

THE DAILY GOSPEL READINGS

**from the Catholic Lectionary:
a personal view, using the
New Revised Standard Version of
the Bible.**

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INTRODUCTION

I began work on this project about 2006 and completed it in 2015. My purpose in embarking on it was to have something that I could use in speaking to people about the daily Gospel readings from the *Lectionary* at Mass. It covers those readings from Monday to Saturday of each week of the liturgical year, beginning with Monday of the first week of Advent, and ending on Saturday of Week 34 of Ordinary Time.

As the title indicates, it is a personal view. I have had no formal training in scripture other than the general seminary course of now more than forty-five years ago. Professional scripture scholars may raise an eyebrow – or blow a fuse – from time to time if they ever read it. But that is unlikely, since I have compiled it for my personal use with no thought of publishing it.

My hope is that it may help, in those churches which I serve, to bridge the large gap that exists between the findings of the biblical scholars and the understanding of the ordinary man or woman in the pew. If it helps that process in some way, I will feel well rewarded.

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Scripture texts are mostly from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, Catholic edition, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

I also used: -

Biblia-Catholic.net, a US translation available on the internet;

The Douai Bible, William Egan & Co., Cork, Ireland, 1953;

The Jerusalem Bible, standard edition, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1966.

I consulted: -

Dufour, Xavier-Léon, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Chapman, London, 1961.

Fuller, Reginald C. (general editor), *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, Nelson, London, 1975, abbreviated in the text as NCCHS.

McKenzie, John L., *Dictionary of the Bible*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1976.

Volume 1:
from Monday of the first week of Advent
to Saturday of Week 6 in Ordinary Time.

**Volume 2:
from Ash Wednesday
to Saturday of Week 5 of Easter.**

**Volume 3:
from Monday of Week 6 of Easter
to Saturday of Week 18 in Ordinary Time.**

**Volume 4:
from Monday of Week 19
to Saturday of Week 34 in Ordinary Time.**

Advent, Week 1

Monday

Matthew 8.5-13 Jesus heals a centurion's servant

5. When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him

6. and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.'

7. And he said to him, 'I will come and cure him.'

8. The centurion answered, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.'

9. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this," and the slave does it.'

10. When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.'

11. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,

The *Lectionary* reading stops at v.11.

12. while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

13. And to the centurion Jesus said, 'Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the servant was healed in that hour.

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 7.1-10, and it is like the story of the cure of the nobleman's son in John 4.46-53.

V.5: The scene opens in Capernaum, Jesus' 'own town' (Matthew 4.13; 9.1), where he began his teaching, and worked signs and wonders, but which later provoked him to curse it (Matthew 11.23) for its unbelief.

V.6: There is great humility here on the part of the centurion, coupled with manliness and strength of character. He was taking a risk, exposing himself to the possibility of a humiliating rebuff. Without grovelling, he makes known his need and asks for help. And it's not for himself, but for his servant.

V.7: Jesus' response is simple and direct; he agrees to do it. That sounds easy but it took courage and more. The Romans were the occupying power, and they were cruel; to kill one of their subject people meant nothing to them. Here was Jesus showing himself willing to help one of their leaders – in other words, he was collaborating with the occupiers. He could have said, 'We Jews owe you Romans nothing; you have no claim on us. Go back to where you came from, and take your boyfriend (*pais*) with you.' Had he done so, the crowd would have been delighted, probably applauded, and revelled in the humiliation and dismissal of a representative of their enemy. But then Jesus would not have been Jesus. By agreeing to help a Roman, he put himself at risk

from the Zealots who made a point of targeting the Romans in their soft under-belly, the local collaborators.

Vv.8-9: But the centurion, speaking from his experience as an army officer, wants to save Jesus the trouble of going to his house; all he need do is give an order and it will happen.

Vv.10-12: Jesus was amazed at his faith and contrasted it to the weak faith of his own people. If his own people, to whom he came first, do not accept him, others will. This is a key theme of Matthew, who was a Jew writing for Jews. Jesus goes on to say that many will come from east and west, and will eat – an earthy image - in the kingdom of heaven. This is one of many universalist perspectives in Jesus. He is not imprisoned by narrow loyalties. But it grieved him that his own people – ‘the heirs of the kingdom’ - were so resistant.

The *Lectionary* stops the story at v.11, cutting it off in mid-sentence. To have stopped at v.10 would have focused on the punch-line. To have continued until v.13 would have completed the story, but stopping at v.11 seems to have nothing to commend it. Was it simply a mistake?

V.13: The centurion’s servant was healed in that hour, ‘according to your faith.’ There is no healing

without faith. Healing is not waving a magic wand; it requires human cooperation. Miracles are intended to give witness to who Jesus is and what his mission is. They require trust in him and a readiness to let go of one's self. Matthew makes the same point in Matthew 9.2, 22 and 28 in the miracle stories which follow this.

An anonymous article on the internet has this to say about the passage: -

The usual word for a slave or servant was *doulos*. But the word used in this passage is *pais*, perhaps because it produces a play on words with the Greek word for paralysis. At the time, *pais* could mean one of five things: -

- a son or boy;
- a servant who ruled other servants and cared for his master's children;
- a servant who was his master's male lover;
- the junior partner in a homosexual relationship;
- an attractive young male.

Instead of *pais*, Luke, in 7.1-10, uses the term *entimos doulos* which means *honoured slave*. This would be a common expression for a slave who had an especially close relationship with his master. We can exclude all but two (explanation to follow) potential definitions: either this was a slave who managed the household, taking care of his master's servants

and children, or he was in a romantic or sexual relationship with his master.

The head of a Roman household would, likely, treat his slave as sexual property. Until late in the Roman Empire, the adult male had the right to maim or kill his slaves on a whim. Even after laws to protect slaves were enacted, they were largely ignored. At no point in Roman history were laws enacted to prevent the rape, sodomy, or sexual exploitation of a patriarch's human property; such actions were always within his legal authority. Both Jesus' audience and the early Roman and Jewish hearers to whom the Gospels were first preached would have known that.

In the ancient world, homosexual armies were commonplace. The elite fighting forces of the Greeks, Romans, Spartans, Cretans, and Boeotians, were based on homosexual relations. Rome continued this tradition of military homosexuality as a means of improving morale, bravery and fighting capacity.

To promote homosexual armies, the Emperor Augustus, about the year 13 BC, banned certain ranks of soldiers, including centurions, from marrying. This lasted until 197 A.D, so, during the years that Jesus lived and the Gospel writers wrote, a centurion was generally childless, single, and engaging in homosexual acts.

Furthermore, while he was at war, a centurion did not have the right to have regular slaves save one, namely, a chosen, trusted, physically fit male - as long as he would later free him to join the Roman army (only free men could serve in it). This allowed the centurion to have sexual release while away at war, for the slave to train in war with a senior soldier, and - most importantly to the Romans - for a bond to form that would not be broken.

This bond was the overarching goal of encouraging homosexual relations in the military. Four hundred years before Christ, Romans had begun advocating that their armies be composed entirely of homosexual males. One such battalion, the three hundred members of the Sacred Band of Thebes, was lauded by the military captain Pelopidas (via Plutarch), saying ‘a bond cemented by friendship grounded upon love is never to be broken and is invincible, since the lovers, ashamed to be base in sight of their beloved, and the beloved before their lovers, willingly rush into danger for the relief of one another.’ And a monument was built in their honour.

Knowing that a centurion was forbidden to marry, was not allowed to have children or regular slaves, and was encouraged to have a special slave as a homosexual lover give us great clarity as to their relationship. A *pais*

would pass to a centurion at about the age the age of thirteen, whereas the centurion would be in his twenties or thirties. This passage deals with underage sex slavery, not a willing union.

One cannot argue that both the Old and New Testaments do not make very strong statements against homosexuality. However, ancient homosexuality and modern homosexuality are essentially dissimilar. (The Bible never actually uses the word homosexuality, as it - neither the concept nor the practice - had truly culturally occurred in the form we have today until the 1800's.) Those who wish to have the Bible make a clear statement about modern homosexuality are simply asking the Bible to exist in a time other than its own. It does not address the issue, as the passages often cited as dealing with homosexuality are in fact about a substantially different concept.

What is that difference?

1. In the Old Testament, and for almost all but the military class in the New, just about everyone was married by the age of sexual maturity.
2. Procreation was considered a cultural, national, and religious obligation.
3. Most importantly, being penetrated was seen as a sign of weakness - a lowering of men to the status of women. For one man to have sex with another was to shame him and express

dominance over him, and the man being penetrated often did not have a choice in the matter. This is why, throughout the scriptures, homosexuality is never spoken of outside of orgies or temple prostitution. The story of Sodom in Genesis 19 expresses succinctly what homosexuality was to the ancient world: a group event, defined around shaming the penetrated one, usually with the latter an unwilling participant, or, alternatively, someone willing, for whatever reason, to consent to the humiliation.

What Jesus says and does not say is what gives the story its meaning and which set Jesus apart as dramatically different from others who claimed the title of Messiah. Jesus does not quote Leviticus 18.22, ‘You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.’ (“Abominations” called for the death penalty.)

Instead he says, ‘I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ This is nearly identical to what he said about drunkards, tax collectors, and prostitutes, namely, that they will enter into the kingdom of God before the devout.

Jesus' interaction with the centurion gives us an insight that is more valuable than simply what our position should be on homosexuality, and which is especially important for those who do not struggle with homosexuality or homophobia.

Healing someone's ailments neither condemns nor condones their behaviour, even if it caused the ailment. In this passage, Jesus' healing the centurion's sex slave is not a teaching about homosexuality. It does show that, for Jesus, reconciliation of Israel's enemies is more important than moral condemnation or indignation. Jesus healed the servant *because of the faith of the centurion* (v.13).

The story is a parable in action, and its meaning is clear: God's generosity knows no bounds; it is a scandalous mercy. It is precisely those who were contemptuously called "sinners" for whom there is room at Jesus' table - and not just any seat, because they are the ones for whom the party is being thrown in the first place!

Jesus both breaks and fulfils the expectations placed upon him; the story overflows with a mercy that was deeply scandalous. There is perhaps no greater story from which Jesus emerges as a great philosopher, dynamic political leader, and transcendent character for

both his time and ours. (*An edited quote from an anonymous internet article.*)

A significant, and disturbing, point is that neither here nor anywhere else in the Gospels does Jesus call into question the morality of slavery. He seems to presuppose it as a fact of life, no more.

This story breaks remarkable new ground in that Jesus is so open to a Roman, almost certainly a Gentile, and, even more so, that, in v.10, he holds up the Gentile as an example of greater faith than his fellow Jews. To them, with a powerful sense of apartness as the chosen people of God, for Jesus to place one of the *goyim*, commonly called dogs, above them, must have shocked them to the core. It called their identity into question.

Advent

Week 1, Tuesday

Luke 10.21-24 Jesus rejoices

21. At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

22. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the

Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’

23. Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!’

24. For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.’

There are passages parallel to vv.21-22 in Matthew 11.25-27, and to vv.23-24 in Matthew 13.16-17.

Vv.21-22 express the joy of Jesus in his Father having revealed ‘these things’ to ‘infants.’ ‘These things’ probably refers to the power to expel demons, while the latter refers to the disciples. Earlier, Jesus had said to them, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God...’

V.22: Jesus rejoices in his intimate relationship with his Father. They know each other fully, as no one else can, except those to whom they choose to reveal themselves.

Vv.23-24: In Matthew 13.16-17, Jesus similarly rejoices, saying,

‘blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see

what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.’

The “outsiders” – in this context, the simple and ignorant – are favoured above the “insiders” – the wise and the intelligent. And all this was the Father’s gracious will.

In this passage, Jesus speaks in an explosion of joy, celebrating the return of his companions, and sharing in their happiness. They were ordinary men, none of them particularly religious, as people then understood it, none of them from an academic background; they were fishermen and a tax collector, “infants” in knowledge. But they had received Jesus with open hearts, had committed themselves to him, and experienced a power previously unknown.

Once, I was with a class of primary school children of about seven years of age, and asked them, ‘Why did God create anything?’ - not an easy question to answer. A boy spoke up, ‘Because he doesn’t like playing by himself.’ I thought, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and children...’ It was a great answer. Saint Thomas Aquinas said the same thing, ‘God is pure joy, and joy needs company.’ Einstein said, ‘God does not play dice.’ But God does play. Creation is God’s playground, where God pours out his creativity in joyful exuberance, with an endless variety of marvels. Creation is God’s companion, his image, where he is always at work, always celebrating, always breaking the mould and starting

afresh, from the dawn of time until now. And God doesn't like playing by himself, so he created us, his second image.

Sometimes a child can see with clarity and simplicity what the adult has lost. The same may be true of those crushed by suffering; they see directly, having no mask to look through. It may be true also of the poet or musician; in language different from that of analysis and dissection, of comparing and contrasting, of logic and reason, they express intuitively the music of the soul.

