

Thursday June 3rd

Mark 12:28-34

Palestinian piety delighted in distinguishing between what they considered to be the weightier and lighter matters among the 613 individual statutes. These were worked out according to whether they were commandments or prohibitions and in terms of the satisfaction that would be demanded if the commandments were infringed. At the base of this question is an understanding that God's blessing could somehow be obtained through human effort. The reply of Jesus goes deeper than the concept of there being 613 statutes, for he addresses the underlying purpose of the Law. This is a very Jewish question, for Hillel the Elder was asked by a Gentile to sum up the law in a single sentence. He said "what you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbour: this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary". The reply of Jesus turns this around and makes it into a positive command. Hillel told people to avoid doing harmful things while Jesus commanded the disciples to act positively in a loving way. The opening words of Jesus' reply comes from a daily prayer and confession of faith called the *Shema* (Deut 6:4).

This is a wonderful story which is rich in messages. It tells us that we can never reach the stage where we can say we are "fulfilling" the commitments we made at our baptism. We are always called to be doing more, to be giving more and to be loving more. Our faith lives tomorrow should be an advancement on how we are living out our faith today. How we live in the Church should be always growing and always expanding as God is forever calling us forward in our relationship with him. But there is another important message as well. This is made clear to us when we are told that we need to love "with all our heart, with all our understanding and with all our strength". Our love of God cannot be limited to one small part of our lives. Our lives of faith have to involve all that we do. We have to find ways of allowing God to permeate all our activities as human beings. If an activity has an impact on our lives then there is a need for an input from God. Our Christian responsibilities cannot be met by an hour of worship on Sunday. It is through daily prayer, through a daily listening to God in the Scriptures, that we allow him to have an impact on what we do. That is the only way that we can say that we are truly "loving". We need to remember that Christianity is a "doing" religion which involves our daily "doing" to God and "doing" for others.

Prayer

Loving Father, we are sorry for the times when we have served you half-heartedly and served you with only a part of our lives and our energies. Help us to love you fully and generously.

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BIBLE STUDIES

MAY 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

Wednesday June 2nd

Mark 12:18-27

The early Church had to speak about both of the positions presented here. The Pharisees had detailed presentations on what the resurrection would be like and the Sadducees rejected the resurrection altogether. The Sadducees were the priestly group and were considered as the aristocracy within Judaism. They only accepted the authority of the Law of Moses (the first five books of the Law). For them the resurrection was not scriptural as it did not appear until Isaiah 26:19. The Levirate marriage (see Deut 25:5ff) which is the situation under discussion in the debate with Jesus was designed to protect a man's property. The Pharisees had an elaborate range of beliefs about what the resurrection was like: angels did not drink or eat, they did not marry and people became angels after they rose from the dead. In this way Jesus' answer is not that much different to many other answers of the time. His answer is different in two respects from his contemporaries. He begins by asserting the right of God to act beyond human expectations. God can do something radically new. In replying to the Sadducees he uses Scripture to explain Scripture. God pledged himself to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If these men are dead and if there is no resurrection it is absurd to claim that God is their God. They must be living or his pledge to be their God is without any meaning. Death does not annul this commitment.

God's powers are beyond our wildest expectations and the real mistake of both of those groups was to try and tie God into what made sense to them and to their interpretations of Scripture. God is always greater. Even death, which seems so final and all-powerful, is unable to contain the actions of God. This is why Jesus in this reading is calling his followers to be ready to stretch out beyond their own sense of their limitations, and what they may see as their inability to perform, and trust in God to make his power available to them. The key thing is the call to move forward in faith. Rising from the dead seems to be an impossible hope. The Pharisees tried to make sense of it in terms of what would be good for them. The Sadducees rejected it because it did not fit in with the way they understood Scripture. Both sought to tie God into human ways of thinking and understanding and so were condemned by Jesus. God is more than we can ever hope or devise and through his power we can do great things.

Prayer Lord God, never let our uncertainties and insecurities limit what we think we can do for the life of the Kingdom in our world. Help us to move forward in faith, confident of your strength.

Tuesday June 1st

Mark 12:13-17

It is hard to find the proper setting for this story as it is inserted into the Gospel without introduction or warning. We are warned in the opening verse that this is meant as a trap for Jesus. Tribute payments were imposed by the Romans in Judea in 6AD. For the Zealots this was an affront to God who was the only one they saw as having dominion over them and so it was presented as a religious issue rather than as an economic problem. The Pharisees did not like the humiliation the tax brought with it and the Herodians accepted it, at least in principle. The question is worded in an extremely cunning way and was meant to catch Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If he supported the unpopular tax he would alienate many people and if he opposed it he would come under the scrutiny of Rome. The inscription on the denarius read: "Tiberius, Caesar, son of the divine Augustus", and in Syria it added "the majestic son of God". Jesus' reply was based on the principle that what belongs to another person should be returned without asking about how it had been obtained. Caesar owned the coin (it was his name on it) and so it was reasonable that it was returned to him. The problem was whether or not using the coin was the same as acknowledging Caesar as king.

There is much in Jesus' answer which flows over into our daily life. He is telling us that the world has its limits. Not everything that is said and done in the world is good and acceptable. Just because it is expected of us does not mean that we have to fulfil those expectations. Giving to God will inevitably mean that we are in opposition to what is being demanded by the world and its decision makers and image makers. What belongs to the world should be given to the world. As Christians we need to take our part and to shoulder our responsibilities, but there are limits, and these limits are set down by God in his Law and especially through the life and teachings of his Son Jesus. Everything belongs to God and he has a right to have a say in how it is to be used, and everything we have should in one way or another be put to use for the work of the Kingdom. What is important in this is that for Jesus the world is not the enemy, that there is no distinction between the Kingdom and the world. We live in both and our call is to extend the Kingdom throughout the whole of the world. The hidden warning is to not shape the Kingdom according to the world.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for all that you have given to us, and ask that we are so strengthened by your graces that we can share them with others, and at the same time use them so that your name can be praised.

Saturday May 1st

St Philip and St James

John 14:6-14

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

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

Prayer

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

Sunday May 2nd

John 13:31-35

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

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

Prayer

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

3

Monday May 31st

Mark 12:1-12

This parable continues as a part of the response of Jesus to the questions raised by the Jewish leaders. Mark was writing to a community of Christians after the crucifixion and they would have understood the vineyard as being Israel, the tenants the Jewish authorities, the servants the Old Testament prophets and the Son and heir being Jesus. It clearly mirrors life in Palestine at that time where many estates were owned by foreign landlords and rebellious tenants were a constant problem. Other literature gives examples of revolts by the tenants and accounts of violence visited upon the representatives of the owners. The parable opens with language that comes from Isaiah 5:1ff where the vineyard represents Israel. Usually the tenant farmers would pay their expenses and send to the owner a quarter to a half of the produce. As many of the owners were foreigners it was not uncommon for those sent to collect the rent to be attacked. The fact that the owner (God) continues to send his deputies even though they are greeted with violence is meant to highlight the goodness of God and the evil of Israel's leaders. The expectation that the tenants would respect the Son brings out the belief that God, even when faced with brutal rejection, continued to look for great things and a sense of repentance from his people Israel. Their killing of the Son is an irrational act because it could not possibly bring about the peace they seek especially as they treated him with the ultimate form of contempt in throwing him out of the garden and leaving him unburied.

