

Wednesday November 3rd

Luke 14:25-33

For Jesus, entry into the Kingdom of God has conditions. It cannot happen by chance and accident. It stems from a choice freely made and a covenant faithfully lived out. It is a teaching directed to those seeking to be disciples and so is not meant as a judgement or assessment on the performance of the Pharisees (in Matthew the equivalent is found in the directions to the Twelve and is a part of their mission instructions). The demands are uncompromising: be willing to leave family ties, be prepared to face some self-denial and be ready to put aside material possessions. These are put down as serious considerations to be examined, understood and accepted prior to the life of discipleship. They are conditions of discipleship and as such are not up for negotiation or compromise. This is why martyrdom was seen as being at the pinnacle of discipleship, for such people did place their love of Jesus and faith in his promises before all else. It is in this context that we need to understand the metaphor of picking up the cross and following after Jesus. Everyone has a cross that is personal and to be found in their individual lives. This needs to be picked up in the manner of Jesus and then, and only then, can the disciple follow after Jesus. Is the point the picking up of the cross, or the following?

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus did not carry his cross to Golgotha. Simon did it for him. The point for Luke is not that this "cross" is the wooden object on which he was crucified. That cross has come to symbolize the whole of the humble and obedient service of the Son for his Father. The cross of Jesus was his ministry, his mission and his response to God. Discipleship begins with an understanding that we have a role, a mission and a ministry to carry out for God in the world. That is our cross and we are called to carry it in the same way that Jesus carried his — in obedient and humble service of God. Once we acknowledge that, we then need to follow after Jesus and that is where the real challenge is to be found. It is easy to pick it up, and then when the demands become too great, to put it down again. Following is tough and that is where the cross can be seen as the yoke of Christ about which Matthew speaks (Matt 11:29). It is the cross of Christ, taken up in faith, that makes it possible for us to then journey forward in hope and in peace, for we know that the Father, having given us our crosses will not allow us to fall under the weight.

Prayer

Merciful God, we thank you for our callings to discipleship and for the promise of the graces and gifts we need to live lives of service. Help us to walk faithfully in the steps of Jesus.



BIBLE STUDIES OCTOBER 2010

+ Michael Hough
with **Fr Peter Yeats**
and **Fr Robert Newton**
and **Fr Drew Hanlon**



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

Tuesday November 2nd

All Souls

Mark 14:15-24

We find Jesus and his disciples at their Passover meal, a gathering that included Judas. While Jesus seems to have known that he was about to be betrayed, there is no such evidence that the other disciples had any idea about what was going to take place. There is a certain inevitability about the whole story, because it is clear that if Jesus had made his thoughts known clearly to the disciples then they would have stopped Judas from the betrayal. But he did not. This is important in Mark's theology, for it means that Jesus could have avoided the confrontation. He chose not to. He went to his death fully aware of his options, and choosing obedience rather than his own comfort and life. This is a part of why the cross in Mark is a sign of the triumph of God and not of defeat. However, just because this is all going according to the plan of God it does not excuse the betrayal of Judas. He was still free to pursue a path of faithfulness and to repent of his sins. The question of the disciples "Is it I?" is meant to be a question that is on the lips of all who seek to be disciples, for the betrayal of the Lord is not a one off event, but is an ongoing reality.

One of the themes that Mark weaves through his Gospel is the pure conviction that Jesus has of the love of his Father for him and the divine origins of his mission. These are the two beliefs that make it possible for Jesus to deal with the betrayal of one of his close companions, the abandonment of him by the rest, the handing over to the Jewish authorities, his suffering and his terrible death on the cross. It does not stop him from being afraid and it does not take the threats away. What it does is provide him with a firm foundation with which to tackle those huge challenges. He begins with a belief in the love of God for him and he knows that nothing can take that away. His senses may be fooled and it appears as if all is lost. To the unbeliever the cross and the tomb look like defeat. He sees that these will not stop God's love for him, whatever the views of the world around him. Nothing can stop the love of God. Not the hatred of others. Not the plotting and planning of misguided and selfish men. Not the malice and vindictiveness of the soldiers and priests. Neither death nor burial can stop the love of God flowing through to him. It is there that we have our inspiration and our hope, for as we pick up our own crosses and follow after him, we too can know Peace.

Prayer

Father, through the grace of your Holy Spirit, give us courage and hope in all things. Fill us with confidence in your presence so that in all life's struggles and hurdles, we can know peace.

Monday November 1st

All Saints

Matthew 5:1-12a

When Jesus sees the crowd, he sees before him people who must be challenged to enter into the Kingdom of his Father. It is not just the disciples who must be saved. The gifts of God are meant for everyone. By having Jesus go to the mountain to preach this message of life in the Kingdom, Matthew is clearly making links between Moses and Jesus and between the journey of the people of Israel to Canaan and that of the new people of God out of slavery into freedom in the Kingdom. We see Jesus begin his ministry with this teaching on the mountain top and he will end his ministry at his Ascension once more on the top of the mountain. This time he will be sending out his disciples to take this teaching and to proclaim it to peoples all over the world. As the old covenant was made on a mountain, so this new covenant will also revolve around the mountain: the mount of the Beatitudes, the mount of Calvary and the mount of the Ascension (commissioning). Jesus has the crowd sit down at his feet, a device used by Matthew to present Jesus as the new teacher in the line of Moses and that he has come to present to the people a message and teaching from God. The rest of the Gospel will explain in detail the message that he brings.

One of the important things about the teaching is the repetition of the word "bless". The best translation would go something like: "God blesses those who...". This is important because the whole idea of blessedness comes from an understanding that it is something that God will do to a person if they live in a particular way. Blessing is not something that can be earned or built up by human behaviour. It comes about because a person is united with God. These teachings are saying that if you live in this way, then you will find that you have left behind your old ways of sin and have united yourself to God. Because you are united with God you will find that there are certain blessings that will find their way into your life. The list of things that come about from union with God are really quite exciting: such people will live in the Kingdom and so find comfort when they need it, inherit the earth, be satisfied in all that they do, see God, become children of God (with all the protections, support and the rights of inheritance that go with it) and know what it is to be loved by God. But they have to live in the way set out by Jesus.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ. Help us by your grace to live according to his teachings that we may know the blessings of your Kingdom.

Friday October 1st

Luke 10:13-16

This is a difficult section and seems to break into the story of the sending out of the seventy-two (which would conclude naturally with verse 16). So why do we have the addition of verses 13-15 at this point (we find that their setting in the Gospel of Matthew is different [Matt 11:21-24])? It would seem that Jesus is addressing his condemnation to a Galilean town which is rejecting the call to repentance. They seem to be satisfied with their present circumstances and do not feel the need to change any further. They have heard his preaching and seen the miracles he performed and yet still refuse to change! Such behaviour incurs the wrath of God. He compares their situation with two notorious pagan cities which are well known for their debauchery and wild living. The prophets of the Old Testament pronounced judgements against these towns because of their hostility towards God's people and now these same judgements are turned against Hebrew towns because of their opposition to the new covenant. The image that comes to mind is that of Jonah and the people of Nineveh. The people of that wicked city repented in sackcloth and ashes and were able to divert the anger of God. If Tyre and Sidon had been given the opportunity of seeing the miracles that Chorazin and Bethsaida had seen, they, like Nineveh, would have repented and believed in Jesus as the Son of God. Why then were the other towns so reluctant to listen and obey the message proclaimed to them?

Verse 16 rounds off the presentation of the mission of the disciples with a powerful theological statement. The ones who are sent are to be considered as being the sender himself. Disciples speak and act in the name of Jesus just as Jesus himself spoke and acted in the name of his Father. The roots of the Church and of individual discipleship are to be found in Jesus. These are not to be seen as some new movement but are a continuation of the mission of Jesus. The onus is therefore on the one who seeks to be a disciple to ensure that they have an intimate union with the Christ who calls them and who sends them. This is why the disciples will come to Jesus and ask that he teach them to pray (11:1ff). The harvest is enormous, the work overpowering and the opposition constant. Without guidance and reassurance from God and without a divine perspective on what is happening, it is easy to be overwhelmed.

Prayer

Compassionate Father, you know that we are weak and limited and that we so easily give up our lives of discipleship when the demands become too great. Strengthen us, we pray, that we may persevere in proclaiming your love to the world.

