

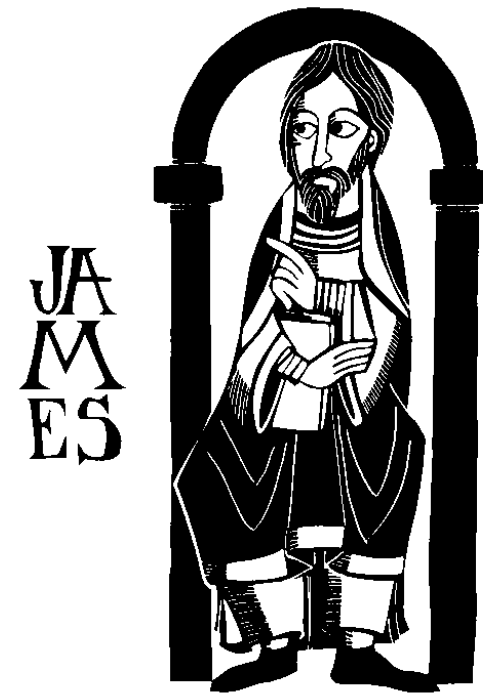
## Monday August 3rd

## Matthew 14:13-21

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

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

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



# BIBLE STUDIES JULY 2009

+ Michael Hough  
with Fr Peter Yeats



## LANTERN SERIES

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

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

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

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

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

The Lantern Series is an initiative of the Diocese of Ballarat. These studies are also available at the start of each month at the diocesan web page at [www.ballaratanglican.org.au](http://www.ballaratanglican.org.au)

### Sunday August 2nd

### John 6:22-35

This teaching is developed by John in four sections. The first sets out the nature of the food used by God to satisfy the hunger of his people (vs 26-34). The second identifies that satisfaction with Jesus Christ (vs 35-40). The third deals with the question of how are men to recognize Jesus as the divine bread, the consequences of such a belief for them and the tragic cost for Jesus in giving himself as heavenly bread (vs 41-51). Finally, we are told how in his self-offering to God on the cross and to men in the Eucharist, Jesus Christ is and remains the true and eternal bread of life (vs 52-59). The frustration shown by Jesus (v 26) arises out of the fact that the crowd saw the miracle of Jesus and were mesmerized by the potential it seemed to have for material well-being and power. He sees in their response a hope that he would provide material food and possibly a new Jewish empire free of the Romans. Any hope they had of understanding the call of the Kingdom of God would arise out of their being disabused of this misconception of the teachings of Jesus. This is what the teaching on the sign is all about. The key point is not the miracle but what the miracle is pointing to. John does not see this as the highest form of faith but as a necessary step for them to move forward. Thus we can follow through the teaching of Jesus. He takes them through a process they understand, from their physical appetites and the bread they ate yesterday to feed those desires. The seal set on the Son of Man by the Father is the cross and resurrection and it is through these events that men and women will be truly fed with food that will lead to eternal life.

It is in this context that we can understand his reference to Moses and the manna in the desert. It was not Moses who fed them in the desert, it was God and the manna was not really bread. God is the constant giver and Christ is the real food of all men and women (1 Cor 10:4). What made Israel the people of God was that they allowed themselves to be fed by God, watered by God (from the Rock) and led by the Father into the land that was theirs only through his promise to Abraham. John uses this story of the Exodus as a kind of parable to highlight what it was that God was doing in Jesus. The Son of Man was leading them to life in the Kingdom, was their food and drink for the journey and the light in their darkness and the cloud that leads them through uncertain times. All that is required is that we understand our need for a new life and God's graces.

#### *Prayer*

Heavenly Father, you are the Lord of all life. Fill us with your Holy Spirit that we may walk in the way you want us to walk, trusting in you to be our light, our strength and our hope.