The scary thing about this reading is the realization that it is quite possible to go along thinking that you are doing the will of God and being a faithful son or daughter but are really killing the work of God in the world. It is much easier to think of the Jewish leaders as being evil men who live hypocritical lives and are full of their own self-importance. Most of them were not. Most were deeply spiritual men, steeped in the Law and the traditions of their ancestors who were dedicated to their faith. Their problem was that they were closed to the possibility that God was working in other areas than the ones with which they were so comfortable. They had forgotten the broader picture of the salvation of all peoples and were concentrating on their own internal petty problems. It is the old problem that we have seen so often of religion stifling faith and mission.

Prayer

Loving God, help us with the power of your Holy Spirit so that we may be open to all of your movement in our lives and able to respond and follow you wherever you want us to go.

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Sunday May 30th

Trinity Sunday

John 16:12-15

Fr Robert Newton

One lesson on the Trinity that I see in today’s Gospel is that the triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — is capable of doing what we call these days “multi-tasking”. Not too long after Jesus’ death, the early Church found that they had some big problems on their hands. Could Jews be Christians without first being circumcised? Could Greek Christians eat meat sacrificed to pagan gods? Could Greek and Jewish Christians sit down and eat together? Some of these issues were worked out better than others, and some were left for future generations to resolve. The problem was that Jesus had not given specific directions on any of these. Under the guidance of the Spirit, the Church had to arrive at the truth. We, ourselves, have some big issues that are equally difficult to resolve: Gay people in the Church, stem-cell research, and beginning-of-life issues on the one hand and end-of-life issues on the other. These are just some of the pressing issues that divide Christians. This does not even speak of ongoing concerns such as war and capital punishment. Jesus did not speak specifically and directly on any of these issues, or at least, not all Christians agree that he did, or on what he may have implied by what he did say. That’s why God can give us the guidance we need with how to deal with these uncharted areas that Jesus left for us to decide. We will know what to do, when the Spirit tells us. Better still, we will know how to do it, for the Spirit will guide us along the way.

The one thing the Spirit will not do for us is to decide for us. We have to let the Spirit guide us. We can take comfort in knowing that the Spirit will be guiding us all the way. And it all has to do with the multi-tasking way the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit go about working out things. The Spirit extends the ministry of Jesus, allowing us to go beyond what he had to say when he was here on earth. Equally important, the Spirit will prevent us from going off the deep end, and coming up with all kinds of things that might capture our fancy. This is the test. Wherever the Spirit leads, it is always consistent with what Jesus taught about God the Father when he was here on this earth. That’s the standard and the measuring stick. As for us, we can rejoice in knowing that the Holy Spirit not only gets the message onto the page for us to read, but also gets it off the page and into our minds and hearts. That’s how we experience this multi-tasking, triune God when we’re guided by the Spirit.

Prayer

Most Holy Trinity, give us your blessing, so that we may be animated by your love and so bring glory and honour to your name.

Monday May 3rd

John 14:21-26

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

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

Prayer

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

Tuesday May 4th

John 14:27-31

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

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

Prayer

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

Saturday May 29th

Mark 11:27-33

Jesus is tackled by the representatives of the Sanhedrin who were concerned with the religious life of the people. They are questioning the source of the authority behind Jesus' teachings and activities. They were not questioning his formal status within the community, as he had none. He was not a priest or a judge and held no recognizable position and so there was a real question about his right to teach. Twice Jesus tells them to "answer me" suggesting that he was after a straight answer that could be relied upon and not something that was designed simply to protect their own privileges. The point Mark wants to bring out is to be found in the final verse. When asked about John's authority they replied "We do not know" an uncertainty that will continue throughout the Gospel. They remain blind and unable to make a faith decision. Jesus does not give them an easy way out because he refuses to tell them from where his authority is derived. Faith is about personal choices. It is inevitably made in an uncertain context that will test those making the decision. They should be able to see what he does, observe how he lives, listen to his teachings and as a result of all of this declare their faith in him as the Son of God and Messiah. They struggle with this as will the disciples.

It is a mistake to think that everything associated with discipleship will be clear and unambiguous. Things do not always go according to plan and expectation and our faith in God is put to the test. He is not often active in pushing our lives along in the way we would like them pushed and we find ourselves face to face with doubt. That was the situation with these Jewish leaders. They could not imagine why God would want to carry out his work of salvation through someone like Jesus or approve of the message this Son of God was preaching. This is why it is so important to be readers of the Bible, to study and reflect upon the Scriptures, to be involved with a Church that is outside our own experience. It is through these kinds of involvements and activities that we can see God at work and be reassured of his great faithfulness and love. He is the God who is, who was and who always will be and so we should be at peace whatever the circumstances of our lives. But ultimately it gets down to the situation in which those men found themselves: step forward in faith with a confidence that God will bring all things to his own ultimate end and do it in his own way.

Prayer

Loving God, from the beginning of time you have shown your love for us time and time again. Help us in all of the events of our lives to discover your comforting and healing presence

Friday May 28th

Mark 11:11-26

This story begins the section that ends with the death of Jesus. For Mark the city of Jerusalem is the home of all opposition to Jesus. The story of the cursing of the fig tree leads into the cleansing of the Temple and helps provide an interpretive framework for it. It is a miracle that is so out of character and on a reality level makes little sense. Why curse a tree for not bearing fruit out of season. However, the existence of such a withered tree on the side of the road may well have given rise to a teaching of Jesus about Israel. The fig tree was used as an image for Israel (Jer 8:13; Ezek 17:24; Mic 7:1-6; etc). This is the unfaithful Israel and the leaders of the nation that have been presented so far in the Gospel continue in this blindness and stubbornness. The cursing of the tree then represents the curse of God on Israel and this is what Jesus was symbolizing in the expulsion of the traders from the Temple. The cleansing took place in the Court of the Gentiles. Around the colonnades the scribes taught their pupils, traders sold their wares and the money changers provided the change. They swapped the Greek and Roman coins for the Jewish currency (pagan money being considered to be unclean). They were not doing anything that was not allowed by the Law. All the things condemned by Jesus were accepted as custom, so we need the story of the cursing of the fig tree to interpret his actions.

The frustration of Jesus seems to shine through here. Israel, as is represented by the Temple, is continuing on with its life of faith while the Son of God goes to his death. They kill him because they think their faith demands it. To prove their love of God they kill the Son of God! This is why Jesus curses the fig tree and cleanses the Temple because the ritual, structures and traditions of the religion of the people has blinded them to a real faith in God. Their religion was dead. It was being carried out faithfully and regularly but it was not leading the people into a more intimate union with God and it did not help them to listen to his call to repent and believe in his Son. It is a powerful symbolic act by Jesus because the Temple sacrificial system was seen as **the** way of union with God, of purification and thanksgiving. Mark's warning to his Church in this story is equally clear: if our religion does not deepen and grow and enliven our faith then it needs to be purified and pulled down to be rebuilt (Jn 2:19).

Prayer

Merciful God, we accept that our faith is not perfect and that we often say one thing in our religion and another in our lives. Strengthen us in our faithfulness and determination to be true.

Wednesday May 5th

John 15:1-8

This powerful allegory stresses the importance of fruitfulness in the life of Christians and the truth that this is not the result of human achievement but of abiding in Christ. It has a harsh side though because the branches which do not yield fruit are pruned away. Clearly Jesus had in mind some of the great images of the Old Testament: Ps 80:8-16; Isa 5:1-7; Jer 2:21; Ezek chapter 15; Ezek 19:10; Hos 10:1. The vine had become a symbol of Israel and in using the image the prophets are talking about Israel as the faithless nation. When Jesus uses the image he talks of himself as being the True vine. Again we see this section beginning with the emphatic **I AM** saying. The role of the Father here is important, for he watches over the vine and like the vinedressers, does whatever is necessary to secure fruitfulness. Those branches which do not bear fruit are cast aside (Matt 3:10) and this is done so that the other branches may be stronger. For maximum fruitfulness some pruning is inevitable. In verse 2 he uses two images. The branches that fail to yield fruit are cut away while those which do bear fruit he cleanses so that they yield even more abundant fruit. We are not told here just what this fruit is though it is clear to us from other parts of the New Testament: Matt 3:8; Matt 7:20; Rom 6:22; Gal 5:22; Eph 5:9; Phil 1:11.