Saturday October 2nd

Luke 10:17-24

In his reply to the joy of the seventy-two Jesus reminds them that their success is a result of heavenly blessings and not their own efforts. Their ministry is expressed in terms of the dethroning of Satan which is to highlight the significance of what they were doing. The evil that is symbolized by Satan has been defeated and instead of seeing Satan seated in heaven we have the names of the disciples written among the stars. But the real cause of their joy should not be because they are able to defeat Satan. They can rejoice because their names are now written in the Book of Life by God himself. This is far more significant because it is their guarantee of eternal life. This comes about because of their response to a call that was given to them by God in Christ. Luke is not saying here that Jesus was having a vision of Satan falling from his throne. The saying is meant to indicate the comment of Jesus on the effects that the ministry of the disciples was having on the world. Satan is now dragged down to earth and is subject to the judgement of Jesus. Luke has used the title "the devil" before, but here he uses "Satan". That is the name found in the beginning of Job where his task is to test the servants of God and to accuse them before the heavenly court. Now, because of the ministry of Jesus and the faithful discipleship of the seventy-two he sent out, there is no one to accuse them before the Father.

This is one of the most reassuring parts of the whole of the Gospel story and makes clear what has so far been hinted at. The disciples have all the power and authority that had been given to the Son because of their union with Jesus. Those who serve the Son also serve the Father, and those who know the Son also know the Father. It is this mystical union that gives the disciples so much hope and peace as they go about their ministries. When we think of the many obstacles that faced the early Church, we can understand why they needed reassurance. They faced hostile communities, experienced persecutions and martyrdom. Their own communities were made up of saints and sinners and they must have wondered how they could manage to proclaim the Gospel in such an environment. The answer is to be found here in their union in the life of the Trinity. When things appeared to be falling apart, they could retreat back to this still point and find peace and reassurance.

Prayer

Father, your Son chose us to live in such a way that people everywhere would come to know you and repent of their sins. Strengthen us in our lives of discipleship, that we may remain faithful in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

Sunday October 31st

Luke 19:1-10

Fr Robert Newton

Zacchaeus is called a chief tax collector and probably was working at an important trading post in Jericho. As a tax collector he belonged to a calling which was commonly detested and seen as an arm of the Roman occupation. His position would have also meant social ostracism. No sightseeing curiosity would have induced such a man to risk either ridicule or violence by mixing with a large mob in the city street. He must have been prompted by a powerful urge to want to see Jesus to take such a risk in public. In the eyes of the Pharisees, tax collectors were seen as amongst the worst sinners along with prostitutes. Even the crowd appear to join in the protest against Jesus entering his house, since he was seen as a sinner of the first order. The ensuing encounter with Jesus was nothing short of life transforming. Jesus was able to burst through the barrier of religious prejudice that isolated him, and convince Zacchaeus to undertake restitution far beyond what the law required and to forsake even the legitimate profits of his profession. Here was a sinner treading without hesitation the path of forgiveness from which the rich young ruler has been too easily deterred (18:18-23).

Zacchaeus could not walk through the crowd because he was a tax collector and a sinner and they would, more than likely, verbally or physically abuse him. He wanted to see Jesus. He wanted to find out more about him but was unable to come near to him and so was forced to climb a tree. Zacchaeus' bravery and single-mindedness to seek Jesus in a dangerous environment provides us with a marvellous example of determination to seek forgiveness where forgiveness is not seemingly available. In particular ways this story in Luke's Gospel is a picture of some aspects of the Church. Far too often what keeps people out of the Church is not the message of the Gospel but we, the disciples (who are supposed to be the ones who are preaching and living out its message). The Church can become the "crowd" standing between those seeking Jesus and the Lord himself. Our conversations and the way we act, our attitudes to those we feel who are on the "outer", can have a dramatic affect in holding back people from finding Jesus in our churches. Who are the Zacchaeus characters in our modern day communities, what can we do to help them?

Prayer

Merciful Judge and Father, we pray for those who seek a closer walk with you and we pray that we may not get in the way or block your glory as revealed in your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Saturday October 30th

Luke 14:1, 7-11

Fr Robert Newton

The writer of Luke's Gospel again taps into a common concern in Jewish society, but unusually here it is presented as a parable by Jesus. Jesus uses a familiar home truth about good manners to convey a religious lesson which the Pharisees particularly needed to learn. As in social etiquette, so in the spiritual realm, recognition and status eludes those who demand it, it is given to those who think more highly of others than of themselves. True dignity and honour are always unconscious and unexpected. The rule for hosts was also particularly applicable to Pharisees. The common characteristic of cultivating a society of one's own kind had been taken by the Pharisees and turned into a religious principle, refusing all social contact with those who did not share their standards of piety. Whatever satisfaction they gained from their mutual benefit society, they missed the many blessings bestowed on those who show hospitality and kindness where there is no possibility of recompense or obvious reward. The loving service of the helpless and the needy, which Jesus himself so clearly illustrated, is at the very core of the life of the Kingdom of God, and those who learn to enjoy such a life on earth will enjoy the perfection of it in heaven.

What was true for the Pharisees then, is as true for us today. Obsession with status and position and the embarrassment of those who seek to place their nametag higher up the table has nothing to do with the Kingdom of God. Ralph Waldo Emerson, poet and philosopher, writing in the 19th century, identified three signs of "true success". Firstly, to love God and respect his creation. Secondly, to love all God's people. And thirdly, to leave the world in a better state than you found it. A simple set of ideas but with a profound reminder of why we are here. A set of ideas that Jesus will agree with wholeheartedly. A mutual reciprocity of hospitality to those we normally associate with, or taking some advantage of an astute acquaintance, is far short of the Gospel demand and Jesus' teachings. The prayer of St Ignatius resonates loudly in this context: "Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to look for rest; to labour and not to seek for any reward, save that of knowing we do your will".

Prayer

Almighty God, we offer you our prayers of praise and thanks and we ask that through the power of your Holy Spirit, we might ensure that our first acts of praise are in our works of charity.

Sunday October 3rd

Luke 17:5-10

Fr Robert Newton

In the previous verse the words about forgiveness were an earthquake for the apostles. They were all shocked and amazed when they heard them. "We just don't have enough faith to understand what you are saying", they were saying as they pleaded for more faith. Even if we've heard these words about forgiveness many times before, these words shake us up, too. Questions abound. "Seven times a day? Are these repeated sinners really repentant or are they just saying the words? Are they going to change their ways? How can we forgive that often?" The problem of offering repeated forgiveness is compounded when we hear Peter's question in Matthew 18:21-22: "... Peter came and said to him (Jesus) 'Lord, if another member of the Church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?'. Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times'." Peter thought he was being generous. The rabbis of his time taught that under certain conditions of repentance you might forgive a person as many as three times. Peter thought he'd be commended for more than doubling that amount. He was all shook up when Jesus told him, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times". Other translations say, "Not seven, but seventy times seven". Whatever the numbers, Peter must have felt that he was experiencing something like an earthquake when he heard the words. His foundations were shaken. The apostles said, "Increase our faith", because they were totally challenged by Jesus' words about forgiveness. They realised how far from God they were. They sensed they needed to be closer to God if they were to act like God acts in offering forgiveness to sinners.

The faith factor means that we change our orientation from the ways of this world to the ways of God's Kingdom. Sometimes it takes another person's strong words about what is really important to wake us up. That's what happened to the apostles. Having to face our sins helps us see the need for our Saviour. The faith factor means that we give up control of our lives to Jesus Christ. We seek to do what God wants us to do, instead of stubbornly clinging to what we want to do. Submitting to Jesus Christ as Lord is the one thing needed and the hardest thing of all. The faith factor means that we seek to act the way Jesus acted. Since he forgave people, we are called to forgive. Since his arms were always outstretched to sinners, we should also be willing to forgive.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to increase our faith in you and in our own calling to be your disciples. Give us the strength to imitate your only Son.

Monday October 4th

Luke 10:25-37

This is really two separate sections joined together by Luke. Verses 25-28 cover the discussion between the lawyer and Jesus and the parable adds a Lucan qualification to the exchange. The lawyer begins with the first part of a prayer that is said daily by the Jews — the Shema (Dt 6:4-9) and a teaching from Leviticus 19:18. The first command insists on an absolute love of Yahweh (with heart, soul, might and mind). The second part insists that the Israelite has the same attitude towards his neighbour as he shows towards God himself. When Jesus affirms his answer, he is making this twofold command a demand that binds all who seek to be disciples. The lawyer asks Jesus who is to be understood as being his neighbour and the parable is put in here to answer that question. The point of the parable is summed up in the lawyer's comment that a neighbour is anyone in need of our compassion, pity and kindness. Most importantly for the Jews, it extends neighbour beyond any ethnic and religious divisions. There are in our text, two different meanings of the word neighbour. The first is the person in need — the one left half dead on the side of the road. The second meaning is "the one who showed mercy to the person in need" (10:37). The priest and Levite in the story did not lack a love of God. They fail to gain life because they are unable to love a Samaritan and love in this setting has no limits.

