

Monday May 4th

John 10:1-10

There is no introduction to this chapter, suggesting that John meant it to be read in conjunction with the earlier story of the man born blind. He is among the sheep while the Pharisees are the very embodiment of the false shepherds. The parable presents an accurate picture of a common event in Palestine and the details would have spoken eloquently to those listening. The passage begins with the solemn warning: "I tell you most solemnly...". In presenting himself as the Door he is making it clear that he is the only way to the Father and to salvation. This then makes sense of the "thieves and robbers" allusion. The alternative "way" is that which is put forward by the false shepherds (Pharisees) and will never lead to a life of salvation. This includes the old way of the law as well as the long list of traditions that have grown up on the Law. They come to steal the sheep which belong to God and do not have the good of the sheep in mind. As soon as difficulties come, they will abandon the flock. But Jesus is the Good Shepherd and what makes him Good is that he is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. This willingness is based on love...Jesus knows intimately those who belong to him and they know him with an equally high level of intimacy. Biblically the word "know" means a deep and personal level of knowledge about and experience of the individuals concerned. It is life-giving knowledge and that is the sense used here.

This parable has a strong emphasis on the sheep recognizing the shepherd and the role that hearing plays in the relationship. The sheep listen for the shepherd and respond to his voice. That is a model of discipleship. To enter into the fold (which is the Kingdom of God) we need to hear him speaking and calling us. If that opportunity of listening is not provided then we miss out on his voice. We can also presume that recognizing the shepherd's voice comes about because of a familiarity with the voice. It is no use listening for the voice of God on an every-now-and-then basis and then wonder why he is not speaking. He does but his voice is unfamiliar. We need to build up that familiarity through exposing ourselves to his voice: in prayer, through his voice in the Scriptures, in the sacred liturgy and through the other sheep in the fold. There are other ways we can live but there is no other way that has the same guarantee of providing food and shelter.

Prayer

Loving Father, you shepherded Israel your flock and sent your Son to be our Good Shepherd to bring us together into your family so that we too can know your Peace, your support, your healing and a fellowship bound together in love.



BIBLE STUDIES

APRIL 2009

+ Michael Hough
with **Fr Robert Newton**



LANTERN SERIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sunday May 3rd

John 10:11-18

Jesus is now spoken of as the "good" shepherd. His goodness is shown in the care that he has for his sheep. Being a shepherd entails a constant living for one's sheep, a commitment that will eventually cost Jesus his life. The image of the shepherd is found in the Old Testament and is applied to God who leads, protects and gathers together his people, looking after them solicitously and lovingly. The only king given this title is the future messiah-king of the house of David. He exercises the office of God's shepherd (Ezek 34:23ff; Mic 5:1-3). We also find in Zechariah mention of a shepherd of God who is put to death and whose death brings about a turning point (Zec 13:7-9). In the New Testament this prophecy is focused on Jesus. Hired shepherds were not uncommon in Palestine but they were expected to do everything possible to ward off wild animals. However, it was all a matter of pay and as they had no inner relationship with the sheep, there could well come a time when they would flee to save themselves. Clearly the hirelings are written up to highlight the attributes of the good shepherd. The word for "knowing" his sheep is one with a rich biblical heritage that suggests an intimate friendship and intimacy on the level of the love between a husband and wife. Its origins are to be found in the deep relationship that exists between the Father and the Son. That is the model for the relationship between God the Father and his Son and the guarantee of the love of the Son for his sheep.

It is important to note that Jesus also acknowledges the existence of sheep who are "not of this fold". The Father had sent him, not to form some exclusive group of the "saved", but in order to bring all peoples together into the one flock. That is what the Father wants. He wants all people to live together under the one Shepherd — Jesus. It was at the Ascension that the mission of Jesus was, in a sense, formally handed over to his disciples who were left behind. They now take up that responsibility and it is the responsibility of every baptized person to bring those "not of this fold" to come to know Jesus. If we are living out our faith in such a way that people feel judged, or unworthy, or in a manner which suggests an hypocrisy on our part; if we are living the Gospel in a way that makes the message of Jesus irrelevant to the needs of our world, then we are failing to do as the Father wants. The ultimate measure of our faithfulness is to be measured in terms of our willingness to lay down our lives for others. Quite a barometer!

Prayer

34

Father, we are like sheep, easily put off, in need of being fed, guided and protected. Keep us close to Christ our shepherd.