This is an uncompromising teaching of Jesus. He is saying that to be a disciple means to produce fruit. It is not enough to **'be'** a Christian. We are called to **'live'** in a Christian lifestyle. This may seem to be an impossible task, given our tendency to sin and to give in to temptation. That too is a part of the message of Jesus. It is impossible! The only way we can live faithfully, and so enjoy the blessings of the Kingdom of God, is by our union with Christ. Only by living as a part of the vine can we overcome our weaknesses and live righteously. There is the challenge that Jesus is offering to his disciples. The emphasis of the Pharisees was on observance. If you obey the commandments then you will live. Jesus has put the responsibility for giving life back onto himself. Our invitation then becomes one of being united with him. Jesus says he will bear our yokes and carry our burdens and here he goes further by saying he will give life in abundance to all those who attach themselves to him and allow him to invigorate them.

Prayer

Loving God, you planted Israel in the Promised Land and gave them your blessing, yet they abandoned you. Help us to live faithfully in Christ that we may bear abundant fruit and share the Good News of your love and mercy with all peoples.

Thursday May 6th

John 15:8-12

In John it is usually the Son who is glorified but here we see the Father is glorified in the Son, in his obedience and perfect accomplishment of his work. The Father's glory is the faithfulness of the Son. It is because of the faithfulness of the Son that the disciples will bear much fruit and so give glory to the Father. The bearing of fruit is the outward sign of being a disciple. It is one of the ways that discipleship becomes apparent. The way to show love for Jesus (and so share in life with the Father) is to keep the commandments. Love is more than a feeling. It is a way of life. Love arises out of obedience and obedience springs from love. The joy that Jesus speaks about in verse 11 comes from his doing of the will of the Father and from being united with him in love. The Father responds to this love by raising him to be with him in heaven. This should be a cause of great joy to the disciples, for where he goes they too will go and he is going to prepare a place for them (John chapter 14). In verse 12 Jesus presents love as the bond that binds together the Father and the Son with the disciples. Love takes the believer up into the life of the Trinity.

This whole section of St John's Gospel rests on an understanding that the disciple is called to represent Christ present in the world. They are called to love as he loved. Jesus is The minister in the Gospels and all other ministry takes its validity and obtains its power from him. A disciple is the one to whom is given the task of making Christ known. It is through the disciple that Jesus continues on in his ministry. He has risen and ascended to the Father but he continues on in the world through the life and ministry of those who follow him. That is a unique gift but it is also an awesome responsibility. If disciples do not make Christ known, how will the world come to know the message of the Kingdom? There are two questions we need to ask in this post-Easter period: "How am I making Christ known to those I meet?" and secondly: "Is the Christ that I am making known the Christ that is revealed to us in the Scriptures?". There is a real danger that the Christ I am revealing is one of my own making and I have the expectation that everyone will come to know, love, worship and serve "my Christ" in a manner which has my approval. Both questions need to be answered, from the point of view of the individual believer as well as the believing community.

Prayer

Father, you created us in your own image and likeness and sent us out into the world to rule over it in your name. Through the graces of baptism, enable us to make your love and mercy known to all those with whom we live and work.

Thursday May 27th

Mark 10:46-52

There are only two healing stories in this section of the Gospel so we can presume that they are used to help Mark to bring out his message. This is the only place in Mark where Jesus is called Son of David. It reflects the common Jewish expectation of the time that God would send a messiah in the line of David and presumably would carry out his ministry in a similarly kingly and military style. This title goes well with the story of his entrance into Jerusalem where the crowd associate him with the Davidic dynasty. The man's determination in the face of opposition by the crowd ends with Jesus reaching out to him. The fact that there are no actions denoting healing and no words related to a cure suggest that Mark's main point is not about healing. What is highlighted is the response Jesus makes to the person who responds with faith to the call given to him by God. The man's eyes are opened because of his faith. Jesus notes that his faith has saved him which refers not just to his physical well-being but also to his eternal salvation. It is the last line which shows its link to what has gone before. Bartimaeus immediately (that is, as soon as his sight is restored) follows Jesus along the road. This is the road that leads to Jerusalem and the road of discipleship that has been set out so clearly for them.

Mark brings out a contrast here between Bartimaeus and the disciples. When Jesus tells the son of Timaeus to "Go!" he "...immediately...followed him along the road". There was no pausing to count the cost, or to work out whether or not it fitted in with what he had planned for the rest of the day. The disciples were hesitant at just about every turn because what Jesus was demanding and teaching was outside of their expectations and experience. They seemed to have wanted something a little more secure and concrete before they whole-heartedly took up the Gospel life. This is not the case with Bartimaeus. He responded to God's call to believe in Jesus and was then prepared to follow him whatever the cost. That is what Mark wants his community to be reflecting on. Just what are the limits to their faith and commitment? Where does their discipleship, their life of faith, fit into the rest of their lives and their other commitments and responsibilities? We would all do well to read back over chapter 10, draw up the points Mark associates with discipleship and assess our own lives of faith. Are we more like the disciples in their blindness or like Bartimaeus in his faith?

Prayer

Father of all, your Son came as Light to the world and opens up for us the way we are to follow if we wish to be your sons and daughters. Strengthen our faith response to that gift.

Wednesday May 26th

Mark 10:35-45

James and John continue the picture which shows the disciples as continuing to misread and misunderstand Jesus and his teaching. They are still using human standards and human expectations as human status is very much a part of the world around them. The seat on the right was the one of greatest honour and the one on the left was that of the host or ruler. This could refer to the Messianic Kingdom which the disciples expected to come at any time or to the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom once it had been established. For Mark their request shows the level of their blindness for they are still speaking in terms that would have made sense to the Jewish leaders. Jesus is talking about the cross and the necessity of suffering and dying and the disciples are speaking about rewards, status and power. The suffering of the Son of Man and the way of discipleship are inextricably interrelated. The promise that Jesus offers is that they will most surely suffer and, in his eyes, such suffering can be a sacrifice through which others can come to know God's love. Any reward for suffering is left to the generosity of God and their focus is to be on their call to live in a sacrificial manner that others may come to know the loving and saving mercy of God.

James and John betray an attitude that can be found in many places within the Christian community. Because they are disciples they see themselves as being entitled to some kind of recognition by God. They put in the hours and follow the rules and so God must turn around and show his thanks to them. That is an easy attitude to adopt and it can be done without our really noticing it. We are called to serve God because he is God and because we his creatures are so much in his debt. We owe him a life of faithful discipleship and this is why Jesus left out the question of rewards (though in 10:30 it is clear that there will be a reward). The more a person grows in their discipleship the more they will be asked to sacrifice and the more likely it will be that they face some kind of "persecution". By persevering with their faith in the face of all those difficulties they will know blessings "in this present time and in the life to come" (10:30). In our serving of God and our brothers and sisters we come to know that salvation. We lose its blessing in our lives when we focus on serving ourselves.

Prayer

Loving Father, your Son lived a life of humble and obedient service and through him we have been saved. Through the graces given to us at Easter, strengthen us as we seek to be servants of the Gospel and to reach out in love to others.

