

Wednesday June 3rd

Mark 12:18-27

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

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

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



BIBLE STUDIES MAY 2009

**+ Michael Hough
with Fr Robert Newton**



LANTERN SERIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tuesday June 2nd

Mark 12:13-17

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

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

Prayer

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

Monday June 1st

Mark 12:1-12

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

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

Prayer

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

Friday May 1st

St Philip and St James

John 14:6-14

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

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

Prayer

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

Saturday May 2nd

John 6:60-69

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

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

Prayer

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

Sunday May 31st

Pentecost Sunday

John 20:19-23

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

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

Prayer

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

Saturday May 30th

John 7:37-39

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

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

Prayer

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

Sunday May 3rd

John 10:11-18

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

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

Prayer

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

Monday May 4th

John 10:1-10

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

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

Prayer

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

Friday May 29th

John 21:15-19

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

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

Prayer

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

Thursday May 28th

John 17:20-26

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer

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

Tuesday May 5th

John 10:22-30

For John, Jesus is the fulfilment of all that the Feast of Dedication stood for. It began on the 25th of Kislev which would be during November and December on our calendar and went for eight days. It was winter and the cold darkness of that season provides some of the background to his message. It was started in 165BC by Judas Maccabeus to commemorate the re-consecration of the Temple. The Greek of the question asked by the Jews is notoriously difficult to translate. It has something of the idea of: "Why are you being such a pain to us! Tell us straight. Are you the Christ?". This is no friendly inquiry by a friendly crowd. They are trying to pin him down and are doing so in a most aggressive manner. In some ways they highlight John's concern in writing the Gospel — to present Jesus as the Messiah. One can also discern in the language used a hint of contempt. The request "If **you** are the Messiah..." has within it the idea that such a notion would be absurd, that there was nothing of the glory of the Messiah that they had come to eagerly anticipate. In a way this question had already been answered when Jesus told them that the sheep recognize him as the Shepherd and listen to his voice. The Jews do not recognize his voice and so are not able to acknowledge him as their messiah. He repeats again that his concern is "eternal life" and therefore many of the political hopes of the Pharisees will not be met by him. He offers something of a more lasting nature.

The story is set against the backdrop of the Feast and places Jesus in the role of the purificator of the new Temple of God. Not only does he come to purify, but he takes the place of the Temple. As with the woman of Samaria (chapter 4) we know that the Father can be worshipped in spirit and in truth in Jesus. A place of worship is only a place for coming together around the centre of our worship, which is Jesus himself. Of course when we look at our Christian communities it is all too easy to see how these places of worship can take over the life of the community so that they end up becoming more important than the person with whom they are supposed to be uniting us. Jesus brings new life, not just to our places of worship, but to all aspects of our lives of faith. In the midst of the winter darkness that can arise in all of us, he comes as light, new life and the promise of things to come. The Pharisees wanted him to do something to change the world but could not see that **he himself was the something** and that apart from him, no more was needed.

Prayer

Merciful God, help us in Christ your Son to purify our lives and as we celebrate the Easter joy, to rededicate ourselves to you.

Wednesday May 6th

John 12:44-50

These words of Jesus form the end of John’s account of the ministry of Jesus and in some ways are a summary of his words. Its message is simple: there is an intimate union between the Father and the Son and to know one is to know the other and to trust one is to trust the other. God is characteristically referred to as “he that sent” and not by name. In verse 46 when Jesus says “I have come as the light” it is an emphatic “I”. A better translation might be “I by myself and no other have come as light...”. The Greek for “come” is also in the sense of coming and remaining as light. The reason for his coming is to end the control that darkness might have over the lives of individual believers which is the biblical way of talking about salvation. He came to deliver the world from darkness and so has not come as a judge, and does not need to, for those who reject him and choose other paths are judging themselves. Notice that “the world” is mentioned twice indicating an emphasis by John. This is his way of highlighting the choices that people have to make. They can choose to go the way of the world in which they live which is the way that is lived out under the control of human passions, human desires and human authority, or they can choose to walk in the light. All this stands under the blessing of God because everything Jesus has said and done has its origins in the one who sent him.

