

Monday March 2nd

Matthew 25:31-46

This is in many ways an extraordinary teaching of Jesus. One thing that stands out is the impressive collection of titles that he applies to himself: Son of Man, King, Shepherd, Lord and Judge. On what is just about the eve of the crucifixion we have a message of reassurance. Whatever their eyes may tell them about the end of the ministry of Jesus the truth is that he is the All-powerful King and Judge of all and it is before him that all men and women will one day stand in judgement. What will be the grounds of judgement? Their good works. Faith is not mentioned here, nor are words. What the judge will be looking for is whether or not the tree has borne fruit (Matt 7:17ff). They were told that they had to be lights giving light to all peoples, and salt giving flavour to the world and it is their "lighting" and "salting" that will be called into judgement. In this Gospel story Christianity is a "doing" religion that is meant to be the tool used by God for the transformation of the world. In this way it follows on naturally from the parable that goes immediately before it, the story of the talents. God gifts believers at baptism and expects those gifts to be used for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Our parish communities are families rich in gifts and talents. Each of us, through the goodness of God, has gifts that he means to be used for the whole community. As a body does not function properly if one part of it is sick or diseased, so the Church does not function properly unless all of its members contribute their gifts. Of course it is very easy to find reasons for not being involved. All of us have too much to do and too many responsibilities and demands on our time and energies. But this tough Gospel allows for no excuses. Each of us has to bear our share of the burden of Church life and be ever prepared to extend ourselves according to need and demand. We are also reminded that our faith needs to be lived so that others may know God by seeing him alive in what we do. The Christian faith has never been just one more philosophy of life amidst many philosophies. It is the way of living out our humanity in response to the call of God and is meant to be based on relationships. On our own relationship with God and on the way we live with our brothers and sisters in this world. If our faith does not reach these depths, then it remains little more than just another religion and will be powerless to change us.

Prayer

Lord God, we thank you for the many gifts you have given to us and to our Church community. We ask forgiveness for the times when we have failed to use them fully and pray that through our Lenten observances we may be strengthened to more fully live out our faith.



BIBLE STUDIES FEBRUARY 2009

+ Michael Hough
with Fr Robert Newton



LANTERN SERIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sunday March 1st

Mark 1:9-15

This is often called the "Baptism of Jesus" though a read through the text will show that there is very little about the actual baptism. The focus is on what Jesus saw and heard after the baptism. They are a part of what could be called the prologue or introduction of Mark's Gospel and highlight the true identity of Jesus as the Messiah, an identity that will from now on be only gradually revealed. The same voice will appear again in the story of the Transfiguration, though there the voice will address the disciples. Here, it is Jesus who is being addressed. Each Gospel's version varies in their telling of this story and it is worthwhile examining the differences. Here we see "the heavens torn apart". This is a recurrent theme in biblical writings (Ezek 1:1; Jn 1:51; Acts 7:56; Acts 10:11; Rev 4:1; Rev 19:11). Ezekiel's version also takes place on the bank of a river and it provides a possible background for the presentation of this story. The word Ezekiel uses for "torn open" is only used by Mark at the other end of the Gospel, when the curtain of the temple is torn open at the crucifixion. It is also the word that is used in Isaiah 63:19 (or in some versions Isa 64:1) in a prayer asking God to tear the heavens and come down so that the fortunes of the people can be restored. The other feature is the descent of the Holy Spirit, another biblical image. This fulfils the prophetic expectation of a messianic figure who is filled with the Holy Spirit (Isa 11:2; Isa 61:1). This is to be understood as the Spirit of God equipping Jesus for the task in a manner that brings to mind 1 Samuel 16:13. The Spirit in the form of a dove takes us back to the opening images of Genesis where the Spirit hovers over the waters of the deep.

Jesus is presented as the one who initiates a whole new era in human living. This is shown in our present story by the two images: the baptism taking place in the wilderness (the Exodus and the journey from slavery in Egypt to new life in the promised land) and the Spirit hovering like a dove (the transformation of the darkness and the deep and the beginning of creation in Genesis ch 1). Jesus is sent by God to bring about the same kind of transformation in the lives of people and he sets out the agenda that must be followed for people to enjoy its blessings. Disciples must "repent and believe in the Good News" (1:15). That is the same invitation on offer to us. A new life is possible but not without the journey through the "wilderness" and a leaving behind of areas of our lives ("Egypt's").

Prayer

Father of Light, guide us and strengthen us by your Holy Spirit, that we may see where we need to repent and have the will to actually do so.

Saturday February 28th

Luke 5:27-32

In Judaism the sinner was someone who was cut off from God and isolated from their community. As sin made them unclean and this could be passed on to others, they were not welcome in the communities of the pious. In order to make themselves clean again they had to go through the processes set out in the law, offering the necessary sacrifices and enduring the rites of purification. It was a shock then when Jesus went out and called public sinners to be his disciples. He proclaimed by word and deed that he had come to save sinners, not to condemn them. St Paul says it so well, that Jesus died for us "while we were sinners". Prior to this, freedom from sin depended on the Law and how closely it was observed. Now salvation comes directly from God through Jesus and sin does not isolate people from God's love and mercy. Through union with Jesus (symbolized by his eating with sinners) salvation is gained. The approach of the Pharisees was based on Leviticus 10:10 "You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean". From this position came their idea of salvation by separation. Jesus came along, and in episodes like this, proclaimed a message of salvation by association. He mixed with sinners and in the mixing brought salvation.

Important in this story are the words of Jesus that he had come to call sinners "to repentance". The gift of salvation, of forgiveness, and of a place in the Kingdom of God were no more than invitations. They were free offers by God but it is up to the individual believer to take the steps necessary to make them realities in their lives. Jesus comes to sinners, but for them to enjoy the blessings he offers they must first of all repent. That word means more than just saying "sorry". In its biblical setting it means a reversal in the way we are living, a turning around of our lives. The choice and responsibility rests with the believer. Levi understood this and so he "left everything and followed Jesus". There is a cost and those who wish to be disciples must make choices in their lives. Some things will have to be left out and life cannot go on as normal. Lent is the time when we re-evaluate our response to this invitation from God. We need to begin by acknowledging that we are failing, that there are areas that need to be renewed, and then go out and take the necessary action. Will we?

Prayer

Merciful Father, forgive our sins and failings and set us free from all that stops us from committing our lives to your service. May our works of penance open us to your merciful love and help renew our lives of faith.

Sunday February 1st

Mark 1:21-28

Fr Robert Newton

The first full picture of Christ at the beginning of Mark's Gospel is Jesus preaching and teaching, which makes a clear statement of how aware the writer of Mark was about the centrality of teaching to Christ's ministry on earth. If so why then does the writer of Mark devote so little of the rest of his Gospel to the contents of Christ's teaching? No doubt he could assume that his original readers were already familiar with it, but that hardly serves to account for the great disparity in this respect between him and the writers of Luke and Matthew. We must remember however, that the different Evangelists were inspired to write to different audiences, and it was not a paramount aim with Mark, as it was with Luke and Matthew, to preserve the teachings of Jesus in a systematic and memorable form. It is typical then of the writer of Mark in verses 22 and 23 not to attempt to tell us *what* Jesus taught, but *what effect* the teaching had on its hearers. That this teaching of Jesus had an authority which astonished the hearers and differentiated it sharply from the teachings of the scribes to which they were accustomed. Christ's authority credentials are further explained not only through his teaching but by his actions in verses 24 to 26. Here is a typical example of Jesus simply uttering a word of command and such is its authority that the unclean spirit must obey, however unwillingly. But now a new element is added, for the powers of evil not only recognise the fact of Jesus' authority; with their supernatural insight they penetrate to the true explanation of it — they recognise that Jesus is the true Messiah.