Friday May 7th

John 15:12-17

In verse 10 Jesus told the disciples that to remain in the love of Christ they needed to "keep my commandments". Now, in verse 12, those commandments are reduced to one, the command to love one another as Christ has loved them. This is the new commandment of 13:34: "A new commandment I give to you, love one another as I have loved you". He goes further by saying that the greatest love is to lay down your life for another person, something he is about to do on the cross. They are his friends and he is ready to die for their salvation. What makes them his friends comes back to the expectation of them "doing the things that I command you to do" (v 14). They are not slaves because a slave does not know the will of his master. They are friends because he has told them what he wants and has revealed to them all that the Father has told to him. Their knowledge, however, is not as yet exhaustive, and there is still much to learn, and much to do. This is why he needs to go, so that the Spirit can come and teach them all that they need to know. He rounds off our section by gently reminding them that the initiative for all of this comes from him. This is not a calling they have chosen for themselves. If he called them then the responsibility for success rests with him. By calling this a commandment Jesus is able to stress that discipleship is not something that we can choose only when it is convenient.

It is all too easy to be overcome with a sense of unworthiness, of our own weakness and inability to live lives of faithfulness. We all sin and all fall short of the mark we set for ourselves and which God sets down for us. Why, then, would Jesus call us to be disciples? He must know that we will be sorry excuses for disciples. Why does he bother? The answer to these questions has vexed believers from the very beginning. Even Peter said to Jesus "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). The answer to us remains the same as the answer that was given to the disciples. On our own we are lost. It is only through our intimate union with Christ Jesus that we have life and that we are able to live lives of faithful discipleship. We can never reach our full potential as human beings or as believers if we seek to live in a state of separation from Jesus. The closer we are to him, the more alive we become and the more faithful we are in our ministries.

Prayer

Father, you sent your Son to us "while we were still sinners". Help us to accept that, because of the love Jesus has for us, there is nothing we can do which will separate us from your love and keep us from your care.

Saturday May 8th

John 15:18-21

John begins this section by continuing on with a theme that is important to him: that when the Gospel life is lived fully it will attract opposition from the world. What has happened to Jesus is evidence of this and the warning is that those who follow him should expect no less. The closer they come to him, the more faithfully they live out their faith, the more they will find that they are rejected by the wider community. The disciples are to be known by their love and those of the world by their hatred. Significantly John begins verse 19 with the words "If you belonged to the world..." making it clear that they do not so belong and the reason for this is that Jesus has chosen them out of the world. John's characteristic way of highlighting this point is to repeat the word "world" five times in the one verse! If we ask ourselves what "the world" represents, it is that part of creation which rejects Jesus to the point of hating him, hating his message and hating those who seek to follow him. He then goes on to say that it is not a surprise that they would reject Jesus because they do not know the one who sent him. Not knowing God, they have no chance of knowing the one sent by him.

Part of the challenge that John is offering to his community is this idea of "keeping my words". It is the "keeping of the words" of Jesus that makes one a disciple and this "keeping" stems out of a close and deep personal union with the Lord. In some ways it is in verse 17 that we can see what these words say: "love one another". It is this which separates us from "the world" which is self-interested, unwilling to listen to new directions from God and which prefers to live in the darkness of human weaknesses and sin. When we take this idea and read it with the other Gospels in mind, we can see how this love is to be lived out in the teachings of the Beatitudes (Matt chapters 5, 6, 7). This is meant to be reassuring for the faithful because the guarantee is that if we die with Jesus we will also rise with him. There are some hardships, there are things that we will need to put to one side, areas where we will have to readjust our priorities and a daily obligation to open ourselves to the words of the Lord. The result is that we will know life and the blessings that come from living in the Kingdom. Each moment of our daily lives offers us possibilities of responding as Christ would, and love as he would. That is our challenge.

Prayer

Loving Father, we thank you for always revealing yourself to those who love you, and in particular for the great gift of revelation which is your Son Jesus. Open our eyes and hearts that we may hear and obey.

Tuesday May 25th

Mark 10:28-31

Peter provides the link with the previous story and again shows the level of his blindness. He reflects on what he has given up, what it has cost him so far and only then moves on the spiritual questions. This is clearly something of an exaggeration as Peter had not broken all his links with his home and his family (1:29; 3:9; 4:1; 4:36). In his reply Jesus spells out the blessings that people receive from God and this is the focus that he expects Peter to have. Instead of talking about how much his desire to serve God has cost him, he should be thanking God for the many wonderful things he has received. The repayment of "one hundred times over" stresses the generosity of God. There is a sting in the tail because he also points out that there will be persecution involved in the discipleship. This is a part of the price we pay for the reward of eternal life. He ends by noting that human achievement (being first) can be a real impediment to discipleship rather than a sign of the blessing of God. In the Kingdom this will be reversed.

This section is not primarily about the need for disciples to live lives of poverty. Jesus is reassuring the community of disciples that their real qualifications do not come from their own efforts and application nor from their wealth and the things that they can accumulate during their lives (including status in the wider world). What makes a disciple is the grace of God and a willingness on the part of the individual to receive these graces. One could leave all they have and still not be a true disciple. It requires the putting of God at the centre of our lives, of making service of him a higher priority than all the other things which make a demand on our time, energy and resources. What is exciting about this is the comment of Jesus that the blessings of living this kind of life begin "now in this present time" and are not just about having eternal life in heaven. If we live detached from the world and in a state of dependence on God, then our lives will change and we will know all the blessings of life in the Kingdom. But it is a big ask for it can mean putting aside some of the things that we have built up as being of importance to who we are. It is also comforting, for ultimately the success in our life of faith, our discipleship, comes from our heavenly Father and not from our own efforts and energies.

Prayer

All-powerful God, through the power of your graces, help us to see in our lives all that you have done for us, that, reassured by your loving presence, we may enjoy your blessings in this life and praise you forever in the life to come.

Monday May 24th

Mark 10:17-27

The journey Mark refers to is the movement of Jesus towards Jerusalem and his death. There are no details of the man and so he represents for Mark "everyman" and he approaches Jesus in an attitude of great respect. He is clearly a devout Jew but suspects that there is something lacking in his life of faith. He observes the laws but is looking for that extra component that will bring to his life the blessings of God. The man comes to Jesus and Jesus directs him to God who is the source of wisdom and grace. Jesus begins with reference to the Law which is the will of God, though he does not tie himself to a strict adherence to the letter of the Law. He points to a further truth, that discipleship and sacrificial renunciation go hand in hand. The young man is rich and Jesus warns him of the dangers of being tied to worldly possessions. Discipleship is a gift from God and the only way to accept the gift is to be free from all the things that may make demands on his time, his efforts, his commitment and ultimately his life. The problem is not wealth. It is really a matter of the dangers of possessions. They can absorb so much of a person's time and commitments. At the heart of the question is the challenge of faith. To go and sell all that he has would be to make him dependent on God to provide for his needs.

This reading opens up all kinds of difficult questions for the disciple as it asks us to assess our faithfulness and commitment. On one level we can find ourselves in a position similar to this rich young man. We feel that we are doing what is required — keeping all the commandments (though for Christians this means more than just observing the ten commandments). We can never reach a point where we can sit back and relax and say "all is well". Sometimes selling what we have involves non-material areas of our life if these are holding us back from a life of discipleship. As with the Twelve this may include our understanding of God, our traditional spiritual life, our levels of commitment, our prayer life, what we do with our spare time, or family life and many more. Jesus tells us that the key to eternal life is the building of our earthly lives around God so that we can **be saved**. He will save us if we give him room to move in our lives. We cannot save ourselves.