Jesus celebrates his union with God, whom he calls his Father. This title was already there in his Jewish tradition: 'the Lord... is he not your father who created you, who made you and established you?' (Deuteronomy 32.6); 'The Lord said, to me, "You are my son." Today I have begotten you.' (Psalm 2.7) But the manner in which Jesus used this title was unique. There was about it a directness, intimacy, affection, depth and even frequency, which was without parallel. He used the child's word for father – Abba – rather than the formal word. A change of language leads to a change of understanding.

Jesus did not see God as a Greek-style Prime Mover, or in abstract terms, such as a Life Force, First Cause, or Supreme Being. In seeing God as personal, as did Jewish tradition before him, it means that all supreme values are personal. Among

other things, that means that ideology must take second place to the human. It means, too, that religion must itself never become an ideology.

All great ideas are dangerous. One danger in seeing God as Father is that of making him a role model or supreme archetype of male self-centredness and self-sufficiency. The Orthodox icons of Christos Pantocrator (Christ the Ruler of All) suggest this, projecting an image of aloofness and power. The Scholastics used to say, 'Every analogy limps.' So does every image or idea about God.

Perhaps that is why in some Christian traditions, especially the Catholic, Mary has been invoked, in the liturgy for instance, with a clear parallelism between the celebrations of Jesus and those of Mary, as a counter-balance to an all-male image of God's presence and action in the world. For example: -

Conception of Jesus (the Annunciation) and of Mary, (25 March and 8 December).

Birth of Jesus and of Mary, (25 December and 8 September).

Jesus' presentation in the temple and that of Mary (2 February and 21 November)

Holy Name of Jesus and of Mary (2 January and 12 September).

Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary (Friday after the second Sunday after Pentecost and the next day)

Ascension of Jesus and Assumption of Mary
(Forty days after the resurrection and 15 August)
The Triumph of the Cross and the Sorrows of
Mary, 14-15 September
Kingship of Christ and the Queenship of Mary,
(last Sunday of year and 22 August)

Without embarrassment or hesitation, without arrogance or pride, Jesus claims a unique relationship with God: 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows... who the Father is except the Son.' (v.22) No one else can have such a relationship. God as Father was the magnetic north pole to Jesus' personal compass, his constant reference point. It is also the key to understanding his universalist outlook.

And he tells his disciples that this moment which they now experience is unique. Previous generations had waited, prayed, and hoped for it, but never experienced it. It is something given; it cannot be invoked or conjured up, can never be the conclusion to a syllogism; it is not something achieved through mental or spiritual discipline; like creation itself, it is pure gift.

Advent
Week 1, Wednesday
Matthew 15.29-39 Jesus cures many people, and feeds four thousand

29. After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down.

30. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them,

31. so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

32. Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.'

33. The disciples said to him, 'Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?'

34. Jesus asked them, 'How many loaves have you?' They said, 'Seven, and a few small fish.'

35. Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground,

36. he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

37. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

(The *Lectionary* stops at v.37.)

38. Those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children.

39. After sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magdala.

There is a broadly similar passage in Mark 7.31-37 to vv.29-31, and in Mark 8.1-10 to vv.32-39.

V.29: ‘He went up the mountain.’ Mountains were often holy places, places of encounter with God – Mount Sinai, Mount Nebo, Mount Ebal, Mount Moriah, Mount Horeb, Mount Hermon, Mount Gerizim, Mount Zion, Mount Tabor, the Mount of the Beatitudes, the Mount of Olives. This encounter with God and healing of the sick are interactive; the divine and the human go hand in hand. The silence of the mountains helps.

How simply the Gospel says, ‘he cured them.’ It makes it sound easy, but it can’t have been. Jesus had compassion on people. The word compassion means ‘suffering with.’ There is no cheap grace; suffering is never easy. It must have cost him energy and effort, not like waving a wand or uttering a magic formula. ‘Power came out from him.’ (Luke 6.19; 8.46) Jesus entered into the rejection of the leper, the fear of the rich, the helplessness of the cripple, the weakness of the hungry, the desperation of the thirsty. That must have been enormously draining.

The great crowds that came to him responded by praising ‘the God of Israel.’ That, it seems, is how

they thought of God – “our” God. It was something they – and we - have to outgrow; God is not going to be co-opted to anyone’s particular agenda. “My” God is always an idol, something made in my image and likeness, a projection. We choose our God in choosing names for him. But the reality of God is always greater than any image, idea, name or concept we may have. The prohibition in the Old Testament (and the Quran) on the making of images is, one might say, the easy part. Not making a statue of “God” is easy compared to not making a mental image which we identify with God.

Vv.32-37: This is similar to the description in Matthew 15.32-38, and, most likely, is a second account of the one incident. The reduction in the number of men from five to four thousand (Matthew 14.21; 15.38) is insignificant, as is the different description of the food supply, from five loaves and two fish in 14.19, to seven loaves and a few small fish in 15.34.

Why two accounts - and why so close to each other? The first account is found in all four Gospels: Matthew 14.13-21; Mark 6.31-44; Luke 9.10-17 and John 6.1-3. Only Matthew has this second. Is it anything more than an editorial glitch, a bit of untidiness, perhaps, on the part of either Matthew or a later copyist?

In each case, Jesus asks his disciples to deal with the problem of the people’s hunger. Their response

was: ‘Give us the resources and we can do the job.’ They failed. Part of their training, it seems, was to experience failure, and to learn to trust in Jesus.

The language used is suggestive of the eucharist: ‘he took the... loaves... and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples’ (Matthew 15.37); while in the institution narrative of the eucharist, it is, ‘Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples...’ (Matthew 26.26)

Moses had fed people in the desert (Exodus 16.13-14), and Elisha had fed a hundred men with twenty loaves (2 Kings 4.42-44). Matthew’s accounts both say Jesus’ feeding of the people took place ‘in the desert.’ Like the other Gospel writers, Matthew wrote with a theological purpose: Jesus is greater than Moses or Elisha; with Jesus, the impossible is possible; he is the Messiah.

Where stories have such a directly apologetic or persuasive purpose, where they appear to be constructed in order to elicit a particular desired response, it is difficult not to wonder whether they weren’t simply constructs, as is obviously the case in, let us say, the parables of the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan. If someone had been there at the time with a video camera, what would they have seen? Would they have seen loaves and fishes being multiplied miraculously, or Matthew struggling to

find an imaginative and appealing way of communicating an idea through a story?

There is a painting by Nicholas Régnier (1591-1667), of the Flemish school, depicting an old, tired-looking Matthew, sitting at a table on which lies a parchment, and he holds a quill in his hand. Behind him, an angel whispers into his ear, telling him what to write in his Gospel. That's one view of biblical inspiration, but I think it unlikely that it corresponds with the reality. Matthew, like any writer, drew on sources for material, in his case Mark and perhaps others such as collected sayings of Jesus or stories about him. He may have been influenced by Paul. He was systematic in his presentation of material, and shows the signs of a careful writer. He used the talents God gave him, including that of creativity.

V.38: This verse – the *Lectionary* omits it and v.39 – sounds belittling to modern ears. Its wording makes women and children appear as an afterthought, not worth counting.

V.39: As is commonly the case in the Gospels, some information about a change of location is given, mainly, it seems, with a view to announcing a change of scene or focus.

Advent, Week 1
Thursday

Matthew 7.21, 24-27 Hearing the word and doing it

21. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

Verses 22-23 and 28-29 are not in the *Lectionary*.

22. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’

23. Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

24. Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

25. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.

26. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

27. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell - and great was its fall!

28. Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching,

29. for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 6.46-49, with an echo in Luke 13.25-27.

V.21: Maybe the false prophets of Matthew 7.15 include those Jesus speaks of here, those who talk but do not do. They are not unlike the teachers he warned against in Matthew 5.19, ‘Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.’ The essential point Jesus makes is that being a disciple is not about what you think, or say you believe in, but what you do. After all, what we live is what we really believe in. The message of Matthew 25.31-46 is the same: it is what the person does that counts.

What does ‘Lord’ mean? It seems, in the Synoptic Gospels, to be no more than a title of respect, like ‘Sir.’ In Paul and in Acts, especially in association with the resurrection or the second coming, it goes beyond its usage in the Greek world when applied to kings or Roman Caesars and implies that Jesus is divine. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, Lord (Greek, *Kurios*) is the normal title for God.

Vv.22-23: ‘On that day’ refers to the Day of Judgment, a pervasive theme of the New Testament. Some may then claim to have prophesied, exorcized, or worked miracles in the name of Jesus. He will reject them, saying he does not know them. It is difficult to understand this, which may be why the

Lectionary omits it. After all, those are deeds done in the name of Jesus; they would seem to fulfil his call to go beyond words and into action. He had said, ‘Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’ (Mark 3.35)

But there are examples in every age of history of people who have been able to perform wonders, who seemed to have, perhaps did have, astonishing powers, but whose manner of life was far from Christian. Rasputin comes to mind. I once spoke with a man who, as a teenager, had interviewed Prince Felix Yussupov, the leader of the group that killed Rasputin. He asked him, ‘How does it feel to have murdered Rasputin?’ Yussupov replied, ‘I did not murder a man; I killed the devil incarnate.’

Vv.24-27 give the example of someone who builds a house in a *wadi*, a river-bed which floods when the rains come. These floods are a not uncommon occurrence; they come after heavy rain, are very powerful, running over ground baked hard and dry by months of sunshine, and they sweep all before them. To choose such a place as a site for a house is seen as being almost proverbial in its folly. (People in Ireland built houses on flood-plains during the Celtic Tiger.) A site on one of them might attract by its low price, but the risk of flooding would be so high as to be almost a certainty. By contrast, a foundation of rock, though much harder to work on than the soft sand underneath the crust of the *wadi*, is secure.

Jesus' point is that people who base their life on his teaching have a sure foundation, while those who instead listen to false prophets will go astray. Since the time of Jesus there have been many ideologies, philosophies, theologies, spiritualities, political systems and so on, offering themselves as messiahs, saying in effect, 'I am the one; follow me.' They have come and they have gone – many of the “-isms” are now “wasms” - often leaving immense human suffering in their wake. Jesus is constant and still draws people to himself. No one in human history has had such influence. His message resonates with the human spirit. Those who interiorize, assimilate, and ‘digest’ the words of Jesus, and then act on them, will be as solid as a rock, unshakeable when the storms of life beat down on them. But those who only listen, without resulting action, will be shallow and superficial, will come down with a crash when faced by the storms of life, like a house built on sand. God is not amenable to the neutral observer; God is ‘Father’ for believers. Jesus wants disciples, not students. He looks for commitment, not the kind of academic enquiry which doesn't go beyond the level of words. The best way to learn about the Bible is to try to live it.

V.28 is a type of wrap-up phrase used elsewhere by Matthew to conclude a teaching. In Matthew 11.1, we read, ‘Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities,’ and, similarly in Matthew 19.1 and 26.1,

‘Jesus had now finished what he wanted to say....’
They are similar also to Mark who wrote at the conclusion of a teaching that the people said, ‘Here is a teaching that is new – and with authority.’ (1.27)

V.29: The emphasis on authority is interesting. As far as we know, Jesus had no official teaching position. But ‘he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.’ The latter proffered second-hand goods - as most of us do; there are few original thinkers - while he gave what came from his intimate relationship with God. He said of himself, not simply, ‘I teach the truth,’ but ‘I am the truth,’ (John 14.6) a breathtakingly arrogant claim to make for anyone who was not of God.

Advent

Week 1, Friday

Matthew 9.27-31 Jesus heals two blind men

27. As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, ‘Have mercy on us, Son of David!’

28. When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ They said to him, ‘Yes, Lord.’

29. Then he touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith let it be done to you.’

30. And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, ‘See that no one knows of this.’

31. But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

There is a passage very similar to this in 20.29-34, and one in Luke 18.35-43 which has common ground also.

V.27: Clearly these men are appealing from the depths; their need is great; they know what they want, and they want it with all their heart. It is easy to understand the strength of their appeal.

They call Jesus 'Son of David.' This title expressed the expectation among the people that the Messiah had to be a son of David. For example, in Matthew 22.41-46: -

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question:

'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.'

He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

"The Lord said to my Lord,

"Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet"?"

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?'

No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

There are almost identical passages in Mark 12.35-37 and Luke 20.41-44. And in 12.23, Matthew has the people ask about Jesus, 'Can this be the Son of David?' And the crowd shout about Jesus, on his entry into Jerusalem, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' Luke has the angel Gabriel say to Mary about Jesus at the annunciation, 'He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.' (1.32) John 7.42 has the phrase, 'Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?' Saint Paul, in Romans 1.3-4 – 'the Gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God' - and 2 Timothy 2.8, 'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David' - shows that the early Christians shared this expectation.

However, it appears clear from Matthew 22.41-46 that, for Jesus, descent from David was not important. He had told Jews not to boast of their descent from Abraham (Matthew 3.9), and, in his relations with his own extended family, he made it clear that family ties took second place to commitment to doing God's will. (Matthew 12.46-50) His preferred self-designation was Son of Man, a title which meant a human being. For Matthew's Jewish audience, though, the title Son of David most likely was important; hence its inclusion. Maybe his point is that this was something even the blind could see, so all the more, the leaders of the Jewish people

should have been able to see it, and are, therefore, blameworthy for not seeing it.