Saturday May 2nd

John 6:60-69

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

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

Prayer

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

Wednesday April 1st

John 8:31-42

This section is addressed to those who "believe" and yet who do not fully believe. They lean towards belief, but struggle, and this puts them into a dangerous spiritual state. To deny Jesus is to align themselves with the forces that are opposed to him. In John's presentation such people are under the influence of evil which is holding them back from belief. This makes them slaves. True freedom is to be found in the freedom which Christ alone gives. They claim ancestry to Abraham and that it is their faithfulness to their traditions that stop them from believing. In reply Jesus says that when it comes to faith, actions speak louder than their words will ever speak. Abraham was called a Friend of God, and by claiming links with Abraham they were claiming links to God as well. This is what Jesus calls a lie, because while they claim faithfulness to God they wish to kill the One sent by God. This is the Truth Jesus talks about in verse 32. Belief in Jesus as the Son of God will be the only thing that can free them from the chains of sinful disbelief.

Much of what the Pharisees say is true and faithful to their traditions but the problem was that it had become so powerful in their lives that they had lost contact with what God was trying to say to them in Jesus. Religion had taken over from faith. So strong were the restraints of their religion that they were no longer open to any new ways through which God may have been speaking. They could not believe in Jesus because their expectations were that God would speak through the law, the priests, the ancestors.....and so he did. But he was not to be limited by them. As God he was free to speak through any means he wanted, even the sending of his own Son. That is what they could not accept. For them it was so outrageous a thought that they planned to kill Jesus. While God spoke in traditional ways they remained faithful and loyal. When God moved in ways that would move them beyond the comfortable, when he extended the demands on their faith, they refused to obey. They believed but limited their belief to what suited them. Lent is about making sure that we are not walking that same path, and giving God room to move as he wills. It all becomes possible though, only when we "make my word your home", for only then will we be his disciples.

Prayer

Almighty God, we are sorry for the times when we have made the ways of our religion more important than the life of faith it was formed to nourish. Help us during this season of Lent to listen to where it is you wish to lead us and strengthen us that we may follow your calling.

Thursday April 2nd

John 8:51-59

John brings this section of his Gospel to a close with a powerful climax: the claim of Jesus to divinity. The Jews understand this, reject him and seek to stone him. Their attempts at murder fail because his time has not yet come. Their accusation (verse 48) that he is a Samaritan suggests that their concern is that Jesus is leading his followers along a path that will diminish the many traditions that had grown up in Judaism. As children of Abraham and inheritors of the teachings of the prophets they have been faithful for generations and can put forward the law to prove their faithfulness. Jesus counterclaims that while they claim to know God their actions prove otherwise. He knows God because he comes from God and he knows Abraham because he existed before Abraham. That is the guarantee they need. God was working in Abraham and he is still working now in the Son – the same God – the same power and the same purpose. The difference was that Abraham heard and responded, and they are refusing to listen to what God is saying. The key figure in all of this was not Abraham, as they insisted, but the God who called Abraham.

There are two messages of hope in this reading. The first is that John reminds us that the Father never abandoned Jesus. Even in his darkest hour Jesus knew that the Father was in control and that is why the Jews could not put him to death....until his hour had come. God who created the world remains in control. For the early Church community, surrounded by suffering and persecution, this was an important message, that there was no such thing as an absence of God. What they had to do was be open enough to find him at work and be prepared for him to be working in unexpected ways. The second great message of hope comes at the end where Jesus says "I Am" (verse 58). This is the name of God given to Moses at the start of the Exodus, and the powers that God displayed in leading the people out of Egypt, through the desert and into the Promised Land, are there in Jesus. Faith in him brings with it the possibility of new life, a new beginning and freedom from the things that kill hope and enthusiasm. If Jesus is God, and that is the invitation offered to us again, then our lives can change....if we allow him to change us. The way that all this happens is by "keeping my word". Through our faithfulness to the Word of God, the Spirit makes all things possible in and through us.

Prayer

Loving Father, you have always been a God who has walked with your people, protecting them, healing them and leading them to new life. Through our efforts in this Lenten season, may we find our hope renewed and our life refreshed.

Friday May 1st

St Philip and St James

John 14:6-14

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

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

Prayer

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

Thursday April 30th

John 6:44-51

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

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

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

Friday April 3rd

John 10:31-42

Significantly our text again speaks of the Jews seeking to stone Jesus. While the penalty for blasphemy was stoning to death, the Jews here are not interested in justice. They have a ‘lynch law’ mentality quite contrary to what the Law demands. In his explanation Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6: “*I said you are gods*”. The Hebrew understanding of this was that the Law was given to them on Mount Sinai and the effect of having the Law was to, in a special way, make them a divine nation. There is no way that they would have understood this to be literally true. The divinity resided not in them but in the Law which was within them and the life of God which was the heart and soul of the Law. As it was the Law that made gods (note the small “g”) so it is the life of the Father within Jesus that makes him the Son of God (capital “G”). He and the Father are One and this is where his justification is to be found. Not in his works and not in his teachings, though these are full of authority because of his divinity. This section follows on from the teachings on the Good Shepherd and helps us to see that the main concern here is with authority to speak out for the people. As the Good Shepherd who has the people entrusted to him by the Father, Jesus has the responsibility to act on their behalf, whatever the consequences he might face. The Pharisees feel that they have the main responsibility for pastoral care because they are the interpreters of the Law and so have the final word on what is the will of God.