When we read this Gospel we are reminded of the authority and power of Jesus and the authority and power he has left his Church to bear witness to the world. However this is an authority and power based upon the model of Christ's Messiahship, not as conqueror in an aggressive sense but as a servant King who suffered upon the cross for our redemption. Therefore the authority and power of the Church must also follow Christ's way, not the way of the world. The true authority and power of the Church has been seen through the ages in service and sacrifice, not in temporal power or domination. Through the many examples of lives of faith of countless men and women throughout the ages we can see the effect of Christ's authority to overcome tribulation and reveal the true power of service and sacrifice.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, give us the strength to serve you and our neighbours through service and sacrifice as you have shown us in word and deed.

Monday February 2nd *The Presentation of* **Luke 2:21-40**
Christ in the Temple *Fr Robert Newton*

The writer of Luke's Gospel can hardly have had a deep personal interest in the details of Jewish ceremonial coming from a Hellenistic background, and therefore it is remarkable that he should mention no less than five times in this passage that the observances were carried out according to the Law. Jesus we are to understand was brought up in the strictest traditions of Jewish devotion. But at once we are introduced to two people of like devotion, whose loyalty to the Law, so far as making them satisfied with its provisions, had kindled in them a flame of expectancy. Simeon was looking for the consolation of Israel; Anna and others like her were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. The piety of the Old Testament properly understood produced faithful men and women eager for the coming of the Gospel. The Mosaic Law provided three ceremonies to follow on the birth of a male child. (Lev 12; Exod 13:12; Num 18:16). The first was circumcision, which took place on the eighth day from the birth and was usually the occasion for the giving of the child's name. Then in the case of the first born, there was the rite of redemption by the paying of a five shekel offering; this could be done any time after the first month. Finally after forty days, there was the purification of the mother, who up to then was regarded as unclean. The purification involved the sacrifice of a lamb and a turtledove, or young pigeon, but the poor were allowed to substitute a second dove or pigeon for the lamb; and Joseph and Mary made a poor person's offering. Luke seems to have confused the second and third ceremonies.

What stands out in this story is how much Simeon, Anna, Jesus, Mary and Joseph built their lives around the expectations of God. They could have easily found excuses for not carrying out all the demands of the Mosaic Law but chose instead to be faithful. That is something that is so easily overlooked in our modern world. As a faithful Christian we cannot determine our commitment according to our own likes and dislikes. The expectations of the faith have been established by Jesus in his preaching and teaching and these demands are every bit as binding as were the precepts of the old Mosaic Law. God expects us Christians to be living in a particular Gospel manner, not just mouthing words or "talking the talk", but "walking the walk".

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the many blessings of life and that we show you our hearty thanks by the way we live out our faith in our daily lives through your Son Jesus Christ.

Friday February 27th **Matthew 9:14-15**

The fasting that the disciples of John have in mind here are probably the private devotional fasts. These were common and according to one early Christian writing, (the Didache 8:1), hypocrites fast on Monday and Thursday. Christians, therefore, should fast on Wednesday and Friday! It is important to note that what is at issue here are not the major fasts associated with the Day of Atonement (cf Lev 16:29-34). Jesus does not seem to have encouraged his disciples to engage in fasting as a spiritual exercise. After the death of Jesus Christians adopted a Jewish pattern of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. Matthew is making it clear that fasting was inappropriate while Jesus was with them but after the ascension it is once again acceptable. For Matthew, the old ways are not over and the community must find ways of binding together the new and the old (9:17). The "old" for him relates to Judaism pre-70AD (the destruction of the Temple): the Hebrew Bible, Israel's history, the Temple, the land, etc. Matthew the Jew proposes the outrageous view that the best way of preserving the traditions of the past is to centre these traditions on Jesus and his teachings. As we know from the teachings in the rest of this passage (9:13), the future of the community will rest in "mercy" and not in "sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). Hence the growing conflict as this novel interpretation would have antagonized and threatened the Pharisees and the establishment settled in Jerusalem. They thought that changing the outward expression of their religion meant undermining their faith.

This is not a question about the Law. It is really a question about the relationship that the believer has with God. Jesus has already taught that he has come, not to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it (5:17-19). The Pharisees made the observance of laws the absolute measure of a person's faithfulness. Jesus is saying that the Law was given by God so that people could come into an intimate relationship with him. The Law was not an absolute. It was a gift of God for a people looking for light in their darkness. This is why the coming of Jesus fulfilled the Law. Believers no longer needed laws written on stone for they had a living link with the Father in Jesus. It is by uniting ourselves with Jesus and by living according to the way he set out that we find the Father. A measure of our faithfulness is now the role that Christ plays in our daily lives. Do we turn to him daily; read his Word and reflect upon it; assess all we do by the Gospel demands of love? That is discipleship.

Prayer

Lord God, we thank you for the many supports, helps and graces you have given us, especially your Son Jesus Christ.

Thursday February 26th

Luke 9:22-25

Chapter 9 in Luke's Gospel is an important one in the presentation of the Mission of Jesus. He began with the call and sending out of the Twelve, the misunderstanding of Herod, the miracle of the loaves, Peter's profession of faith and then today's Gospel. All these have been piecing together the mystery of Jesus and now we hear him teaching about his mission. He is "destined" to be rejected, to suffer and to die and then God will raise him up on the third day. Nothing in the previous miracles or activities prepares the disciples for this shock. Then, to make it worse, anyone who wants to be a disciple will walk the same road of the cross. This cross-carrying is not a one off act, as Jesus demands that disciples take up their crosses "daily" and daily follow after him. It is the same message that he will repeat again at the end of the chapter and was clearly one that upset his followers. What makes it possible to escape despair from this message is the story of the Transfiguration and the cure of the demoniac which come next. If Jesus has the power that these two stories illustrate, then why would the disciples worry! In this chapter the readers are prepared for what is going to come with the crucifixion and it is a sort of antidote against panicking when they see Jesus at Golgotha. Luke is preparing for the cross by building up the faith and hope levels of his reading communities.

The cross of Jesus was not just the piece of wood on which he died. The cross was his vocation. He was called by the Father to humble himself to become a man, to allow himself to be taken and crucified and by his willing obedience, even when it meant a painful death, to bring salvation to all peoples. This is the cross that disciples are asked to take up daily. It is not all about physical suffering and dying, though that may be a part of our callings. Our daily cross is to live lives of humble submission to the will of God, to build our lives on him and his grace instead of our own will and our own desires. It is about serving God and serving our brothers and sisters, especially when it is inconvenient and difficult. And it is a daily call, something we need to do every day of our lives. Humble and obedient submission is our cross. To carry the cross, we must first of all determine what it is God wants us to be doing. Each day we need to decide what is God's purpose for me in this situation?

Prayer

Loving Father, as we are called to take up the call to repent during this season of Lent, strengthen our wills that we might willingly submit ourselves more fully to your demands and serve you and others in love.

Tuesday February 3rd

Mark 5:21-43

We have seen Jesus' power unfolding as he ministers and teaches around the Sea of Galilee. He has cured the sick, cast out demons, calmed the winds and the sea and now we see him raising a dead person back to life again. Mark has painted a clear picture of a man of God for whom nothing is impossible. This will be an important part of the background as we see Jesus nailed to the cross. Mark has already set the foundation for being able to say: "Why panic? We know his power and the authority with which he has lived and worked. Surely, that same power will come into play on Golgotha and in the grave". One thread that we find in the sequence of stories is the reaction of Jesus to the purity laws. He confronted the spirits among the tombs in the Decapolis which would have made him unclean. He then cast them out into the pigs which must have been wandering around the area also making him unclean. He touched a woman with a discharge of blood and then touched the corpse of the little girl. None of this seemed to worry Jesus who saw higher priorities that had to be met. What Mark seems to be doing is to set the stage for the confrontation in chapter 7 when he will argue with the Pharisees over the law and the meaning of purity. In the end this will be a clash between religion and faith, between the work of God as human institutions wish to regulate it and the action of God as he wishes to work in the world.