## **Saturday August 1st**

## **Matthew 14:1-12**

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

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

### ***Prayer***

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

## **Wednesday July 1st**

## **Matthew 8:28-34**

It is interesting to compare this story with the account in Mark 5:1-20. This is the first Gospel account of Jesus the exorcist. It takes place in pagan territory and the devil is seen as being particularly active there. Jewish belief held that when the last days come the devil and his demons would be deprived of their power and thrown into the fires of hell. In some pagan cultures pigs were sacred animals and were used in the cult (hence they were declared to be unclean for the Jews) and so they would become a natural home for demons who were cast out of a living person. In Babylonian traditions demons were thought to be the cause of many diseases and the doctors (or exorcists) would cut up a pig, lay it on the sick person and demand that the evil spirit go into the pig instead of remaining in the sick person. That the demoniac is wandering about among the tombs also highlights what was thought to be the primary result of the work of demons — death. The overall message is clear enough. Jesus, as the Son of God, came to set people free from the control of sin and the things that seek to destroy their lives. To do this he first of all has to defeat Satan. This and the other exorcisms are all a part of that overall picture.

One of the reasons that Jesus had such an impact on the lives of the people of his time and why the Church spread so quickly was that the Gospel worked. Jesus did make a difference. When people set out to live his teachings and to become disciples following in his ways they discovered a true and lasting peace in their lives. When people came together with Jesus as the foundation of their community then their differences were overcome and their group knew a love and peace that had not been possible until that time. This is also the reason why the Church has managed to continue to spread and grow down through history in a wide variety of cultures and times. The Gospel works. In Jesus people can know healing, peace, reconciliation; discover purpose and meaning in their lives and have ample resources to manage and overcome the many difficulties and problems that are a part of life. With Jesus in a person's life (in the centre and not on the periphery) there is simply no room for destructive evil. But we have to move Jesus to the centre.

### ***Prayer***

Merciful Father, cast from our lives those things which harm us, which hold us back from loving you and knowing your lasting peace in our lives. Help us to build our lives on the Gospel message and be more faithful in our discipleship.

**Thursday July 2nd**

*Visitation of the  
Blessed Virgin Mary*

**Luke 1:39-56**

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

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

*Prayer*

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

**Friday July 31st**

**Matthew 13:54-58**

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

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

*Prayer*

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

## **Thursday July 30th**

## **Matthew 13:47-53**

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

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

### ***Prayer***

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

## **Friday July 3rd**

## **Matthew 9:9-13**

This text has three separate parts: the calling of the tax collector (v 9), an argument about eating with sinners (vs 10-12) and the teaching on the primacy of mercy (v 13). In Matthew the twelve disciples are prototypes of the early Christian community. In Mark and Luke the tax collector is called Levi (Mk 2:13ff; Lk 5:27ff) and the general theological opinion is that later editors of Matthew's Gospel changed the name to Matthew to give more authority to the writing. In Luke 5:29 it is made clear that the call of the tax collector is followed by a party given by the converted tax collector. At this point other sinners and publicans were in attendance creating the setting for the conflict with the Pharisees. When he talks about seeking out the sick he has in mind those who are suffering on a moral and ethical level, those who are morally and ethically sick. The Rabbis never offered or carried out a ministry to these sinners and outcasts and indeed would have considered it to be improper. Jesus on the other hand sees these people as being the ones to whom he was sent to minister.

Towards the end of this section Jesus talks about mercy and sacrifice and in doing so seems to use a quote from Hosea 6:6. He is not condemning the Jewish sacrificial system or calling for its abolishment. What he does is establish that mercy has priority over ritual performances. He points out that in the Kingdom of God it is more important to attend to the demands of mercy and love before carrying out ritual observances. When we think about that statement it places enormous demands on all of us. We are used to going along to church on Sunday and saying our prayers. Now Jesus is putting further obligations on those who seek to be disciples. He is saying that (using the Hosea text) he is not going to accept any of our prayers and offerings if we are not living our lives in love. We saw in the Sermon on the Mount that if we have anything against another person we should leave our offerings at the door and fix up the conflict. Only then can we proceed with our worship. How does that apply to our own lives in community? It should stop us in our tracks to think that God will not listen to our prayers if we are hurting others and if we are showing a lack of charity towards our brothers and sisters. We are unable to separate our daily lives from our Sunday worship. One flows into the other and what we do on one level impacts on what we do in Church.

### ***Prayer***

Lord God, we praise and worship you as our Heavenly Father and come to you in need of your blessing. Help us to give to others the same love and acceptance we receive from you.