Prayer

Lord God, heavenly Father, strengthen us with your grace that we can see what it is in our lives that we need to let go of and need to change. Build within us a spirit of confidence and hope that we may take up our lives of discipleship and so inherit eternal life from you.

Sunday May 9th

John 14:25-31

There are three sections in our reading: (a) 25-26 – the Paraclete and the disciples. The time is almost over when Jesus will be speaking with the disciples. In a short time it will be the Paraclete who speaks with them. (b) 27a – the gift of peace. Jesus is offering to them a unique gift, a peace that is not possible for the world to provide. (c) 27b-31 – Departure to the Father. The disciples were not to worry when the Son returned to the Father. He is warning them of this in advance so that when it happens they will not panic. The battle lines have been drawn between the love that has been revealed in Jesus and the rulers of this world and the inevitable clash is about to take place. What will come out of the clash will not be a disaster but a revelation of the love Jesus has for the Father and in it all the Father will be glorified. When Jesus returns to the Father, he was making it clear that he was not leaving behind some new garden of Eden. There has been hostility to Jesus from the world (14:17, 19, 22, 24, 30). Even though Jesus proclaimed that the prince of this world has no power over him (v 30c) the hostility did not disappear. For John and his community this hostility was something with which they would have to live.

We can clearly feel the tension in which the early communities lived and with which faithful people inevitably live today. Jesus has had the victory over Satan and we believe that the Prince of Darkness has no power over him. We await the return of the Son of Man and in this interim period we continue to experience hostility. Jesus is gone but the problems continue! If he is gone, how are we to find strength and hope. This is where our reading today comes into play. Jesus has gone but in his going he has sent the Holy Spirit to us that we may continue to know the will of God and so that we may also know Peace. He calls the Holy Spirit (and this is the only place in the New Testament where this phrase "the Holy Spirit" is to be found) the Advocate because it describes his role. He is before the throne of God pleading our cause. He is also the teacher who will help us to understand what was meant by the teaching and ministry of Jesus. This is all because the Father has loved us and wants us to have this farewell gift of peace. The peace then comes despite there still being pains and problems. The peace comes, not because we can organize our world, but because the Father loves us and wants us to know Peace.

Prayer

Father, help us through the gift of your Holy Spirit to live the lives of faithful discipleship. Through placing our trust and hope in you, may we know Peace in the darkest of times.

Monday May 10th

John 15:26-16:4

Our text begins with a positive affirmation: "When the Advocate comes...". This is not "if" but a strong "when". The Son sends the Spirit who is at home with the Father, making this a strong statement of the Trinity. The word for the Spirit here is "paraclete" which in Greek means "one who is called to the side of". Here it is passive and so it becomes "Advocate" or "the one who pleads for". He is the Comforter, the one who exhorts, who comforts and who strengthens. In 1 John 2:1 it is applied to Jesus but here it refers to the Holy Spirit. John seems to be saying that while the two are different, in some ways their roles are similar. The pronouns used are all masculine to proclaim that this Spirit is a personal spirit with whom it is possible to have an intimate relationship. His role is to reveal the Christ to believers. This Spirit belongs to all who are disciples of Christ and who keep his commandments. It is he who enables his followers, individually and corporately, to comprehend the true meaning of Christ's person and understand the significance of his deeds and words. In this he guides the believer in the way of truth and to a true and full understanding of who Christ is and what his significance is to their lives. As we shall see in the Acts of the Apostles, it is the Spirit who empowers the disciples to go out and proclaim the Gospel message with power and who is the guarantee of the success of the mission.

Jesus links two important things. He reassures the disciples that the Spirit is coming and that he will lead them in the ways of Truth. Having set this promise in their minds, he then warns them that the time is coming when they will be thrown out of the synagogues and even be put to death for the sake of their faith. How are they going to be able to cope in the face of this persecution? What will happen when the hardships come? When Christ returns to the Father, what will happen? The guarantee on offer here, for those who follow Christ and keep his commandments, is that no hardship will be able to drown out the life which is on offer in the Spirit. It is not just for those being attacked and persecuted. The Spirit offers comfort, consolation, courage, strength and light to all who are going through times of hardship and difficulty. A believer is therefore someone who is always filled with hope, for their hope depends not on their own strength or determination but on God faithfully fulfilling the promises he made.

Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love. Fill us with all Truth and empower us with your grace so that we may give faithful witness to Christ.

Sunday May 23rd

Pentecost Sunday

John 20:19-23

"Peace be with you" says Jesus to the disciples who were locked away for fear of the Jews. That greeting is a traditional one which says "it is now possible for you to live with the presence and power of God in your midst". It is not "may you live without fear and problems", for our human condition is such that these scourges will always be a part of our lives to some extent. The greeting is one of reassurance, of hope and of confidence. The disciples' response was that they were "filled with joy" upon seeing the Lord. Their joy came not from the destruction of the Jewish leaders or the Roman army. Their joy came from seeing their Lord standing there before them. Jesus then gives the greeting again: "Peace is with you". The way the Greek goes is "the Peace is with you and will continue to be with you". This then leads on to his message. The Father had sent him into the world and so he was sending them into the world. It was a continuation of the same mission. It was knowing that Christ was with them as they went out into the world and that they were given the Holy Spirit as their authority that made it possible for them to go out and begin this ministry in the face of extreme hostility. This message also continues the basic understanding of discipleship as being a call to "go out".

The Spirit given to the disciples is the same one that was breathed into the dust at creation to make it alive. That is the imagery Jesus is using here. The Spirit offers a chance of a new life, a new birth and a whole new beginning. As we have seen so often, the gift of the Spirit is a gift so that the sins of the world may be forgiven. It is not just for the benefit of the disciples' own lives. It is an empowering that is to take them out to others so that others may know the Peace that they have received, and be set free from fear and anxiety as they have been set free from fear by the Risen Christ. The disciples received the Spirit at Pentecost and the results were instantaneous. They were able to ignore the threat of death at the hands of the Jewish leaders because they had been changed. The threat remained but they were at peace as they confronted their fears. That is what we too are offered. Not a hassle free life, not a fear free life, but a way of living in the midst of all these things. That way is Christ and our union in him.

Prayer

Father, send us the gift of your Holy Spirit that we may be renewed and strengthened in faith, able to overcome our doubts and our fears and willing to witness to the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world.

Saturday May 22nd

John 7:37-39

The Feast of Tabernacles was a joyful time when the people camped out under leafy constructions and made sacrifices to God. It was a commemoration of the Exodus journey and the entry into the Promised Land. Psalm 118 was used as a song for God’s blessing on the land as they sought the gifts of rain and fruitfulness for the soil. On each of the seven days of the Feast the High Priest would draw water from the well of Siloam and carry it to the Temple. Along with wine this water was poured onto the altar. In this they were thanking God for his goodness to them (remembering his providing of water from the rock in the desert). They prayed that God would send them rain in the coming year. The Jewish Talmud asks the question: “Why is this Feast called ‘The Drawing of Water’? Because of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit”. This provides the background for Jesus’ teachings here. He takes the water symbols and applies them to himself and his words. The people are thinking about their bodily needs and rain and he is turning their attention to the needs of their immortal souls. He had come to meet those spiritual needs. Jesus refers to a passage of scripture but it is difficult to find which one he has in mind. The waters of life are however a biblical theme (Isa 58:11; Ezek 47:1ff; Joel 3:18).