The parable ends with the command of Jesus: "Go and do the same yourself". While addressed to the Scribe, it is a message that is meant for all who seek to be disciples. This is now the measure of one's faithfulness to God, how one reaches out to those who are marginalized, who suffer, and who are on the fringes of our communities. Jesus is not talking about showing love and compassion to those we know and who are important to us. He is talking about strangers and even those who are despised and hated by us. There is no special merit in loving family members. This has serious repercussions for the Christian community (individuals, parish, family, diocese, youth group, Women's Guild, Mothers' Union, etc) because it means that we can only measure our integrity as a Christian group in terms of how we reach out to those in need. Failure to actively love the "Samaritans" in the world around us is to fail in the discipleship to which we have been called. Loving God without loving our neighbour is meaningless.

Prayer

Creator Lord, you have shown us your love in many ways and continue to love us even though we are not worthy. Strengthen us so that we may take that love out to others.

Friday October 29th

Luke 14:1-6

Fr Drew Hanlon

As is typical in Luke, the writer uses the layered symbolism of Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem throughout the section that this passage is located in (13:22-17:10). The Pharisees are once again on the lookout to see if they can trap Jesus through their litigious mindset. This has carried over from the end of chapter 13. In contrast this passage lays the foundation for the imagery and reality of a God whose arms are open and embracing as evidenced by the Great Dinner that Jesus hosts (14:15-24). Typical to Luke, the answers of how people should behave in the Christian community are given in the context of a meal. The meal acts as a conduit for teaching because it is so important to the human condition, and it is a place of intimacy. The Pharisee should have invited the outsider, the man with dropsy, to the meal rather than further increase his isolation by not agreeing to the healing that would restore him to the community. This story is unique to Luke's Gospel, it is also the final controversy that occurs on a Sabbath in this Gospel. The narrative shows the folly of litigious thinking, for the sake of self-serving piety in contrast to compassion that is lived out.

How often do we look on, waiting to see others fail, or make a mistake, or perceive ourselves to be more righteous than others? How often do we like to follow the letter of the law, rather than the spirit of the law? How often do we desert others in their time of need because we might be "tainted" by their "impurity"? Unfortunately, human beings have probably not moved on a great deal from the time of Jesus, when there were those who were watching Jesus closely, waiting for him to slip up and then attack him. These people were not interested in wholeness and holiness, but litigiousness and control. While we might like to think that this behaviour does not occur in the Church, it does. Great hurt arises when we are judgemental rather than trying to see the whole picture. When we jump to conclusions we do not live out the Spirit of Christ, but rather the small-minded assumptions that constrain the individual and communal experience of God's life-giving Spirit. To do so is likely to cause great harm to ourselves and to others, sometimes obviously, sometimes subtly, but usually insidiously. Such practice does not bring freedom or joy but rather a wave of suffering.

Prayer

Spirit of Life, who calls us to be free from all that stops us from building up the love of Christ's Body on earth, give us the strength to follow bigger visions, that we might be embraced by your love in our broken lives and communities.

Thursday October 28th *St Simon and St Jude* **Luke 6:12-16**
Fr Drew Hanlon

In the preceding section (5:17-6:11) Luke has presented Jesus as encountering friction and intense dislike from the Pharisees. In this next section (6:12-49) Jesus is seen to be choosing twelve sojourners and students who will effectively be representative of a new Israel, mirroring the twelve tribes. This symbolises Jesus' and the disciples' continuity with Israel but also their distinctiveness from it. This twelve must be maintained to retain that continuity and so in Acts, after the suicide of Judas, a twelfth disciple is chosen. In contrast to the conflict with the Pharisees, who are portrayed as myopic in their thinking, there is unity in diversity in the selection of the disciples and their trades and origins. The section (6:17-49) represents what this reconstituted community will be like in everyday life. The mountain represents for people in these times a place of difficulty to get to in the communion with God. In their worldview God was "up there" and so naturally the highest places a human could go would be where they are most likely to commune with the divine.

When we read this account of Jesus choosing the twelve apostles it is striking how succinct this story is. There is an urgency to this event. It concludes with the blunt statement regarding Judas Iscariot: "who became a traitor". The word traitor contains great power. It is one of those words that needs to be sparingly and carefully used because of the gravity of its implications. There are emotional connotations tied up with this word depending on the context in which it is used. Treachery or betrayal is something that many of us have experienced. It is a hard experience to get over and to trust again. But failure to do so will blind us to the reality that eleven of the twelve disciples were faithful to the God who is with us in Jesus. In what way do we betray the love of God as shown in Jesus? Do we get fixated on the betrayals and hurts in life or do we realise that there is much to be thankful for? How do we seek to change the world that it might be more Christ-like, where others less fortunate do not feel betrayed in any sense? How willing are we to sit with those who have been betrayed? How willing are we to forgive and seek reconciliation with those we believe have betrayed us as individuals or as a community? How willing are we to realise that even when we have betrayed the love of Christ through our actions that God is still loving us all through the journey?

Prayer

Blessed Trinity, who gives us life and loves us into being, help us to be faithful to the love that you show us in Jesus. Help us to be true to the love that you show in Jesus.

Tuesday October 5th

Luke 10:38-42

This present story seems to be a distraction from the journey to Jerusalem and his fate at the hands of the leaders of Israel. The story shows Martha wanting to prepare a large feast for Jesus, to give him honour. Jesus turns around and reminds her that it is much more important to listen to what he has to say. Properly serving Jesus means taking in what it is he has to say more than providing for his physical needs. This does not mean that Martha was wrong. It is all a matter of perspective. Jesus is presented as having Mary sit at his feet to be instructed as a disciple, in much the same way as the Rabbis had their disciples sit at their feet. This in itself is quite a radical move as women in Judaism were not considered to be rabbinical disciples in the same way that men were. In some ways it serves as a balance to the preceding story. That parable highlighted the primacy of the command to love. However, loving without listening to what it is God has to say is a love that will quickly burn out. Service in the Gospel is not a form of humanism. Service for a disciple arises out of the Word and is a love that is formed by the Word. It is impossible to find in this story a hierarchy in the life of discipleship. Mary's listening and Mary's service go hand in hand. Luke does not present listening and service as being options, that a disciple could be a "listener" or a "servant". Both are required.

Listening to Jesus did not seem to have a high priority for Martha and she in some way represents most of us. Taking time off to give God a chance to speak to us is not something we do enough of. It is so much easier to run around and do things, to be busy for the Kingdom. It is also very tempting to think of "praying daily" as something for the saints or for the clergy. But as we know from the life of Jesus, daily prayer is a part of the armoury of a disciple and without it the mission will never be a success. The problem with the "being busy about many things" approach, is that it may not be what God wants us to be doing. How do we know what he wants unless we regularly stop and listen to him? This is going to be an important theme throughout the rest of this travel journey. The disciples are people who turn to God in prayer, which is precisely what the next three stories in the Gospel will explain. One way of assessing our lives of discipleship is to look at the amount of time we give over to God for listening to what he wants to say to us. Only when we pray constantly will our daily work then become prayer.

Prayer

Loving Father, we thank you for being a Father who listens to the cries of your children. Fill us with your Spirit that we may learn how to pray and strengthen us that we may pray often.

Wednesday October 6th

Luke 11:1-4

Up until this point Luke has been trying to set out for his readers the attitude that must be a part of the thinking of the disciple. It is worth comparing the Our Father as found in Matthew 6:7ff and the version that we have here in Luke, for each evangelist gives the prayer their own twist. Luke begins with an address to the Father, two wishes uttered before God and then three petitions (Matthew has an expanded address, three wishes and four petitions). Jesus encourages the disciples to address God as "Father", the same title that he uses. It thus proclaims an intimate relationship between God and the disciples that is unheard of in the Judaism of the time. God is now being presented as not only the Lord of all creation, the transcendent God who sits on his throne in heaven, but also as being intimately engaged with the daily lives of those who seek to serve him. What Luke is interested in here is the individual person and their life with God. Later on in the prayer it becomes a community focus (as it is in Matthew) but here it is interested in God and the believer. The prayer then hopes (prays) that God will make his name glorified within the communities of the world. God is holy and Christians are called to "be holy as I am holy" (Lev 11:45). The second wish will bring about the first. If God sets up his Kingdom on earth, then all people will see his glory and praise his name. The three petitions that follow cover all aspects of daily life: they pray to be fed, to have their sins forgiven and to be preserved from apostasy, the abandoning of their faith when things become difficult.