One of the powerful messages of this section is the idea that the light which is Christ has come into the world and forever works at lightening all that is darkness. It is not an historical event that remains in the past, but an historical event which continues to enlighten the lives of all who come to Jesus. Our humanity is forever changed because the Son of God took on our humanity when he became man. It means that we are different as individuals and that all other people are sanctified as well. That is an exciting insight because it means that the light is in the world, our world, right now. We do not have to ask God to send light, or to allow his light to shine on our particular patch of darkness, for he is already doing it. What our prayer needs to be is one which asks God to help us to see the light, to allow his light to illumine our darkness, to give us the graces we need to be able to walk in that light. Sometimes it can seem as if the darkness is winning and that it is impenetrable. Our story today tells us that Jesus the light is shining now and always.

Prayer

Almighty God and Father of all, we ask that you help us to remove from our eyes those things which stop us from finding your light shining into our lives and to help us walk in that light.

Wednesday May 27th

John 17:11-19

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

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

Prayer

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

Tuesday May 26th

John 17:1-11

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

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

Prayer

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

Thursday May 7th

John 13:16-20

Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the disciples are not to expect better treatment than Jesus himself endured. Equally, they are not to think that they are above having to perform the acts of humble service that marked his ministry (more specifically the washing of their feet). Jesus seems to be saying (verse 17 is a little vague): If you know these things and do them (following the way of the master and washing each other's feet), then you are blessed. As with many other places in the New Testament, John insists on both hearing and doing. John introduces the note about the traitor Judas into the middle of his reflections on the meaning of the foot washing. He presents Judas as being someone who has separated himself from the community which is united in the love of Jesus. The things he has just spoken about do not apply to Judas for he has chosen to cut himself off from the fellowship. By noting that all this was done to fulfil Scripture, John is indicating that the choice of Judas was not a mistake on the part of Jesus, but was done that what was prophesied might be fulfilled. Our section ends with a powerful statement about ministry. Jesus sends the disciples out into the world to continue the work that the Father had given to him which was to bring the world to a knowledge of God. The way to know the Father was through knowing the Son. With this statement of Jesus, the way the world comes to know the Father is through the ones sent by Jesus.

There are two important aspects of this reading that need our prayerful reflection. The first is the reminder that it is always possible for a disciple to abandon Jesus. We should presume that Judas began his life as an apostle filled with enthusiasm and zeal. What was it that tempted him away and distracted him from faithful following? He must have had some weakness, some sin, some temptation that gradually replaced the spot occupied by Jesus in his life. If it could happen to Judas then it could happen to any of us. What do we need to be doing to ensure that we follow Jesus in the way he wants us to? The second important message offered to us by John is that as Christians our fundamental calling in life is to make God known. All that we do in life needs to be done in such a way that people come to know, love, and themselves serve, God. The worrying part is that the opposite is also true. It may be that the way we, as believers, live out our faith, stops people from coming to know God. That is a worry, for we are to present God to the world as did Jesus.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, in this Easter season, enliven the Spirit within us that we may reveal your love and mercy through all that we do.

Friday May 8th

John 14:1-6

The talk of betrayal and the departure of Jesus must have unsettled the disciples for this new section begins with a calming promise and a message that pervades the whole of the chapter. For men who had left everything to follow him, this must have come as something of a shock, especially as he also says that where he is going they cannot follow. How can their hearts not be troubled? Jesus would have known that in a few more hours their hearts would be even more profoundly disturbed as the drama of the crucifixion unfolded around them. The answer is to be found in trust. They need to trust in God and they need to continue to trust in Jesus. When he says "there are many rooms in my Father's house" he is indicating that there is far more to discipleship and eternal life than they can ever imagine and that Jesus is preparing a place for life beyond the present trouble. Whatever apparent disasters come upon them now are nowhere near the complete picture or the end. Going is not the same as forgotten, for Jesus will return and collect them so that they will be with him forever. Their trust must be in the promise that they can never really be separated from Christ and so isolated from God. With that as the guarantee and promise, they need fear nothing. Comforting words as the crucifixion approaches.