The image of water is a rich one. God provided water for the people of Israel in the desert and it was this water from the rock which enabled them to complete their journey to freedom. Paul says that the rock in the desert was Christ (1 Cor 10:4), meaning that what God did to Israel through the miracle of the rock, he is doing to us today through Christ. The water that is on offer is not for a physical thirst but for our spiritual needs. Paul’s picture of the rock following the Israelites through the desert helps us to understand how John presents Jesus. He is there for those who are thirsty and provides a “water” that makes us alive. Like the rock of the Exodus he “follows us around”, on offer for anyone who wants to seek him out. As Jesus notes though, it is only when a person can acknowledge that they are thirsty and wants to do something about it that they can partake of this water of life. We do need to take the step to partake. Jesus offers us the water but we need to drink and keep on drinking.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you listen to the cries of your needy people. Hear us as we call to you in search of life and peace. As we were born again in the waters of baptism, so may we live as people who are renewed and revived in Christ.

Tuesday May 11th

John 16:5-11

When Jesus reminds the disciples that none of them has really been concerned about “where I am going”, but just with their own immediate worries and the thought of being on their own without him, he nudges them towards a wider picture. What is happening here is far more significant than them simply being sad. The real issue is what Jesus calls the “Truth”. Jesus is returning to the Father **for the benefit of the disciples** (and all believers who come after them). The blessing that they are to receive is what he calls ‘The Advocate’. The Spirit is to teach them all about the meaning of his ministry and life and why the world was wrong in its understandings. The Advocate will reveal to them the way they should be living so that they can be fully alive and so avoid sin. The reason for revealing about sin and judgement to them is so that they can avoid the misery and death that comes from sin. They will also understand about the importance of the world to come, that life on this earth is not the end and that they need to live with one eye on that bigger reality. He will also show them that the “prince of this world” (the devil) is without power and that he is subject to the Prince of Light, Jesus the Christ. Those who walk in the light will enjoy that same victory.

The idea of the Advocate is one that is very biblical but which is a special insight of John. The Old Testament used the image of God living in heaven with a heavenly court around him to give support (Job 1). John is using this picture and saying that the disciples and all men and women of faith have their own special Advocate there at the side of God, pleading their cause and bringing their needs to the attention of the Father. It is only an image, but one that proclaims a great theology. Of course God never ignores us or needs our worries to be brought to his attention. What John does is highlight the intimacy of the relationship that is now possible through Jesus. We are now caught up in a deeply personal way in the life of the Spirit and share the life of the Godhead. This is not because of who we are or our worthiness, but because of Jesus. He is the link that we have with God that is now possible through him, if we live in his way. It is also a wonderful thought to think that we have Jesus our friend in heaven as our advocate pleading and interceding for us with the Father.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the life that you give us in Christ Jesus our Lord and for bringing us into your presence, listening to our prayers, taking action on our needs and sharing your love. May we take up your invitation to life.

Wednesday May 12th

John 16:12-15

The teachings of Jesus are not complete and there is still much more that the disciples need to know. But the problem is that if Jesus were to continue then they would not be able "to bear it" and it would be too much for them. The meaning of this is probably to be found in the idea that their human limitations are still controlling them, that they cannot step out in faith and that they need some inner stirring and grace to be able to accept these further revelations and proceed further along the journey of faith. It is only when the Spirit comes that they will be able "to bear" the full truth. As John understands it, they will only be able to fully understand the meaning of Jesus' life and ministry after the death and resurrection. This is a central part of the Gospel message of John. The cross sits at the centre as the throne from which Jesus reigns as King and it is only by coming to terms with the death of Jesus that they are going to be able to understand their own lives. They are only going to be able to continue on their journey of faith in the face of the death of Jesus, with the grace and insights that the Spirit will bring. We need to remember that this Gospel is being written in the midst of the persecution of the Christian community, when they had been thrown out of the synagogues and in the face of an uncertain future. The answer is that the only way to survive and to grow in faith is going to be in union with the Spirit.

With this reading we are offered a way forward in our times of hardship and difficulty. There is no promise that life will be easy or that we will be freed from struggle. Pain and death, suffering and persecution will be a part of the Christian experience. All this is hard to bear and there will be times when it seems that the darkness is stronger than the light. This is where the Spirit comes in. If we are living lives of faithfulness, and if we are living according to the teachings of Jesus as found in the Sermon on the Mount, then we will know that there is always a way forward. There will always be an avenue of hope and life and we will never need to fear the future. This is why Christians are men and women of hope for whom there is never a situation in which the darkness is more powerful than the light. We have hope because we are caught up in the life of the Trinity. It is then the life of the Trinity that enables us to know peace and hope in the darkest of times.

Prayer

Merciful God, as we seek to live lives of faithfulness, keep us aware of the movement of your Spirit within us, so that we may listen to the way you want us to go and so that we are never despairing in the face of adversity and hardship.

Friday May 21st

John 21:15-19

Jesus' question to Peter has some difficulties in interpretation. When he says "do you love me more than these others" to what/whom is he referring? Does Peter love Jesus more than the other disciples do? It could also be "do you love me more than you love the fishing gear that represents your former way of life and which I am calling you to abandon?". It could also represent a rebuke to Peter as not much earlier he not only abandoned Jesus to the cross but also denied any links with him. The three questions here would then tie into the three denials in the courtyard of the High Priest's house. Peter professes his love three times and he is then given the task that will prove his love — feed my sheep. This line of thinking is developed further when Jesus speaks of Peter's former life as being one in which he made the decisions and choices and went his own way. He was strong, young and brash. If he is going to be responsible for feeding the flock of Christ, then he will grow old and be taken in ways that he does not want to go, but which will be necessary journeys for the spread of the Gospel. The ultimate path will be the one that leads to his death as a martyr. Irrespective of the consequences of a life of discipleship, the most fundamental reason for being called is so that the sheep of God may be fed. That is Christ's basic demand.

Jesus presents Peter with a picture of discipleship. Serving God is about being led by the Truth proclaimed by Jesus. Peter used to do what he wanted and how he wanted. But true discipleship is about allowing his hands to be tied and being led by the Spirit of God, even into ways that he does not want to go. The world around us speaks of the rights of the individual, but John speaks of the demands of the Gospel. The world speaks of building up in our lives the things that mark success, possessions, wealth, power, influence and more. John speaks of the road to Peace as being one which begins with a willingness to leave some things behind us. A true disciple cannot live as they have always lived. Discipleship is a slow stripping away of a self-centred life and the building up of Christ-centred life. It is by doing this that the world will believe and will be fed with a food that leads to eternal life and which will satisfy them. As with so much of John's theology, it comes back to our willingness to sacrifice.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, we offer to you our lives for you to do with us what you will. Make us generous in our love, caring in our relationships and ever willing to die to ourselves so that others may know your love and your salvation.

Thursday May 20th

John 17:20-26

The prayer of Jesus extends beyond the disciples to all those who come to believe in the Gospel and what he prays for is important. He prays that they may be "one" and the prayer follows the following format:

You, Father, are in me. I am in you. So that they may be one in us.

That the world may believe it was you who sent me.

The oneness prayed for here is a unity "in the Father and in the Son". He is praying that people may come together in the Godhead. This is to be the source of their unity and the place where they are truly one. Unity is not something they bring about, it is something that God makes happen when people unite themselves to him through their unity in the Son. This has a missionary thrust because the unity makes it possible for the world to believe in the person and ministry of Jesus. Unity is not just important for the individuals but for the whole world. Jesus gives to them the glory that had been given to him and it is an unusual gift. The glory of Christ was his humble obedience, even to death on the cross. That is the path to glory that must be followed by his disciples. The link to the previous part of the prayer is there to make clear that it is their union with Christ that makes it possible for them to walk that path of sacrifice and it is only in Christ that what seems to the world to be defeat becomes glorious. It is only from this perspective that the events of Golgotha make sense.