It is God who gives life. It cannot be earned or gained by the full observance of some law or tradition, nor is it administered by some group or person. The Pharisees set themselves up as the arbiters of life and their way was to be the only way. They were an exclusive sect and those not following their ways were condemned. This has been a major sin within Christianity at all levels. Groups have seen themselves as somehow **The** way. Theological positions have insisted that their way is the only way, or the best way, and the danger has always been that those who live differently and believe differently are to be condemned. Christians can also easily view the world in that way: we are saved while they are condemned. To avoid the sin of the Pharisees we need to step back and leave judgement to God and to find ways of allowing God to work his will in a plurality of styles and a variety of ways and that is a difficult call when we have become comfortable with our religious lives.

Prayer Father, we thank you for your patience and your compassion, that despite our arrogance and stubborn pride, you welcome us back again and again. Keep us truly repentant.

Saturday April 4th

John 11:45-57

In the Gospel we now focus more specifically on the impending death of Jesus and are made very much aware of the human dimensions behind that death. The raising of Lazarus led some to faith in Jesus and others to betray him. John laces this section with irony as Caiaphas the High Priest (the persecution of Jesus now moves from the Pharisees to the priests) spells out his perception of Jesus. He gives the meaning of Jesus' coming death: "It is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed". He uses this as an excuse for the crucifixion when in fact it is exactly what Jesus is doing, not just for the nation of Israel but for all peoples. This gathering of the Sanhedrin was not the official meeting. What it represents is an informal gathering of like-minded priests who wanted to address what they saw as a problem for the nation. It was therefore personal and not something that (at this stage) represented the Jewish people. What we have seen so far in the Gospel is a slow and inevitable movement towards this point. For John this would be a slow unfolding of the plan of God for the salvation of all.

There is a strong sense of tragedy in this final story before the crucifixion. We have a group of priests getting together on their own to plan the death of Jesus. The tragedy is evident in that here we have men who believe, who strive to live the law and who would rather die than abandon their God, but are still planning to kill the Son of God. It is a salutary warning about the dangers of not being open to what God is saying. They have had their life with God well set out and the processes for finding out what God wants equally well established. Because they were not going to allow God to do something as radical as establish a new covenant they killed the very messiah for whom they had been waiting. They were clearly threatened. They were also anxious about what changes would mean for them and the kinds of things they would have to give up. There was also a question about power. If they went the way of Jesus they would have less power and less authority and that worried them. This is no isolated sin but is something that remains a real danger to all who seek to be disciples. The sad thing is that for the sake of their own prejudices and their own views, they were prepared to put to death the Son of God. That is a frightening thought for all believers.

Prayer

Lord God, keep us open to your will and so filled with hope that we are able to let go of the things that stop us from allowing the Kingdom of God to be alive in our lives, and help us work towards that hope flowing out to other people.

5

Wednesday April 29th

John 6:35-40

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

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

Prayer

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

30

Tuesday April 28th

John 6:30-35

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

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

Prayer

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

Sunday April 5th

Palm Sunday

Mark 15:1-39

In Mark, it is the Passion narrative that is the key to unlocking the significance of Jesus of Nazareth. In his death his kingship and divinity is revealed. Jesus interpreted the meaning of the Messiah's ministry in terms of his death. The Messiah had to die (8:31-33). This was no triumphant Messiah-King but a suffering servant Messiah and the fact of his death was repeated three times (9:9-13; 9:31; 10:32-45). This is why the status of Jesus as Messiah is validated on Golgotha. There is a great irony in Mark when the Romans insist on the title "King of the Jews". Jesus resists the temptation to prove his messiahship by miraculously saving himself from the cross (15:31-32) and by losing his life he affirms his vocation as Messiah (8:34-35). It is with further irony that in Mark the Roman centurion is the only human being to recognize and acknowledge Jesus as God's Son. The only other ones in the Gospel to do this have been evil spirits. This is the true conclusion of the Gospel. Until now Jesus has commanded people not to reveal who he was. This secret of Mark's Gospel is found at the end of most of the miracles, with Jesus telling the people blessed by a miracle not to tell anyone. Now the proclamation could be made and the centurion is the one chosen for the task. After looking at what has happened, he can proclaim the truth that is now apparent from all that Jesus did and said: This man is the Son of God.