There are a number of places in the Gospels where Jesus gives the greeting and promise of "Peace" to his disciples. They all come at times when they are faced with traumas and threats and they look around and find Jesus with them. In some ways this is a picture summary of what Jesus has come to do and it is a common biblical picture: God walking with his people. There is, in John's mind, no such thing as an absence of God. Once people are able to come to an appreciation of God present within their lives and activities and in the world around them, they have hope. The next step is to live in that hope, to live with awareness that God is doing something in them as their troubles unfold. What in this present situation seems like an abandonment by God is in fact an opportunity of faith. God is always pointing forward to new possibilities, new horizons, new hope and provides the believer with the strengths they need to move on. No one need live in fear of what may or may not happen in the future.

Prayer Lord God, your Son Jesus Christ came to us as Light and Life for the world. We pray that as we move towards the celebration of the season of Pentecost we may be strengthened and comforted by knowing his presence within our lives.

Monday May 25th

John 16:29-33

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

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

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

Sunday May 24th

John 17:11-19

An important aspect of this prayer is that it places the crucifixion into the context of Jesus’ mission and the loving mercy of God. What is about to happen is to be seen as a fulfilment of the saving works of God down through history. It is not a mistake. The prediction of the coming death is not a prediction of a disaster. It is not a coming defeat and it is not going to happen because the Father has failed to care for the Son. Rather, the death of Jesus is all about the glorification of the Son by the Father and of the Father by the Son. What will be revealed through the events of Golgotha will be the glory of God’s involvement with creation. What it brings is the hope of eternal life through a sharing in the life of God. It is the communion, the loving union of Father and Son that makes the victory of Jesus over the grave possible. The important thing that flows on from this is the promise that those who are united with Jesus will also share the same victory. Jesus announces that he will soon be no longer with them, but they will remain in the world to face all of its hostility and violence. Their hope is that they remain in the “name” of God. This “name” is the presence of God with all of his love and power. The oneness that Jesus speaks about here is a union in Christ. It is Christ who brings about the unity of the community just as he held the Twelve together during his ministry in Galilee and it is in this unity that they are to find peace, life and hope, even in the midst of violent attacks...and so they will have joy.

Being united in God’s love does not mean that a disciple will be shielded from the hostility of the world. In fact, Jesus makes it clear that he will not be taking his disciples out of the world. They will be there, in the midst of violence and they will know peace. What he does guarantee is that the Evil One will not destroy them. They may suffer death (and indeed the cross is a defining part of discipleship) but not a loss of eternal life. Jesus died on the cross but that was not the end. The disciples may die at the hands of violent men (the world) but the grace of God can and will turn that around so that it becomes a victory. Our life, suffering and death are all opportunities to fill the world with blessings — through the grace of God. That makes all of our lives important, indeed vital for the future Peace of the world, but only through our union in Christ.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you loved your Son and through the Son’s great love for us we share in your divine life. Help us as we search for ways to build up our relationship to your Christ so that all people may come to experience your love and care for them.

Saturday May 9th

John 14:7-14

It is a strange question by Philip but it enables John to go on and speak about the intimate relationship that exists between the Father and the Son. It is important because it has consequences for the prayer life of the disciples. We presume that what attracts Philip is the thought of seeing the Father (1:43). Seeing the Father might be the end to some of the difficulties in his life. When he asks for the Father to be revealed, he would have had in mind the traditional biblical understanding of the way that God makes these revelations. The classic event was when God made himself seen on Mt Sinai where his appearance was accompanied by strong wind, earthquakes, darkness, lightning and other signs and wonders. This helps to explain Jesus’ gentle rebuke as he reminds Philip that in seeing Jesus they are also seeing the Father for “the Father is in me and I am in the Father”. There are two sorts of belief argued for by Jesus. He asks that they “believe me” and then later “believe in me”. There is a content to our faith and this is to be found in the teachings of Jesus. He has taught, he has preached and he has revealed Truth from his Father. Those who seek to be disciples must believe this content. But they must also believe in him. As his works have made clear, he is the Son of God, the Messiah and in him and through him the Father brings his salvation and healing.