V.28: What did matter to Jesus was that people have faith in him, that they believe, trust, and hope in him. He was not a magician waving a magic wand, saying, ‘Abracadabra’ and making wonderful things happen in a puff of smoke. ‘God created us without us, but did not will to save us without us,’ wrote Saint Augustine. (Sermon 169. 11, 13: PL 38.923) Jesus does things *with* people rather than *to* them or *for* them. Human cooperation is always part of the process; people are not passive recipients but active agents. So he asked the men if they believed, and they professed their faith in him, saying ‘Yes, Lord.’ That’s what counted, and therefore their prayer was heard. (The title of Lord is used in the Synoptic Gospels with a meaning similar to *Sir*; however, after the resurrection it becomes a divine title.)

V.29a: Jesus ‘touched their eyes.’ Nobody likes their eyes being touched by another; we naturally react against it. It takes an act of trust for us to allow a stranger to touch our eyes. In Matthew, Jesus touches eyes again in 9.29 and 20.34; he touches a leper in 8.3, a hand in 8.15 and the apostles in 17.7. Most of all, he touched people’s hearts. It was his way; he did not believe in keeping a distance from people; he was not afraid of the bodily.

V.29b-30: For Matthew and the other evangelists, faith in Jesus is a necessary condition for a work of power by him. In 8.13, Jesus healed the centurion's slave in response to the centurion's faith, 'let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the same applies in 9.22, where Jesus healed a woman, saying to her, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.'

Vv.30b-31: Jesus gives similar instructions in analogous situations, e.g., Matthew 9.30, 12.16, 16.20, and Mark 1.34. The Gospels emphasize the force of his command: 'He sternly ordered...' Jesus seems to ask the impossible. How could two blind men possibly keep quiet about having their sight restored? What answer should they give to family, relatives and friends who would ask them what happened? You could hardly blame them for telling everyone about their healing. It was something you couldn't keep to yourself.

This is most likely another example of what scripture scholars call "the Messianic secret," namely, that Jesus wanted to keep secret his identity as Messiah – and even more as Son of God – until a time and place of his own choosing. The reason most commonly advanced for this is that, in his time, the title of Messiah was laden with political expectations: he would be the one who would drive out the Roman conquerors and restore the kingdom of David – none of which was any part of Jesus' mission. But perhaps it might also have been that he

did not want people to follow him simply because of his miracles.

Advent

Week 1, Saturday

Matthew 9.35-10.1, 5a, 6-8 Proclaiming the Good News

35. Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.

36. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

37. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few;

38. therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

10.1. Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

5.a. These twelve Jesus sent out, with the following instructions:

6. go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

7. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'

8. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.’

There are passages parallel to 9.35-38 in Luke 10.2-3, and to 10.1-8 in Mark 3.13-19a and 6.6b-13, and in Luke 6.12-16 and 9.16.

9.35: Jesus went on a tour, teaching in the synagogues. That was a common practice among rabbis in his time. This is a virtual repeat of Matthew 4.23-25, which introduced a section of ten miracles, showing Jesus in a messianic role as teacher and healer.

He went, ‘proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.’ The Gospel is Good News, not good advice. The latter is usually the product of a fussy mind, anxious to sort people out and solve their problems for them. By contrast, Good News is always welcome and readily shared.

The kingdom of heaven is the central theme of Matthew’s Gospel, and his other themes are subordinated to it. The phrase “kingdom of heaven” occurs thirty times in Matthew, and “kingdom of God” four. He uses the term more often than do the other Gospel writers, and the terms “king” and “kingdom” interchangeably. The kingdom comes with Jesus, whose teaching and miracles are in the messianic tradition. Matthew’s point is to show that

Jesus was the Messiah (not a divine title). Jesus is the king of the kingdom, not one like royalty of any time, but a humble one. Zechariah 9.9 reads:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

The beatitudes (Matthew 5.3-10) are the charter of the kingdom.

In the Hebrew Bible, God was king, and Israel the kingdom. By the time of Jesus, this hope had been secularized into the vision of a political kingdom of Israel free of Roman, Greek or any other foreign control.

Jesus taught and proclaimed. Is there a difference? Is it like catechesis and evangelization respectively? He wasn't starting from a clean slate. His hearers were Jews, probably already well-versed in the Torah, and it is from within that context and commitment that he spoke. He had come not to abolish the Torah, but to fulfil it. (Matthew 5.17)

V.36: He had compassion on the crowds, because 'they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.' Today, soap operas show people without values to live by or hopes to live for, without an anchor in life, people who don't know

what they want, and are driven by fashions, fads, and hormones. Blaise Pascal wrote, ‘What good is it to tell people who do not know themselves that they should make their own way to God?’

V.37: This has traditionally been seen as asking people to pray for “vocations” to the priesthood and religious life. That fits, but the appeal has wider application; it includes everyone who serves God’s kingdom in any capacity. The harvest is an image widely used in the Bible of messianic times and of judgment; Matthew himself has it in 13.9 and 13.24-30.

10.1: Jesus gave the twelve disciples whom he summoned authority to do as he had done: to cast out unclean spirits and to cure ‘every disease and every sickness.’ There is no mention here of proclaiming the kingdom of God. Is that significant, or not? Probably not, as it comes just a little later in 10.7.

The people who come closest to curing ‘every disease and every sickness’ are doctors, nurses and research scientists – many of whom today are not Christian even in the most extended sense. But, by their work, they show respect for the person, and compassion, too, as Jesus taught and did. They would do well if judged according to the parable of judgment in Matthew 25.31-46. A blessing on them!

Vv.5-6: Jesus sent them out, not to gentiles or Samaritans but rather ‘to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ Was that Jesus or Matthew speaking? In either case, it emphasizes one of Matthew’s themes, which is the rejection of Jesus by Jews and the consequent opening up of the Gospel to gentiles. In 4.23-25, Jesus’ fame spread ‘throughout all Syria’, ‘and great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.’ This was after preaching in their synagogues (4.23), so it is likely that those who followed him were not gentiles but Jews living in gentile territories.

V.7: Here he says that ‘the kingdom of God has come near.’ Is it merely quibbling to ask whether it would not be more accurate to say that it had already come – with Jesus? But the same phrase is used also in 3.2 and 4.17.

Clearly it is not possible to pin down the kingdom to any point in space or time just as it is not possible to pin down heaven to a place.

V.8: Jesus gives the twelve a new commission, more broad-ranging than before. It includes new elements such as raising the dead and cleansing lepers. (The term “leprosy,” it seems, applied to many different skin diseases.) Their service is to be given without charge, just as it was received without charge. Does that mean that their mission was to be temporary or local? Were they to live solely on

voluntary contributions or would they continue to support themselves as before by their ordinary work as fishermen, etc.? If the latter, how then would they travel to spread the news of the kingdom?

Clearly, the disciples and apostles of Jesus today do not, and cannot, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cure every disease and every sickness. Does that mean that we have failed, or what does it mean?

On one occasion in Zambia, before my time there, the first bishop of the diocese, Timothy Phelim O'Shea, a Corkman, came to the mission in Mangango for a while, probably for confirmation. Early one morning, he went out into the garden and was shocked to see a man lying on the ground, apparently dead. But a quick examination made it clear that he was not dead - only dead drunk! The bishop spoke to him and he woke up, gradually got his bearings, and stood up. Unknown to the bishop, all this had been seen by a passer-by, who put two and two together, made twenty-two of them, and then ran around telling everyone that the bishop had raised a dead man to life! The story remained alive for years to come, no matter how often it was denied.

Advent

Week 2, Monday

Luke 5.17-26 Jesus heals a paralytic

17. One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal.

18. Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus;

19. but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus.

20. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.'

21. Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?'

22. When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?'

23. Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you," or to say, "Stand up and walk"?''

24. But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins - he said to the one who was paralyzed - 'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.'

25. Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God.

26. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 9.1-8 and Mark 2.1-12.

V.17: It begins like an unholy Inquisition, a panel of critics waiting for a mistake, perhaps setting a trap. Did they see themselves as the guardians of orthodoxy – we have the truth, it has been entrusted to us for safe keeping, and it is our duty to protect it; we are here to judge if this man’s teaching conforms to it? They came from Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem; this suggests a late stage in his ministry when opposition to him was coming to a climax. But this story is set at an early stage. Maybe Luke moved it from one time to another; the Gospel writers felt free to do this because they were not writing Jesus’ biography or history, but his story as they saw it from a later post-Resurrection perspective.

‘The power of the Lord was with him to heal.’ (JB has Power.) That’s a way of saying that God was with him. Similar expressions are used in Luke 6.19, ‘power came out of him and healed them all,’ and 8.46, ‘I noticed that power had gone out from me.’ Jesus saw power as a gift from God to be used in service. He used it to heal, to feed, to restore life, to cleanse. Sometimes power is used to control or manipulate, the language of service being used as a smokescreen.

Vv.18-19: The men bring the paralytic into the house by lowering him through the roof, since they had no other access. Houses were usually flat-roofed, simple in construction, and simple also to repair. (What did the householder think?) They were desperate, and desperation doesn't take no for an answer.

V.20: 'Seeing their faith...' Faith is the essential pre-requisite. It's not certainty; it's more like hope and trust. It may be like the faith of the man who asked Jesus to heal his epileptic son, and said to him, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' (Mark 9.24) We live all our life between belief and unbelief.

Jesus says, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' He makes a link between the man's condition and his sins. In other cases, as in that of the man born blind (John 9), he rejects such a link. What's true in one may not be true in the other. Jesus doesn't imply that the paralysis is a *punishment* for the man's sins; but it could be a *consequence*, as, for example, cirrhosis of the liver may be a consequence of over-indulgence in alcohol.

V.21: The inquisitors begin. 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?' Jesus knew what they were thinking; it wasn't hard to guess. Even unprejudiced people might have thought the same thing.

Vv.22-23: Jesus doesn't wait for them to ask; he takes the initiative by asking them the question in

v.23. Anyone could say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ because no one knows whether it will happen but only a unique person could enable a crippled man to walk again for all to see.

V.24: He then makes the claim to have the authority to forgive sins, and supports it by enabling the man to stand up and walk. No one can forgive sin but God, so, in forgiving sin, Jesus is making the ultimate claim about himself.

V.25: The man did as Jesus told him, a rarity among his followers!

V.26: As elsewhere, the people’s response was one of awe: see Luke 4.15; 7.16-17; 8.25, 56; 9.43; 11.14; 13.17; 18.43; 19.48; 21.38.

Advent

Week 2, Tuesday

Matthew 18.12-14 A lost sheep

Jesus said to his disciples:

12. ‘What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?’

13. And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

14. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.’

There are close similarities between this passage and the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15.1-7.

V.12: ‘What do you think?’ As always, Jesus is prodding people to think. He didn’t feed answers into their heads; he engaged them in the thinking process. It was an approach taken up very much later by a Christian saint, and educator, who wrote,

It is chiefly by asking questions and in provoking explanations that the teacher must open the mind of the pupil, make him work, use his thinking powers, form his judgment, and make him find out the answer for himself. (Saint John Baptiste de la Salle)

Parents worry over the sick child, not the healthy one. You worry over the person who gets into trouble, not the one who keeps out of it. God wants people to be saved. Part of being ‘saved’ is being integrated into a community; being ‘astray’- not as strong a word as ‘lost’- is being out of it, like the sheep.

The Lord God is depicted in Ezekiel 34.11-31 as a good shepherd, who cares for the sheep: -

The Lord Yahweh says this: ‘Look, I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it.

As a shepherd looks after his flock when he is with his scattered sheep, so shall I look after my sheep. I shall rescue them from wherever they have been scattered on the day of clouds and darkness.

I shall bring them back from the peoples where they are; I shall gather them back from the countries and bring them back to their own land. I shall pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the inhabited parts of the country.

I shall feed them in good pasturage; the highest mountains of Israel will be their grazing ground. There they will rest in good grazing grounds; they will browse in rich pastures on the mountains of Israel.

I myself shall pasture my sheep, I myself shall give them rest - declares the Lord Yahweh.

I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the injured and make the sick strong. I shall watch over the fat and healthy. I shall be a true shepherd to them.

As for you, my sheep, the Lord Yahweh says this: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and he-goats.

Not content to drink the clearest of the water, you foul the rest with your feet.

And my sheep must graze on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have fouled.'

Very well, the Lord Yahweh says this: 'I myself shall judge between the fat sheep and the thin sheep.

since you have jostled with flank and shoulder and butted all the ailing sheep with your horns, until you have scattered them outside,

I shall come and save my sheep and stop them from being victimised. I shall judge between sheep and sheep.

I shall settle them round my hill; I shall send rain at the proper time; it will be a rain of blessings.