Tertullian, the great theologian (160-225AD) wrote: "In all our travels, in our coming in and going out, in putting on our clothes and our shoes, at table, in going to rest, whatever we are doing, we mark our forehead with the sign of the cross". It is a real shame that for some people the sign of the cross is some kind of Roman Catholic superstition. As Tertullian notes, it is a pious act that goes back to the very early days of the Church. He encourages people to mark themselves with the cross so that they live out every part of their lives under its shadow. It reminds them that all they do needs to be done from the perspective of discipleship. It is a call to allow the Gospel and the teachings of Christ to modify all that they do. It is a reminder also that Jesus demands that those who seek to be disciples must take up their cross every day. Discipleship is not something that happens once at baptism, being a Christian involves continuing a way of life.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, in your great love for us you sent us your Son Jesus that we may know the forgiveness of our sins. Help us live our lives under the cross, to be prepared to die to our own selfishness and pride and humbly live Gospel lives.

Monday April 6th

John 12:1-11

Importantly John links this story of the anointing with the raising of Lazarus and the intention of the Jews to put Jesus to death. Like the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, where this story is also recorded (Mk 14:3-9; Matt 26:6-13), what John has in mind is the coming crucifixion. We have the themes of both death and resurrection providing the background against which the events at Bethany were written. He has moved this story so that it takes place before the Palm Sunday event so that when Jesus finally enters Jerusalem it is with the death and resurrection in mind. He enters as the anointed and triumphant Messiah whose death is undertaken so that the sins of all peoples may be forgiven. He arrives in the city on the Sabbath before the last Passover he is to share with his disciples, though in John this is a very different celebration, for Jesus is going to be the true Paschal lamb. When Mary anoints the feet of Jesus it has the symbolic function of her anointing the whole of his body for she sees him as the resurrection and the life, and this before he had died. It is a reinterpretation of death for she knows that Jesus "lives and shall never die" and "though he dies yet shall he live" (11:25-26). This is the same kind of imagery and message that John uses when he speaks of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus runs into some criticism that the money should be used for the poor instead of for anointing his body. John rejects this criticism and puts forward a theology of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God who has come to save all men and women from their sins. Care for the poor has its place, but so does due recognition of God. To have a faith community that has wonderful social outreach but little time for worship and praise of God is a community that is failing in its duties. God must be given a prime place within the life of the Church and of individual believers. Both of these are basic elements of the Christian faith and it would be a betrayal of the Son of God to ignore the opportunities for respectful worship. This is something that is easy to lose sight of in our modern world, where worship, contemplation and meditation are so foreign. All the things we do in the parish are fruitless unless they flow from a life of intimate union with God. That is why Jesus came and that is what he offers us and it is a union he initiates and sustains. It is not dependent on our worthiness.

Prayer

Almighty Father, we acknowledge you as God and offer you worship and praise. Lead us through this great week of Easter, that as we die with Christ we may rise again with him and live new lives, free of sin and filled with your Joy.

Monday April 27th

John 6:22-29

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

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

Prayer

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

Sunday April 26th

Luke 24:35-48

Fr Robert Newton

Some years ago, the author H. A. Williams wrote a little book he titled *True Resurrection*. Williams said we have too narrow an understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. The New Testament witness to the resurrection of Jesus is not about Jesus alone. Instead, Jesus is the chief exemplification of the resurrection. For Jesus exemplifies something at the heart of all reality — life continually rising from death. Jesus’ resurrection simply makes this truth clear. There are many in any congregation who can be called “troubled sceptics”. They are often the mainstays of the congregation, serving on committees, and holding down their pew every Sunday morning. But there is something that they hide from others, and often from themselves. They are troubled in understanding traditional Christian doctrines and the meaning of scripture. They enjoy their church and they work hard for it. They possess a critical, modern worldview, making any approach to doctrine and scriptures difficult. They have not been able to bring the ancient world of scripture and doctrine and their modern world together. They become “closeted” by this spiritual chasm. They long for help from the pulpit and study groups, but they often find these wanting. Many priests could do this, but they are fearful that to do this would involve them in uncomfortable and dangerous ways.

