stem-cell research, cloning, abortion, homosexuality, AIDS, to extend life or terminate it. It's not always crystal clear what to do in these half dead or half alive situations. "What would Jesus do in these borderline situations?" we ask ourselves. The parable of the Good Samaritan answers clearly and unambiguously: Jesus would offer help!

So how did the Samaritan take care of the man? First, he used what he had. He dipped into his own resources, the oil, wine, money, even the donkey he was travelling on, and graciously — there is no better word to describe it — used it all for the one in need. But he did not let it go at that. He saw that the man would have what he needed when it came time for him to leave. In other words, he saw to it that there were others who could pick up where he had to leave off. Since he was not able to stay with the man until he was brought back to health, the Samaritan did the next best thing. He wrote a cheque to the innkeeper to cover whatever the man needed. And if, as it turned out, that was not quite enough, he would settle up when he returned. Then the Samaritan went on his own way to take care of whatever it was he had to take care of, confident in his own heart that he had done all that he could do. That's a good feeling. It's one of the best there is in these kinds of situations. It is satisfying to feel that you have done all that you could possibly do. That was the situation and how one man chose to respond to it. But what about today? What is our situation today? Is it anything like that? If you're beginning to think that there are more problems like this that we have to deal with every day, you are certainly right. Recently, there have been more disasters, both natural and human. Sometimes they seem to come at the rate of one or two a day. The truth is, we have more opportunities all the time to try to be a good neighbour by following Jesus' example of the Good Samaritan.

Prayer

Loving Father, we ask that you help us to see that everyone is our neighbour regardless of their wealth or their colour, creed or gender.

Monday July 12th

Matthew 10:34-11:1

The warning that the Kingdom is not going to bring peace to the world is something of a shock. Jewish teachings held that the Messiah would impose God's Peace on the world. Jesus on the other hand proclaims that his coming will bring internal divisions because he demands an almost absolute commitment. Jesus is not speaking about an end time peace (though that would be a part of his message). This section is about a present reality. Jesus is saying that those who hear the word and respond to it will find their lives changed in the present life, as well as a future peace. Jesus is not concerned about preaching some pious philosophy. He is making some clear demands of his disciples and there is no room for indifference. These demands are quite radical and engage the believer on all levels of their lives. This is brought out by noting that the normal values of society, social harmony, family ties, friendship and so on are no longer absolute values if they come into conflict with the demands of the Gospel. Obedience to the teachings of Jesus must now take precedence over all else. In Luke this is addressed to the crowd (Lk 12:51ff) but here in Matthew it is a part of the directions given to the disciples.

It is hard to be faithful in all things. Most of us fail and fall because we are unable consistently to live out the demands of the Gospel. In terms of today's Gospel it is because we entertain other priorities. We become caught up in the affairs of daily life and the struggle to meet the demands of the world in which we live. We end up compromising on the demands of the Gospel because God does not stand up and yell and kick up a loud protest at our failures! The longer this goes on the more our discipleship is diluted and the less effective we are in proclaiming the Gospel to the world. The prophets of the Old Testament were often subjected to abuse and persecution because they preached a message from God that was without compromise. They also lived in such a way that the will of God was evident in all they did as well as said. This constant persecution was almost inevitable because the people of the time did not want to hear what God was saying and did not want to be reminded of their failures by seeing the lifestyles of the prophets. It is a good point for reflection. If there is little turbulence in our lives of faith, could it be because we have simply compromised our discipleship?

Prayer

Almighty God, we live in a world that needs to know of your love, your power and your mercy. Help us to live out our lives of faithful discipleship without fear and compromise.

Wednesday July 21st

Matthew 13:1-9

The whole of chapter 13 is made up of teachings on the Kingdom of God, on the process of its propagation, the growing of the crop and the harvesting. What is the Kingdom like? Is it like the sower going out to sow and sowing the seed? Is it like the seed? Like the garden? Like the crop? Or somehow like the whole process? Jesus weaves all these features together. All the teachings on the Kingdom use images of action, for the Kingdom is a process of unfolding revelation. It is planted, it grows, it yields and it continues to bear fruit. The opponents to the seed (the Gospel) are the rocks, the path, the birds and the thorns. Each of these has its own special characteristics. The rocks stop the roots from going deep enough to sustain growth. The path is hard pressed ground and resists the implantation of the seeds. This leaves them exposed and they are quickly eaten by the birds. The birds are opportunists who are hovering around waiting for a shallow seed. The thorns are running in competition to the wheat, trying to take the best nutrients for itself. All these relate not just to ministry in the time of Jesus but also to the life of the Church. It is up to each new generation of believers to identify the obstacles to the Gospel and to find ways of minimizing their ability to hamper the capacity of the world to enjoy the fruits of God's harvest.