It is impossible to pray the Our Father properly unless the person praying is prepared to acknowledge that they are willing to leave their lives in the hands of God. It is a prayer of submission that stems out of a deep understanding of sin, of failure, of human weakness and vulnerability and of a need of someone greater and more powerful than the person praying could ever be. The prayer involves a stepping back and praying that God will take over. It is built on a desire to let go of life, to be prepared to allow God to shape life and to allow his ways to be the way that is followed by the believer. The prayer can be summed up by the image of a vassal coming before his king. He would bow down with his face in the dust, baring his neck and acknowledging that the king had the power to take his life or spare it. In the Our Father, we come before God with our faces in the dust that he might raise us up and give us a new life.

Prayer Our Father in heaven, make your presence in the world known to all peoples through the way we live, that they too might give you the honour and obedience you deserve.

Wednesday October 27th

Luke 13:22-30

Luke now moves into the second part of his journey to Jerusalem and we find Jesus delivering his teachings on salvation and acceptance into the Kingdom. The question asked of Jesus was a common Palestinian concern. Many believed that in the end all Israelites would be saved and be given a share in the Kingdom to come. Now they hear Jesus preaching about the Kingdom and wonder just where they will stand in it. Is there a place for every Jew? What Jesus does not do is answer the question in a direct way. He says that it is up to God to decide who will be saved. What they are required to do is to "enter by the narrow gate". The fact that it is narrow highlights that it will not be an easy road, that they will have to work hard and search diligently for the way forward. It is also easy to be lost when the road is so narrow. When he says that many will try and enter but will fail, the picture is of a kind of traffic jam with a great number of people trying to make their way through a single narrow gate. The alternative is to get in early. Entry into the house does not depend on the person knocking. It depends on the master of the house and he will make up his own mind according to criteria that he has set. With the original question in his mind, Jesus now teaches not only that many of the people of Israel will not be able to enter into the feast but also that many Gentiles will find themselves at the heavenly banquet with Abraham and the patriarchs. That would have been quite a shock to many.

There are a couple of important points worth some reflection. The first is the contrast between life inside the house (the Kingdom) with life outside it. Inside there is a feast with all the celebrations that go with it. Outside, there is weeping and grinding of teeth. The Kingdom is about joy and about contentment. The Kingdom is about people being able to realize their full humanity and enjoying life to the full. It is also true that life without God leads so easily to "weeping and gnashing of teeth" because without God the less noble aspects of humanity inevitably take over and the community begins to fragment. The second point is that it is very difficult for us to be able to decide who is "in" and who is "out" in the eyes of God. Such judgements must be left to the divine judge and not to be a part of our human actions. It is all too easy for us to decide that someone, because of what they do, or certain behaviour is unworthy of God's love.

Prayer Heavenly Father, there are times when the road to the Kingdom seems too difficult for us and we are tempted to seek easier options. Keep us strong in faith and focussed on you.

Tuesday October 26th

Luke 13:18-21

Luke now finishes off the opening part of his travel diary with two parables. The first is about the mustard seed and the second about leaven. One is about a man and the other about a woman, both of whom "took" something that brought to mind the Kingdom of God. By using the tiny mustard seed, Jesus tells his disciples that the Kingdom of God starts off in a small way but will grow into a mighty force in the history of the world. This is how his preaching will work. It may not seem to be bringing about enormous changes but the seeds have been planted, and by God's grace it will change the lives of many. The real point of contrast is not really related to the size of the seed, though that may be a point of comfort and reassurance. The point being made is that of growth. The Kingdom grows, it does not immediately appear in its fullness. No one can really understand the forces that are within a seed to make it grow and become a tree and the Kingdom is no different. It grows mysteriously through the intervention of God. It is inevitable that the seed will become a tree in which the birds can shelter. It is inevitable that the Kingdom will grow and provide the blessings that God intends. Nothing can stop it. There is also a note of challenge introduced. The birds of the air make their homes in the mustard tree and so find shelter and food. Are the disciples of Jesus Christ ready to "make their nests" in the Kingdom of God?

Anyone who in any way plays around in gardens knows that there is no automatic and work-free transformation from seed to crop-bearing plant. There are many things that need to be done to ensure that the seed grows. Weeds need to be pulled out, fertilizer added and water delivered to the flowerbed. Birds and plant-eating bugs need to be kept at bay, and then, with luck, the crop will be produced. This must be part of the background to this story. The Kingdom will grow, and does grow, but it involves a great deal of work by the individual disciple. God will take care of the producing of fruit if we care for the valuable plant that is the gift of faith. There are things and attitudes that we need to keep out of our lives, and spiritual activities which must be included. Action needs to be taken when our faith lives are under threat and we never reach the stage where we can sit back and say that all is well. Such is the Kingdom.

Prayer

Lord God, through your love for your creation you care for us and fill us with many blessings. It is your presence in our lives that makes it possible for us to know lasting love and peace. Make us ever grateful through living lives of faithful service.

Thursday October 7th

Luke 11:5-13

This story follows on from the Our Father and encourages the disciples to further prayer. It is important to persist in prayer to God which is a bit different to what Matthew says. Matthew says that God already knows what you want before you ask it so there is no point in constantly making your demands known (Matt 6:8). Luke stresses the certainty of prayers being heard, yet as it is written here it does look as though God can be "nagged" into hearing prayers when he really does not want to. This has led commentators to suggest that the ending of the parable has been lost and that Luke is using it here to simply stress the importance of praying. For some the parable is not really about the persistent friend but about the person who is roused at midnight by the request for assistance. Others would see it as a kind of rhetorical question leaving those hearing it to ask: "Can you imagine such a thing happening? Impossible!". In the customs of the East, it would be unthinkable for a person to refuse to provide hospitality when it was requested. So it is with God. He knows and loves those who are his disciples and it is unthinkable that he would not listen to their prayers for assistance. But he does acknowledge that they will need to come before him in their need.

For Luke the key thing is the certainty that the prayers will be heard. The man who comes along to his friend's place and asks for help knows deep down in his heart that his request for assistance will be heard. It is this conviction that keeps him going when at first his requests seem to be denied and even rejected. So well does he know his friend and the demands of their culture that he goes into the contact with a kind of guarantee of being heard and helped. The man in the house knows that he will get no sleep unless he does what is asked of him. It is this person who is the figure of God in the life of the believer. We all start off with an understanding of God as being merciful, loving, generous and desirous of caring for his people. That is what makes persistence in prayer possible. But God does not have to be woken up and cajoled into giving us what we need. He even cares for those who do not acknowledge him as Lord! The call is a call to faith and the need to express our faith through prayer, for the parable brings out the nature of our human existence – children in need of a loving and caring Father who gives us each day our daily bread and who will listen to us, whenever we call to him.

Prayer

Merciful Father, strengthen our faith that we may be willing to persist in our prayer, bringing to you all that is important to us, that you may pronounce your blessing and fill us with grace.

Friday October 8th

Luke 11:15-26

This story is the first of three that deal with demons and signs from heaven (11:14-23, 24-26, 29-32). Matthew and Mark also have their own variations of the Beelzebul tradition with Luke including some major variations. Jesus is forced to defend himself against accusations that he is under the authority of Satan, an attack that seems to spring from surprise that Jesus could cast out demons. The images of the falling household and the divided Kingdom suggest a civil war which is what his actions would be if he were in league with the Evil One. He then presents a contrary picture of what is happening. He claims that he is casting out demons by the "finger of God". This is an image from Exodus 8:15 where the magicians of Pharaoh acknowledge that the third plague was an act of the "finger of God". Using it here has Jesus making it clear that he is not acting through magic or the use of incantations or spells, but by the direct power of God himself. The challenge is for the Pharisees to see that what they are experiencing is, in some ways, the same divine presence that was evident when God set his people free in the Exodus. The Kingdom for which they are praying in the Our Father (your Kingdom come) and which was a common prayer of the Jews, is now made evident among them. It is God who makes the ministry of Jesus so powerfully transforming. It is not the power of Satan within him.

The worrying part of the story is to be found in verses 24-26. Just because a person has a demon cast out of them does not mean that they will forever be free of demons. The Palestinian people believed that evil spirits must dwell somewhere and that they did not like wandering around the arid deserts. They would do all in their power to fight their way back into the life of the person from whom they had been expelled. The image is clear. If the spirits are to be stopped from returning then the house needs to be broomed out. It is not enough to repent and to turn to God. Such actions are only a starting point in the life of discipleship. A person who has been freed from sin needs to begin to put into their lives the kinds of things that will stop them from being overpowered once again by sin. They will need to pray constantly, listen to the word of God, and work hard on putting into practice the teachings of Jesus (see Luke 11:28).