But the churches of the modern world could help. We could start with this central doctrine of the resurrection. We could say that Jesus’ resurrection calls us to understand that this is a resurrecting universe. Time and again those great Greek virtues — goodness, truth and beauty — seem destroyed in the flow of history. Then, somehow, they rise up again with renewed power and persuasiveness. All the great values of Western civilization were in peril when the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933. But the things that seemed to be given over to death from 1933 to 1945 have returned in Germany. This larger view of the resurrection can be seen on the personal level, too. Fate and decision to a death short of physical death drive some of us. We may have been near spiritual and emotional death after a great loss. Then after some healing has taken place we have rejoined life and are now working to eliminate whatever caused our great loss. We stood up out of our death and began to live once more. Let us not forget, this is resurrection, too. In a very real sense we have to believe in resurrection to make sense of the world.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, give us the courage and wisdom to see your resurrecting power in our lives as exemplified by your true and only Son.

Tuesday April 7th

John 13:21-38

In this short section John reminds the readers that despite their callings there was unfaithfulness among the Twelve. They were reclining at the Passover meal and Jesus announced the treachery that was to follow at the hands of Judas. When Jesus gave Judas the piece of bread we are told that Satan entered him. This was a decisive moment in the Gospel and it seems that this was a moment of choice for Judas. He could accept the bread and repent (which was a traditional sign of a special friendship) or he could accept the bread and continue with his betrayal. His choice is made and at that moment he is taken over by Satan. John, making clear that corrupt human motives and aspirations are not driving the events, has Jesus command Judas to go about his work quickly. Even though he is now in Satan’s hands, he still obeys the Christ. When he goes out darkness falls. He is cut off from the Light and so walks in darkness. It is now a clash between darkness and light. The section (verses 31-35) is in many ways an interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus. These are the actions that show us what love is. The traitor is now gone and the glorification of the Son has begun. It began with the act of betrayal but what evil might see as victory is in fact a glorification of the Son and so a glorification of the Father. All this takes place on the wood of the cross for it is there that the love of God is made so painfully clear. Jesus sheds his blood to save mankind. When Satan enters into Judas it appears that the prince of darkness is “winning”, that he is in charge. This appearance will continue through the cross which will then become a tree of life.

This section is important for all of us and gives great hope to believers. As Christians reflect on the horror of the death of Jesus on the cross they are invited to see in it not death, but life. It matters not how dark a moment may appear, how hopeless a situation may seem to have become, for God can and will bring a glorious victory for those who remain faithful and who believe. Jesus offers to all of us a way of handling suffering and loss, doubt and uncertainty. If God can turn such a terrible death into new life, then working with our problems is going to pose few difficulties for him. Why should God do this? Not because we have deserved it, but because he loves us and nothing can take away this love. As at creation God overcame the darkness, so in Christ we have hope of a new creation.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for the forgiveness, life and hope that you give us in your Son Jesus Christ. As we continue on our journey towards Golgotha may we find in the cross a promise of great hope in our moments of darkness and pain.

Wednesday April 8th

Matthew 26:14-25

The thirty pieces of silver is in accord with what Exodus 21:32 sets out as the fixed price for the life of a slave. The betrayal by Judas in Matthew is set out as a contrast to the act of love that went just before it, when Mary anointed the feet of Jesus, heedless of the high cost of the oil. Now Judas betrays the Son of Man for a handful of coins. In Matthew Judas is not described as the one who betrayed Jesus (though this is Luke's phrase in Lk 6:16). Rather he is called the one who delivered Jesus up. This is in keeping with Matthew's theology which sees the death of Jesus not as the product of human actions but as something that happened according to the will of God. Only Luke has Satan as the instigator of the whole of the Passion drama (Lk 4:13). With Judas, and thus Satan, gone, the disciples then sat down to share the Passover meal with Jesus. The symbolic importance of this event is clear. The Passover was the Jewish celebration that called to mind the mercy of God when the angel of death passed over the children of the Hebrews and the first born male children of the Egyptians were killed. This was the beginning of their journey to freedom and new life in Canaan. Jesus in the Gospels is presented as the new Paschal Lamb whose blood is shed so that all men and women could be set free and be offered new life. This is why Matthew moves from the feast of the Passover to Jesus' institution of the Eucharist where the bread and the wine are the new Passover offerings. He moves from the Passover meal to Golgotha thus making clear the meaning of the crucifixion. The death, like the Exodus, is a movement from slavery to freedom.