It is hard for us to appreciate the true plight of this poor woman. She had been ill for twelve years with a haemorrhage. That Mark mentions the particular sickness is important, because anything to do with blood brings into focus the very real fears about ritual impurity. This woman would have been an outcast in her family and community, for anyone coming into contact with her would have risked being made unclean. She would not have been free to move around the village, wander to the market and mix with others. To go to town to see Jesus would have demanded a great deal of courage from her. All else had failed. She had been to the doctors, endured the humiliation of examinations and was no better off. Her life must have been full of misery and despair and it was in this mood that she covered up her face and quietly made her way through the crowd. What should give us hope in the story is the response of Jesus. He saw, not an unclean person, but a woman of faith and hope and reached out in love, mercy and with compassion. This he does to us, seeing not sinners but people in need of his grace, mercy and love.

Prayer

Loving Father, we come before you as people in need of your mercy and compassion. When we feel overburdened by our lives, remind us of your constant loving presence.

Wednesday February 4th

Mark 6:1-6

Mark's Church community was facing a time of persecution and difficulty and part of the reason for his writing the Gospel is to reassure them and to strengthen their faith and hope. In this story we have the disciples following Jesus to his home town as it is important that they now experience what he is to go through. There they see him rejected because the people there could not look through his "ordinariness". How could he possibly be doing these things, because he is just the son of a carpenter and the illegitimate son of Mary (at that time no Jew was called the son of his mother except as an insult of this kind). Closed to the possibility of God working in unique ways they rejected the divine Son of God. Note that Mark does not say they stopped him from working miracles. He still cured a few sick but the point was made. Miracles are the result of a faith inspired acceptance of God working in the way he wants to work but God will always continue to call and invite faith responses. In putting this story here Mark seems to be putting a timely warning in place. People have seen evil spirits, illnesses, the forces of nature and even death crumble before the power of Jesus. Mark now redresses what may seem a feeling that there is nothing that can resist the march of the Kingdom. But we see here that the biggest obstacle to the Gospel is the inability of people to rise to the challenge to repent and believe. They are caught up in the certainty of their own understanding of the ways of God.

This story is followed by the call and mission of the Twelve and they are clearly related. Unbelief and rejection are going to be the conditions in which the Christian mission is going to be carried out. As the Messiah was rejected so the disciples will be rejected and the message they proclaim will fall on deaf and at times hostile ears. This is why a personal faith that is deep and enlivening is so important because it helps us to live lives of discipleship when so many around reject what we hold as sacred and when it seems that the Church is coming to an end. It has always been like this. One of the comforts that we have from this story is that even when the entire town rejected Jesus, he could still heal a few people. In the end, faith will have its own way if only we persist. What matters is not what the world thinks and does, but how we respond to the Gospel.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, enliven your grace within us that we may always find your Son at work in all we do and in all that happens to us. May we be ever open to him working within us in new ways and seek to share his life and his grace with others by the way we live.

Wednesday February 25th

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Ash Wednesday

This section illustrates what Jesus means when he says that the righteousness of the disciples is to exceed that of the Pharisees. The examples that he uses are those of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. The reward of the Father will depend on a truly righteous attitude (see 6:4; 6:6; 6:18). While they are to be lights to the world (5:14) they are not to be doing things so that they receive the acclaim of the world. Any light that they have must shine on God and be done for his glory and not for the glory of the disciple. What is under attack by Jesus is their attitude. When they give alms (not **if** they give) it is to be done secretly so that when the person on the receiving end of the act of mercy gives thanks he thanks God and praises God and not the person giving. The Pharisees, by their public displays, are robbing God of what is due to him. Disciples do not need praise to keep them going in their love of neighbour and service of God. They should not need thanksgiving. God will reward them in his own time and in his own way. There is nothing wrong with giving alms. In fact, it is essential to discipleship. But Jesus pointed out the dangers when it becomes an end in itself instead of an expression of love.

This is another tough demand by Jesus for it is hard to go on loving when we receive little or nothing in return. It is even harder to go on loving and forgiving when we receive abuse in return. The only way to be able to walk along the path of discipleship is to keep our eyes firmly set on Christ. It is only by living the demands of the Beatitudes (5:1-10) that we can hope to avoid a self-centred style of Christian living. The world around us places a great deal of emphasis on appearances and what it considers to be marks of success. Jesus warns that disciples can go along this road and receive the applause of others but they should not then expect "rewards" from God. The word that is translated "reward" means "restore" and brings with it a sense of the cost of this sacrifice to be repaid by God himself. What we give up by acting in secret will be rewarded many times over by God if we do it for him and not for ourselves. The other side of this teaching is the real presumption by Jesus that the disciples will give alms. Faith is not something that takes place in the hearts and minds of believers, it is something that is given so that the world may know God's love. It is a faith that must flow over into acts of love and a life of sacrifice.

Prayer

Loving Father, your Son Jesus showed us that discipleship would mean a life of sacrifice. Strengthen us so that we can put aside our own desire for recognition and praise and do all things so that glory and honour is given to you.

Tuesday February 24th

St Matthias

John 15:9-17

The section begins with Jesus linking his own ministry and relationship with the Father to that of the disciples. The Father loved him and sent him out into the world and it is this same love that is passed on to the disciples. This love is clearly defined in the following verse as being the fulfilment of the commandments of Jesus. We do not have these commandments spelt out in John in the same way that we find them in the other Gospels. The commandments of Jesus are collected in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7) and its equivalent in Luke chapter 6. The commandments of the Father are not the ten commandments of the Old Testament, but the willingness of the Son to humble himself and "pitch his tent" among men. It is important for the disciples to understand their new relationship with the Father, because it means that they will be sharing in the Joy of the Kingdom of God. It is a time long hoped for by pious Jews and long spoken about by the prophets of old. All that they had spoken about is now possible in Jesus and so it is right that the disciples are filled with joy. John now goes on to further define this commandment of Jesus, summing it up (in a way not unlike some of the Pauline summaries of the Law) in the commandment of Love. This is not some gushy emotional feeling, but a love that is best summed up by a willingness to lay down one's life for another person. This is what Jesus is about to do at the end of the supper (this scene is taken from the Last Supper address to his disciples), lay down his life for sinners, and is what he expects his disciples to do after he has returned to the Father.

The sting in this story is at the end where Jesus tells his disciples that they were chosen by him for a specific role — to go out and to bear fruit. Being a disciple is not about gaining eternal salvation for oneself, or about living in the blessings of the Kingdom. Both of those things are a part of the picture. The reason God calls people to a life of discipleship is so that they can go out into the world and bear fruit, a way of saying, bring to others the blessings of the Kingdom of God. What kind of fruit are we called to bear? The answer is again in the Sermon on the Mount. The kind of world that is described there is to be built by the lifestyles of believers. It is our responsibility to actively set about making those things a reality. It can be worrying to read through the Beatitudes and to ask ourselves just how many of these are we making happen in our world.

Prayer

Father and life-giver, we thank you for our callings to be disciples. Make us truly faithful in living out our vocations.