I shall raise up one shepherd, my servant David, and put him in charge of them to pasture them; he will pasture them and be their shepherd.

I, Yahweh, shall be their God, and my servant David will be ruler among them. I, Yahweh, have spoken.

I shall make a covenant of peace with them; I shall rid the country of wild animals. They will be able to live secure in the desert and go to sleep in the woods.

The trees of the countryside will yield their fruit and the soil will yield its produce; they will be secure on their soil. And they will know that I am Yahweh when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the clutches of their slave-masters.

No more will they be a prey to the nations, no more will the wild animals of the country devour them. They will live secure, with no one to frighten them.

I shall make splendid vegetation grow for them; no more will they suffer from famine in the country; no more will they have to bear the insults of other nations.

So they will know that I, their God, am with them and that they, the House of Israel, are my people' - declares the Lord Yahweh.

'And you, my sheep, are the flock of my human pasture, and I am your God' - declares the Lord Yahweh.

Matthew sees Jesus exercising that same role, thereby fulfilling the scriptures. (Jesus as the good shepherd is a theme taken up in John 10.)

The image of humanity as a flock of sheep is unflattering, and it goes against the grain with us. Everyone knows that sheep are stupid, and we're not, are we? But with 250 wars between World War II and the year 2000, maybe we're in a class of slow learners that makes sheep seem smart.

The story also underlines the importance Jesus attaches to the individual. 'Is fear duine ná daoine,' - The person is more important than people - wrote the Irish poet, Piaras Ó Feiritéir.

Advent

Week 2, Wednesday

Matthew 11.28-30 Come to me

Jesus said,

28. 'Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

29. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

30. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

Vv.28-30: NCCHS regards this as the end of a hymn which begins with v.25. It contrasts the rejection of Jesus by others and, here, acceptance of him.

Perhaps one of the 'heavy burdens' Jesus had in mind is the Torah, the teaching, with its multiplicity of detailed prescriptions and proscriptions. 'The yoke of the Law' had become a cliché among Jesus' contemporaries. Jews had 365 proscriptions (one for every day of the year), and 248 prescriptions or laws of direction (one for every bone in the body, it was said), making 613 in all. It was almost impossible to remember them all, never mind live by them, especially as, in many, if not all cases, the rules were extended into sections and sub-sections. An example might be the commandment (the third) to keep holy the Sabbath day. Among other things, that meant not working on it. But what constituted work? Rabbis listed thirty-nine different categories of activity which were forbidden on the Sabbath.

Jesus got into trouble on several occasions with the Pharisees and scribes for breaking the rules, as, for example, in the immediately following passage, Matthew 12.1-8, about plucking grain on the Sabbath. Questions discussed by them under this heading included such matters as: was it a violation of this commandment for a parent to lift a child on the Sabbath? What about putting on a bandage? – was that work? Cooking food? Lighting a fire? – that was definitely work. Feeding animals? A farmer considers it work, but should the animals then go hungry? Etc., etc., etc., many times over.

Furthermore, the teachers of the Law felt obliged to list the precepts in order of priority. (This is what lies behind the question. ‘Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’)

Was this burdensome? Definitely, yes! It is no wonder that Peter, in Acts, spoke of it as ‘a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear.’ (15.10) And Paul referred to it as ‘a yoke of slavery’ from which Christ freed us. (Galatians 5.1)

Much of Christian tradition has been taken up with re-imposing new moral burdens to replace those of the Torah. I remember an official of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, (then known as the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office), Father Sebastian Tromp SJ, explain the new rule of an hour’s fast before receiving Communion. He declared that every hour had sixty

minutes, every minute had sixty seconds, and therefore every hour had 3,600 seconds, not 3,599 or anything less!

And much Catholic teaching on human sexuality filled people with anxiety and scrupulosity and turned the faith into a moral obstacle course which one had to clear so as to avoid the pains of hell. The second Vatican Council cleared away a great deal of that Christian pharisaism and lightened the burden on people's shoulders.

As intended by God, the primary purpose of the Torah was to teach and motivate rather than regulate. When it came to be used as an instrument of regulation that is when it became a burden. The same may be said of any moral system.

Peter, in Acts, spoke to the first Christians in Jerusalem of the burden of the Torah, saying, 'It would only provoke God's anger now, surely, if you imposed on the disciples the very burden that neither we nor our ancestors were strong enough to support.' (15.10) Paul spoke similarly, 'When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit yourselves again to the yoke of slavery.' (Galatians 5.1) Jesus came to lift that burden from people. In its place he called for commitment to himself as the one who is the way to God. (John 14.6)

But there seems to be an ineradicable tendency among people that when they are given freedom the first thing they do is look around for someone or something to give it away to. Many Catholics in Ireland, the younger and middle generations especially but not exclusively, have all but given away the Catholic faith. Many do not know the Ten Commandments; some do even know that there are Ten Commandments.

Post-Christian secularism undermines freedom of speech through dogmatic, non-negotiable political correctness. In place of the Ten Commandments, we have set up a multiplicity of State agencies to regulate, control and, if necessary, penalize misconduct, seemingly not noticing that with every new controlling agency we lose some of our freedom. Bureaucracy increases as a substitute for the trust which would exist if we shared a common commitment to observing the Commandments. Paperwork multiplies out of fear of litigation. We are more and more concerned with crime and security, we are monitored by CCTV cameras, and carry bundles of keys and plastic cards of various kinds and have to try and remember their PINS. We allow ourselves to be dictated to by fads and fashions in cars, clothing, food, etc. We have made life complicated for ourselves and have created a culture of mistrust, suspicion and fragmentation in place of community.

William Penn, founder of the US State of Pennsylvania, a Quaker, said that we humans have a choice: we can obey the Ten Commandments of God or we condemn ourselves to obeying the ten thousand commandments of men imposed on us by statute and penal law. In Ireland, to a substantial degree, we have opted for the latter.

If we choose to follow the Ten Commandments, life becomes simpler, less complicated and more trusting. We follow them by a deliberate choice and we are in control; they have no binding force other than that of conscience. The Commandments are like being given a map and compass in a wilderness and shown how to use them; that is better than being left clueless as to where we are or are going. They are like the fence at the edge of a cliff to save us from ourselves in our foolish moments.

In Ireland, faced with a choice between self-discipline and imposed discipline, we have opted for the latter. Examples are: -

- the plastic bag levy: people dropped bags out of their hands on the street without a thought, until they had to pay for them and then they remembered;
- the smoking ban imposed on smokers the discipline of having to think about non-smokers and take their needs into consideration, where previously exhortations had failed;

- the excesses of the Celtic Tiger are too many to mention. We did not have self-discipline – not only the banks but the ordinary citizen, too – so we had instead the imposed discipline of the Troika, which we accepted with scarcely a murmur, almost as if we felt guilty and had deserved it;
- the rules of the road: a Garda chief superintendent in charge of the Traffic Corps said that the principal impediment to reducing road deaths was the public attitude that breaking the law is OK as long as you get away with it.

The prophet Jeremiah said to the people of Israel: “Thus says the Lord, “Stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies, and walk in it and find rest for your souls.” But they said, “We will not walk in it.”” (6.16) And so said all of us.

A simple positive example is that if people observe the sixth commandment – ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery’ we would have greater trust all round, less marital breakdown, better family relationships and fewer disturbed children.

Jesus, while re-affirming the Ten Commandments – ‘It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others’ (Matthew 23.23) - re-directs the focus of attention from observance of law to fidelity to himself. He puts responsibility for

behaviour on people's shoulders and makes it personal. 'What would Jesus do?' is a good question to ask, and someone who is familiar with the Gospel will generally not have great difficulty in answering it. If we find and follow the answer the Gospel gives, we will also find that it brings us peace and contentment. Good morals make for good conscience, and for good mental and physical health.

What does this passage say to those people – and they are not few - of good will and honest effort who carry a great, often heavy, burden of suffering with them in life through no fault of their own but simply as a by-product of circumstance? They do not find the yoke easy or the burden light. What can be said to them? Words will likely mean little, but a listening ear and a helping hand may mean a lot. The 'rest' Jesus promises in vv.28, 29 may be a hint of a life that only God can give.

Advent

Week 2, Thursday

Matthew 11.11-15 John the Baptist

Jesus said: -

11. 'Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

12. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.
13. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came;
14. and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.
15. Let anyone with ears listen!'

There is a passage parallel to v.11 in Luke 7.28. It is helpful to read Matthew 3.1-12 in conjunction with this passage.

V.11: John and Jesus were related. Their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, were cousins. Jesus always spoke of John with the highest regard. But this verse is strange. Jesus seems to say that John was the greatest person who ever lived. Was that the literal truth or a rhetorical flourish? 'Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.' Was John not in the kingdom of heaven? Was he considered not to be in it because the kingdom came with Jesus and John was born before him? Strange, if that is what was meant. John was indeed the last of the Old Testament prophets, but Jesus never attached importance to who came first. 'Before Abraham was, I am.' (John 8.58) Perhaps it means that, with his coming, there is something unique in the world, beyond all that preceded it.

John was: -

the archetype of humility, the shining light, the forerunner of Christ, the foetal prophet, the angelic messenger, the dawn before the sun, the first monk, the martyr for justice and truth. (Melanie McDonagh, “Bonfire for the Baptist,” *The Tablet*, 21 August 2004, p.2)

V.12: This is also strange. The days of John the Baptist began not long before those of Jesus. From then until the time of Jesus – ‘now’ - would be a short time, perhaps as little as six months.

‘The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force,’ could also be ‘the kingdom of heaven has been coming violently.’ (The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are the same thing.) Did Jesus mean opposition to John and to himself? Was he thinking ahead to the likely end of his mission in death?

The references to violence are reminiscent of the word *jihad* in Islam. It is an ambiguous term. It may mean violence against the perceived enemies of religion, or the struggle against sin in oneself, or self-sacrifice in submitting to the will of God and to martyrdom, or prophetic witness to truth: ‘The best *jihad* is to speak the word of truth in front of a tyrant.’ (Muhammad)

Like Jesus, John had preached that the kingdom of heaven had come near. (3.2; 4.17) He had probably

had contact with the Qumran community, though no one knows how significant this was, except, perhaps, for the prominence he gave to baptism, a prominence which is absent from mainstream Jewish tradition but important in Qumran, and for his hostility to the scribes and priests. The Gospels are full of opposition to Jesus from the leaders of the Jewish people.

The last part of the verse suggests that their opponents would win the struggle. In the short term, that must have seemed to be the case. John was killed by Herod Antipas and Jesus was to be killed by a coalition of the religious and political establishments.

V.13 seems like a statement of the obvious. Does it mean that the prophets were meant to culminate in John? Perhaps there is an explanation in Luke 16.16 where Jesus says, 'The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone is strongly urged to enter it.'

V.14: John was indeed like Elijah in his appearance in the desert, his dress, and his confrontational style. In 1 Kings 18.4, 13; 19.1-2; 21.23; and 2 Kings 9.29-37, Jezebel was Elijah's Salome, with roles reversed. In 17.10-13, Matthew identifies John with Elijah: -

And the disciples asked him [Jesus], ‘Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’

He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things;

but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.’

Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

V.15: The message seems to be, ‘Wake up and pay attention.’

Advent

Week 2, Friday

Matthew 11.16-19 Neither one nor the other

16. But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

17. ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

18. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon;’

19. the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

There is a parallel passage in Luke 7.31-35.

Damned if you do, and damned if you don't. Sometimes people don't know their own mind and become difficult in a wilful way. Like cranky children, they will neither push nor pull, neither lead nor be led. We don't like John the Baptist because he fasted; and we don't like Jesus because he didn't fast, they seem to say. John the Baptist kept his distance from sinners; Jesus mixed with them. Both were declared to be wrong. The point seems to be that the Jewish people rejected all approaches, whether the denunciations of John or the persuasion of Jesus. And Jesus was frustrated by this. The term 'this generation' has a negative connotation in the Gospels, e.g. in Matthew 12.39-45 and 16.4: 'evil and adulterous generation'; and 17.17: 'faithless and perverse generation.'

Jesus expressed his feelings; he did not suppress them, whether for the sake of keeping up appearances, or because it would go against people's expectations, or for any other reason. He was true to himself. The inner man and the outer man were one and the same. What you saw was what you got.

V.19: 'Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,' or 'her children.' What does that mean? - the proof of the pudding is in the eating? It all comes out in the wash? JB says (in note h), 'God's wise design

carries through, independently of anything extrinsic to itself, and so its success is its own vindication.’

Advent

Week 2, Saturday

Matthew 17.10-13 Elijah and John the Baptist

10. The disciples asked him [Jesus], ‘Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’

11. He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things;

12. but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.’

13. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

Matthew would have been aware of the prophecy in Malachi, ‘I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.’ (4.5 in NRSV = 3.23 in JB) A day need not necessarily mean twenty-four hours, but rather ‘the time of...’, a unique moment of grace, or God’s intervention in human history. ‘With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.’ (2 Peter 3.8)

In the Hebrew Bible, the ‘day of the Lord’ was often seen as a day of judgment and destruction,

such as that of the destruction of Jerusalem, or the end of the world. The core idea is that God is the Lord of history and will ultimately triumph over evil. The New Testament repeats this, but sees it as being brought about through Christ. So the Christian can say with confidence, 'Thy kingdom come!'