One of the long standing traditions in interpretation has been for the believers to put themselves in the place of the garden. They are the ones in whom the seeds are "planted". None of us is a perfect garden, accepting the Word of God in all purity. There are parts of our lives which, like the rocks, stop the plant from taking root. Other parts of our lives are packed down hard like the dirt on the path and because the Word cannot be at home within us, it is taken away by forces outside of ourselves. The same can be said about the weeds. Life is filled with all kinds of pressures and demands which compete for our time and our resources. Once they get a hold in our lives it is hard for the Word to grow. The challenge for us is to work out what the rocks are in our life. What are the particular weeds that compete for our faithfulness and which choke the Word? What are the areas where we simply do not give the Word a chance to penetrate and leave it exposed to the birds? With all these weak spots there is a solution. The rocks can be moved. The weeds pulled out. The path dug over. That is the response called for by the parable.

Prayer

Father, as the New Israel, we are your vineyard and you care for us with love. Help us to do what is necessary to bear good fruit in our lives that all people may know you as a loving God.

Tuesday July 20th

Matthew 12:46-50

We are not certain who Matthew has in mind when he speaks about the brothers of the Lord. In the Mediterranean world the extended family was a reality and everyone had many brothers. The Greek word is probably better translated "brethren". The earlier stories showed Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees and now he moves onto a teaching on the place of family bonds in the Kingdom. Physical families are of less importance than spiritual bonds and the spiritual relationship which unites believers. While Mark has Jesus pointing to all those around him (Mk 3:31ff), here in Matthew the Lord points to his disciples, for the bonds of discipleship are deeper than even the bonds of one's physical family. The will of God is most obvious in the accepting of discipleship. We have seen that such discipleship involves the "doing" of the will of God and family ties can distract from these demands. This section of the Gospel ends with the same message we saw in 10:37: "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son and daughter more than me is not worthy of me".

We need to keep in mind, as we read this text, that the community of Matthew expected an immediate end to the world. Jesus would return at any time and bring all things to an end. This explains why there are at times some uncompromising demands made. If the world will end tomorrow then priorities are different from a community which expects the world to end some time off in the distant future. Jesus is not in any way suggesting that families should suffer because of the demands of the Gospel. What he is saying is that the Gospel must have priority. It is hard to imagine a situation in a Christian family where one would have to make a choice between family and the Gospel. The choice we do have to make is about where the Gospel fits into the family. It is all too easy to leave God out of the way a family lives and works and to fill our lives with so many things that there is no room for God. Isn't it also true that we can often "squeeze" God in so that he seems like less of a priority and more of an inconvenience who intrudes on our life. What makes us God's family is our struggle to "do his will", to actively build our lives on what it is he demands and to find ways of listening to what it is he wants for us. By doing this we are truly his family with all the things that being a member of the family of God means.

Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, we your children come to you conscious that you are a Father who loves us and shares your life with us. Help us to take that love out to others.

Tuesday July 13th

Matthew 11:20-24

It seems that Matthew has collected these two isolated sayings and put them here to further highlight the reaction of Jesus to those who refuse to believe. His generation had seen the signs and wonders of his ministry but remained unresponsive to his call. Matthew refers to the miracles of Jesus as "mighty works" (for the first time) and they should have made his mission clear to even the most difficult community. The problem was unbelief though there was probably also an element of arrogance and pride (remember the saying: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" [John 1:46]). The "woes" are proclaimed because the cities do not repent. Nineveh listened to the preaching of Jonah and turned from their sins and the city was spared. This is not so with these two towns. The cities of Tyre and Sidon were condemned by the prophets as being sinful cities (Amos 1:9ff; Isa chapter 23; Ezek chapters 26-28). Jesus says that these sinful cities, if they had been given the opportunities given to his own town, would have repented and been saved. The scriptures have a long tradition of passing condemnatory judgements on cities that were seen as sinful and this is the tradition Jesus picks up here.