We have here a beautiful and powerful vision of what it means to be fully alive and it gives a message of great hope and peace. Firstly we are told that it is possible to be united to God in Christ Jesus. We can overcome our human limitations and sinfulness by this life in Christ. It is this "Christ-life" which takes us over and which governs and directs all that we do. It also shows us the way to live with others. When we have people with whom we find it difficult to share life and who are a real pain for us, useful communications often cease or sink to the level of causing anger and hurt. Jesus here effectively places himself between believers so that their exchanges are raised to new levels of tolerance, respect and love because of the Christ they have in common. Communities can live differently because of this union in Christ. It is not just a pious idea but has the potential of changing all of our relationships. This is what Jesus prays will come about.

Prayer

Loving God, you have shown how much you love us by making us in your image and likeness, forever stamping us with your presence. Teach us to reach out in love to your presence in all our brothers and sisters.

Thursday May 13th

Ascension Day

Luke 24:36-53

Jesus greets his disciples with the traditional Hebrew greeting (1 Sam 25:6; 1 Chron 12:18; Jdgs 6:23). This fits in with Luke's theology which has been presenting Jesus as the Prophet who came to proclaim God's peace to the world (1:79; 2:14, 29; 7:50). This was the greeting they were to give to households which welcomed them into their homes (10:5-6). They respond with "fear" and "terror" and thought they were seeing a ghost. For Luke, such a response is meant to highlight the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. It was a genuine resurrection. Jesus challenges them for their lack of ability to respond with joy to seeing him, for it indicates that they had trouble believing. In showing his feet and hands, he is not so much showing them the marks of the nails (as he does in John's Gospel 20:20, 25, 27), as telling them to reassure themselves that he has indeed risen. It is truly him. "Come and touch me" is the invitation. Having shown that the prophecies concerning Jesus have been fulfilled Luke now begins to move towards his second book. Verse 47 shows that the salvation brought by Jesus will now be taken out to the world, beginning in Jerusalem. They are to proclaim that message because they have seen it all with their eyes. They will tell the world all that they have experienced. This will all be done under the power of the Spirit whom Jesus will send from on high. The word will therefore spread with divine patronage and not be dependent on human strength. Having reminded them of all that had been done to fulfil scripture, giving them the promise of divine help, he blesses them and is taken up into heaven. He does not go under his own power, but is carried up, by the Father.

What Luke seems to go to great pains to make clear is that as the Father sent him so he is sending the disciples. It is a part of the one and same mission of salvation. The disciples, for all generations to come, are to be a people who are sent out "beginning in Jerusalem" to the ends of the earth. For what purpose? So that all peoples may know the great joy of salvation. That joy begins, as did the ministry of Jesus, with a call to repentance. It is only through repentance, by turning our lives around and attempting to move off in a new direction of faithfulness, can we hope to experience the joy of life in the Kingdom. Luke says that God has done his bit and it is now up to us to respond in the appropriate way. That will be possible through the power of the Spirit who is with us always.

Prayer

Father, fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we may know always your presence and your power in our lives.

Friday May 14th

John 16:20-23

When Jesus begins by saying "I tell you solemnly" John wants to draw our attention to the importance of what is coming. The disciples will be filled with sorrow and will find themselves weeping while the world around them is rejoicing. But their sorrow will turn to joy. Note that the sorrow is not to be replaced by joy. The joy grows out of the sorrow. This is made clearer by the image of the woman giving birth. The joy of a newborn child emerges out of the pain of the birthing process. Christ died and then rose, and the disciples will need to go through the same process of dying. Once they have come to understand the full meaning of the cross, they will never know despair again. It is not that their world will not be filled with sorrow, but that they will better understand the meaning of suffering and death and will see that the resurrection permeates all that happens in a person's life. The final verse brings the thought to an end. Anything that the disciples ask for from the Father will be given to them. This prayer is to be made in the name of the Son, for it is the suffering and death of Jesus that gives the prayer of the disciples such potency. The Father will listen to the prayers of the faithful because Jesus himself brings them to his attention. This is where their hope is to be found. They will never be worried by the things that cause sorrow because they know that the Father will listen to their needs.

So much of the message of John revolves around the promise of hope. That hope is founded in the person of Jesus. Because he became man, because he took on our human nature "even to death, death on the cross...", we can be confident that he knows our needs and is aware of our limitations and sinful failures. If we had to rely on our own resources then we would not know the meaning of hope. But John points out here that if we unite ourselves to Christ then we rise with him through the darkness of whatever "death" happens to be upon us. We will know sorrow. We will know suffering. We will know death. All of this in our own lives and in the lives of those we love and in the world around us as well. If we persevere in prayer and in our struggle to live the Gospel life, then Christ takes us over and we can be confident that we will be able to not only survive, but emerge as renewed and strengthened people of hope and Peace.

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for the gift of your Son Jesus. May we seek to constantly unite ourselves to him, so that as we listen to him speaking we may be reassured by his presence and move out into the world filled with hope and joy.

Wednesday May 19th

John 17:11-19

Jesus uses the title "Father" more often than any other title. Here he uses a unique phrase "Holy Father". This is placing the actions of God into contrast with the actions of the "unholy" leaders of Israel. To talk of God's holiness is to talk of his faithfulness. The history of Israel is a history of how God has been faithful to his covenant. Even the work of Jesus is ministry carried out to fulfil the Scriptures. These Jewish leaders ignore the Scriptures when it does not suit them and so are putting to death the anointed one of God. It is because of this faithfulness of God in the past and his faithfulness in the present in the person and ministry of Jesus that the disciples can find strength. Their safety in the world is dependent on their union with God. If they live in the truth and if they obey the word that was taught to them, then they will live in God and he will be their source of strength and their guarantee of the future. It is also here that Jesus links his ministry with the ongoing ministry of the disciples. He was in the world, called them together, and is now leaving them behind so that his work will continue. It is all one and the same work.

One of the reassuring messages of this prayer is that it is no picture painted through rose-coloured glasses. The prayer indicates that those who seek to live as disciples will be left in the world in the midst of those forces and evils which put Jesus to death and who resisted all that he said and did. Jesus does not take his disciples with him. He leaves them behind in the world. That is very much the human experience. Faith does not mean a life without problems. Following Jesus is not a guarantee of a trouble-free existence. Christians live in fear. They know sickness, death, persecution, doubt, darkness and a million and one other things that disrupt their peace and happiness. Faith does not provide a fortress against these. What faith does is provide the believer with an inner peace, an inner power and a wider perspective in which to view these challenges. We know the story of Golgotha and what our "Holy Father" did for his Son Jesus. We know that if we can unite ourselves with Jesus then we too are guaranteed the same resurrection. It is there that we find our hope. No matter how bad things seem and how powerless we seem to have become, there is always a chance of new life if only we have the courage to turn to God in prayer.

Prayer

Loving Father, draw us closer to union with you and your Son Jesus that we may be filled with hope and peace in all that happens to us and that we may confidently move forward through the darkest of our problems.