## Saturday July 4th

## Matthew 9:14-17

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

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

### *Prayer*

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

## Wednesday July 29th

## Matthew 13:44-46

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

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

### *Prayer*

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

## Tuesday July 28th

## Matthew 13:36-43

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

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

### *Prayer*

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

## Sunday July 5th

## Mark 6:1-6

*Fr Peter Yeats*

This has to be one of the saddest stories in the early part of the Gospel, when Jesus returns home. Before this, he had been out and about, curing people and performing miracles. Indeed, just before this he has raised the daughter of Jairus, possibly from the dead. A man of fame; a local boy to be proud of. So he returns to his home town, Nazareth; he returns as a Rabbi, with disciples, and with fame. He is met with disbelief and scorn. The trouble was that they knew him, or at least thought that they knew. He had grown up among them; they had seen him as a baby, a young boy, a teenager and a young man. They knew him as the 'carpenter' – a working man, skilled maybe, but just a worker. (The Greek word is 'tekton' which actually means a skilled craftsman – a builder of houses and ships!) They knew that there was a bit of scandal about his birth (calling him "son of Mary" is a bit of an insult, meaning that his father was not known). And here he is, with all the trappings of holiness, trying to impress them. They were not going to be impressed. They took offence at him. (The reference to "brothers and sisters" is not as clear as it sounds to our ears; it could refer to literal siblings or, as in many cultures, it could refer to cousins.)

This had always been the experience of the prophets, to be rejected by those who were close to them, and Jesus must have realized that it was always inevitable. Humans tend to despise the ordinary, the familiar, and fail to see their real worth. This is the whole point of the Incarnation; that God became 'ordinary' in order to be reconciled to the ordinary. We have to look beyond the outward appearances that we know so well, and see God working even in the commonplace. So, was this the reason that Jesus could do no miracles there, apart from a few healings? The fact that he marvels at their unbelief implies that it was. They did not want him to do anything; they did not expect him to be able to do anything; therefore he did nothing!

God is always willing to act for us, but we have to believe that he is able. How often do we fail to ask something of God because we have a fear that he might not act? It is true that he might not do what *we* want; but we must believe that he will act for us, in his love! Also, as for Jesus, we cannot take rejection as being a sign of failure; people reject us, and God, for many reasons; but our doing the will of God is the most important thing.

### *Prayer*

Father, may we ever do your will; and may we have the faith to believe that your will can be done.

## **Monday July 6th**

## **Matthew 9:18-26**

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

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

### ***Prayer***

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

## **Monday July 27th**

## **Matthew 13:31-35**

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

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

### ***Prayer***

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

## Sunday July 26th

### John 6:1-15

*Fr Peter Yeats*

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is one of those classic Bible stories that everyone seems to know. It occurs in various forms within the Gospels; some with less people being fed, some with more detail and a different emphasis. One of the details that is only found in the Gospel of John is the mention of the boy who has the five barley loaves and two fish. In the other Gospels, the disciples just present them; John gives us a human touch and, by doing so, introduces a new element into the story. It is important that John gives us the detail that there are five *barley* loaves. Barley was the grain used to make the most basic, the poorest, sort of bread. You only ate it if you were too poor for anything else. And the two fish? These were probably two, very small, dried fish which would only give a little flavour to the bread. This food was the basic; almost the lowest rations possible. The boy – we have no name, no age – is brought to Jesus, and his rations are just dismissed by Andrew; as he points out, what is the good of so little among so many? And what of the boy? How did he feel when these ‘important’ people started discussing his dinner? Again, we don’t know – but one can assume that he would probably have agreed with Andrew – as all right thinking people would! Jesus seems to be waiting for two things. The first is for the disciples to actually turn to him rather than rely on themselves – something which forces them to give up. The second is to see if the boy will offer what he has – however poor he thinks that it is. The boy could have said “No” – keeping the little that he had to himself because he knew that it would do no good. This was a crisis point for the boy, a decision which would seem so easy, yet would have profound consequences. And it presents the same crisis to those who hear the story. It asks them the question, “Are you ready to give of what you have, however inadequate and poor it might seem to you, so that God can use it?”. The miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand was indeed ‘done’ by Jesus; but it happened because the boy said “Yes”.