Prayer

Merciful Lord, we thank you that you have set us free from the power of sin through the life and ministry of your Son Jesus. Help us to not only repent of our sinfulness, but to also take on those things that will bring us closer to you.

Monday October 25th

Luke 13:10-17

We now find Jesus in a synagogue on the Sabbath day where the cure of the crippled woman will open up a debate on the meaning of the Sabbath laws. Jesus uses his power to heal a woman suffering from a sickness. It is set in the travel story to show his power over evil. It is significant in that the travel journey does not have many stories of cures and so we can presume that it is meant to be interpreted in the light of that journey. When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem he will face the forces of evil which will try and destroy him. What we see here is a comforting revelation that his power is in fact greater than the forces of evil. He uses that power to heal the woman and does so on the Sabbath day. The woman is a child of God, a daughter of Abraham, and has been bound up by the spirit that has taken her over. She represents the people to whom Jesus was sent by the Father. The event also takes place in the synagogue which is the house where the people come to pray on the Lord's own day. So the whole setting is one of battle. What is a little ironical is that the only real opposition he has is from the leaders of the Jewish people who seem to feel that their authority is somehow undermined by what Jesus is doing. The arguments that Jesus uses are classical forms of Hebrew debate and are called by the Rabbis the "from light to heavy" argument. If it is permitted to loose the rope holding an animal and to lead it to water on the Sabbath, then it is permitted to care for human beings by loosening the "ropes" of possession that bind them and hold them back from being free.

It was clear for Jesus that the laws of the Sabbath and the demands of the ritual and custom do not take precedence over the welfare of others. The needs of human beings are to come first and only then should they look at what the law is saying. This is an important principle in thinking about all our religious laws. They are only there to help us in our love of God. They are not ends in themselves. For the Jews, it would be hard to think of a more binding law than the Sabbath obligations. Yet this is put to one side to care for another person. How easy it is for Christians to push religious custom and practice to the point where they become absolute laws that can inhibit people coming to know God. People must always be the first priority and the primary law for all believers is that of Love.

Prayer

Loving Father, there are times in our enthusiasm to serve you when we allow our religious customs to hurt people and to keep them from coming to you; for this we ask your forgiveness.

Sunday October 24th

Luke 18:9-14

Fr Peter Yeats

Although this parable is the second of a pair of parables which talk of prayer, it is not about prayer; it is about pride, righteousness and the grace of God. It calls us to look at ourselves, because it would not be good to walk away from it saying "Thank God I am not like that Pharisee...". For the people listening, the Pharisee would have been the righteous man, and his words go on to prove it! Everything he does is beyond the requirements of the law; he is the best of the best. But, there are a few things in the passage which should be carefully noted. Firstly, the phrase "The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus," could also be translated "The Pharisee, standing, was praying to himself...". Odd, but given the nature of the parable, not impossible. Secondly, note the number of times he uses the word "I"; he is focussed on himself. Thirdly, he makes sure that everyone sees that he is avoiding the tax collector, yet makes sure that he comments on him. And fourthly, note that the Pharisee asks nothing of God; he just lists his own achievements. He needs nothing from God, as he manages so well on his own! Yes, blinded by his own self-righteousness, by how he sees what religion should be, he misses the mark completely. He compares himself against the wrong thing; he looks at others, especially the tax collector, and in comparison to him he is indeed a good and righteous man. The righteous man leaves unjustified, unrighteous. What of the tax collector? He would be the natural target for abuse by those who heard the story. A thieving traitor, scum of the scum. His speech is a little shorter, but just as noticeable: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!". He stands away from the others, not because he is too good, but because he is not good enough. He looks at his feet and beats his breast, because he is in awe of the God he stands before. Note that he makes no offer to pay back any stolen money; he makes no offer to amend his ways. There is nothing to commend him, except his humility and the fact that he knows who he is, and knows what he needs. The Pharisee compares himself against the wrong thing; he looks at others, especially the tax collector, and in comparison to him he is indeed a good and righteous man! And that is as far as the Pharisee goes. The tax collector, on the other hand, compares himself with God, and realises that there is a lot lacking! If the Pharisee had done the same, maybe he might have understood himself and his own needs a bit more.

The same is true for us; our goodness is not to be measured against others, but against the goodness of God. When we are able to be honest about ourselves and our need for God's grace, then we will be justified; we will be righteous.

Prayer

25

God, be merciful to me, a sinner!

Saturday October 9th

Luke 11:27-28

In this short section we find that Luke is proclaiming that all who follow Jesus are blessed. These are very Jewish thoughts and there are echoes of Proverbs 23:24-25: "A good man's father will rejoice and he who has a wise son will delight in him. Give your father and mother cause for delight; may she who bore you rejoice". This stands in stark contrast to the attitude that we find in verses 15-16. Jesus once again shifts the focus to what he sees as the main source of blessedness. It is not Mary his mother, or his family or any other group of people who are blessed. It is, as it was in 8:19-21, those who listen to the Word of God and who observe it that are truly blessed. We saw back in Mary's song (1:46ff) that she saw herself as being blessed because of Jesus: "From now on all generations will call me blessed". Elizabeth had pointed out that Mary would be blessed, not just because she was the mother of Jesus, but also because of her great faith and confidence in God (1:45). This is now much closer to what Jesus is demanding. Mary was blessed because she believed that God would work in her what it was he was promising. His words were not empty promises and she adjusted her life accordingly. That is why she is blessed. Mary heard the word of God from the angel and then put it into action in her life. The fact that she was also the Mother of the Lord is an extra cause of blessing.

As we have noted before, one of the key themes of Luke's Gospel is the command "to do". It is not possible to be a disciple by simply claiming to believe in Jesus and to be a Christian. One has to be "doing" Christian things and faith has to be lived out in one's daily activities. It is a struggle that comes up in different parts of the Gospel where Jesus comes into conflict with the legal approach of much of Judaism. What makes a faithful Jew? Keeping the 639 precepts of the Law. What makes a faithful disciple of Jesus? Living the Sermon on the Mount (or Luke's Sermon on the Plain). The Jewish law can be summed up and limited by those 639 precepts but there are no limits to the Gospel demands. One has to not only avoid sinning. The believer must choose to go out and to live the Gospel, to put into action the laws of love of God and love of neighbour. This positive understanding is what Jesus has in mind here. Being baptized does not make a person a Christian. Living the Gospel out on a daily basis is what makes a person a true follower of Jesus.

Prayer

10

Father, Mary our Blessed Mother heard your invitation to serve and was willing to put aside her own plans and hopes so that your will could be done in her life. Help us to be like her.

Sunday October 10th

Luke 17:11-19

Fr Robert Newton

The story of the ten lepers contains some puzzling features. The lepers were directed by Jesus to go to Jerusalem and show themselves to the priests, who alone had the authority to certify their cure; why then were nine of them blamed for carrying out orders? Why did the Samaritan have to come back to Jesus and express his thanks to God? Considering that all ten were cured, how could it be said especially of one of them that his faith had saved him? It may be right that those critics who say that the story has been carelessly told have an interesting point. However, it is quite possible to put forward an answer to these questions. Cleansing came to the lepers from God but through Jesus; and gratitude demanded that the agent, as well as the source, of healing be acknowledged. The cure was no random miracle, but part of the ministry of healing in which the Kingdom of God had broken in upon the realm of disease and sin. Through Jesus God was acting, and through him God must be thanked. Jesus says "Your faith has saved you"; for salvation was much more than just cleansing. Salvation is a new relationship with God and his Kingdom of grace. The most interesting part of this story and which continues Luke's theme is that the Kingdom of God is now open to all, Jews and Gentiles. The eager appreciation of the Samaritan shows up his fellow Jewish sufferers and gives a foretaste of the opening up of the Kingdom to all believers.

Giving thanks for what God has done for us sometimes comes way down the list of our responses to our Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ. It seems that only at times of crises that our thoughts concertedly turn in ardent prayer, request and petition. When we feel that things are going well it is easy to forget our blessings and forget to say thank you. One of the lessons that we can take from this story is that if we are truly reconciled to God and his Kingdom, giving thanks and praise has to be at the heart of our response to life. There is a magnitude of difference between feeling "lucky" or fortunate and attributing our blessings as part of a relationship with our Father in heaven. The example of the Samaritan reminds us that we as Christians must be vigilant and on our guard from complacency and not fall into the trap of believing like the Jews at the time of Jesus, that we have an exclusive arrangement, which turns familiarity into laxity.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the many blessings that you give us. We pray that we may never forget to give you thanks and praise.