There is no doubt that the people of these cities believed in the Law and in the teachings of the Scriptures. What Matthew is asking is "Why were they not prepared to listen to the invitation of Jesus to become disciples?". The answer is that they were not so much faithless but rather that their faith was in something of their own making. They were prepared to believe when it was on their terms and providing it did not demand that they change their rather comfortable ways of living. What Jesus was asking was a more radical life of faith and it was that radical transformation that they resisted. It also seems that they were prepared to accept the healing and miracles of Jesus, because it was to their benefit, but not then ready to take up the call to repent. Jesus seems to be saying: "How arrogant!". But it is a temptation for all believers and is certainly one with which Paul was to battle. What are the signs of our repentance? What are the kinds of things we are putting in place to ensure that our response to Christ is the one he wants? These things are measurable and the Gospel is clear in offering a variety of expectations and demands.

Prayer

Merciful Father, time and time again you offered your people new life and forgiveness and called them to repent so that they could share in life in your Kingdom. Help us to follow the commands of Christ that we may experience life.

Wednesday July 14th

Matthew 11:25-27

Matthew joins this section to the previous one with the introduction "at that time...". The time in question is the time he pronounced the "woes" over Chorazin and Bethsaida. It was as a result of their frustrating lack of faith and their inability to open themselves up to the possibility that God sent Jesus to bring the salvation for which they yearned. He had also condemned them for trying to fit him and his ministry into their own narrow vision (11:17). In contrast with these doubters he presents to his Father "these babes" who are the ones who accept the Gospel like a small child. These "babes" are the poor, the powerless, the meek, those who are persecuted. In short, those who are listed as being blessed in the Sermon on the Mount. The only hope they have is God, a message that is central to all of the first three Gospels. The so-called "wise and clever" on the other hand, those in Capernaum, feel they can determine their own future and have confidence in their own abilities. This helps explain why Jesus calls God by the name "Father". God is the one who does to the "babes" what any Father would do to and for his own children. They are heavy laden by the burdens of life and labour away without hope of relief (11:28-30). Then Jesus was sent by the Father.

The yoke was a part of the equipment used by the bullock as he ploughed the fields. Without it the beasts would not be able to pull the plough or the wagon for the reins and ropes would cut into their skin. The whole point of the yoke was that it enabled the animals to pull enormous loads by spreading the weight over a much larger area. This is what Jesus is promising to the "little children", that he will carry their burdens for them. Note that he is not saying there will be no load or that there will not be a lot of strain and effort required. What he does promise is that he will be there with them to help carry the load. He asks us to learn from him, but learn what? Jesus went about his life and ministry in constant contact with the Father and sought to be obedient to the will of his Father. That approach enabled him to carry the burden of opposition by the Pharisees and Scribes, the attacks, the threats, the abuse and ultimately his death on the cross. For this to work, the yoke needs to be picked up and strapped on. It is of no use if it is hanging on the wall of the shed. Faith in Christ is of no real value while it remains little more than a good idea. It has to be lived out and taken up to work.

Prayer

Loving Father, we thank you for the support and help that you offer us in your Son Jesus Christ. We ask that we may be humble enough to bring our needs to you and live in trust.

Monday July 19th

Matthew 12:38-42

If we compare this story with Mark 8:11-12 we can see that in the Gospels there were two "Sign" stories. In Mark no sign is given while here in Matthew there is the sign of Jonah. For Matthew the setting is a scene of conflict with the Pharisees (v 38). The sign they ask for is more than a miracle, for there have been plenty of those. What Matthew seeks is more than likely an assurance that Jesus truly is from God and so the debate about the source of Jesus' power continues (12:25-37). In calling them an adulterous generation Jesus would have had in mind the ancient prophetic condemnations of Israel (Hos chapters 1-3; Isa 57:3; Jer 3:9). The sign of Jonah, according to Luke 11:30, is Jesus' preaching of repentance to the marginalized, as Jonah preached it to the pagan people of Nineveh. We know from Jonah 1:17 that Jonah was in the whale's belly for three days and nights and while Jesus was not in the tomb for that same length of time, the point of comparison is clear enough — life after apparent death. We are now taken (v 41) to the last day when the repentant people of Nineveh will stand in judgement on those Jews who failed to respond to the teaching of Jesus and his call to repent. They repented even though they were pagans and their preacher was someone far less than the Son of Man. The reference to the Queen of the South continues this theme. The Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-13) and in doing so had to travel a great distance. The Jews of Jesus' own generation failed to respond to his teaching and so will stand condemned.