We can look at our own gifts, our own abilities, and think that they are too poor; that we have nothing to offer. We feel inadequate to the task of being full disciples; we think that we should just sit back and let others ‘do’ things. This miracle shows that God can use everything, and use it to do great things, wonderful things, if we are willing to believe and trust in him, and if we are willing to say “Yes”.

### *Prayer*

27

Father, give us the strength to give back to you all that you give us so that all things may be used for your glory.

## Tuesday July 7th

### Matthew 9:32-38

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

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

### *Prayer*

8

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

**Wednesday July 8th**

**Matthew 10:1-7**

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

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

*Prayer*

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

**Saturday July 25th**

*St James*

**Matthew 20:20-28**

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

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

*Prayer*

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

## **Friday July 24th**

## **Matthew 13:18-23**

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

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

### *Prayer*

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

## **Thursday July 9th**

## **Matthew 10:7-15**

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

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

### *Prayer*

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

## **Friday July 10th**

## **Matthew 10:16-23**

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

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

### ***Prayer***

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

## **Thursday July 23rd**

## **Matthew 13:10-17**

This is another of those difficult Gospel passages with the disciples asking Jesus why he insists on teaching in parables. What Jesus means in verse 11 is that "God has granted you" a gift that others have not received. These mysteries are the mysteries of God, with the phrase "kingdom of heaven" being one that Matthew prefers, instead of using the word "God". It is an example of the Jewish reverence for the name of God. The mysteries are the purposes that God has for his Kingdom (Dan ch 2). The ideas found in verse 12 are used elsewhere to warn the disciples against thinking highly of themselves and their position (Matt 25:29; Mk 4:25; Lk 8:18). Here, Matthew means to highlight the gifts possessed by the disciples through their union with Jesus. Those to whom God has granted knowledge will be given even more through their discipleship. Verse 13, unpalatable though it may seem at times, makes it clear that for Matthew there were two groups — those who believe and so have the gifts of the Kingdom, and those who are blind and who miss out. There are insiders and there are outsiders. Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 as a way of explaining what he has in mind in verse 13. He is talking about a people whose hearts are hard, who do not want to hear what is being said and who have become all too comfortable with their religion and way of life. It is verse 16 that points out the difference with the disciples. Because they have allowed God into their lives, their hearts are not hard and their eyes are blessed and their ears opened. They see and hear the Good News of Salvation.

It is crucial to remember that this section begins (v 11) with what is called a "divine passive". The ability of the disciples to hear the word of God, to know Jesus as the Son of God, to enjoy the blessings of life in the Kingdom of God, have nothing to do with their ability and their goodness. It is a gift given to them by God. The use of the divine passive throughout the Bible is meant to convey that very point. Faith is a gift. Salvation is a gift. Eternal life is a gift. The forgiveness of sins is a gift. We cannot earn them through good works for we do not deserve them. God, in his great love, for reasons known only to him, freely chooses to offer the gift of life eternal to those who are repentant and willing to change and put aside their own selves, take up their crosses daily and follow him. That is what makes us "insiders". It is an unearned privilege that brings responsibilities with it.

### ***Prayer***

Father, we thank you for the gift of faith and pray that you so make us grateful, that we spend our lives obeying the Gospel.

**Wednesday July 22nd**

*St Mary Magdalen*

**John 20:1-18**

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

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

*Prayer*

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

**Saturday July 11th**

**Matthew 10:24-33**

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

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

*Prayer*

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

## Sunday July 12th

### Mark 6:7-13

*Fr Peter Yeats*

Jesus reacts to his rejection in his home town not by giving up or getting down-hearted, but by moving on with his mission and, indeed, developing it. He begins to involve his disciples, sending them out in twos to proclaim the need for repentance. It is interesting that there is no mention of any in-depth training sessions for the disciples for what they are about to do; no workshops; no time at a Bible College. Jesus seems to assume that because they have experienced him, they will be able to do likewise. Evangelism is not about ability or training, it is about sharing our experience of God. It's also worth considering the disciples' reactions to being sent out; maybe they thought that they were only there to sit and listen; it might have been a shock to realise that a disciple was supposed to do something! The disciples are told to take almost nothing with them – no food, no money, only a staff. It is not that Jesus is an ascetic – he is even accused of being a drunkard! – but because he understands that absolute faith in God is the crucial part of being a disciple. It might seem sensible to take provisions and necessities, but God wants his disciples to trust completely in him. Hospitality was expected to be provided by the towns and villages they went through – a normal thing in that culture. But if they received no welcome, they were to shake the dust from their sandals. This is a reference to a custom the Jews had, when they had been in gentile territory, of shaking off the dust when they returned back to Jewish lands. Jesus implies that those who offer no hospitality are to be treated as pagans! And the message they took? The call to repent, for people to turn their lives back to God. This is not something that people want to hear, when they feel that their lives are comfortable enough. And those who bear the message are not welcomed by many. Even Christians resent being told that they need to change.