Thursday February 5th

Mark 6:7-13

Mark has been leading up to this point for some time: the call to be fishers of men (1:17), the call of Levi (2:14) and then the call of the Twelve with a specific ministry in mind (3:13). Here Jesus has authorized them to be his delegates in the world, which is important in the world at that time for they considered the person who was sent to be the same as the person who sent him. As they are on the mission of Jesus the demands that they take nothing with them are essential for it is now God's responsibility to provide all that they need to fulfil their mission. They are to go out trusting in the God who called them just as the people of Israel had to trust that God would feed them and guide them on their journey during the Exodus. But God's protection did not mean they would be universally accepted. They would have to face rejection, just as the master had endured it. The shaking off of the dust was a pious custom performed by Jews returning from pagan lands. They would carefully remove all the dust from their clothes and in doing so proclaim that they were leaving behind the pagan ways and the judgement that would fall on them. In rejecting the message proclaimed by the disciples, the villages were aligning themselves with those people who were opposed to the Gospel. In rejecting the Twelve they would be rejecting Jesus and in accepting the Twelve they would be hearing God's own voice in them.

The Gospel message was never meant to be for the salvation of the individual person. It is a message of hope for all peoples and those who responded to it undertook to share it with others. All Christians are therefore called to be missionaries, people who are sent out to live the Gospel in such a way that the people with whom they work and among whom they live can come to know the goodness and mercy of God. Mother Therese once told me that when I die and appear at the gates of heaven, St Peter will not be interested in what I had or had not done. He will ask one question: "Who have you brought with you?". That is not a bad summary of what it means to be a disciple. One of the key words in all the Gospels is the word that means "go out". The only reason Jesus had for calling the Twelve and for gathering disciples was so that they could be sent out to share the message. That is the mark of a true Church. If it is not missionary, then it is not Church.

Prayer

Lord God, we thank you for our baptismal calling and for the gifts with which you fill our lives. May we be ever open to your Spirit that at all times our lives can give a clear witness to your loving presence among all people.

Friday February 6th

Mark 6:14-29

Herod Antipas (a son of Herod the Great) was the ruler of Galilee between 4BC and 39AD. He was totally insensitive to Jewish sensibilities, marrying Herodias and then building his capital on the site of an old cemetery. Jesus did not begin his ministry in Galilee until after the death of John and so people would not have known much about him. John was seen as a prophet like the prophets of old and was then killed. Jesus appears and to the people it must have seemed that John had risen from the dead and that Jesus was the anointed end time prophet for whom they had been waiting. The Elijah reference goes back to John who spoke of "one who is to come" and again goes back to Old Testament expectations. Herod's own concern arose from the belief that just before judgement is carried out the dead will rise again and so it is with great fear that he sees in Jesus a resurrected John. The story of the death of John seems to bring with it a hint of what is going to happen to the "second John". If the religious and political leaders were unable to cope with the person and ministry of John, they were never going to be able to accept Jesus and he hints that his disciples may well face the same threat.

One thing that is clear from all the Gospels is the uncertainty about the identity of Jesus. There was so much expected of God and people were eagerly looking forward to God stepping in and acting that it seems strange that they could not see in Jesus the promised Messiah. Perhaps it was because they had narrowed down their expectations to such a degree that when God revealed himself in a way different to these expectations they could not see him. They knew how God should act, how he should save them, how he should be acting in their lives. But when God came in his own way, at his own time doing things as he wanted, they could not see and accept. That is a huge problem throughout the Gospels. Even though Jesus preached with authority, drove out demons and healed the sick, he was not their idea of a messiah and so they kept on searching. This is a real danger for all believers to be looking for a messiah who will suit us and our needs. Herod would not accept a messiah who demanded he change his way of living. We face similar temptations today.

Prayer

Lord God, take away the blindness that makes us want to force you to conform to our expectations. Help us to be ever open to your presence that we may allow you to be God as you seek to be God, rather than making you into a God of our own shaping. May we be ever grateful and seek to share your love with others.

Monday February 23rd

Mark 9:14-29

In this story we have the authority of Jesus set in contrast to the power of the disciples. Their ignorance and their lack of faith hampers their mission and their discipleship. In contrast, Jesus has no problem in carrying out the exorcism. When the crowd see Jesus coming from the mountain they are filled with amazement and are anxious about being in his presence. Such is his standing in the community. The disciples are shown as being unable to ease the pain of the suffering boy because their faith is weak. This is why Jesus turns on them with a typically Old Testament condemnation: "You faithless generation" (Jer 5:21; 1 Kings 19:14; Num 14:27). Here we see another side of the Marcan Jesus. He brings the judgement of his Father on the disciples and the crowd. This epilepsy (at that time epilepsy was seen as being the result of a demonic possession) is a powerful strain and has been destroying the boy's life for a long time. It seems as though nothing was able to impact on its power. As Jesus approaches he challenges the boy's father. The faith that he is seeking is faith in Jesus as the Son of God. The father professes such faith, then asks that Jesus help him to keep his faith alive and growing. For Mark, faith is not a one off statement of belief. It is an ongoing way of living that is sustained by the grace of God. It is this faith that leads to the cure. In a scene typical of Mark, the demon's hold over the boy is broken by the word of Jesus. There is no great battle, no struggle and never any uncertainty about who would win. Though the boy appears to be a corpse, Jesus reaches over and lifts him up and sends him on his way.

This is a classical Marcan battle. Jesus is the one who was sent to set people free from whatever it was that was holding them back and stopping them from being fully human and fully alive. The way this freedom is obtained is through faith, but it is a very dynamic kind of faith that is demanded here. It is faith that leads the father to trust in Jesus and he must continue to grow in this faith each and every day of his life. That is how the demonic forces are kept at bay. They only take hold when trust and confidence in the power of God in our lives is lost or weakened. It is a beautiful image of Jesus that we are left with. He reaches down and raises up the boy who appears to be dead and sends him on his way to enjoy the new life of freedom given to him. And so it can be with us.

Prayer

Father, we believe in you and have faith in your loving mercy. Help us through the gift of your Spirit to continue to grow in faith and to move forward in the face of all the problems and difficulties of our lives, confident in your presence.

Sunday February 22nd

Mark 2:1-12

Fr Robert Newton

In the opening chapter of Mark we were first told who Jesus really was and then shown how some typical words and actions of his ministry pre-supposed and revealed this identity, although for various reasons, including deliberate self-concealment on the part of Jesus, people at the time did not grasp fully the secret of the Messiah. Now a further question arises. The ministry of Jesus was wholly helpful and healing (cf Acts 10.38); even if people did not fully grasp or penetrate its secret, how came they to respond to it – with hostility, hatred and persecution? This was one of the big questions about the ministry of Jesus that faced the early Church. The writer of Mark goes to great lengths to show in a series of stories over the next chapter (Mk 2.1-3.6) that opposition came from religious authorities with vested interests, not ordinary Jewish people.

The central problem of this miracle story is the forgiveness of sins. It was no easy task to get the stretcher to Jesus and the determination of the stretcher-carriers was described as "faith" by the writer of Mark and forms the rationale for the man's cure. It is not important for the writer of Mark's Gospel that ordinary people do not understand fully the ministry of Jesus or know who he is. What is important is that they respond to the challenges and disasters in their lives by acting in faith. The friends want a cure but Jesus initiates the forgiveness of sins according to the will of his Father. This helps to bring out the biblical understanding of human life that is found in the Old Testament, where there is no clear distinction between a person's physical and spiritual well-being. It is only at the end of the story, in response to a challenge by the Pharisees, that Jesus even seems interested in curing him. In 2:15-17 the Pharisees and the Scribes objected to Jesus inviting sinners to be guests at his meals but Jesus goes ahead and mixes with them because in him they have forgiveness of their sins. In Judaism there was an expectation the Messiah to come would forgive sins and Jesus does exactly that. However, in so doing he reveals a new inspiring and challenging Messiah who is concerned about the outcasts, and who wants to open up the Kingdom of God to all people including tax collectors and sinners. Jesus offers an example of a Messiah for all people down through the ages who are in need of healing and acceptance.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, time and time again you forgave your people Israel when they trespassed against you. Through the love of your Son Jesus for us, forgive us our trespasses and deliver us from evil.