The celebration of the Mass has always been the key to the life of the Church. Right from the beginning Christians would gather in small groups to break the bread in remembrance of the actions of Jesus. Each time this is done those celebrating are, in a sacramental way, taken to the foot of the cross. This is the great gift of Christ and we share in it and make it real each time we join with others in the sacrifice. At Mass we gather humbly in faith, receive the gift of the forgiveness of sins, are strengthened and enlightened by the Word of God proclaimed to us, offer God prayer for the needs of the Church and the world, bring gifts symbolizing our lives to the altar, join with the universal Church in offering thanks, share in a communion and take all those gifts out into the wider community.

Prayer Merciful God, we thank you for the liberating and strengthening gift of your Son in the Eucharist. May we come to your altar more frequently and in humility for the sake of the world.

Saturday April 25th

St Mark

Mark 16:15-20

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

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

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

Friday April 24th

John 6:1-15

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

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

Prayer

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

Thursday April 9th

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-15

The public ministry of Jesus is over. His words are no longer addressed to the crowds but restricted to his disciples and those prosecuting him. The story of the washing of the feet flows on from and rounds out the great statements about the origin and destiny of the Son. He has come from God and is going to God and both journeys involve a voluntary humility. For the Son to come amongst men as a man, for the eternal Word to become flesh, is itself a supreme act of humility as was the death at Golgotha. The laying aside of his clothes and the taking up of the towel and wrapping it around his body are symbolic of the death and resurrection. It was an action performed by slaves for their masters. Here Jesus reverses the role. This meaning is made explicit when Jesus attempts to wash the feet of Peter. He protests and Jesus explains that while he does not understand its meaning now, he will later. In this way he joins this episode to that of the cleansing of the Temple and the entry into the city as a king riding on a donkey. This washing, while speaking of the death and resurrection, is also symbolic of the union of the disciples with Jesus (verse 8). The death of Jesus brings a purification to those who allow him to wash them (symbolized by the water and washing), a washing that takes place first of all at Golgotha but then later on in the life of the Church in the sacrament of baptism, in confession and in the celebration of the Eucharist. The disciples (and the Church) at the foot of the cross are washed clean by the blood and water from Christ's side.

What we have in this story is a sermon from Jesus that is acted out rather than preached. It not only shows us the nature of the authority of Jesus, that of humble service, but also provides us with an example that we are called upon to follow in our own dealings with other people. When Jesus commands the disciples to go and do the same to others, he is telling them that what must be repeated is the idea of service. No one is to suppose themselves to be better than another. No disciple is to be anything other than a servant. These are tough demands, and Lent is the perfect time for stopping and reflecting on our dealings with others. Are there people we have hurt by what we have said or done? Do we constantly clash with certain people? Are we gossips? Do we spread stories that harm others and create divisions? These are not the ways of God.

Prayer

Father, we can all too easily justify our lack of charity towards others by using arguments that you will never accept. Help us this Easter to heal what divides and hurts.

Friday April 10th

Good Friday

John 18:1-19:42

John introduces his story of the Passion with an extended account of what happened in the upper room with all that Jesus said and did to be read in the light of the coming crucifixion. Of the twelve chapters in this Gospel which are devoted to the ministry of Jesus nine of them are concerned with events surrounding the Passion of Jesus. In a very real way then, the whole Gospel is a Passion story. From the beginning Jesus is the Lamb of God (1:29; 1:36). This Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world and so needs to be a sacrificial lamb. He really does take away the sins of people by his death on the cross. This is why it is so central to the Gospel. When his cross is immediately before him he says "The hour has come" (12:23; 12:27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1). This clarifies again that the whole process of Jesus' ministry is one of obedience to the will of the Father and that all his actions are moving towards this one climax. Jesus had come for a purpose and that purpose can be seen on the cross. There are numerous differences between John's account and the other Gospels but it is the discussion with Pilate that stands out. It is presented as a confrontation between God and the power of the world (represented by the Roman Governor). There they talk about kingship (18:33-38) which Pilate sees in terms of power but Jesus sees in terms of Truth. It is truth that is important for John, not power. Pilate declares three times that Jesus was innocent (18:38; 19:4; 19:6) but under pressure from the Jews he used his power to crucify Jesus. Power corrupts. The Truth frees. But the Truth of the Gospel is not defeated, for Jesus rises from the grave.

John's Gospel powerfully presents Jesus as the model for disciples. He willingly becomes a humble servant of his Father and of other people. He continues in his faithfulness even when it is not felt to be politically correct and when it draws abuse, misunderstanding and even death. He was a man of power who refused to use his power for his own advancement and comfort. He preached the Truth and he lived the Truth and calls us to do the same. It is all too easy to put aside the life of 'gospel love' because it is politically expedient, difficult, inconvenient or at times embarrassing. Jesus offers us hope that beyond the harshest of circumstances or situations, a "resurrection" awaits those who persevere faithfully. The same Heavenly Father who raised him, offers us the hope of life eternal.