We are disciples; we become such at our baptism, and we strive to become more like our Master throughout our life. We look at the first disciples and see how Jesus worked with them. It would be easy to say, "That is not my responsibility" or "I am not trained to do that" – but those do not seem to be part of what God wants from us. One of the great joys, and privileges, of being a Christian is that we are a part of God's mission. Yes, we serve, but we do so for a master who treats us as his own children, sharing with us his work. We must, like the first disciples, learn to have complete faith in God, not in the material things that we believe to be necessary.

**Prayer** Father, like the first disciples, may we feel the joy of total service and total trust in you.

## Tuesday July 21st

### Matthew 12:46-50

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

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

**Prayer**

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

## **Monday July 20th**

## **Matthew 12:38-42**

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

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

### ***Prayer***

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

## **Monday July 13th**

## **Matthew 10:34-11:1**

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

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

### ***Prayer***

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

## **Tuesday July 14th**

## **Matthew 11:20-24**

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

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

### ***Prayer***

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

## **Sunday July 19th**

## **Mark 6:30-34**

*Fr Peter Yeats*

The disciples have been sent and now they return, exhausted after their first stint as workers in the vineyard of their Master. It is interesting that when they are sent, Mark calls them "the twelve"; when they return he calls them "Apostles", a word which comes from the Greek for 'to send'. For Christians then it would certainly have had the technical meaning of 'a missionary' and that they have the authority of the one who sent them. They are tired, yet they are bubbling with excitement and enthusiasm, eager to tell Jesus all that has happened. It is as though they stepped out in faith, with fear and trepidation, and feelings of 'not being ready', but found that Jesus knew what he was doing by sending them, and that it all worked out! But they are exhausted, and this Jesus recognizes and acts upon. He takes them off to a 'deserted' place for rest. In many ways this is modelled on his own way; his ministry is punctuated with times when he disappears off to be alone with his Father.

We don't seem very good at doing 'peace' any more. Our lives are filled more and more; always things to do, always things happening. There is never enough time. We often seem to fear silence, trying to always fill the quiet moments with noise and activity. Even in church, moments of silence bring worry and apprehension; we wonder what has gone wrong! It is always interesting to hear people say that they do not have enough time for prayer, as though prayer is not the most important thing they can do. It is as though a person says that they have no time to breathe; they would not last long! And a Christian who does not pray will not last long! But that prayer can still be one way; we want to fill the silence with our requests, our needs. We have to learn to clear our minds and hear what God wants to tell us. Rest and health are essential for our work, and have to be taken seriously. Vincent de Paul advises, "Be careful to preserve your health. It is a trick of the devil, which he employs to deceive good souls, to incite them to do more than they are able, in order that they may no longer be able to do anything." But Jesus also sees the crowd and has compassion on them. Yes, they constantly interrupt; yes, they always want to bring their petty needs. But Jesus is always available to those who are his people, however petty their problems seem. He does not perform miracles, but teaches them; he does not just solve their problems, but shows them how to solve their own problems. He helps, but wants people to learn to help themselves. For Jesus, teaching is one of the major works of a minister.

### ***Prayer***

Father, help us to learn to be at peace; help us see that in silence we might hear your voice. Give us the discipline to order our lives with you first.

## Saturday July 18th

## Matthew 12:14-21

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

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

### *Prayer*

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

## Wednesday July 15th

## Matthew 11:25-27

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

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

### *Prayer*

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

## **Thursday July 16th**

## **Matthew 11:28-30**

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

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

### *Prayer*

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

## **Friday July 17th**

## **Matthew 12:1-8**

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

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

### *Prayer*

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