Tuesday May 18th

John 17:1-11

We come back again to this beautiful passage. When John is using the word for "glorify" he uses a Greek word that has twenty-five equivalents in the Hebrew of the Old Testament! God's glory is to be found everywhere. It is to be seen in the works of creation, the heavens, the earth and most especially in men and women who are made in the image of God. God's glory is revealed in his creative power, his love and most of all in his saving activity. God's glory is revealed in his Name and this is important because God's name is Yahweh. This name means "the one who IS, who WAS and who IS TO COME". The glory of men and women is to be found in the decorations they can put on, the things they can accumulate, and these are all passing. The glory of God is to be found in who he is and what he does. It is a power constantly at work in creation bringing all things towards their ultimate goal and destiny. In the opening lines of this great prayer of Jesus it is an even more shocking and exciting concept. Jesus is speaking about his imminent death on the cross. The prayer is for God to show his divinity, his power, his love, his saving hand in the crucifixion. That would seem like a set of opposites for the people of his time. How could such a death, an execution reserved for the most dreadful of sinners, be an example of God's glory? How could the grave be a moment of victory? Darkness become light?

This great opening reaches a high point for Christian life in the prayer of Jesus that his death is a death giving glory to God. It mattered not what the world thought, or what the world did. It mattered not that by the standards and judgements of the world it was a disaster. It was a moment which released God's glory into the world, a moment that was filled with all the energy and power of God. It was the humble obedience of Jesus which enabled God to bring glory out of disaster. One may well ask where is this "power over all mankind" spoken of at the end of verse 1. It was this "mankind" that used its power to put him to death. The power that he has is the knowledge that while the world, evil forces and other events may seem to have control over a person's life, there is a broader and wider perspective, that of God. That is where we, like Jesus, find our hope. Our hope is in God and there we have confidence in persevering even in the face of what seems to be overwhelming opposition.

Prayer

Father, help us so to live that all we do is to your glory. As we take up our lives of faith may we proclaim a message of hope by the way we live in peace and with confidence.

Saturday May 15th

John 16:23-28

The disciples are to ask God for anything and it will be given to them... so that their joy may be complete. The only way to find fullness of joy is through prayer. God is interested in the well-being and happiness of all his people. They will go through trials but when their trust is in him he puts a joy into their hearts that can never be removed. They can find joy in the world, but this joy can only be completed through prayer. "When that day comes" refers to the time after the resurrection. Jesus says that he will not pray for the disciples because the Father loves the disciples and he will reach out to them in their need. He loves them because they love Jesus. Again it is this connection. Through their union with Christ their union with the Father is deepened and so they have the graces of the Father at work in their lives. We need to remember that this all takes place at the Last Supper on the eve of the crucifixion. That is the big test of their faith. Can they trust in the Father when their Lord is nailed to the cross and dying. Jesus reminds them that he has faith in the face of this dreadful suffering he is about to endure. If he can rely on the Father and go into the darkness of death filled with hope, they too can walk the same path. Discipleship is about following the Master along this road to Golgotha.

One of the great insights in this passage is that the Father loves the disciples. They do not have to worry about whether or not they will be heard, or worry about how they are to pray, because the most important thing is that the Father loves them for who they are. And so he loves us for who we are. In biblical terms this means that he loves us as his own children because of our union to Christ. We can talk directly to the Father and he will listen to us. We can also note that the Father is not pictured here as sitting on his throne in heaven waiting patiently for us to come to him. He is portrayed as a loving Father who reaches out to us. He takes the initiative. He acts for our benefit and what we need to be doing is learning to discover this "hand of God" at work. John again provides us with the means for this. It is through living Christ-centred lives that we are able to see the Father. Thus John brings us once more back to the importance of prayer, meditation on the scriptures, and our life in the Christian community of faith. It is the only way to know God and it requires a daily commitment to make it a reality.

Prayer

Father, reveal your presence at work in our lives. As we learn to pray, to listen to you speaking to us, and work on aligning our lives with the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, may we be filled with strength, courage and hope.

Sunday May 16th

John 17:20-26

Jesus prays not only for his disciples but also for those who will come to be disciples through their witness and ministry, fruit of preaching. Jesus made God known to the disciples but here goes further than that. He prays that they too may share the oneness that he has with the Father. He asks that the believers themselves be united together as one and the oneness is the same oneness that the Father and Son share. This oneness of the disciples is to be a witness to the oneness of the Father and Son. It is because of the divine unity that the human unity is possible. Through the disciples the world will come to know that Jesus is the one sent by the Father. God had previously made known his glory through the history of Israel and particularly through the Law. Now that glory is made visible in the Son. In the life, preaching, teaching and activities of Jesus, the world comes to know the Father. He also prays that the love that is shown between the disciples will reflect the love that is shown between the Father and the Son and through the love of the disciples the world will come to know the love of God. Within this same prayer he also asks that he may be in them in the same way that the Father is in him. This divine indwelling is not just meant for the good of the disciples, but also is meant to help the world come to know God's love for all people. It is in this way that the disciples, fragile and weak though they may be, will be in the world but not of the world. They will be marked off by these internal characteristics that will enable them to keep their eyes focussed on their eternal mission.

It is in this priestly prayer of Jesus that he makes clear the true meaning of his incarnation. The meaning of what it means to be a human being fully alive is summed up in the humanity of Jesus. To be fully alive to our human possibilities is to allow the indwelling God to take us over. We have the possibility of loving and being loved as God loves Jesus. We have the possibility of having the same unity in our communities and families as there exists between the Father and the Son. It is through Christ that our human living is caught up into the life of the Trinity. That is a magnificent possibility and it is a gift for us here in the world and not simply something we can look forward to after death. But how is it to become a reality? By repentance. We have to change the way we live so that instead of ruling our own lives, we live in such a way that God takes us over in the way Jesus surrendered himself to the will of his Father.

Prayer

Almighty God and Father, through the love of your Son fill us with all of the strength, joy, peace and healing we need to be made whole and to enjoy the blessings of your Kingdom.

Monday May 17th

John 16:29-33

The disciples proclaim their faith in Jesus at least to the point of seeing him as one who came from God. But this belief is not enough, for the time has arrived when they will all abandon him. Jesus understands this but reminds them that he does not accept any such thing as a stage of abandonment. He is never alone. The Father is always with him and even at a time of complete abandonment (the cross and his painful death), when it appears that God too has gone (My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me?), he remains confident of the presence of his loving Father. He knows that the disciples too will one day have to walk along the same road of suffering and death and yet they can know peace. They will have trouble in the world because of their discipleship, but trouble does not mean abandonment by God. They are to look at him, remember back to what he was saying prior to the crucifixion and be filled with confidence. If the cross can be a moment of glory and victory for Jesus then their troubles can also be moments of glory and victory for them. It is a matter of believing in Jesus and living accordingly.

The meaning of faith here is significant. The disciples say that they believe that Jesus came from God yet when things start to fall apart for them they run away and abandon him. So much for their faith! When Jesus tells them to "be brave" he is not saying that the source of this bravery is to be found within themselves. Jesus shows us that it is to be found in the God within them. Confidence in God enables them to overcome the most horrendous of challenges. What is on offer is the same grace that enabled Jesus to go to the cross frightened but at peace. It helped him to see it as a moment of glory instead of an act of defeat. This comes about because of the unity of the Father with the Son and it is our unity to God, through our unity with Jesus, that gives to us the same courage and strength. Jesus conquered the world by his death on the cross and we are able to conquer our problems and difficulties, our weaknesses and the things in our lives which seek to drag us down. We do this through the grace of God. The question that Jesus seems to be asking is: "Why do we need to battle on alone?". The yoke which is Jesus will carry the heaviest of our burdens and loads, if only we take him into our lives.

Prayer

My God, my God, when it seems that you have abandoned me and that my life is being swamped by darkness, and worries, give me the gift of your peace. Lead me to turn to you in prayer and listen to your words of comfort and guidance.