Prayer

Loving Father, may we be so moved by celebrating the Easter mysteries that we commit ourselves to faithfully living out the demands of discipleship, that others may know your love.

Thursday April 23rd

John 3:31-36

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

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

Prayer

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

Wednesday April 22nd

John 3:16-21

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

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

Prayer

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

Saturday April 11th

Easter Eve

Mark 16:1-8

[shorter ending]

Mark's account of the resurrection is simply and matter-of-factly presented. It is no heroic epic with scenes of wonder and glory but its message is clear. The Jesus they saw crucified some forty hours earlier has risen, *just as he said he would*. That the women were bringing the oils and spices to the tomb to anoint the body clearly suggests that they did not expect him to have risen. Mark mentions the first day of the week to tie the Christian practice of celebrating their Sabbath on Sunday to an historical moment. Mark's point about their concerns for the huge stone highlights the point that it would have been difficult for anyone to steal the body (as the Jews would later claim). It is therefore a dramatic surprise when they arrive and find the stone rolled away. Something superhuman has happened. The young man's clothes are stunningly white, especially given that he was inside the darkened burial chamber. This is suggestive of the supernatural (a similar whiteness is to be found at the Transfiguration [9:2ff]). Verse 6 is the crucial verse, presenting us with the finale of this Gospel's message: he is risen! He is not talking about Jesus living on beyond death, a life after death. The word he uses makes it clear that he is talking about a physical resurrection. The tomb is empty. The body is gone and Jesus continues to live and minister on earth, though in a different manner than before. The women are to go back to the disciples (Jesus presumes that they are still together and have not yet scattered in their fear) and let them know the good news and reassure them that they will see him once again, in Galilee.

One of the powerful messages in the account of Mark is that the women are sent out to tell Peter and the other disciples what they had seen. What a message of forgiveness and hope that must have been for Peter. How easy it would have been for him to respond in despair like Judas did. Peter not only abandoned the Son of Man, he betrayed him and denied ever knowing him. That must have torn Peter apart. But it was not just Peter, for the other disciples too must have been filled with shame over the way they had responded to the needs of their Messiah. But Jesus did not abandon them. He sent the women back to them and reassured them that despite their behaviour, he would come to them and be with them in Galilee. Therein is our hope. We too are not much better than Peter and so easily abandon our Saviour. But he will never abandon us.

Prayer

Loving Father, fill us with a sense of sorrow and a desire to repent and build our lives around the demands of the Kingdom.

Sunday April 12th

Easter Day

Luke 24:13-35

This story of the Emmaus appearance is filled with important notes from Luke’s overall theology. The disciples’ journey to Emmaus, like much in the Gospel, takes place “along the road” thus presenting the ministry of the disciples as a journey. During that journey Christ appears to them, but they fail to recognize him. This is not because of Satan’s activities but because of their human inability to believe fully in the power of God. It is only after they are instructed in the faith that the blindness is removed and then only in the breaking of bread. This act becomes important in Luke’s second book, the Acts of the Apostles. From now on Christ will be present to his assembled disciples, not visibly (after the Ascension), but in the breaking of the bread. The disciples themselves are convinced that Jesus is a prophet “mighty in deed and word” whom they had hoped would deliver Israel. Jesus appears and teaches them about a suffering Messiah about whom Moses and the Prophets had spoken and who was made manifest in him. The teaching burns like a fire within them and after recognizing him in the ‘bread breaking’ they return to Jerusalem and proclaim that the Lord is Risen.

The question that we cannot ignore is why the disciples could not recognize Jesus. They surely knew him well, would have recognized him only a matter of a few weeks prior to this event. What has changed? The way Luke puts it, the real problem is that they could not believe that Jesus had risen. It is clear that they thought the Jewish leaders had won, that evil had destroyed their Lord and so they were fleeing the scene. This has been a major problem for the disciples and for all believers down through time. For God, all things are possible. We tend to judge things in human terms (as did the disciples) so that problems we cannot cope with end up problems that are impossible for God. Difficulties, hardships, challenges and threats that for us are overwhelming are for God no more than a blip on his screen and it is this we have trouble accepting. This is Luke’s way of highlighting this fact: if the Father can raise the Son from the darkness of the grave, easing us from our personal darkneses is no great challenge for him. But again, such blessing is an invitation to which we need to respond.

Prayer

Loving Father, as you raised your Son from death to life and promised new life to those who die in him, as we celebrate this gift of Easter, renew us and lead us forward into lives of faithful discipleship.