In the life of Jesus, what was 'the great and terrible day of the Lord'? His life? His death? His coming at the end of time?

'Elijah is coming' (v.11); 'Elijah has already come.' (v.12) There is a different idea of time at work here. It is often said that the train was the symbol of the Industrial Revolution. Would it be more accurate to say that it was the clock? In pre-industrial times, people were not so concerned about accuracy in time. Until recently, Irish farmers used the expression 'idir eatartha' (between the two milkings of the cows, the morning and evening) as a way of speaking about midday. It was accurate enough for its purpose. In Zambia, I remember people raising a arm, pointing it in a particular direction, and saying, 'lizazi cwana' ('when the sun is there.')

As an indicator of time, it served its purpose.

Jesus seems to have felt that events were closing in on him, that his time was running out. In addition to v.12, Matthew has Jesus foretelling his death and resurrection in 16.21 and 17.22-23. This foreknowledge would not necessarily imply supernatural power on Jesus' part. He was

perceptive; he knew that many, if not all, of the prophets of the past had been killed. Perhaps he had heard of John's execution, so possibly he did not expect his fate to be different from theirs.

Advent

Week 3 Monday

Matthew 21.23-27 The temple authorities' question

23. When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'

24. Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.'

25. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven," he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?'

26. But if we say, "Of human origin," we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.'

27. So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 11.27-33 and Luke 20.1-8.

Jesus had been acclaimed as Messiah by his followers (Matthew 21.1-11), he had driven out the money-changers (21.12-17), he taught in the temple daily (Luke 19.47-48), and had cured a number of people. He took the chief priests and elders of the people on in the temple, their own power base. When they asked him for his credentials, he was tough in his response, not a man to be tangled with. In effect, he told them to get lost by asking them a question he knew they didn't want to answer, and he made their answer a condition of his. He knew how to play their game and beat them at it. They were playing cute hoor with an issue of truth, politicizing it, and he was not going to accommodate them. He forced to a conclusion the issue they had raised and the best answer they could come up with was a mealy-mouthed, 'We don't know.' (Ha lu zibi, shaa!) They sat on the fence to avoid committing themselves; *that* undermined their authority.

The more that institutions perceive themselves to be under threat, as the chief priests and elders clearly did, the more sensitive they become about their authority. It was a sore point with them. Here was a young man, on whom hands had not been laid in accordance with rabbinic tradition, claiming to teach in God's name. They were the guardians of tradition; the institution had to be protected. They demanded an explanation, because this was a challenge to their authority. (John has them asking Jesus, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' 2.18) They had come to see the institution as an end in itself, not a

means to an end. Their failure to respond to Jesus' question was an admission that they could not discuss this issue on its merits; in their view, "authority" was self-justifying, self-validating. They went on to show by their subsequent actions that they were prepared to stifle both the messenger and the message in the interests of protecting their position.

Matthew wrote of Jesus, 'the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.' (7.28) He had authority, because he was the author, the source. He pointed to a higher authority than that of rabbinic tradition. The deeds he performed, his miracles and teaching, pointed to God as the source of his authority. They were still thinking 'within the box', locked into institutional self-preservation, unable or unwilling to see beyond it, so there was no room for him. They were right: Jesus was subversive of religious authority. He still is.

Advent

Week 3 Tuesday

Matthew 21.28-32 The parable of the two sons

28. What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

29. He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.

30. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

31. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

32. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.'

The Gospels were written for everyone. Though this text is addressed to the chief priests and the elders of the people, they apply to people everywhere.

Vv.28-30: One son refused at first, but then changed his mind, and did what his father wanted. The other promised to do what his father wanted, but didn't do it. It was obvious which of them did the will of his father – the first. (How much better it is not to make a promise in the first place than to make it and then break it!)

Vv.31-32: As Jesus explains, the story is a parable of acceptance or rejection of John. He had preached to tax collectors and prostitutes. 'Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no

more than the amount prescribed for you.” (Mark 3.13) And they confessed their sins. (Matthew 3.6)

By implication, the story is about acceptance or rejection of Jesus also. Therein lies the heart of the Christian faith. It is not essentially about church, Bible, sacraments, prayer or moral teaching, but about acceptance, or not, of Jesus. All else is derived and secondary.

Jesus makes the point that religious leaders, for all their concern about authority and orthodoxy, missed the message, while “sinners,” those ‘outside the law,’ in Jewish terms, understood and accepted it.

The message of the story seems blindingly clear, but it is one which the Christian community of faith has, literally for centuries, down to and including the present, failed to learn. Instead we have turned means into ends and ends into means. If “the church” becomes the religion of the church, then that is more than simply narcissistic; it is idolatrous - and destructive of credibility. Only when the church loves Jesus and the Gospel more than it loves itself can it recover credibility. And we are all “the church.” Jeremiah (7.1-15) had hard words for those who placed their trust in ‘the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’ There is one only in whom we can trust – Jesus.

Advent

Week 3 Wednesday

Luke 7.18-23 John the Baptist's question

18. The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples

19. and sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

20. When the men had come to him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"'

21. Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind.

22. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.

23. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 11.2-6.

John was in prison, put there by Herod Antipas, who followed the Herodian family tradition of rule by slaughter. Not many people walked free from his prisons. John would have had time to think. Maybe, in his isolation, and, perhaps, fear, he had experienced doubt about himself and his mission. Was it really God's work, or had he been a self-

deluding fool? And what about Jesus? Was he the Messiah as John had believed? Perhaps John shared the expectation of the people of his time that the Messiah would be a political liberator who would restore the Kingdom of Israel. Clearly, Jesus showed no sign of being such, and had explicitly rejected such a role for himself. John needed to know, so he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus plainly, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ That was John’s way, direct and to the point.

The answer Jesus gave would have been clear to John who would certainly have known Isaiah: -

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise;
Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.... He will come and save you.’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy;
The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted... (Isaiah 26.19; 35.4-6; 61.1)

The Hebrew word ‘Messiah’ means ‘anointed,’ or, in Greek, *Christos*.

In effect, Jesus who ‘had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had

given sight to many who were blind' (v.21), was saying, 'Anyone could claim to be the Messiah, but only the one who truly is the Messiah could do what the scriptures say he will do. I am doing those things, so, draw the appropriate conclusion.'

Jesus' concluding phrase, 'blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me,' means, 'Happy is the one who does not lose faith in me,' a final word of reassurance to John.

But there is more than this to the story. The text appears to say that the sign that the kingdom of God has come is that human needs are being met. (The lists given in vv.21-22 are indicative rather than comprehensive.) That is a message with significance for human beings in any time or place. It is not only Christians who do such works but many others also, so they, too, may be considered as building up the kingdom of God, whether knowingly or not. Attitudes to human beings are inseparable from attitudes to God. The Gospel is Good News for all humanity.

Advent

Week 3 Thursday

Luke 7.24-30 Jesus' praise of John the Baptist

24. When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about him: 'What did you go

out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?

25. What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces.

26. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

27. This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”

28. ‘I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’

29. And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism.

30. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.

Passages parallel to vv. 18-27 are in Matthew 11.7-15, and to vv.28-30 in Matthew 21.31-32.

John was not a man for fine clothes or luxurious living. He wore camel-skin, and lived on locusts and wild honey. (Mark 1.6) The priorities of power, position and possessions meant nothing to him. He was an enthusiast, that is to say, one who was *in God*, (Greek: en, in; theos, God) or possessed by God. John had one priority: God. Everything else was secondary and subordinate. He was a prophet;

he spoke the truth. He was probably a rough diamond, maybe uncouth and uncivilized. In keeping with the tradition of the prophets, who were laymen, he was hostile to the priests and scribes, and they to him. It was the traditional hostility between the professional and the amateur, the insider and the outsider. If Herod Antipas hadn't got him, probably the priests would have, as they later got Jesus. He broke the mould of the conventional religion of his time, and people listened to him. John was the last of the Old Testament prophets, a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. The Gospel begins with him. He prepared the way for Jesus, and then stood aside and let him take over: 'Before his [Jesus'] coming, John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And, as John was finishing his work, he said, "What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet.'" (Acts 13.24-25)

The people came in 'crowds.' (v.24) This is often mentioned of both John and Jesus. The people got it right; their leaders got it wrong. But the people don't always get it right. They got it right on Palm Sunday, and wrong on the following Friday. Jesus lost a referendum to Barabbas, though it was their leaders who misled them on that occasion.

Many dictators in the course of history had a popular following, and usually religious leaders went with the flow. In the Nineteen Twenties and

Thirties, religious leaders in Italy, Spain and Portugal, with a few honourable exceptions, went along with the dictators – Mussolini, Franco and Salazar. Pope Pius XI described the Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, as 'a man such as Providence has caused us to meet, a man unaffected by the prejudices of the 'Liberal School... ' (Pius XI, "How the Roman Question was Settled", 11 February 1929; Catholic Truth Society, London, 1929, p.23) In Germany, the Lutheran church, with the exception of the Confessing church, made itself, in effect, court chaplain to Nazism. The Romanian Orthodox patriarch, Theoctist, heaped adulation on Nicolae Ceaucescu in the latter's heyday as Romania's uncrowned Communist king.

In Austria, during World War II, there was a married man, with three children, by the name of Franz Jägerstätter. Like John the Baptist, he was a rough diamond, a bit of a tearaway around his village. But he had the perceptiveness to recognize, and the courage to acknowledge, the truth about Hitler's regime and the war it began. He said that, as a Christian, he had to oppose Nazism; to join in Hitler's war would be to condone it. After many efforts by his parish priest to persuade him to join the German army had failed, the Nazis enlisted the help of his bishop, who told him he was duty bound to defend his country by joining the army. Jägerstätter still refused, and, in 1943, at the age of thirty-six, he - like John the Baptist – was beheaded. Even after the war, when the full extent of Nazi

criminality was exposed, the bishop still insisted that he had been right and Jägerstätter wrong. Early in the controversy, Jägerstätter had said, 'If the church does not stand for justice, what difference would it make if no church ever again opened its doors?' John the Baptist would have approved. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI declared Jägerstätter Blessed.

Advent

Week 3 Friday

John 5.33-36 A testimony greater than John's

33. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth.

34. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved.

35. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.

36. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me.

Jesus honours John as a man of truth, one who testified to who Jesus was. John had said of Jesus, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' (John 1.29) The Aramaic word *talya*, means both lamb and servant, so John could equally have meant 'servant of God.'

V.33: This 'You' contrasts with the 'I' in v.34; both are emphatic. Jesus contrasts Jewish attitudes and his own, as he does frequently in Matthew also

with the juxtaposition of ‘You have heard that it was said... But I say to you...’ (E.g., Matthew 5.21-48 for several instances.)

V.34: Jesus goes on to say that he does not need human testimony, such as John’s, because the deeds of power that he does testify that he is from God. Implicitly, he says to people, ‘Look at what I’m doing, and recognize that these works show that I am from God.’ And later he says, even more emphatically, ‘The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished.’ (John 5.20)

Jesus was focussed, even fixated, on God as his Father. For him, the Father was everything.

V.35: John was ‘a burning and shining lamp’, though ‘he himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.’ (John 1.8) John’s role was to prepare the way for Jesus, who said of himself, ‘I am the light of the world.’ (John 9.5)

Advent

17 December

Matthew 1.1-17 The genealogy of Jesus

1. The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2. Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers.
3. Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram and
4. Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon,
5. Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse and
6. Jesse became the father of David the king. David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.
7. Solomon became the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asaph.
8. Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Uzziah.
9. Uzziah became the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah.
10. Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amos, Amos the father of Josiah.
11. Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile.
12. After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,

13. Zerubbabel the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor,
14. Azor the father of Zadok. Zadok became the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud,
15. Eliud the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob,
16. Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah.
17. Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations

For an alternative genealogy, see Luke 3.32-38.

Matthew relates the genealogy to David and Abraham, two key figures of the Jewish people. He wishes Jesus to be seen as inheriting their mantle, so to speak. For Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Messiah would be a returning David. Matthew also uses the word 'Christ' like a surname, whereas elsewhere he uses it as a title.

The genealogy of Jesus given here is like the credits in a film – the cast of characters sets the scene for what follows. In forming genealogies, people usually like to present the good side, not the bad. In my mother's family genealogy – the McGivneys - we have a king, Niall of the Nine Hostages. Maybe the genealogist upped the fee for

putting one in! But Matthew does it differently. With him, the skeletons are out of the cupboard.

Apart from their presence in this list we know nothing of Azor, Achim, Eliud, Eleazar or Matthan, the great grandfather of Jesus – nobodies all!