One aspect of the Jonah sign that deserves reflection is the one that is brought out more clearly in Luke (Lk 11:30). Jesus came to preach the Good News to those on the edges and in the margins of society, those who were sinners and who were considered to be beyond redemption as outcasts by the world. They are the ones for whom the Kingdom of God is a gift of great joy, peace and hope. This is the message that we see in the story of Jonah, where Yahweh, the God of the Jews, offers salvation to the pagan Ninevites and to the pagan Queen of Sheba. The Kingdom is the home of sinners who are struggling in their search for perfection. It is for those whom the world rejects, who fail in so many ways to meet their own expectations along with those of the world. It is in the great and victorious death and resurrection of Jesus that there is hope for all of us and all the world.

Prayer

Merciful Father, your Son invited us to repent and begin our lives of faith over again. Help us to respond, to turn from our sinful ways and to know what it is to have peace in our lives.

Sunday July 18th

Luke 10:38-42

Fr Robert Newton

Jesus is visiting in the home of Mary and Martha, sisters of his good friend, Lazarus. Their home is in Bethany not far from Jerusalem. It was probably not the first time Jesus had been in their home. But it would be near to the last. Unknown to his hosts, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to be crucified. No doubt he was tired from the journey and looking forward to spending some quiet time with his closest friends. Let us pause for a moment over this and take full notice that it was Martha who welcomed Jesus into her home. Martha was the perfect hostess. And before we get too far into the story, and learn too much about her to prejudice our feelings about her we must remember that it was Martha, not Mary, who was the first to welcome Jesus that day. But then in an effort to be the perfect hostess, Martha became distracted with many tasks. So much so that she felt called upon to ask Jesus for a little understanding. After all, her sister, Mary, was not all that much help. Mary had decided to take her place at Jesus' feet and listen to what he had to say. To put it mildly, Martha is rather put out about all of this. She wants Jesus to side with her. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

Of course, what's so troubling to the many Marthas of this world is that Jesus seems to side with Mary. For centuries, readers of this story have tried to soften the blow and say that this is not really what Jesus meant. What he meant to say was something like this. "There are different ways to serve the Lord. We all have various talents to offer. We need both Marys and Marthas in the Church." And we do. It's just that this is not the Scripture to support that. There are others, to be sure, but this is not one of them. However we must not overlook that Jesus is just as concerned about Martha as he is Mary. But not in the way Martha may think. Jesus is more concerned about Martha's spiritual welfare than her expertise in hospitality. So he gently chides her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her". Just what is this better part? Mary has decided not to miss out on what she can learn from Jesus while he's in their home. She sits at his feet and listens to what he has to tell her. She's bent on gleaning all she can from the time she has with Jesus. Rather than being distracted by all these other things, she sits in attention, hanging on his every word. Here is a wonderful lesson for us.

Prayer

Merciful Father, may the lesson of Mary and Martha be ours, to cherish your presence with us and not be distracted by the fleeting distractions of life.

Thursday July 15th

Matthew 11:28-30

This text is not a part of the earlier Hymn of Jubilation (11:25-27) but is a comment on the person and ministry of Jesus. Jesus holds the secrets of life and peace for all those who repent and turn to him. He invites these people to put aside the heavy burden of the Pharisaic law and instead to take up the lighter burden of the Kingdom as proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount. This is different to saying that he is offering them an easier path, because as we have already seen, the road of discipleship is a road that follows the Master to Golgotha. This too is important, for Jesus is not demanding anything more than he himself was prepared to give. In the Gospel the Pharisees are portrayed as those who heap up "heavy burdens" and place them on men's necks. Having loaded up the lives of the people they do nothing about helping them to carry the load (23:4). Jesus here presents himself as being "gentle and lowly of heart" someone who is wise and a true servant of God. The Rabbis spoke of the yoke of the Law and while it should have been a joy, it was indeed a burden, with each law spawning numerous extensions and clarifications which were effectively tying the believers up in a legal mesh from which they could not escape and which they had no hope of observing. The Law, far from bringing people into contact with God, was fencing them away from God.

Jesus invites all those who are feeling overwhelmed by life to come to him and he will give them rest. In the Bible "rest" is the gift of the Sabbath day and takes us back to the seventh day of creation. The Jews believed that the last day will see the re-establishment of that first "seventh day" and the faithful will once more live in a paradise with God. The message of Jesus proclaims that such a rest is possible now, in the present time. It is not something for which we must eagerly look forward but which is not possible in this earthly life. Very often we spend so much time surviving and living that we do not have time to sit back and appreciate the presence of Christ in our lives. Life rolls on and we spend our time and our energies on keeping up with what is happening. The invitation here is to "come to me" and to "take up my yoke". Jesus does not take up the burdens of our lives from a distance. He has made his offer but the next step and indeed the step that needs to be taken each and every day and in each and every circumstance of life is that we need to bring our lives to Jesus and allow the yoke of discipleship to bear the weight of our pains.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you do not want any of your sons and daughters to be lost and have sent your Son to be our life. Help us to allow him to strengthen, guide and enlighten us.