Who can blame Philip for looking for some kind of spectacular sign or action from God to make his presence known in the world. If God were to act to remove injustice from the world or from our lives or do something that revealed his power and presence in a dramatic way then the world would be converted tomorrow. But Jesus’ answer to Philip and his answer to us today is much simpler. God’s answer to the ills of the world and the problems which assault us is to be found in the death of Jesus on the cross. It is in powerlessness, in humble submission, in a willingness to sacrifice that God is to be found. We do not need another display like that on Mt Sinai to know God is present in our midst. What we need to do is let go of our lives, to let go of control over all that we do so that the God who is present can reveal himself. It is only then that we can hope to experience the promise of Jesus that “whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do”.

Prayer

All-powerful God, let us see your face...in our poor and needy brothers and sisters, in the acts of love of one person to another and whenever one person reaches to forgive another.

Sunday May 10th

John 15:1-8

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

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

Prayer

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

Saturday May 23rd

John 16:23-28

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

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

Prayer

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

Friday May 22nd

John 16:20-23

“Amen” is a Hebrew word that affirms the willingness of the speaker to accept the consequences of what has just been proclaimed. It is used in the Gospels to solemnly introduce a saying of Jesus that will be proclaiming the will of the Father. It acts as a kind of neon light making the reader aware of the importance of what is happening. Here Jesus is referring to his imminent death and the response that the world will make and its consequences in the disciples’ lives. They will be sad because he is gone but they need to keep their minds clearly focused in on what the death will mean for themselves and for the whole of humanity. Like a woman giving birth, there is a period of pain and suffering (the passion and death) that will be followed by the joy of holding the baby (eternal salvation). It is this broader perspective that enables them to deal with the horror of the cross. In verse 21 there is an important change in this perspective. In verse 16 Jesus reassures them that they will “in a little while” see him and this seeing of Jesus will comfort them. Now we see that Jesus is saying that “I will see you”. Now life is guaranteed by being “seen” by God, it is something that Jesus takes on and not something the disciples are expected to achieve on their own, through their own efforts.

During a normal celebration of the Mass we can say “Amen” something like eight or nine times. The most significant time is at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer when we proclaim the Great Amen. The most personal is at communion when the consecrated host is presented to us and we are invited to affirm that this is indeed the Body of Christ. It is worth stopping for a moment to make sure that we understand what it is that we are affirming. It is more than just a response we can throw in at set times. We are making a commitment to live with the consequences of what we are saying. We are not, for example, just saying that this is the Body of Christ. We are also saying that we will make sure that our hearts, our minds and our way of life are acceptable temples for that sacred body and that our lives will reflect the Christ that is within us. When we say the confession at the beginning of Mass and end with “Amen” we are not just saying we are sorry, but committing ourselves to go out and “love and obey in newness of life”. In our reading then, we are saying that we will live in peace and hope because we know that in all that happens, we are “seen by God”. Amen.

Prayer Father, let our “amens” truly be “amens”. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, strengthen us and enlighten us, that we may set about being faithful disciples making you known to the world.