Saturday October 23rd

Luke 13:1-9

In this story Jesus does not comment on the politically charged issue of what Pilate had done in Galilee. As a Galilean it would have been most understandable if he had spoken out against this hated Roman ruler. Instead, he turns it around and uses it as a timely warning to repent. The Jews saw tragedy as a sign of there being some sin in the life of the person. These things did not happen for nothing. God did not punish without a good reason. Jesus is quick to point out that it had nothing to do with their sins and failures. Nor does he explain why such a terrible thing should happen. What he does say is that it should serve as a most timely reminder of the state of our own lives which could come to an end at any moment. It is therefore important that people repent now and change their lives to ones that are built on the Gospel that he is preaching and teaching. He adds his own story to the one brought to him about the Galileans. In his story the people in Jerusalem suffer an equally tragic end, but again it is not as a consequence of their sins. Death can come into the lives of anyone standing there listening to him as quickly as it came to the Galileans and the Jerusalemites. People should not think that they are somehow immune to such an end. The need to repent and to be ready is always an urgent one.

One of the things that many people find difficult to accept is that being human means that we are weak and fragile creatures. We get sick. We suffer. We die. We live in a world that is dangerous and which is beyond our ability to control. Natural disasters happen. People die. We are also at the mercy of other more powerful, or thoughtless and more selfish, people and sometimes the consequences of their greed and self-indulgence is the death and suffering of someone else. Despite all our advances in science and economics, these things will continue. They are not sent by God as punishment, they are a part of being human in the world. What Jesus is saying to us here is that it is important that we see and understand this reality and that we are prepared should it happen. In his mercy God is giving us an opportunity to do something about the state of our lives, to repent of our sins and to put into our daily existence those spiritual things which will help us bear the fruit he seeks. Let's use them.

Prayer

Loving Father, we come before you and acknowledge that we are weak and fragile creatures in need of your care and your protection. Help us to build our lives on the Gospel message that we may be at peace in all that happens to us.

Friday October 22nd

Luke 12:54-59

Now Jesus turns and speaks to the crowds that were following him. It is important to note when he is speaking specifically to his disciples and when he is addressing the crowds in general. He is critical of their inability to see what is happening in his ministry and to understand what it is that God is doing through him. This is not the first time Jesus has expressed his frustration at this blindness. In 7:31-35 he used an image of children in the village square to say the same thing. The majority of the audience would have been Palestinian farmers for whom it was important to be able to read the signs of change in nature around them. The saving of a crop or their newborn lambs could depend on it and so their life and the lives of the members of their families. Why could they not then apply these same skills to what was happening around them? They should be able to see the hand of God at work in what he was doing and saying and their failure to do so will bring judgement upon them (this is implied from earlier sayings — 7:22-23). The second half of our text seems to move on to a different topic (vs 57-59). He is offering his followers a timely warning to work out ways of coming to a compromise with their opponents, and so avoid the dangers of being dragged into court. It is hard to see a more spiritual application than this as the original setting of the saying has been lost. In the later Christian community it places a pressure on Christians to find ways of resolving conflict without having to resort to public battles which would harm the unity of the community.

One of the observations that we can make of modern urban communities is that they have lost contact with nature. While they lived on the land and farmed to live, or even had their own small plots on which they would grow some of their food, they viewed the world differently. They would know about the times for the rains, the frosts, the scorching winds, insects, droughts and so on. The more urban they became, the less they are able to see those same things. The Kingdom is the same. Things that used to be sin and a sin of failing to obey God are seen as a part of life. We look at the needs of people and see problems and sinners instead of opportunities to reach out in love. Why? Because we have lost our intimate and daily contact with God. Signs are only signs when we can interpret them and to do that we need the code book of the Gospel.

Prayer

Creator God, you have given us so many signs of your love and your powerful presence is everywhere. Remove the things from our hearts that stop us seeing you and serving you.

Monday October 11th

Luke 11:29-32

This is truly a difficult exegetical passage to untangle. In what sense was Jonah a sign to the people of Nineveh? Most commentators would see the person of Jonah *and his preaching* as being the sign that is on offer in Jesus. The people of Nineveh listened to the message of God through his prophet and repented of their sins (Jonah 3:1ff). In so doing they avoided the destruction that was threatening. While Matthew uses the story to also bring out a comment on the resurrection of Jesus (Matt 12:38-42), this is not Luke's point here. As Jonah was a prophet called from a distant land to preach the message of salvation to the people of Nineveh, so has Jesus been sent to preach the Good News of salvation to all peoples. His preaching is the only sign that he offers. We already know from 7:31-34 that this present generation have heard the word preached and yet refused to listen. The Ninevites who listened to Jonah were so moved that they changed their way of living and it will be those repentant sinners who will stand in judgement on the unbelieving Jews. The Queen of the South came all the way from Egypt to listen to Solomon; the Ninevites listened to the preaching of Jonah; but the Jews of Jesus' generation would not listen to the heaven sent preaching of someone who was greater than Solomon. What is also important for Luke's theology is that both Jonah and Solomon preached their messages to pagans, while Jesus was preaching to the people of the Covenant. This fits in with Luke's message of universal salvation.

There are at least four different versions of this in the Gospels which is something of an indication of how much of an impact it made on the early believers. The reason for this is the focus that it places on the call to repentance. For the Jews the real miracle of the story of Jonah was not the unusual method of transportation. The miracle was that the pagans in the great city of Nineveh would repent and change their way of life upon hearing the message from God. If the people of Nineveh could do that then there is real hope for everyone else, for their sinful city was renowned for its evil ways. The way to salvation is in listening to the Word of God and living it out in our lives. Once again we find that familiar Lucan theme: discipleship is not about believing in some kind of new way of thinking. It is about finding ways of putting into action the demands that have been set down by Jesus in his teachings.

Prayer

Almighty Father, we thank you for your merciful love shown to us down through the ages and pray that we may seek to repent and amend our lives and so know your lasting peace.

Tuesday October 12th

Luke 11:37-41

The journey continues with Jesus addressing criticism towards the Pharisees and Lawyers. Altogether he pronounces six “woes” against them. Jesus accepted the invitation to dine with the Pharisee but then ignored what would have been an important custom, the washing of his hands before the meal. For the host, this would have been of major importance and quite an insult to his sensibilities. His response was one of shock, strong enough to be noticed by Jesus whose words are a little confusing. He begins his attack on the importance the Pharisees place on cleaning utensils (not what had initiated the discussion in the first place, which was the washing of hands). Outward cleansing is only superficial for it cleans nothing more than the surface. A good clean must include the inside as well. This “inside” represents the human heart which is full of sin. The heart, for the Jews, was the place of human emotions, decision making and intent and whatever was in the heart controlled the whole of a person’s life. He then brings in a reference to the one who made the pot. He made not just the outside but the inside as well. God, whom Luke refers to as “the knower of the hearts” (Acts 1:24; Acts 15:8), observes not only what a person does in public but knows also what goes on in a person’s mind. It is therefore necessary for the one (the outer action) to truly reflect the other (what is going on inside a person’s heart). The inside and the outside.

Jesus is ruthless in his attack on this hypocritical attitude of the Pharisees and the Lawyers. They are so concerned with getting the form and the outward appearance right that they forget about what is truly important. Not only that, they then judge others by their ability to appear to be doing the right things, rather than looking beyond the externals to the child of God underneath. It is so easy to get caught up on this. We see it all the time in the Church where what is important can sometimes be the externals: the form of liturgy, the right hymns, the correct music, the tried and tested shape of our churches, the make up of the parish council, the style of ministry and so on. While these may all be important in the life of the Christian community, they are not of the essence. They help the Church to live out and express the faith that is far more important. It is worth noting Jesus’ final recommendation: give away to the poor what you have in the cup, then you will not be so worried about preserving it!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we so easily become caught up in things that are not essential in our lives within the Christian community. Help us to keep our eyes and hearts fixed clearly on you.

Thursday October 21st

Luke 12:49-53

Jesus now begins to teach more widely and speaks of his own ministry. In previous texts we have been introduced to ideas like the coming of the master of the household, the coming of a burglar and the coming of the Son of Man. Now we are being told about the coming of Jesus and how to understand his ministry. It is the clearest prediction that we have coming from the lips of the Lord. It must have been quite obvious to him that if he continued to preach and teach in the way he had been doing, then the growing opposition to him would result in his death. He presents his own ministry as being a fire that has come to earth. He then goes on to talk about a baptism, not one that he gives to others but one which he must undergo. He brings fire to test others but endures it himself first. The result of this fire and baptism seem to run contrary to what Luke has already presented as being one of the aims of Jesus. The Christ was to bring “peace on earth” (2:14; 19:38). This is now said to be not peace but divisions in the most basic levels of community life. Even the heart of his own mother was pierced by a sword (2:35). John the Baptist had seen in Jesus a kind of reformer who would overturn the complacency of people, but he was not as strong in his views as Jesus is here. The people to whom he had been sent to bring salvation now find him a source of division and disunity.