Friday July 16th

Matthew 12:1-8

This is the first of two Sabbath controversies which reveal to us the attitude of Jesus to the Jewish religious institutions. Matthew notes at the beginning that the disciples are hungry (not found in Luke or Mark [Mk 2:23; Lk 6:1]) and this is the reason they pluck the corn. It would seem that Matthew is putting two groups into parallel here: David and his followers alongside Jesus and his disciples. David and his men are excused from their sin because of the person and character of David. The same argument must also apply to Jesus for he is the "Lord of the Sabbath" and so greater than David. If it was good enough for David it was good enough for Jesus. This would have been seen by the Pharisees as a very confrontational argument. Jesus is the Davidic heir and carries with him the same authority over the Law. It is because the Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath (and so Lord of all Laws) that he is free to act in this way. This story then is not so much a controversy about the relevance of the Sabbath as much as it is a statement about the authority of Jesus. If indeed he is able to dispense his disciples from their Sabbath obligations, then he is truly the Son of Man and the long awaited Messiah and this is where the conflict with the Pharisees would have arisen.

One of my favourite statements is that "the Church has no place in the bedroom" or "the Church has no place in the laboratory—work place—etc". These come from people who do not like the Church speaking out on matters of morality when it impacts on the work of science, or business or affects people's private lives. Some would like us to think that these are all areas where a person's individual conscience has the final say and absolute control. In some senses they are right. A person's conscience is the final authority and every believer is bound to follow his conscience. What they leave out of this equation is that the Church insists this applies to a "fully informed conscience" and not to a conscience of convenience. God's authority applies to every aspect of our lives whether it is behind locked bedroom doors, in our places of work, the laboratory of stem cell researchers, our Houses of Parliament and even the local pub. Wherever human beings interact and exist they are bound by the authority of God and his teachings. Our duty is to find out what those teachings are and to see how we can go about applying them to what we are doing in our everyday lives.

Prayer

Father, there are many times when we find it difficult to obey your will for us and seek to go our own way. Help us always to listen to your Word and to allow it to guide all we do and say.

Saturday July 17th

Matthew 12:14-21

Most of this text comes from quotations from the first Song of the Suffering Servant (Isa 42:1-4). The Jesus presented here by Matthew is one who seeks to avoid all displays of power and self-aggrandizement. His mission is therefore similar to that of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah. He does not set himself up as an all-powerful Messiah coming to conquer by force of arms. Nor does he use his miracles to overpower his opposition and to win followers. On the contrary he accomplishes his mission by being a Servant of God and brings the Justice of God to the Gentiles. By linking Jesus to these Old Testament texts Matthew is showing Jesus as being the one who fulfils promises made by God. He stands in contrast to the Pharisees whom we see in the early section ready to start their planning to put Jesus to death because he was healing sick people on the Sabbath day. They are the ones who are presented as being more interested in protecting their position and privileges than furthering the spiritual life of the people. Their ministry stands in contrast to that of Jesus because they are anything but humble servants.

The Servant Songs in Isaiah (Isa 42:1-9; Isa 49:1-6; Isa 50:4-11; Isa 52:13-53:12) are a beautiful collection of hymns that paint a picture of the will of God being carried out through one who is ready to suffer for the good of others. The Servant is one who is so taken over by God that he no longer seeks his own advancement, comfort or survival. For the sake of God's people he undergoes all kinds of sufferings and injustices and never once does he cry out or complain, enduring all that comes along so that others will be united to God. When we read through these hymns we cannot help but be moved by the great sufferings he endures yet at the same time amazed that they do not destroy him. He is often knocked down but he is never crushed. Time and time again God raises him up and just when it seems that the opposition will be too much for him, he staggers to his feet and continues on with his mission. We are told that it is through his sufferings that others are made whole. His sufferings are salvific and it is because he is willing to take on these burdens that others come to know God's mercy and love. This is the message the Pharisees could never understand, that the call of God is to serve him by serving others. The contradiction of the Gospel is that there is strength in humble submission.

Prayer

Almighty God, you are worthy of all honour and praise yet we seem to continue to want to raise up our own name for honour and praise. Help us to be your humble servants in all we do.