Isaac is mentioned but not Ishmael, whom he displaced;

Isaac was the father of Jacob who cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance by lying to his father on the latter's death-bed;

Jacob begets Judah; yet he was chosen for mention instead of Joseph who was so extraordinarily good.

David was a king credited with writing beautiful poetry and songs. (King Henry VIII is credited with having composed *Greensleeves*: did he really write it, or did someone else do it in his name, or on his behalf? Was it that sort of writing?) David was an over-sexed bandit with a liking for other men's wives. He didn't stop at arranging the killing of a husband in order to get his hands on the man's wife. (2 Samuel 11)

Women are mentioned in this family history. Normally they would not have been; women did not count in Jewish genealogies. It is easy to know who a child's mother is; but you can never be sure who the father is. Did Matthew list the mothers' names as a way of trying to establish an otherwise doubtful line?

If there are some dodgy characters among the men, the women are worse. Far from being pious ladies staying at home to knit socks for their husbands, they were more like those on page 3 of the tabloids in danger of catching a cold. Among them are Tamar, a Canaanite. She got her father-in-law drunk so that she could have sex with him and a child by him (Genesis 38); Rahab, also a Canaanite, was a prostitute (Joshua 2.1-21); Ruth was from Moab – yet another Gentile - possibly a lesbian or bisexual (See Ruth, especially 1.16-17 and 3.5-14); Bathsheba married her husband's murderer (2 Samuel 11.27).

There was suspicion about “foreign wives” – a flawed pedigree, perhaps? They would bring in foreign gods and rear the children to believe in them; there was suspicion and fear about children coming from the wrong side of the blanket. Were they really kosher?

Mary, Jesus' mother, was pregnant before marriage. That was punishable by death. Joseph was ‘a man of honour who wanted to spare her publicity.’ (Matthew 1.19)

A name not on the list is that of Cohen, nor is there any mention of the tribe of Levi. This means that Jesus was not part of the priestly family or tribe,

which you had to be born into if you wished to be a Jewish priest. Entry to the priesthood was not by personal choice, but by birth.

How reliable is the list? There are only two names in common between it and the one in Luke 3.23-38. Matthew starts with Abraham and works forward to Jesus; Luke starts with Jesus and works backward to Adam. That reflects a particular concern of Matthew's – to show Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. He sets out the genealogy in the context of Jewish history: from Abraham to David; from David to Jechoniah; from after the Babylonian captivity to Jesus. This is done in stylized form, with fourteen generations in each period, making a total of forty-two (v.17); it necessitates the removal of three kings from the list. The number fourteen is made up of four and six and four, representing the Hebrew letters D and W and D, the consonants of the name David. The four women had children in unusual ways, seen, without regard to moral considerations, as the result of God's intervention. This was probably to prepare the way for Mary's unusual motherhood. Matthew directs his genealogy towards Jesus. His aim is to show that Jesus was in direct line from the leading figures of Jewish life. Luke's genealogy has a universalist purpose, so it goes back to Adam, the father of humanity.

The fact that Jesus' family's dirty linen is aired rather than edited out strengthens the case for Matthew's reliability as a witness. He's not into PR,

or spin; if he was, he'd have sanitized the list by pressing the Delete button. He was a Jew, writing a Gospel for Jews; they would have known much of the genealogy anyway. It was important that they recognize Jesus as one of their own.

Saint Paul wrote later,

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.... Let anyone who boasts boast in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 1. 26-29, 31)

The basic message may be that salvation is a gift, not an achievement; a grace, not the result of effort by good people. God chooses whom he wills. If God can use people like those on the list, then maybe he can use us, too, with our sinfulness, weakness, and stupidity. The purpose of this Gospel reading is to affirm that Jesus, the Son of God, has come in the flesh as a real human being and truly one of our race.

Advent

18 December

Matthew 1.18-24 The birth of Jesus

18. Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

19. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

20. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

21. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

22. All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23. 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'

24. When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

Matthew speaks of Jesus as the Messiah (the anointed one, the Christ in Greek). It is one of his principal themes: Jesus is the one chosen by God for his people; he fulfils the scriptures.

Mary and Joseph were engaged, probably by way of an arrangement between their parents. Such arrangements were often entered into when the boy might be as young as sixteen and the girl thirteen or fourteen, and the wedding would take place about two years later. Between the arrangement and the wedding there was an engagement, or betrothal, after which the fiancé would be called ‘husband,’ even though the couple might not meet until their wedding day. Then Mary was found to be pregnant. For a woman to become pregnant outside of marriage was, according to Deuteronomy 22.20-21, a crime punishable by stoning to death. In part at least, her becoming pregnant was seen as an offence against her father’s property rights, since she was regarded as his property until she married. (A relic of this remains in some Christian denominations with the father “giving away” the bride at her wedding. The Napoleonic code, among others, regarded the wife as a “chattel,” that is, the property of her husband.)

Mary was ‘with child from the Holy Spirit.’ It was seen as an intervention by God, a pointer not so much to a special place of Mary as to that of her child, a pointer to his divine origin, a way of saying that he was uniquely from God.

Joseph, ‘being a righteous man,’ did not want to bring disgrace and, possibly, death on his betrothed, so he ‘planned to dismiss her quietly.’ This sounds strange, because, in the eyes of the law, it was

precisely his righteousness that would have required him to make the matter known. Dismissing her quietly might not solve Mary's problem, though it might divert blame from Joseph.

Then the 'angel of the Lord' spoke to him. This expression is often another way of saying, 'The Lord spoke...' And 'angel' may be the name of an office rather than of a nature, a function rather than an existent reality. (Saint Gregory the Great, Homily 34.8, in the *Breviary* for 29 September.) In the Bible, angels are earthly realities. They shield (Daniel 3.8; 12.1); reveal God's message of salvation (Matthew 1.20); heal (Tobit 3.17); carry out God's judgments (Revelation 15.7-8); escort souls at death (Luke 16.22); praise God (Luke 2.13).

Q: 'Do angels exist?'

A: 'Do you think we are the best God can do?'

The message was, 'Do not be afraid.' It is the most widely used expression in the Bible. 'The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.' This is God's choice, God's work.

'You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'. Jesus is Yehoshua, or Yeshua (= Joshua), for short in Hebrew; it was a common name at the time and means, 'the Lord is salvation.' Normally, it was the mother who chose a child's name. Here, the angel gives the name; this serves to underline his divine origin. In the Bible,

the giving of a name often implies the giving of a mission with it.

There are other stories in the Hebrew Bible of births resulting from divine interventions, one involving Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17.15-22, and another, announced by an angel to Manoah and his wife, in Judges 13.

Matthew sees all this as taking place in fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah 7.14 which spoke of one called Emmanuel, a name which means, 'God is with us.' (Many Hebrew names end in 'el', e.g. Daniel, Gabriel, Israel, Michael, Raphael, Samuel, Emmanuel, etc.; the 'el' is an abbreviation for Elohim, which means gods.)

'God is with us.' That means that God is with us here and now, in this time and place, this set of circumstances – and it is down to God's own initiative. Humans would not have had the imagination or the daring to think of God coming among us in human form. Aware of our sinfulness, stupidity and selfishness, we would have felt unworthy even to suggest such a thing. But God comes out of his graciousness. With him terms and conditions don't apply; there are no ifs, buts, maybes, 'I'll think about it,' or 'I'll see about that later on sometime.' God is here and now, ever and always. Thank you, God.

‘When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.’ (Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all of us woke up and did what the Lord commanded us?) Joseph was a man of dreams (Matthew 1.20; 2.13, 19, 22.) Joseph of the book of Genesis was also a man of dreams and an interpreter of them. (Genesis 40, 41) Both were sons of a man called Jacob, (Genesis 30.1-24 and Matthew 1.16.) Both went to Egypt, and it became a place of safety for them from the troubles of their home-land. Historically, the story of the first Joseph is located in the 17th century BC, but the names used in it date from seven centuries later. John L. McKenzie calls the story of the first Joseph ‘mostly a creation of edifying fiction.’

Christian tradition speaks of four modes of interpretation of scripture: the literal, the allegorical, the moral and the anagogical: -

The *literal* sense is the meaning conveyed by the words, and discovered by study, following the rules of interpretation.

By means of the *allegorical* sense, we can acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ. Thus the crossing of the Red Sea from slavery in Egypt is an allegory of Christian baptism.

The *moral* sense. The events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly. As Saint Paul says, they were written 'for our instruction.'

The *anagogical* sense (Greek *anagoge*, 'leading.')

We can view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us towards our true homeland. Thus the church on earth is a sign of heaven.

These four modes of interpretation are summarized by saying that the letter speaks of deeds, allegory to faith, the moral how to act, and anagogy to our destiny. (Adapted from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn.115-118) Those four senses may contribute to a better appreciation of this difficult text.

In pagan literature preceding Matthew, there were many stories of miraculous births. Among those said to have been born by virgin birth are Adonis, Alexander the Great, Athena, Bacchus, the Buddha, Hercules, Hermes, Horus, Indra, Krishna, Mithra, Osiris, Perseus, Romulus and Remus, Sargon I of Assyria, and Zoroaster.

Hellenistic [Greek] religion presents one of the best examples of a civilization in which miracles play a major part. The intervention of the gods in the affairs of the Homeric heroes takes place in a cosmos in which the divine and the human spheres... interact.... Miraculous cures (e.g. at the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus), divine manifestations of various kinds (e.g. voices, dreams, and theophanies) and even virgin births and resurrections were widely

reported. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, entry: Virgin Births)

Mind the gap; that advice applies to more than railway platforms. The infancy narratives in Matthew especially, but also in Luke, provide perhaps the best examples of the gap that exists between the popular and the scholarly understandings of how to read scripture. The popular understanding of the birth of Jesus, especially as found at Christmas, may be substantially different from reality. Some scripture scholars see the infancy narratives as examples of the Jewish literary form called *midrash*, which, to borrow McKenzie's phrase above, is 'a creation of edifying fiction' for moral or didactic purposes. They suggest that Matthew created the story in order to bring about "fulfilments" of Old Testament texts. They say that, most likely, Jesus was born in Nazareth, that there was no message from an angel, no wise men with gifts following a star, no massacre of infants, no flight into Egypt – just a normal birth which Matthew felt obliged to cast in a new mould in order to give it a more explicitly "divine" origin, in keeping with accepted literary practices of his time.

John L. McKenzie, in his *Dictionary of the Bible*, (Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1976) has this to say about *midrash*: -

‘Midrash... means more particularly a commentary or an explanation of a homiletic character;’

‘Midrash looked for the maximum number of edifying lessons; it is... an imaginative reconstruction of the scene and episode narrated;’

‘The OT exhibits numerous examples of *midrash*;’

‘The NT also exhibits no small amount of *midrash*. In the Gospels, Matthew is especially fond of *midrash*.’

‘The infancy narrative of Luke 1-2 is a splendid example of *midrash*.’

‘Hebrews employs *midrash* throughout.’

‘It is quite impossible to accept *midrash* as literal exegesis, and it is unjust to reject it as the simply play of fancy. A sympathetic understanding of something so important in the Bible requires that we attempt to place ourselves in the intellectual and religious atmosphere in which *midrash* was almost the only possible way in which the Bible could be kept relevant to the life of the Jewish and then of the Christian communities.’ (Article, Midrash)

And perhaps to our communities, too. In recent times, a rabbi described the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) as ‘the novel of our relationship with God.’

Advent

19 December

Luke 1.5-25 The birth of John the Baptist foretold

5. In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

6. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

7. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8. Once, when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty,

9. he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.

10. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.

11. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

12. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.

13. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

14. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,

15. for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

16. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

17. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’

18. Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.’

19. The angel replied, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

20. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’

21. Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary.

22. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak.

23. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

24. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said,

25. 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

The story of the birth of John to an elderly couple, previously childless, echoes that of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17.15-19; and 21.1-7; of Joseph to Rachel and Jacob in Genesis 30.1-2, 22-24; of Samson to Manoah and his wife in Judges 13; and of Samuel to Elkanah and Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. In each case, they had given up hope of having children. Not to have a child was seen as a humiliation or a punishment. But an angel intervenes, and a son is born who becomes a key figure in the religious story of his people.

In the case of Abraham and Zechariah (but not Manoah), the angel's news was received with doubt. Abraham 'fell on his face and laughed' (Genesis 17.17) in the presence of God when the news was disclosed to him, but, unlike Zechariah, he escaped punishment for doubt. His wife, Sarah, also laughed. (Genesis 18.12-15) (Their son's name, Isaac, or Yitzhak, means 'he laughs'.)

The wording of the stories bears similarities, such as, 'You shall conceive and bear a son.' (Genesis 17.19; Judges 13.7; Luke 1.13) The phrase, 'He must never drink wine or strong drink' (Luke 1.15), echoes the words of the angel about the wife of Manoah, 'She is not to drink wine or strong drink.'

(Judges 13.14) References to Nazirites are also shared. Nazirites were men or women who took a vow, usually temporary, to commit themselves in some special way to God's service. The joy of the new mothers is similar: Genesis 30.23; 1 Samuel 1.27; 2.1-10 and Luke 1.25.