Monday May 11th

John 14:21-26

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

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

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

Tuesday May 12th

John 14:27-31

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

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

Prayer

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

Thursday May 21st

Ascension Day

Luke 24:36-53

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

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

Prayer

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

Wednesday May 20th

John 16:12-15

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

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

Prayer

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

Wednesday May 13th

John 15:1-8

The early Church traditions indicate that the disciples thought of themselves as in some way constituting the new Israel (Matt 19:28; 20:21; Mk 10:37; Lk 22:30). A common Old Testament image of Israel was the vine. Israel was the vine planted by God in the garden of his making (cf Ps 80:8). This is why it is important to note that Jesus begins this section of his farewell address with the words "I am the true vine" not "you are the true vine". What was once applied to all Israel is now taken on by Christ. The trouble with the old vine planted by God was that it was unfaithful, a "fruitless" vine. Israel had not been the true Israel and had failed to produce in the world the fruit demanded by God. What Jesus is saying in our text is that the true vine, the real vine, has now been planted by God and it is a vine that will bear lasting fruit. Of course there will need to be some pruning and cutting away of the dead wood, but it will bear fruit. Israel should have borne much fruit (the conversion of the Gentiles to come to know Yahweh) but they failed in that task. As the cleansing of the Temple shows, they had concentrated on hoarding their spiritual treasures, keeping them for their own pleasure and glory. The true vine (branches and main trunk together) would bear fruit through the ministry of evangelism.

This is a truly magnificent text but it does have some tough sections. Note well verse 7. If the disciples are living in a close and intimate relationship with their master and his words live in them (the words pointing out his imminent death, his departure to the Father and his return, his humiliation and of his glorification) they can ask whatever they like and it will be given to them. But in John's mind is the understanding that the disciple would not be asking for a smooth path to success in his mission, that all the hard parts and difficulties in his life be taken away from him. That would water down the importance of the Lord's own suffering and death as witness to the victory of God over the world of sin. The way the victory is won is not through the divine removal of sin and evil, but through an intimate union with Christ. It is by making Christ alive in the world, through him being alive in our own lives, that the world is changed. It is by the taking of Christ and making him visible in how we live, in who we are, that the victory already won by Christ on the cross becomes a living reality for all peoples. The call of our reading today is to bear fruit through a closer union to Christ.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are tempted to despair about the success of the mission of the Church and seek out new programmes of renewal. Help us instead to keep our lives more intimately united to Christ and allow him to change your world through us.

Thursday May 14th

John 15:8-12

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

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

Prayer

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

Tuesday May 19th

John 16:5-11

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

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

Prayer

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

Monday May 18th

John 15:26-16:4

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

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

Prayer

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

Friday May 15th

John 15:12-17

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

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

Prayer

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

Saturday May 16th

John 15:18-21

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

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

Prayer

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

Sunday May 17th

John 15:9-17

Fr Robert Newton

The death of Jesus is another form of death noted in our lectionary this morning. This is a death that is freely chosen. The text comes from chapter 15 of the Gospel of John where John is depicting those last hours of Jesus with the disciples in the upper room. In an almost throwaway line, John's Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends". We're not certain why Jesus went up to Jerusalem that last Passover. The reasons given in the Gospels are shaped by later Christian beliefs and are not tight history. All we really know is that Jesus did go up to Jerusalem. A guess might be that he had no detailed plan about his death. Perhaps he thought nothing would happen to him in the city, and he would return to Galilee after Passover. Certainly he knew the saying that no prophet would die outside of Jerusalem. But this would provide no specific plan. Maybe all that Jesus really believed was that he was in the loving, caring hands of God whatever happened. He certainly believed God would work something good out of his death. So Jesus went to his death, chosen without an overall plan, but still chosen. He laid down his life for his friends.

What we do know is that the death of Jesus had a powerfully transforming affect on his followers, and those who join his cause, then and now. At one level, the violent, tragic death of Jesus revealed meanings in him that were not recognized in him, even by his closest friends. This is not strange; for this often happens at the death of loved ones and friends. Their death clarifies their meaning and worth, and we see things that escaped us until their death revealed them to us: "Uncle Charlie was so good at caring for Aunt Elizabeth", we say; or we venture, "Dad never really took anything for himself. He always put all the rest of us first". This may have been noticed before Dad's death, but his death made it an indelible understanding of Dad. Likewise, the death of Jesus falls into a common human experience of death, making clear something we didn't know the full extent of in the dying person. Death can reveal understandings and appreciations we have missed altogether in life. Jesus is a powerful inspiration to live our lives before God and neighbour in a loving fashion as seen in him. In these and other ways, the death of Jesus continues to have a serious influence upon us.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, during this Eastertide give us the strength to reflect on the greatness of your Son's death and resurrection and what it means in our everyday relationships, particularly with our friends and family.