Saturday February 7th

Mark 6:30-34

This is the only place in Mark where the Twelve are called Apostles and it is an appropriate title because the Greek word means "those who were sent out". They went out and have now returned to Jesus. Jesus takes them to a "lonely place". This is more than just a place where there are no people. In the Bible God had regularly provided his people with rest in the wilderness. This is the theme of the Exodus where God refreshed his people in the desert. This is both the promise and hope of each generation and now with Jesus we find the "new Moses" leading the "new people of God" into the wilderness to be fed by God. The preaching of Isaiah and Jeremiah are both peppered with promises of this "rest within the wilderness" and that is what we have here. What more could the disciples search for? They are with the Messiah, together in a community and fed and nourished by God. This meal stands in contrast to the meal in the palace of Herod and continues to highlight the great differences between "the world" into which the disciples have been sent and the ways of the Kingdom which are built on humble service. The problem for them is to live in such a way that it is clear that their feeding depends on God's love and not on their own worthiness.

The mission of the disciples could not have been an easy one. True, they were able to preach the Gospel and perform some miracles but there would also have been a fair amount of opposition. They would have been rejected in some towns and there would have been some who would have been keen to take the line of Herod and see them follow John to an untimely death. It is never easy living out a life of discipleship especially when they had to depend only on God for their needs. Being faithful is easy when there are few demands and all goes smoothly. The real test is when more and more is asked of us and when we are pressed to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel. This is why we need time with Jesus in the wilderness. We need to be able to "retreat" into times of prayer each day so that we can find divine reassurance and comfort, so that we can be fed with grace and receive from God the help and encouragement that we need.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as you led your people Israel out into the desert where you fed them, cared for them and led them to their new home in Canaan, be with us as we take up our calls to serve the Gospel. Reveal to us your presence in our lives that we may always live in hope, be comforted by faith and know your love.

Sunday February 8th

Mark 1:29-39

Fr Robert Newton

In the last incident (Mk 21-28) we saw how the messianic power of Jesus could deal with demonic possession. On this occasion Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law. What is significant in this story is her response. She does not respond with surprise or begin to question Jesus about the authority he has to do these things. Instead she was helped to her feet and "began to wait on him". Mark shows here that this is the appropriate response for a disciple who in faith hears the word of God and then attempts to live a life of service. This story is then connected to the next story by the words "that evening" which has the sense of: "Well, you thought that was impressive!". These understated dramatic words "that evening" lead into the story of Jesus casting out demons. Jesus not only casts out the devils but commands them not to speak. It is interesting to note that Jesus often commanded those he cured not to say anything about what had happened. This story ties in with Mark's maintenance of frequent non-publicity requests or demands made by Jesus on those whom he cured or influenced.

There are a number of occasions in Mark when spirits or people who have been cured are told not to report about what had happened. This is called Mark's "Messianic Secret". For Mark, the time had not yet arrived for the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. That time would be at the Passion, his crucifixion and death and for anyone to understand the full message of Jesus they needed to follow him in his ministry to the cross. For the writer of Mark, only by understanding what was happening at Calvary can the rest of Jesus' ministry be understood and appreciated. It is only by the grace of God, given through the death of the Son, that it is possible for people to follow the path of a disciple. Not only does the cross make it possible for someone to be a follower, the cross is also a requirement of discipleship. These miracle stories in the Gospel of Mark are not simply about someone being cured of illness or possession, but rather they are proclamations of God's involvement in human history and bringing salvation and life to all. These stories and the way that they are written by the writer of Mark's Gospel are invitations to believe that the same thing is possible today. For the writer of Mark, and for us today, these stories point to the fact that those who walk the path of discipleship will know the comforting, healing and loving presence of our God.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, give us strength at those times in our lives when we find ourselves beset with trials and temptations that seem impossible to overcome.

Saturday February 21st

Mark 9:2-13

The story of the transfiguration is intended by Mark to be the fulfilment of the prophecy of 9:1. What they experience there on the top of the mountain is the Kingdom of God in power. It is a part of Mark's strategy that Peter, James and John experience the vision of the divine power of Jesus before the crucifixion as it provides a reassurance when that period of darkness descends upon them (verse 12 points forward to this). What we have therefore is a taste of the great paradox of the Kingdom of God. It is here with all its power and glory and yet at its heart is humble obedience to death, even death on the cross. If the disciples were tempted to be carried away with delusions of triumph and victory by the prediction of 9:1, their hopes were dashed by the prophecy of 9:12. At the baptism of Jesus in 1:11 the voice from heaven was addressed to him. Here, the same voice is addressed to the disciples. The "secret" is being shared and there is now a kind of formal proclamation of the news of the coming of the Messiah. We now know that it is the Son of God who will be going to his suffering and death in Jerusalem, so that when it happens it is no surprise to us. It is not until 14:61-62 that Jesus himself declares his identity as the Son of God. When the centurion makes the formal declaration (15:39) from the base of the cross, we are already well-informed. With this in mind we can understand that the opening visions of the transfigured Jesus on the top of the mountain stand in contrast to the horrors predicted in 8:31 and provide a moment of light and a source of hope during the crucifixion and burial.

The disciples struggled with this sign of contradiction: the cross as the moment of glory for the Son of Man. How can a terrible death at the hands of proud and angry men proclaim a message of hope and salvation? How can the Kingdom have come if the road to discipleship is a road of the cross? How can evil be overcome by a life of humble obedience? The transfiguration answers those questions. If Jesus is the Son of God, and he has proclaimed this by word and action and most eloquently in his transfiguration, then why would we think he is King of all things except death? It is the victory of Jesus over the grave that gives us all hope in our darkest of moments. This is the meaning of the incarnation. It is because the Christ took on our humanity that we are raised to new levels of hope, while we walk with him and live as disciples.

Prayer

Father, you raised your Son Jesus to life from the grave and in so doing gave us new hope, that as you did to him you will do to us, raising us from the slavery of sin, fear and despair.

Friday February 20th

Mark 8:34-9:1

Jesus makes it clear in this short section that the basic condition of discipleship is following after him. It is joining Jesus on the way to the cross and it is the first use of the word "cross" by Mark. Jesus' predictions of his death (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) do not spell out the means of death and this specifically Roman form of execution would not be the first to come to Jewish minds. Used here, at the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem, it is calculated to shock and to further qualify the nature of discipleship. This is further qualified when Jesus talks about losing life and gaining life. One could remain alive by avoiding martyrdom and persecution but real "life" comes only from a willingness to endure these things for the sake of the Kingdom, for then one has eternal life. This depends on what a person values in the world. This "adulterous and sinful generation" values life in this world. The disciple values life in the Kingdom and at times the two will be in conflict.

There is a real danger that the power of what Jesus is saying here is lost because of a temptation to water it down. The metaphor of taking up one's cross should not be domesticated into encouraging people to endure their hardships patiently, putting up with all the little problems and difficulties that are inevitably a part of people's lives. What Jesus is demanding of his disciples is a willingness to lose their lives for the sake of the Gospel and not simply endure discomforts. While few may in fact face martyrdom, this does not lessen in any way the absolute nature of the demand. It is important to appreciate the absoluteness of what Jesus is saying before we begin to apply it to lesser situations. Of course, this kind of thinking demands a very different understanding of life. A disciple can approach martyrdom with an "it's only death" attitude. As Jesus himself overcame death by rising from the tomb, so for those who follow him, death is not the end. Eternal life is the inheritance on offer for those who believe. Once we understand this we can then go on to see that, for most disciples, the taking up of the cross of discipleship will mean things like a loss of privilege, advantage, reputation, comfort, self-centredness, luxury and so on. To cling to the things of this life, the things which humanity values most, is the way to forfeit true life as the efforts we make to cling to them and to accumulate them distract us from the demands of a truly Gospel way of living.