There are pictures of Jesus around in Church halls and private homes that show a Jesus with a serene look on his face, smiling wanly at the artist and giving off feelings of being a gentle Jesus, someone who is meek and mild. And that is true. There are many examples of his gentle and compassionate nature. But it is also only half of the picture. The Jesus we meet in today’s story is one that challenges the very roots of a person’s existence, setting fire to their lives to burn out of it all that does not bear fruit for the Kingdom. It is so easy to fill our lives with all kinds of “extras” and there is a very real risk that these will eventually take over the garden that is the Lord’s. Instead of producing fruit the good plants will be starved out, shrivel, and the weeds take over. That is why Jesus saw his ministry as a purging fire. There are times when Gospel faithfulness is painful and when we will be confronted and challenged, and have to make some choices between God’s Kingdom and the material things of the world.

Prayer

Father, we are weak and in need of your grace and power. Help us to examine our lives in the light of the Gospel and to root out all those things that distract us from serving you.

Wednesday October 20th

Luke 12:39-48

Jesus now places the focus onto watchfulness. The owner of the house is on guard to stop it from being burgled by the robber. The thing about a burglary is that it is impossible to know when it is going to take place. There are no set times for robberies. What we have is an understanding that there is the possibility of a burglary and the householder has to be prepared for the worst. Such is the condition of the disciple who does not know when the Son of Man will come as judge. Peter questions whether this is meant for them or for other people. In his reply Jesus makes it clear that the qualities that are being demanded of the disciples are a state of readiness, watchfulness and a prudent management of all that has been given into their care. The real test of discipleship comes when the master seems to be late in returning. This brings out the real nature of the man, for he then fails to carry out his tasks. He thinks he can get away with being lazy. He is thus abusing his role and position and neglecting his important responsibility and so merits the punishment he receives.

One of the great Biblical themes is that of mission. Human beings were created by God for a task. Their lives have meaning and a purpose. In the creation stories in Genesis, the man and the woman were created and placed in the garden to "rule over" creation in the name of God. They were to till the soil and were given responsibility for naming all the animals created by God. So it has been down through the story of salvation. God raised up men and women and sent them off to do his will. This is the meaning of discipleship. No one is here for decoration or simply to fill space. The other half of this revelation is that those whom God calls he gifts for the task he gives them. Success is guaranteed to all those who allow God to work through them. This is why the servant in our parable is so harshly punished. He thought his life and his work were all about his own satisfaction and could be directed according to his own terms and conditions. Jesus is reminding his disciples that they are servants called by him. None of them came and asked to be a disciple. They were all called because God had a mission for them. This is what baptism means for us. It is our call, a reminder that our lives have meaning and purpose and that all we need to do is to listen to God and to allow him to direct our ways and we will be crowned with success.

Prayer

Compassionate Father, we ask your forgiveness for the times when we have failed to serve you as you have asked, but have lived out our lives on our own terms. Show us your way.

Wednesday October 13th

Luke 11:42-46

This earlier introduction is now followed by three woes addressed to the Pharisees. These were the men whose lives were strictly controlled by their interpretation of the Law of Moses. Their interpretations came from the group called the Scribes, whose role it was to study the Law and work out what the demands meant in day to day life. The first woe goes very much to the heart of the problem. The Pharisees stand accused of concentrating on the minute demands rather than keeping in mind the weightier demands of the Law that cover areas like love and justice. It is not that Jesus is removing the rules governing tithes. What he is doing is saying that they should keep the perspective right. The second woe hits at the Pharisees tendency to seek public praise and acclamation for their work. Presumably, in the light of the first woe, what Jesus has in mind is their seeking out of public acclamation for their living out of the Law. The third woe is a truly powerful condemnation. They are likened to an unmarked tomb that is hidden away on the side of the road. Someone may come along and rest on it, not realizing that it is a grave full of bones. In this way they make themselves unclean through something that seemed alright. The people of Jerusalem run the same risk with the Pharisees. They will be harmed in their lives of faith because of the sin and wickedness that is hidden away underneath the good external behaviour and actions of these men who claim to be called by God the Father.

Jesus continues his scathing attack on these leaders of the Jewish faith. In his attacks he echoes those great words of the prophet Micah (Mi 6:8) who summed up obedience to the Law in the following way: "Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God". Living a life of faithfulness is not about keeping all of the details of the law. It is about living a particular style of life. We are told that if we wish to be faithful servants of God the starting point is the "doing of justice, the showing of love and kindness to people and living a life of intimate union with God". All of these things will show themselves in observance of the laws of God, but it cannot be measured by how well people keep to the laws. It is not about avoiding sins against love and justice, but about going out and initiating works of justice, about finding ways of showing love to other people. He moves faithfulness into a sphere of positive action.

Prayer

Just and merciful Lord, in all your dealings with your weak and sinful people, you have never failed to show your love for us. May we find ways of building up a truly loving community.

Thursday October 14th

Luke 11:47-54

We now have three woes addressed to the Lawyers who are also at the party. As was the case with the Pharisees, the Lawyers are criticised because they concern themselves with legalistic interpretations of the Mosaic Law. In their attempts to make sure that the Law was observed, they kept on adding more and more interpretive additions to what Moses had handed down. A good example of this in modern times was the question whether or not a faithful Jew could turn on an electric switch on the Sabbath. Was turning on a light the modern equivalent of lighting a lamp and so should be listed as a task forbidden on the Sabbath. The Lawyers of the time of Jesus kept adding these kinds of interpretations in their efforts to ensure a true observance of the Law. The end result was a community which was weighed down by hundreds of laws. The criticism is partly that these laws have now made the service of God a burden instead of being a joy. The Law has become something that crushes instead of being something that brings a person closer to God. Jesus notes that it is not enough for these men to simply point out where a person is sinning. They must also find a way to help lift the load and make it easier for the sinner to carry the load. They have to help people to understand the law as a way of God showing his love for his people. The other two woes follow similar lines to the attacks on the Pharisees. They are accused of being more interested in building monuments to the past than responding to the calls of God in the present and, not having the courage to enter the Kingdom themselves, they do all they can to stop others from entering. And so they stand condemned by Jesus.

One of the great sins of both the Scribes and the Pharisees was that they understood their interpretation of Judaism and the demands of the Law to be the proper way of serving God. They were right and set the standard against which everyone else had to measure their responses. How easy is it to do the same kind of thing in the Church today! The way that we like prayer, liturgy, ministry, parish life and so on becomes the cornerstone of the Church and God help anyone who wants to change it or come up with an alternative! It is my way or no way. Anglicanism is filled with people who have wandered away from the Church because it failed to meet their expectations or who have stayed, actively making life difficult for others.

Prayer

Loving Father, keep our eyes firmly fixed on what is essential in our lives of faith and may we refrain from judging others whose ways of responding to your love are different to ours.

Tuesday October 19th

Luke 12:35-38

Luke now moves on with the theme of watchfulness in these addresses which are directed at the disciples. In them he links watchfulness and faithfulness as vital parts of the meaning of discipleship. There is a certain commonsense attitude evident here. If a person is detached from earthly and material possessions (which moths can eat and thieves steal) then there is the real chance that they will then be free to focus on that which is far more important and which will be the reward of a life lived in faithful service of God. The text before us encourages the disciples to keep their minds set on the approaching end. They are to be vigilant and ready for the return of their Lord. He reminds them that they are no more than servants and that they are expected to carry out their duties whatever the circumstances of their lives. Their master will return at a time they do not know and they will be asked to give an account of all they have done (or failed to do). If the master returns and finds them working away then they will be rewarded, and what a reward that is. The master himself serves them. What Jesus has in mind here is the heavenly banquet which the Jews believed would be the reward of the faithful when God brings the world and history to an end. The opening image of the parable, with the disciples being encouraged to keep their aprons on (being dressed for action) brings to mind the Passover scene in the Exodus, where the Jews are told to eat the lamb in a state of readiness. What is important to note here is that the return of the Lord is certain. They do not know the "when" but they do know it will happen. Jesus asks: will they be ready?

What is it the disciples are supposed to be doing while they are waiting? What is the meaning of faithfulness? Faithfulness in what? As we have seen all along, what is important for Luke is the "Doing" of the word of God. Discipleship, as it is presented here, is something that can be measured, for it involves not thoughts in the head, but actions that are carried out in a person's daily life. What should a disciple be doing? A disciple is called to go out and preach the Good News. They are to live in such a way that others will know that human life is defined and shaped by divine grace and teaching. They are to love, to forgive, to share their resources with the poor and to live lives of humble service of both God and their neighbours. In other words, their lives are to be shaped by the Gospel commands. Then, when Christ returns, they will be ready.