Tuesday April 21st

John 3:7-15

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

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

Prayer

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

Monday April 20th

John 3:1-8

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

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

Prayer

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

Monday April 13th

Matthew 28:8-15

Matthew’s Gospel is the only one of the Synoptic Gospels that reports this appearance of the risen Christ to the women. The same applies to the stories of the stealing of the body. It is here that we can see Matthew’s editorial purpose which is directed against the Jewish leaders. It is apparent that the Jews were circulating rumours about the body being stolen by the soldiers to counter the Christian stories of the resurrection. We need to remember that at the time of his writing Matthew’s community (which was Jewish in origin) was facing problems ending up with them being thrown out of the Synagogues. By questioning the fact of the resurrection and planting doubt in the minds of new believers the Jews were clearly creating difficulties for Matthew. Hence this story. It was a cunning plot because grave robbing was a problem at the time as soldiers would plunder graves and steal what they could. It was vital that the priests debunk the idea of a resurrection.

How comforting were those words of Jesus to the women! Here they are, feeling abandoned and lost with their whole world falling apart and suddenly Jesus appears in front of them and says “do not be afraid”. But it is addressed to more than just those women. It applies also to Matthew’s suffering community. They must have been wondering just where they would go from there and how they would survive the persecution and misery. They also wondered about their faith and just what Jesus was going to do for them now. Here is the answer, an answer that is eternal and applicable in all situations. “Do not be afraid”. Why not? Because I am here. Death could not hold me in its power and the grave was but a resting spot on my obedient service of my Father. If all that is true, then whatever problems the women faced in Jerusalem, or Matthew’s community struggled with in Antioch, were minor challenges for the Risen Christ. The Early Church had a clear image of the Risen Christ seated on a throne at the right hand of the Father. It was a picture that reminded them that he was ruling, continuing to spread the Kingdom and bringing Light and Life to the world. It shows a belief in an active participation by Christ in the daily lives of believers. It does not say that the Jews will no longer persecute them, or that life will be easy. He does say that they can find peace in the midst of whatever darkness overtakes them.

Prayer

Father, your Son came and brought to us your gift of Peace, a Peace that is possible no matter what problems overtake us. Help us to find that Peace and share it with others.

Tuesday April 14th

John 20:11-18

The story begins with the word "but" or "meanwhile". The disciples had come and found the tomb empty and had gone home still in doubt, in fear, with their faith shaken and still anxious about what was going on. BUT, Mary stayed on. Tradition has always held that verse 14 suggests the angels made some gesture towards Jesus and she turned and looked at him. She looked but did not recognize, leaving us with the question "why?". Jesus questions her about weeping and then asks a guiding question: "Who do you seek?". The question is not "What do you seek?". She had presumably been looking for a body and found a living person, which perhaps explains the confusion. Perhaps harking back to the story of the Good Shepherd who knows the names of his sheep and whose sheep know his voice, he simply calls her name and she turns in response and calls him "Rabboni" which is an unusual usage of a word which is often used to address God. When he tells her not to cling to him he may be simply making it clear that things have changed and that they could not return to the old life. He had Risen to a new life and Mary along with the disciples were also called to live in a new relationship with him, a relationship that involved him at his Father's right hand.

It is significant that while the disciples went to the tomb to see what the enemies had done to the body of Jesus, it was to the infamous sinner that he made his first appearance. John highlights this point by use of the word "but" suggesting that we meditate on why she stayed. What was the gift for which she was searching and hoping. What was it that enabled her to see something the disciples failed to observe? The Fathers of the Church wrote that it was because she was aware of her need for Christ and because she understood the greatness of the healing and forgiveness she had received at his hand that she stayed and searched for more. She did not allow her grief nor the desperate nature of her sorrow and sense of loss to remove hope, and her fear of what may lie ahead did not stop her from searching for her Lord. It seemed to have been her need that kept her there and that need helped focus her actions. Christ appears in various ways to those who search, who through meditation and prayer give him a chance to call them by name. But first we have to need him.

Prayer

Loving Father, stir up within our hearts a true hunger for union with your Son Jesus. Help us to know always our need for the grace and life which he brings and to so shape our daily living that there is always an opportunity to listen to him call us.

Sunday April 19th

John 20:19-31

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

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

Prayer

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

Saturday April 18th

Mark 16:9-15

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

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

Prayer

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

Wednesday April 15th

Luke 24:13-35

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

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

Prayer

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

Thursday April 16th

Luke 24:35-48

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

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

Prayer

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

Friday April 17th

John 21:1-14

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

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

Prayer

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