There are also echoes of these stories in that of the announcement and the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph in Luke 1.26-38 and 2.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, looked at broadly, suggests an encounter with God, which, like any such encounter, must necessarily go beyond human experience, and therefore human description. When people are overwhelmed by a transcendent experience - of joy, for example - they may become incoherent, and consequently resort to a manner of expression which goes beyond ordinary language or logic. Where Greeks communicated with ideas, Semites used images. A story, rather than a Hellenistic-style academic discourse, would be their preferred way of speaking about God's intervention in human affairs. Luke faced the problem of trying to communicate in ordinary language an experience that was beyond the ordinary. His response to that challenge was a story which was imaginative, colourful, evocative of the heroes of the past, and pervaded by a sense of mystery and joy.

His references, implicit and explicit, to characters and incidents of early Jewish tradition were intended to place Jesus at the heart of that tradition, to see him

as the fulfilment of Israel's messianic hopes. His choice of titles and descriptive words about Jesus are intended to associate, perhaps identify, Jesus with Yahweh (God). These include Great, Luke 1.32; Son of the Most High, 1.32; everlasting king, 1.33; Holy, 1.36; Son of God, 1.36; Lord, 1.43 and 2.11; Saviour, 2.11; Christ, 2.11; the Lord's Messiah, 2.26; God's salvation, 2.30; light, 2.32; glory, 2.32. Perhaps the most significant of these is that Luke, unlike Matthew or Mark, assigns the title of Lord (*Kyrios* in Greek) to Jesus to translate the *Yahweh* (God) of the Hebrew Bible.

Advent

20 December

Luke 1.26-38 The annunciation of the birth of Jesus

26. In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

27. to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

28. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.'

29. But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

30. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.'

31. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.
32. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.
33. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'
34. Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'
35. The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born of you will be holy; he will be called Son of God.
36. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.
37. For nothing will be impossible with God.'
38. Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Luke tells the story of the announcement and birth of Jesus from Mary's point of view, while Matthew does so from Joseph's. This story has obvious echoes of the stories about the birth of Isaac, Samson, Samuel and John the Baptist. It is impossible not to see that Luke has borrowed substantially from them. (See under Luke 1.5-25 above.)

The ‘sixth month’ refers to the conception of John the Baptist, who was a relative of Jesus. The church celebrates his birthday on 24 June, six months before that of Jesus at Christmas.

Gabriel means ‘the strength of God’. Why Gabriel? Perhaps because in the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), Gabriel addresses Daniel, saying, ‘You are greatly beloved,’ which has a tone like the ‘Blessed are you among women’ of v.28, and like, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved’ spoken to Jesus at his baptism in Luke 3.22, and ‘This is my Son, my beloved’ at his transfiguration in 9.35.

Furthermore, the book of Daniel has the character of fiction, a type called ‘prophecy after the event,’ in which an author reflects on significant events, and then writes a pre-dated “prophecy” about them. It would not have mattered to his readers whether the story was historically true. What they would have sought in it was a religious truth, such as, in the case of the book of Daniel, that God does not abandon his people in time of trouble. Maybe Luke, by the reference to Gabriel, is suggesting that a similar process is at work here.

Luke speaks of Joseph and Jesus as being in the line of David. (vv.27, 32) That was important in establishing credentials within the Jewish messianic tradition.

Mary's reaction was one of confusion; she did not understand what was happening. The angel's response, 'Do not be afraid,' is used not less than eighty-three times in the Bible. God does not come to frighten or intimidate; that is not his way.

But Mary's confusion remains, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' Perhaps this also reflected fear on her part, and she had reason for it. She was betrothed to Joseph, but they had not yet come together. If she was found to be pregnant, the least serious consequence is that she could be accused of being promiscuous; the worst could be death by stoning as the Torah prescribed:

They shall bring the girl [who has been found not to have been a virgin] to the entrance of her father's house and there her townsmen shall stone her to death, because she committed a crime against Israel by her unchasteness in her father's house. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst. (Deuteronomy 22.21)

This custom is still followed today in different form in some countries in the Middle East, such as Lebanon and Jordan, among members of the Muslim, Druze and Christian communities. The girl's father or older brother is required to kill her, usually by cutting her throat, for bringing disgrace on the family. These are called "honour killings," and the man carrying them out is held in high esteem as a man of honour.

The angel tells her of Elizabeth's pregnancy: if "the impossible" has happened, it can happen, 'for nothing will be impossible with God.'

Mary's response was one of acceptance. She still did not understand, but she believed and trusted, saying, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.' Her response echoes Samuel's triple, 'Here I am', and also his 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,' in 1 Samuel 3.1-10.

Mary's freedom remained. She was asked by God's messenger to undertake a mission she did not understand. She could have refused. She chose to say yes, and, by doing so, opened the way to the birth of humanity's Saviour. She allowed the Son of God to grow in her, she brought him to life in the world, and then stepped back into obscurity, although making a re-entry thereafter at each significant turning-point in his life. Her attitude was that of John the Baptist, who said, 'he must increase but I must decrease' (John 3.30); of Paul, 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2.20); and of Jesus, 'not my will but yours be done.' (Luke 22.42) When people do as Jesus says, good things happen.

It is significant also that Mary did not reply by saying that she was not worthy and suggesting that another woman be invited instead. Perhaps she

simply accepted that, if God called her to a task, he would provide her with the means of doing it.

Christian tradition has seen Jesus as the man who undid the harm done by the first man, Adam: ‘Just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam].... much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.’ (See Romans 5.12-21) Similarly, Mary is seen as the woman who, by her acceptance of God’s will, undid the harm done by Eve, the first woman, through her rejection of it.

Bishop Donal Murray suggests, in *Where the Heart is*, (Veritas, Dublin, 2014), that Mary’s misunderstanding and surprise here are echoed again in her reaction to Jesus being lost in the Temple [that Jesus was becoming a man responding to God’s agenda], and at Cana [that Jesus was no longer hers] and on Calvary [that God would let him die]. In each case, Mary is asked to say yes to something new and not understood by her. By doing so, she opened up the way to new possibilities of God’s grace.

This Gospel passage is also read on the solemnity of the Annunciation, sometimes known as the Hidden Christmas, which is celebrated on 25 March, nine months before the celebration of the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. It marks the beginning of the Incarnation and Redemption.

Advent

21 December

Luke 1.39-45 Mary visits Elizabeth

39. In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,

40. where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

41. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit

42. and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

43. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

44. For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

45. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Mary joined love of God and of neighbour. She had been told that God wished her to be the mother of his Son. Despite her confusion and fear, she consented, responding with trust. And then she went into the hill country to be with her relative, Elizabeth, who was expecting a child. Being open to God leads to openness to one's neighbour. How could a person be open to God and closed against their neighbour? It doesn't match up.

There is a later tradition which places the dwelling-place of Elizabeth and Zechariah at Ain Karim, about 8 km. west of Jerusalem. Nazareth is over 100 km. from there, and it would have taken Mary the best part of a week's walk to get there. For a woman, herself pregnant, to undertake such a journey – alone? – was a big venture, and not without dangers. Did it really happen?

There is a joyful atmosphere about this action of Mary's. Maybe she was motivated by a desire to help Elizabeth, but, even more than that, they may simply have wanted to share their joy in motherhood. The wide age gap between them does not seem to have hindered a close friendship. Elizabeth was 'getting on in years' (Luke 1.7), while Mary was probably only in her middle teens. In each case, there was an element of surprise at what had happened, but it was joyful.

The text suggests that Elizabeth knew of Mary's pregnancy, and knew something at least of its significance. The phrase she used of Mary, 'Blessed are you among women' is reminiscent of that used of Judith by Uzziah, 'Daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth.' (Judith 13.18) But the context could hardly be more different: Judith was praised for hacking off the head of the Assyrian general Holofernes, an enemy of her people, when he lay drunk after a party. And she

then gave it to her maid, who neatly wrapped it up in a food bag! (Judith 13)

Elizabeth speaks of Mary as ‘the mother of my Lord.’ The child in her womb leapt for joy. There is a down-to-earth physical character to this. It underlines that the Christian faith is about a person, a child born of a woman, not about an ideology, a system, or an institution. A woman gives birth to a child, not to a theology, a morality, or a spirituality. The child, the living person, is the focus, the centre of gravity.

Elizabeth attributes all that has happened to Mary’s faith: ‘Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’ (v.45)

Advent

22 December

Luke 1.46-56 Mary’s song of praise

46. And Mary said,

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

47. and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

48. for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed;

49. for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

50. His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51. He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their
hearts.
52. He has brought down the powerful from their
thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53. he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54. He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55. according to the promise he made to our
ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’
56. And Mary remained with her about three
months, and then returned to her home.

These verses, often known as the ‘Magnificat’, from the Latin for ‘My soul magnifies the Lord,’ are a hymn of praise and thanksgiving. They show a sense of wonder and enthusiasm at the work of God, who turns human standards upside down, by choosing the weak and helpless to achieve his purposes. Mary celebrates God’s fidelity to the promises he made to his people. The language is powerful, with sharp contrasts, either-or, not both-and; there are no careful nuances, no attempt at balance; it has the subtlety of a cavalry charge.

The *Magnificat* is a rallying-cry for liberation theology. It shows Mary as a person of strength, who wants to see justice in the world, and, if that means turning it upside down, well and good. She wants to see the hungry filled with good things, and let the rich go away empty. Mary was no tame *Hausfrau* knitting socks for Joseph; she wanted justice for the poor.

There is an alternative view of the text which puts these words into the mouth of Elizabeth, and some of the ancient texts have her name in place of Mary's in v.46. It may indeed suit Elizabeth better, since she was more familiar with the milieu of the temple, where her husband, Zechariah, was a priest.

Whether from Mary or Elizabeth, the hymn evokes memories of the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2.1-10:

Hannah prayed and said,
'My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in your victory.
There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.
Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,

but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out
for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.
The Lord kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
he raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honour.
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
and on them he has set the world.
He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;
for not by might does one prevail.
The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered;
the Most High will thunder in heaven.
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king,
and exalt the power of his anointed.'

Neither Mary nor Elizabeth need have been hymn-writers; the text was already there for them. Probably the song, or psalm, of Hannah was well-known among Jews, and sung in celebration of Hannah's role in Israel as mother of Samuel, one of its popular heroes. Did Mary actually sing it at the time that Luke indicates? That seems unlikely, as it

does not relate very clearly to her situation at the time. What seems more likely is that Luke took it from one of his sources, possibly a hymn of the early Christian community based on Hannah's, and inserted it here.

Advent

23 December

Luke 1.57-66 The birth of John the Baptist

57. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

58. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

59. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father.

60. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.'

61. They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.'

62. Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him.

63. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed.

64. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

65. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea.

66. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Vv.60-63: Naming her child was the mother's privilege. In the case of a boy, the name was given when he was circumcised. Zechariah confirms Elizabeth's choice, even though it went against family tradition. This seems to be a way of underlining that everything about John was unusual.

V.64: Zechariah's speech is restored at this point. His loss of it had been a punishment. The angel had said to him, 'because you did not believe my words... you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.' (Luke 1.20) Now all is made well again and he praises God.

One could argue that the treatment meted out to Zechariah was severe. After all, Abraham, when told similar news, had fallen on his face laughing (Genesis 17.17); his wife Sarah also laughed, and then made matters worse by lying about it. (Genesis 18.12-15) Surely that showed less respect than Zechariah's not unnatural question. (v.18)

V.65: The sense of wonder among the neighbours seems like a fulfilment of v.14.

V.66: ‘The hand of the Lord was with him,’ is a way of saying that he was protected by God. The hand, or the finger, is a symbol of power: ‘When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.’ (Exodus 31.18)

Vv.57-66, like other parts of the infancy narratives, surround the birth of John and Jesus in the miraculous. This makes it sound contrived, made up after the event – which was probably ordinary – to give it extraordinary authority and significance, the stamp of divine approval, so to speak. For people of today, this diminishes rather than enhances its credibility.

Did Luke intend it to be believed as it stands? He probably did. Did the author of the account of creation in Genesis intend it to be taken as a factual, eye-witness account? Probably not, but rather as a parable or allegory containing real truth. Genesis is more believable, instructive and life-giving when read as a parable. Is the same true of Luke?

Do such ideas reduce this Gospel account to the level of fable as, for instance, Aesop’s? Maybe so. Where do you stop with such a process? Is the resurrection, for example, also to be taken as a parable or allegory rather than a real event that actually took place in a particular place and time?

If the answer is yes, would that not reduce the Gospel to something subjective, where you make of it whatever you want, robbing it of objectivity, and, with that, of authority? “Revelation” would then be no more than a creation of the human mind. Is that what it is?

What relationship is there between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith? Some say there is none, that the Jesus of history, the “real” Jesus, is gone forever, lost behind the creative interpretation of his story by the early Christian community, whose ideas the Gospel writers themselves interpreted and then recorded.