Prayer

Gracious Father, we thank you for your generous love to us and for all the good things you have poured into our lives. May we show our gratitude by living lives of faithful service.

Monday October 18th

St Luke

Luke 10:1-9

The whole point of the sending out of the disciples was to prepare the way for the Lord. This had been the role of John the Baptist before this and now Jesus was casting the disciples in the same light. The Twelve had been sent out to preach the word of God and to heal and now this number was expanded to include seventy-two disciples. They go out from Jesus and they return to Jesus. This is Luke's understanding of all forms of ministry. All ministry is Jesus-centred. This section of the sending out ends with a series of woes which are uttered against the towns which refuse to receive the mission of Jesus and his disciples. They are sent out with minimal loads, indicating that what they are setting out on has a note of urgency about it. The Kingdom of God is close at hand and it is important that people are called to repent. The warning is there that the message they are to proclaim will set them apart and there will be those who will reject what they say. Such is the urgency that many of the normal niceties of social interaction will have to be put aside. They should not therefore be too choosy about where they sleep and what they eat. Risks will have to be taken to achieve the ultimate goal of the Kingdom of God. The harvest needs to be reaped, collected and brought in before it is spoiled.

There is a marvellous book of spiritual thoughts by a man called Thomas a Kempis called "The Imitation of Christ". His thesis is that those who seek to be disciples of Jesus must shape their lives so that it is as close as possible to being like the life of Jesus. Christians were to be "another Christ" to people, so that when the world observed the way they lived, how they spoke to one another and the kinds of things they did, they could come to know Jesus. This then became the way they could measure their lives. Would Jesus have done that? What would Jesus do in this situation? How would Jesus respond to that person and so on. This is the kind of picture that Luke has in mind when he is writing about the sending out of the disciples. They are to go out so that the people they meet might come to know Jesus. They are to live in the world prepared to be treated in the same way that Jesus was treated. Though they might end up dying like Jesus, they also know that they will rise again. Jesus is the measure against which we must evaluate our lives.

Prayer

Lord God, we thank you for calling us to be followers of your Son Jesus Christ and pray that we may be able to proclaim the Good News of your Kingdom in all that we do and say. May people come to see in us the love you have for everyone.

Friday October 15th

Luke 12:1-7

Fr Drew Hanlon

This text is part of a larger section in which the disciples find themselves encountering opposition from inside and outside the community (12:1-59). Luke continues the theme that sees the Pharisees as the main opponents to Jesus' mission. In particular Luke cannot abide the fact that the actions of the Pharisees do not match up with their words. The opposition and backbiting that has been keenly felt by Jesus is consequentially and logically felt by his disciples. The comfort that the disciples have in the face of such opposition is the commitment of God to their lives. It is this faith that marks Jesus and his disciples out as distinctive and a threat to the spirit-sapping litigiousness that Luke presents the Pharisees as having. While there were undoubtedly some Pharisees who were like this, we must remember that in some ways the Pharisees are the "bad cops" in Luke's presentation of Jesus and that this is in no way a true presentation of Judaism.

The first part of this reading is not pleasant for any human being, particularly those parts of ourselves that like to think of ourselves as superior to others, or having greater virtuousness than others, or kidding ourselves that we do not have skeletons in the closet that we would prefer not to have aired. This hypocrisy is alive and well throughout our society, its media, its institutions and not least of all its churches. This reading calls each of us to account, in particular, Christians. How are you and I like the Pharisees; setting lofty standards that we are not prepared to meet ourselves. For a community that is meant to be a bearer of grace, forgiveness and redemption we are often quick to condemn or let fear dominate our lives. This is all the more tragic because this goes against the very spirit of the Gospel. Consequently we become more like the Pharisees and less like the disciples who are willing to suffer because of the liberation that the message of Jesus brings. The only liberation from hypocrisy and the destruction of community is conversion from self-preservation, be it self or community, to trust in the love and terribly frightening compassion of God. This love is signified by the fact that God cares for all that is created; be it the hairs on your head or the bird that made a mess on your car this morning. Opening to this love leads to liberation from hypocrisy that we all participate in.

Prayer

God of compassion, teach us to love ourselves. May we be drawn into the truth of your love and forgiveness and so bear your grace and compassion in our lives. When each of us fall may we share the love they need to journey deeper into your love.

Saturday October 16th

Luke 12:8-12

Luke now presents us with a series of sayings of Jesus. They seem to be a collection from a wide variety of occasions and put together here within the travel journey. Verses 8-9 are called Son of Man sayings insisting that the true disciple will be called to acknowledge Jesus before the rest of the world, and sometimes this may mean in the face of opposition. If someone is prepared to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of Man and the Messiah, then they will be amply rewarded at the end judgement. They will even stand as judges in the heavenly court. If anyone was to deny knowing Jesus, then Jesus will deny knowing them. Thus we have a combination of threat and promise working together. In verses 10-12 we have the strange teaching about sins against the Holy Spirit. The early Fathers understood this to mean that speaking against the Son of Man was a sin that was committed by pagans and so was forgivable, whereas sins against the Holy Spirit were sins of apostasy by Christian disciples. This was a very serious sin in a community that held unity to be one of its defining marks. Perhaps it is best understood not as being a specific sin, but reflects a life lived in opposition to the word of God and a constant denial of the role of the Spirit in a person's life. God's forgiveness cannot be given to this person. It is not that it is not offered, and it is not because the sin is so bad. Forgiveness is impossible because forgiveness is a gift on offer and if the person will not open themselves up to God, then they are unable to receive it. There is no evidence in the New Testament of there being any sins so bad that they cannot be forgiven if forgiveness is sought.

When we read back through the Gospel we see that there is just about every imaginable kind of sin. We have the arrogance and pride of the Scribes and the Pharisees, the woman caught in adultery and a whole host of tax collectors and public sinners. There is Mary of Magdala who had the demons in her and of course Peter and the Twelve who ran away prior to the death of Jesus. Thomas could not believe in the truth of the resurrection of his Lord and Saul persecuted the Christians. Which of these sins is the worst kind of sin? There is not one person in the Gospel who sought forgiveness and was refused. This is why the Gospel is called the Good News. It brings salvation and the forgiveness of sins to all who seek God. That is the great hope, consolation and joy that we have.

Prayer

Merciful Father, do not look on us as our sins deserve or we would justly be condemned. Rather look on us through the eyes of your Son and make us more worthy of your love.

Sunday October 17th

Luke 18:1-8

Fr Robert Newton

The writer of Luke's Gospel shows again his deep interest in prayer and mentions the subject many more times than the other synoptic gospels. Also Luke's Gospel taps into the familiar theme of the perversion of justice mentioned so frequently in the Old Testament and probably is reflecting on a common cultural observation of the time. It was the proper function of a judge to be not only an impartial arbiter but also a champion of the helpless and downtrodden – the widow, the orphan, the poor and the foreigner; whatever other cases he heard, he must be sure that these at least received their rights (Exod 22:22; Deut 10:18; Isa 1:17; Jer 22:3). The judge in the story was swayed neither by religious principle nor by public opinion, so that the widow, too poor to resort to bribery, and lacking influential friends, had no weapon but her persistence. God, on the other hand, is the righteous Judge, the champion of the needy and the oppressed, who listens patiently to their requests when they call upon him. God can therefore be relied upon to intervene on their behalf with vindication. If persistence of petition prevails with one who only cares for his own peace and comfort, how much more will it prevail with One who has compassion for the faithful. "The faithful" in this context are those who are called specially to serve God through suffering for their faith. In this story the writer of Luke points out God's favouritism and bias for those who are the innocent victims of persecution.

Jesus tells us the story of the widow in order to remind us that the way to the Father is not a question of how self-sufficient, or organised, or how powerful, or controlled we are, but how persistent and faithful we are. We read time and time again in the Scriptures how faithfulness to God is always rewarded. Yet as Christ consistently reminds us, we are not called to faithfulness based upon self-protection or slave-like obedience. Christ calls us to be his friends, his brothers and sisters. We are family, not business partners or hired hands. But true faithfulness is hard work. It is based on love, genuine commitment to the other founded in a close relationship of open communication and understanding. It's based on trust. As Christians we are called to trust our heavenly Father in season and out of season, in the good times and in the bad. God is unendingly faithful to us because he has no alternative – he is so deeply in love with us. He asks only that we remain close to him until we see him face to face.

Prayer

Father, may your faithfulness to us become our pattern of love. Deepen our faith in the risen Lord and save us from isolation and despair.