Prayer

Father in heaven, save us from the temptations of this life to become caught up in the ways of the world, that we may enjoy the blessings of your eternal Kingdom.

Monday February 9th

Mark 6:53-56

This short text should be read within its setting. We have seen Jesus rejected and misunderstood by a whole range of people. His home town of Nazareth rejected him. Herod killed the Baptist who announced his arrival and then could not see in him God's Messiah. The disciples who were called and chosen by him panicked in the boat when the storm came up because their faith was not enough. Then there were the Pharisees who were already at odds with him and who are about to be further condemned. Those who you would think were in a position to know better could not recognize him...but the crowds of poor and needy people did. The outcasts of society, those who were seen as rejected by God, came to him in faith. Jesus will say later that it was for the sinner that he was sent and only those who know their need and humble themselves will know life in the Kingdom. The series of miracles around the lake, which began in 6:31, now concludes on its western beaches. Unlike the people around the town of Nazareth, the people in this area are clearly people of faith and come to Jesus believing in his ability to cure them. The results are spectacular and many people are cured of all that ailed them. It is important for Mark's message that Jesus is presented as the one sent by God to those in need.

It is amazing just how often this theme comes up in the Bible. We see time and time again people unwilling to allow God to be God in the way he wants to be God. We see them thinking that they can organize things better than God can. It was the sin of Adam and Eve and we see it thrown up against Jesus. It is so easy to move God to the periphery of our lives, to give him the "leftovers" of our time, our energies and our resources. This is partly because it is all too easy to think that we can run our own lives and manage on our own. We have an understanding of God that we have conveniently created ourselves. One that will not mind if we allow other things to control our decision making and our lives. The Gospel command is different. The model for us here are the poor and needy who are content to just allow the shadow of Jesus to pass over them. It is only in need that we can find God's grace and life at work in us. Otherwise we are on our own.

Prayer

Almighty God, we acknowledge you as Lord of all in our lives and pray that we can humble ourselves so that all that we do, all that we think and all that we say may be under the guidance and light of your grace. Help us to be humble enough to realize our need for you.

Tuesday February 10th

Mark 7:1-13

During the Exile the Law became the centre of Jewish religion and provided the pattern of Jewish life. When the Temple was rebuilt by Ezra the old priesthood was re-established and the priests put back into their former places of authority. But there was also a new breed of lawyers who were laymen and gradually began to grow as interpreters of the Law in opposition to the Temple priesthood. With the coming of the Greeks the priesthood became more and more corrupt and Temple sacrifice was heavily influenced by Greek ways. The Law however held its place and those interpreters of the Law who were outside the priesthood became more powerful. By the time of Jesus they were in open opposition to the priestly Sadducees. Their chief characteristic is their rigorous and rigid interpretations of the Law and their separation from the rest of the community. They were accused of building a fence around the Law, keeping people away from its life and making themselves the ones who dealt out salvation. They thus saw in Jesus someone who could undermine their position by making God accessible to anyone who was ready to repent and believe. This new chapter signals an ominous change in atmosphere in the Gospel as the teaching of Jesus moves him into a position where his views are in stark contrast with the teachings of the current religious orthodoxy. His opponents are the leaders from Jerusalem and the focal point is no longer the Sabbath observance but the laws of purity which will affect the mission to the Gentiles in a way that the Sabbath laws will not. It was important for those first Gentile Christian communities to find support for their position in the ministry of Jesus.

The problem with the Pharisees was that they substituted observance or performance for a personal relationship with God. They had reached the stage where their life with God was to be measured by their observance of the 639 traditions that they taught. This was behind the later question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17). Jesus on the other hand came and preached a law of love, of how we are to live with other people and how we are to live with God. He preached no laws apart from these. There is a danger that we can put all kinds of things between ourselves and God and never get around to entering into the kind of personal relationship that he seeks. He wants us to talk with him, to listen to him and to allow him to guide our lives.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, comfort us by revealing yourself to us in all the activities of our lives. Help us to find you and to lay our lives open to your grace and healing power.

Thursday February 19th

Mark 8:27-33

The journey to Jerusalem begins in the far north of Palestine, which is more than a hundred miles north of Jerusalem. This means that there will be several weeks of walking in which the disciples will be working through the mysteries of what Jesus was saying and doing. We need to remember that while readers of the Gospel have been given an insight into the identity of Jesus (1:1-13), the disciples are still struggling. They know something of the secrets of the Kingdom (4:11) but are still uncertain as to the fullness of his message and role. This key section begins with a more general question about what the crowds are saying. They predictably thought of Jesus as a prophet. At the time the Jews believed that the time of prophecy ended with Malachi. To have a prophet among them again would have been a significant moment for the people, but it shows that they have not yet grasped the full significance of his ministry. Now Peter is asked and for the first time Mark allows the title Christ to be used. Up until now Jesus has insisted that all indications that his miracles had deeper meanings be suppressed. Now it is up to Peter to make the proclamation: "You are the Christ". One problem was that Jesus had a very different understanding of the meaning of this term to that of the crowds, the Pharisees and the disciples. At the time of Jesus the term "Christ" (Messiah) came to sum up all the hopes of the Old Testament and the one who was the Messiah was the one who would be involved in initiating the time of these blessings becoming available to believers. Hence it was a dangerous term to be using.

It is not all that unusual for people today to think of Jesus in terms of being a "good bloke" or moral educator who gave some wonderful teachings. Many would accept that his teachings are inspiring and would help to build a better world were they to be faithfully lived. But disciples need to go further than that. Jesus is more than an inspiring leader and his teachings are more than inspirational. He is the Christ, the Son of God who became a man so that all men and women would know salvation. The words that he proclaimed are more than ordinary philosophical reflections. They have an inner life and power and like a two-edged sword, can cut through the events of life and reveal an inner truth and inner meaning to all that happens. The challenge today is to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ.

Prayer

Almighty God, down through the ages you have offered hope to all who believe in you. Enlighten us that we may build our lives around Christ Jesus and his teachings and know your Life.

Wednesday February 18th

Mark 8:22-26

We now begin a new section in the Gospel, when Jesus begins the journey to Jerusalem (8:22-10:52) and it is worth noting that this section begins with a cure of a blind man (our present story) and ends with a cure of a blind man (10:46-52). One of the things to note in this section is the use of the phrase "on the road", which is Mark's way of trying to focus attention on the sense of discipleship as a journey. What we shall also find from this point on is a more open acceptance by Jesus of his messianic role and what it will mean for his journey to Jerusalem. The cross will now be more clearly in focus. The cure of the blind man at Bethsaida comes immediately after the disciples have been accused of being blind. They stand in contrast to the friends of the blind man who bring him to Jesus believing that a cure will take place and to the large crowds that have followed them through Galilee and the surrounding Gentile districts.

Most commentators see the two miracles opening and closing this section as symbolic and the way this particular miracle unfolds makes this point even clearer. Jesus does not simply command the sickness to end. He takes him to one side (presumably to keep him away from the crowd so that the miracle can be performed in secret) and carries out quite a bizarre ritual. Jesus puts spittle on his eyes and lays his hands on him and then as the vision gradually returns he once more puts his hands on the man's eyes and only then is he cured. Given that this is more than a simple cure, we can see what it is that Mark is saying about discipleship. Simply being baptized is not enough. It does not turn someone into a Christian. It is merely the starting point of what will be a lifelong journey "along the road" with the Master. Later on Jesus will describe this as "taking up your cross" and following after him. That is how Jesus defines discipleship. The first step is repentance (8:34). Unless something is left behind, unless there is repentance, there can be no discipleship. Then there is the real difficulty of walking along the road to Jerusalem. Significantly, Jesus is in Galilee when he makes this statement, so it is quite a walk. The disciples, like all disciples after them, have been given the gift of divine grace to help them understand, it is now up to them (and us) to not just talk the talk but to also walk the walk, or else we remain in darkness and continue to struggle with our limitations.

Prayer

Father of life, you reveal yourself to us in many ways. Open our eyes that we may be reassured that you are with us in all things, strengthening us and leading us to lives of Peace.

Wednesday February 11th

Mark 7:14-23

The whole of the section is focused on the theme of purity and we are made aware of a remarkable difference of approach to the question of these laws. In verses 1-13 Jesus is critical of the Scribes because they undermine the authority of the laws of the Old Testament. In verses 14-23 he himself seems to undermine one of its key provisions. In verses 1-13 Jesus' attack is directed only against the Scribal traditions and in verses 14-23 the Scribes are no longer mentioned and Jesus' criticism is directed instead against the fundamental principle of the Old Testament Law itself. The food laws of Leviticus chapters 11 and 17, and the whole concept of ritual purity which they protected, were of central importance to Jewish culture and identity. They were laws that helped to set them apart from others. In challenging these laws, Jesus is making it possible now for people from all walks of life to share a meal together. Without a change in these laws, it would have been impossible, in the Christian communities, for Jewish and Gentile Christians to share a meal together. We know from Paul that this was a major issue in his communities. Matthew, writing to a more Jewish community of Christians, does not report this story in the same way, preferring to focus instead on the washing of hands and Luke leaves it out altogether from his Gospel. Jesus purifies in a way that observance of the Law can never achieve.

This story should bring to mind many struggles and battles in our own Church. Most religious communities are instinctively conservative and tend to resist any change to fundamental traditional values (usually until there is no other option). Once we recognize the radical implications for the Jewish communal identity it is hardly surprising that there was such a violent reaction to what he was saying. What is at stake is not only who they are as the People of God (a nation set apart) but also the authority of the Law. Jesus is replacing that authority with the authority of his own teaching and person. What the Scribes had lost sight of was that these laws and provisions were not ends in themselves. They were means for helping people to come to know, love and serve Yahweh their God. What could not change was God. What could change was the way he was worshipped and glorified by his followers. We are no different today. What cannot change in the Church are the Gospel demands. What can and must change is how they are understood by each successive generation and how they are expressed in our institutional lives of faith.

Prayer

Father in heaven, keep us ever confident in your presence within our communities of faith, that we fear not change.

Thursday February 12th

Mark 7:24-30

It is important to read this story in the context of the whole of chapter 7. Having pushed out the boundaries relating to the laws on purity, Jesus now continues his radical reinterpretation of the will of God by reaching out to a Gentile woman. It is a story that can sometimes be read to understand Jesus as being somewhat harsh to the woman. But this would be false. A far better reading would be to understand Jesus as a kind of Devil's Advocate encouraging the woman and teasing out her understanding of the actions of God. It is hard to overestimate the importance of this exchange as it moved Christianity out of the bounds of Jewish exclusivism into a community gathered around to share the "children's bread". The setting for the exorcism is in Gentile territory and Jesus is approached by a Gentile woman who asks for a cure. Any orthodox Jew would have avoided her for fear of being rendered ritually impure, but we again see Jesus breaking the usual bonds of convention by engaging in a discussion with her. We cannot soften the impact of the words of Jesus comparing the rights of Gentile "dogs" to Jewish "children". It is softened somewhat by adding that the "children" are fed "first" implying that the "dogs" will eventually be fed. It is this that gives the woman her hope. She is content to have the "scraps" knowing that even these rejected bits of food will be more than enough for her needs. Her spoken response to Jesus moves him to carry out the exorcism, for it shows her understanding of who he is and what his mission entails. While the Jews fail to accept him, this pagan woman responds in faith.

The early Church struggled with its Jewish roots once it began to move out into Gentile communities, for the acceptance of Gentiles into the Kingdom of God was generally unheard of within Judaism. Who is in and who is out? For the Jews it was clear. Be children of the Covenant with Abraham as your Father. For Jesus it was clear: hear his words and act upon them. It is all about faith and not actions. Those who believe in him as the Messiah, the Son of God, know what it is to live in the Kingdom of God and receive the blessings of that Kingdom. This means that there is room for the sinner, for the failures, for the sick, the depressed, those living in fear, in poverty and those with nothing much to live for. They might not have much to commend them in the eyes of the world, but their faith in the love and mercy of God brings them peace and life.

Prayer

Loving Lord, there are times when our unworthiness seems to govern all that we do and we wonder how we can continue. In those times, reassure us by reminding us of your presence.

Tuesday February 17th

Mark 8:14-21

This is a somewhat confusing little account but it is important because it sets the stage for Jesus undertaking the "re-education" of the disciples. There can be no excuse for them missing the point of the miracles of Jesus. Why should they be worried about being short of bread when they have Jesus with them. This is not the first time they have been caught short of food. With the large crowd to feed they had only five loaves and two fish but managed to feed everybody. If they were to understand what the miracle of the loaves and the other signs that had been performed said about Jesus they would not be worried about not having enough bread to eat. Surely, after all they had been involved in, they would understand the significance of the one performing these signs. This section draws to an end with a somewhat sombre note: even with the gift of divine enlightenment, understanding has still not been produced in the hearts of the disciples. The high point of this lack of understanding will be their abandonment of Jesus at Golgotha. It is hard to work out just where the metaphor of the yeast fits into the section as the yeast and the warning against the Pharisees and Herod plays only an indirect part in Mark's message here.

Jesus uses strong language here in condemning the lack of spiritual awareness on the part of the disciples. They function well on a physical level (their eyes see and their ears hear) but are closed to the much more significant spiritual dimension to life. Here they are hungry, and instead of casting their minds back to what Jesus had done for the five thousand and having faith in what he will do for them, they begin to worry about it. They were also probably starting to blame whoever it was who forgot it and wonder how they will solve their dilemma. While they were worrying about their stomachs they had with them the Prince of Life, the Messiah who had cast out demons, raised the dead and cured those who were ill. Somehow, they had lost their spiritual perspective. This is why they were to panic later on at Golgotha. All they could see was their great hope dying painfully on the cross. They dared not have hope in the face of apparent disaster. If they were going to worry about a shortage of bread, the risk of death would worry them more. Mark's answer is simple: Jesus is there with them. It is not that Jesus will take away their problem, but if they walk into it with Jesus, then they know there is hope for the future.

Prayer

Loving God, through all the stages of our lives we are faced with problems and are tempted to flee before them. Strengthen us by making us aware of your saving presence.

Monday February 16th

Mark 8:11-13

This section (8:11-21) moves the disciples away from Galilee and brings to an end the first section of the Gospel. From 8:27-29 there will be a whole new direction as Peter makes his profession of faith. In preparation for that decisive moment Mark now sums up some key ideas in his story so far and introduces the theme of the "re-education" of the disciples. The opposition to Jesus seems to come from the local Galilean Pharisees who were conscious of their roles as guardians of religious orthodoxy and practice in the area. They were perhaps threatened by the growing popularity and influence of this new teacher and were trying to "put him in his place" by insisting on checking out his credentials and qualifications. When they insist on a "sign from heaven" from Jesus, they are not interested in yet another miracle, though it is hard to imagine what more they could want! Perhaps it was just that they had not personally witnessed any of these miracles and were unwilling to accept the word of others. In 3:22 we saw that the Pharisees had accepted that he could perform exorcisms, but attributed the power to demonic rather than heavenly power. This expectation of divine authorization has strong biblical and Jewish roots. It is found in the story of Moses (Ex 4:1-9; Ex 4:29-31; Ex 7:8-22; etc). The problem here is that Jesus suspects that these Jewish leaders are not really after a justifying sign from heaven, but have ulterior motives behind their request.

What is interesting in this story is the reaction of Jesus, who gives a "sigh that comes straight from the heart". This is an indication of his distress over the unresponsiveness of "this generation". They continue to ask for signs when all around them are glowing signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. We can see here a Jesus who is passionately caught up with the needs of the people he has come to serve. He is hurt at being rejected, a hurt that is not directed at himself but at the loss by the people. They are the ones missing out on the blessings of the Kingdom. What he does from this point on is to focus his attentions on a smaller group of people, his disciples. He wants them to come alive with the Good News so that they can then go out and enliven the world with the same Good News. This is the way it is today. God is not going to change the world, but he will enable it to happen through the ministry of believers who live the Gospel in such a way that others are attracted to it.

Prayer

Merciful Father, you want the world to come to a knowledge of your Truth and your Life. Strengthen us, so that by joyfully living the Good News, all peoples might know salvation.

Friday February 13th

Mark 7:31-37

Jesus now journeys back to the non-Jewish area at the eastern edge of the Lake of Galilee (where he carried out the exorcism in 5:1-20). The story is notable, not just for its location, but also because Jesus uses saliva in the cure and we hear him speaking an Aramaic word of healing. We see, for the first and only time, a healing that is carried out by touch and a command that is given, not to a demon, but to the sick person himself. The way Mark has reported this incident brings to mind the prophecy of Isaiah 35:5-6 where we are told that "the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped...and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy". This is very much in keeping with the Jewish thinking about the end of the world. Once again we see Jesus trying to avoid public notice but having the news of the cure proclaimed throughout the district. The healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) was used by Mark as an introduction to a section dealing with the blindness of the disciples and their gradual enlightenment. Here it is possible that Mark used the account of the cure of the man who was deaf and dumb to introduce the gradual enabling of the disciples to both hear and proclaim the word of God properly. Jesus looks to heaven when he prays for the sick man, a useful device to highlight the divine dimension to what he is doing, but the key to the cure is the command: "Open up!". The effect is immediate and both the deafness and the inability to speak are cured at once. The amazement of the crowd possibly comes from the fulfilment of both of the elements of Isaiah's vision. This is what is supposed to happen when the Messiah comes to set up God's Kingdom, and they are witnessing it here. This is why it is Good News, because God has now acted to save his people.

Blindness and deafness are both qualities that Mark attributes to the disciples of Jesus. Throughout most of the Gospel they struggle to believe in Jesus as the promised Messiah, despite witnessing the great signs and wonders he performed. It is a sad characteristic of discipleship that those who have received much are so easily overcome by doubts and fears. Mark makes it clear that, in times of anxiety, when we are unable to see clearly the way forward (the blind man at Bethsaida) or are unable to hear God speaking to us in the events that are unfolding around us, we need to "come to Jesus" (or bring our brothers and sisters, who are struggling, to Jesus), for he is the one who can enlighten our lives.

Prayer

Father, down through history you have spoken to your people, revealing to them your will, your love and mercy. Help us, that we may hear your voice in all that happens in our lives.

Saturday February 14th

Mark 8:1-10

The geography of Mark is (typically) a little obscure but given the wording used and the setting in his Gospel, this second feeding miracle takes place as a part of the ministry of Jesus among the Gentiles. He has had an exorcism, a healing and a nature miracle all extending the mission of the Messiah of Israel for the benefit of the Gentiles. It ties in well with the discussion that Jesus held with the Syrophenician woman about allowing the "dogs" to share in the "children's" bread. This perhaps explains some of the differences to the first feeding miracle: fewer people, fed with more loaves and a "few small fish" and there was less food left over. For Mark, there was clearly a difference between the feeding of the people of Israel and the feeding of the Gentiles. Importantly though, the Gentiles are fed. When Mark begins the chapter with the words "and now, once again" he is encouraging readers to go back to the earlier story of the feeding. These people have come to Jesus as a direct result of the cure of the deaf man, even though he had requested that the crowd remain silent. In non-Jewish areas, his popularity and fame was spreading. In this story of the feeding Mark uses the word "eucharist" (give thanks) which perhaps suggests that Mark has in mind some link to the Last Supper and the breaking of the bread of the early Church. As Jesus fed the crowd who came to him in need, so he feeds those who follow him as disciples.

One of the oddities of this story is that the disciples find it difficult to believe that they could feed this many people from their own resources. It was not all that long ago that they had been present when Jesus fed more people with fewer resources. They seem incapable of understanding that there is a different dimension to the ministry of Jesus, a problem that Mark is going to stress throughout the chapter (cf 8:17-21). Perhaps this is the power of Jesus' question: "Do you have any bread?". It is slightly ironic as they have been through this situation before. What is the problem with the disciples? Why is it that the disciples can know all about the power of Jesus and yet still think that there are areas of their lives, and situations in which they find themselves, over which Jesus has no power? Again it is possible that Mark is writing from his own experiences of discipleship within his own community, where he ministers to people who struggle with challenges they should be bringing to Jesus in prayer. After all, his yoke is easy and his burden light.

Prayer

Loving Father, we give thanks to you for all the times that you have fed us when we have been hungry. We thank you for the foods of love, of mercy, of forgiveness and discipleship.

Sunday February 15th

Mark 1:40-45

Fr Robert Newton

Leprosy, besides being a loathsome and disfiguring disease, involved ritual uncleanness and complete segregation from the community and the religious life of Israel. The Law could do nothing for the leper; it could only protect the rest of the community against him or her. It was considered at the time in rabbinic circles as being as difficult to heal as raising someone from the dead and was a clear example and sign of the Messiah's arrival. Lepers had to keep their distance from others and shout out "Unclean! Unclean!" when they saw anyone approaching (Leviticus 13:45). The leper believed that Jesus had the power to cure him and was prepared to place his trust and confidence in his care. We are not aware of just how much information this man had of Jesus but it is clear that he was prepared to trust him completely. Older texts of Mark read that Jesus was "angry" when he saw the man, a translation that many modern biblical translations turn into "had pity". I think the older texts catch the correct meaning of the encounter, for the writer of Mark's Gospel, Jesus had come to confront all those things which were against the design of God and which held people in prisons from which they could not escape. Jesus' conflicts came not only with the demons, but also those other circumstances that afflict people's lives and alienate them from others and from God. This miracle, being born to new life, would have been seen as a kind of raising from the dead.

As with the other miracles, this story is not just about healing. The cure of the leper's disease is no more than the means of proclaiming a greater message of the nature of the Messiah. For the Mosaic Law created two sorts of people. Those who were outcasts and unclean and those who were not. The unclean were kept outside of the community and so, in the eyes of the priests and many of the "clean", outside the love of God. This situation of the leper explains Jesus' anger, rather than his pity. When Jesus touches the leper he shows how the Messiah breaks through all the barriers that divide people, where there are no more clean and unclean, no more insiders and outsiders. He is angry at what the Law had allowed leprosy to do to this man. This story of Mark displays the difference between God's ways and the ways of man. Jesus challenges us all to think through our traditional views unless they make "lepers" of people who are loved by God and for whom he died on the cross.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, give us the strength to see that your love is for all and that we are called to be vehicles of your grace in a broken world.