But what was it that made that community of very disparate people to be a community in the first place? Was it not a shared faith in Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One of God, who died and rose again as Lord? That faith predates the writing of the Gospels. The Gospel writers wrote from a context of faith, from within the community, and they wrote for believers. If their interpretation, or re-interpretations, amount to a denial of historical fact, or to its replacement by creative imagination, then that undermines what is central to the Christian faith, namely, that God intervened in human history in the person of Jesus. Does it have to either-or? – either history or faith? Clearly not. But the Gospel is sometimes written in the language of either-or. And sometimes, the balance between history and faith swings one way or the other. In the case of the

infancy narratives, it seems to swing significantly away from history. While that was not a problem for earlier generations, it is one for ours.

Advent

24 December, morning

Luke 1.67-79 Zechariah's prophecy

67. Then his [John's] father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

68. 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

69. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David,

70. as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

71. that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

72. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,

73. the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us

74. that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear,

75. in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

77. to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

78. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from
on high will break upon us,
79. to give light to those who sit in darkness and in
the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way
of peace.’

Zechariah’s hymn of thanksgiving and prophecy, commonly known as the *Benedictus* from the Latin word for blessed, is a celebration of the coming of the Messiah and of his child’s role in preparing for it. The word Messiah (or Messias, *moshiakh*) is the Hebrew for ‘anointed,’ which is Christos in Greek, and Christ in English. The Messiah was the one that the people of Israel had longed for, in whom their hopes lay for the future. Zechariah saw him as like a new King David, ‘a mighty saviour’ (v.69), by whom ‘we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.’ (v.71) In Zechariah’s time, the expectations around the figure of the Messiah had become politicized, perhaps because of a history of foreign invasion and occupation, such as the then prevailing Roman one.

Zechariah describes John, his child, as ‘the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.’ (v.76) As in Luke 1.16, the word ‘Lord’ in this context means God. Luke is placing Jesus in the role of God.

The canticle of Zechariah, like the Magnificat before it, is a composition drawn from texts of the

Hebrew Bible. It may have been used in the public worship (liturgy) of the Christian community, then adapted, and put into the mouth of Zechariah by Luke. It has the appearance of an insertion. If it were not there, the story would run freely from v.66 to v.80: -

66. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

80. The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

The first part of v.80 is similar to Luke 2.52, which reads, 'Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in favour with God and men,' while the second part, with its reference to 'the wilderness,' suggests that John may have had links to the Essene community of Qumran.

Zechariah summarizes what it means to spread the Gospel, to evangelize: -

... go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins....
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in
the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace. (vv.76-
77, 79)

Christmas

24 December, Christmas Vigil

Matthew 1.1-25 The genealogy and birth of Jesus

1. The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
2. Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers.
3. Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram and
4. Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon,
5. Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse and
6. Jesse became the father of David the king. David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.
7. Solomon became the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asaph.
8. Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Uzziah.
9. Uzziah became the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah.

10. Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amos, Amos the father of Josiah.

11. Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile.

12. After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,

13. Zerubbabel the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor,

14. Azor the father of Zadok. Zadok became the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud,

15. Eliud the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob,

16. Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah.

17. Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations

The birth of Jesus

18. Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

19. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

20. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and

said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

21. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

22. All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23. 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'

24. When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

25. but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Vv.1-17: For a comment on the genealogy of Jesus, see the entry under 17 December.

Vv.18-25: For a comment on the birth of Jesus, see the entry under 18 December.

Christmas

24 December, Midnight Mass

Luke 2.1-14 The birth of Jesus

1. In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

2. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

3. All went to their own towns to be registered.

4. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.
5. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.
6. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.
7. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.
8. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.
9. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.
10. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:
11. to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.
12. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'
13. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God and saying,
14. 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace, goodwill among people.'

V.1: A census was held in the Roman Empire in the years 8-6 B.C. with a view to raising taxes. Quirinius is known to have been Roman governor of Syria, which included Palestine, in 4-1 B.C.

V.7: 'She gave birth to her first-born son.' This does not necessarily imply that other births followed. In some cultures, including the Jewish, being a 'first-born' has special significance: 'you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb.' (Exodus 13.12) In Bantu areas of Africa, something similar applies in custom and language.

There is no mention here of a cave, a stable or indeed any building, just a manger (French, *manger*, to eat), a wooden frame for holding hay used as animal fodder. Neither is there mention of an ox or an ass, figures in the Christmas crib that seem to have come from a fanciful allusion to Isaiah 11.6-8, with its image of animals living together in the peaceful kingdom of the Messiah: -

Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them.

The cow and the bear shall be neighbours, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox.

The baby shall play by the cobra's den, and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair.

Nor is there any date, nothing about 25 December. That came centuries later when Christians took over the pagan festival of Sol Invictus, the birthday of the Unconquered Sun, the principal god of the Roman Empire, a festival which celebrated the turning of the year with the passage of the winter solstice in the northern hemisphere and the lengthening of days. There is reminder of this in a Christian hymn with the line, ‘Thine be the glory, living and unconquered sun...’

With the coming of Christ, the ‘Sun of Righteousness’ (Malachi 4.2), the ‘light of the world’ (John 8.12), the days lengthen. Nowadays Christians complain about Christmas being hijacked by commerce; then it was Christians who did the hijacking. They saw nothing inappropriate in taking over pagan customs and symbols, and bringing them into the service of God who is Lord of all. They “baptized” the culture. If Christmas did not exist, we would probably invent a festival of some sort in its place to lighten the burden of the long, dark and cold winter of the Northern hemisphere. Christmas performs this “secular” function well. The sacred and the secular can be partners; they come from one source.

It has also been suggested that ‘there was no place for them in the inn’ might be translated as ‘the inn was no place for them,’ meaning that an inn, with men drinking, shouting and, perhaps, fighting, was

no place for a man to bring his wife when she was about to give birth to her child.

V.8: Is the reference to the shepherds a way of saying that Jesus was first welcomed by the “nobodies”? In some cultures, shepherds are despised, considered as being at the mental level of their charges. The shepherds responded, not by talking, but by action. They went, they saw, they found, and they made known. Then they ‘returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.’ The Christian faith is not so much a teaching to be understood as a life to be lived - and celebrated. The nobodies know that.

V.9: The phrases ‘an angel of the Lord’, and ‘the glory of the Lord’, are ways of saying that God was present, and bringing not fear, but joy.

V.11: The titles ‘Saviour’ and ‘Messiah’ claim the fulfilment in Jesus of the prophecies of Jewish tradition, but the title of ‘Lord’ goes further, inserting the new-born Jesus into the realm of the divine. In the Hebrew Bible, it was reserved for God.

V.12: The reference to a ‘sign’ suggests the prophecy of Isaiah, ‘Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel, that is, God is with us.’ (Isaiah 7.14)

In 1979, with a companion, I visited Bethlehem and said Mass in what is known locally as the Shepherds' Field. A church has been built there, small but beautiful. We said a Gloria, the angels' hymn of praise to God: 'Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth.' Where else could it be so appropriate? Part way through, we heard booming sounds echoing across the sky from horizon to horizon. Thunder? Rolling drums of the heavenly army? We didn't know, but, when we had finished, we asked. It was neither of those, we were told, but the sound of Israeli air force jets, possibly breaking through the sound barrier, on their way to bomb Lebanon. It was a disappointing and disturbing violation of the place, an act of defilement, but also a reminder that the birth of Jesus says that God is with us in the evil and the ugly, as well as in the good and the beautiful: -

God is always accessible within whatever is happening to us, not outside of it; if God cannot hold us in our sin and shame, then God is dead; if God is not touching us in our weakness, then Christmas is a cruel joke. (Daniel O'Leary, "The face of a baby", *The Tablet*, 18/25 December 2004, p.18)

Christmas Day
25 December, Mass at Dawn
Luke 2.15-20 The birth of Jesus (continued)

15. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.'

16. So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

17. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;

18. and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

19. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

20. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

'Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.' To ponder the things of God in the heart - that's a good description of prayer. After Jesus was lost and found again in the Temple at the age of twelve, an almost identical phrase is used again by Luke about Mary, that she 'treasured all these things in her heart.' (2.51)

The word 'Christmas' comes from 'Christ's Mass', or 'Cristes maesse' in Old English. The earliest known celebration of the feast of Christmas dates from Rome in the middle of the fourth century.

Jesus wasn't born in the year 1 A.D., (Anno Domini, in the Year of the Lord). Neither is there a

year 0 between B.C. and A.D. More likely he was born in 4 B.C. (Before Christ!), if not as early as 8.

Early Christians followed local custom in calculating time. But, in the Roman Empire, the point of reference was the supposed founding of the city of Rome in 754 B.C. Years were designated as A.U.C. (Ab Urbe Condita), that is, since the foundation of the city.

When Christianity came to be recognized as the religion of the Empire, a sixth-century Scythian (Romanian) monk called Dionysius Exiguus (Little Denis) undertook the task of devising a new calendar for the empire, taking the birth of Jesus as its starting point. Unfortunately, he got his sums wrong, and forgot that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod, who died in 4 B.C. But his calendar was accepted, though it was not until the fourteenth century that all of Europe had adopted it. Even the papal court in Rome waited until the tenth century. The matter is insignificant: ‘Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever.’ (Hebrews 13.8)

This Gospel text powerfully turns upside-down our assumptions about God and God’s ways of acting in the world. Jesus comes, not in power, but in weakness, not as a king or ruler but in the helplessness of a child. Jesus is God-made-vulnerable. The awkward Latin word Incarnation means the enfleshment, or, better, embodiment of God in Jesus. ‘God became man that man might

become God', said Saint Athanasius (and Saint Augustine). The incarnation means God entering into humanity, thereby investing everything that is human with an eternal and transcendent significance. It also means taking humanity into God, thereby lifting it up beyond itself, saying that it is not within its own limitations, but in God, that it finds fulfilment.

If Christmas is a birth it is also a death, death to old attitudes about a remote or impersonal God who acts through power, and makes people his playthings. It is death to coldness and unforgiveness, to the exaltation of riches and status, and to the devaluation of the child.

Christmas is a present as well as a past reality. It means that God is expressed through the human. Where people love or forgive, it is God who loves or forgives through them. The more human we are, the more God-like we are. Jesus is true God and true man – both. And what God has joined together in a holy union, let no one divide.

Christmas is a challenge to rediscover the child in ourselves. The child, or, more accurately, the infant, means the authentic self, the self that is true to itself, before the fears, masks, image-building, posturing and pretence took over. 'Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' (Luke 18.17)

A characteristic feature of this Gospel story is its silence. Nobody speaks. There is a sense of amazement and wonder. If we keep silence, silence keeps us. It leads to gratitude and thanksgiving.

Christmas Day, 25 December

Mass during the day

John 1.1-18 The Word became flesh

1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
2. He was in the beginning with God.
3. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being
4. in him was life.
5. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.
6. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
7. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.
8. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.
9. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
10. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.
11. He came to his own home and his own people did not accept him.

12. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,
13. who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.
14. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.
15. John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."
16. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.
17. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
18. No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

(In reading this text, it may be best to skip vv.6-8 and 15, those that refer to John the Baptist, so that the reading focuses more clearly on the Word. It will still read well, with a good flow. The *Lectionary* arranges the text to facilitate this.)

This text is the Prologue to John's Gospel. As such, it encapsulates its themes: Jesus as the self-revelation of God; all who accept him become God's children; there is a struggle between light and darkness and light wins; grace surpasses law.

I remember this text being read by a man who first explained that he was an atheist but found the

text moving and inspiring. I never, either before or since, heard it read so well. Scripture scholars say that it was probably originally a hymn.

Vv.1-2: Its opening phrase, ‘In the beginning’ is likely a deliberate echo of an identical opening of Genesis. The Word – *Logos* – was with God in the beginning and was God. The Word is a title applied to Jesus. He was with God in the beginning and was God.

The Greek word *logos* is translated as *word*. Many scholars regard it as inadequate, saying that the original is a more wide-ranging, richer, deeper and more dynamic reality than the English word suggests. They suggest that in its usage in the Bible it includes elements of charisma, counsel, wisdom, Torah, story and history. The word of God has a sacramental character, effecting what it signifies, since it is an expression of the power of God, as, for instance, when it is spoken by a prophet. Creation and nature are “words” of the Lord. You could say that *logos* is a noun that has the power of a verb. Jesus is the self-revelation of God, his Word to humanity. In him, God’s word is not a desiccated, impersonal, objective idea, which may be considered in isolation, reified as a metaphysical entity, as it might be in Greek philosophy, for example, but a living reality in flesh, blood and bone – a person living in relationships. For John, the *logos* did not simply dwell in Jesus; it became him.

V.3: The Word – Jesus – was creator, no less than the Father.

V.4: Everything has life through the Word, who conserves and vivifies all things. The Word, no less than the Spirit, is the Giver of Life.

V.5: The Word is a light shining in the darkness, which could not overcome it. Darkness can never overcome light; it is simply the absence of light.

Vv.6-8: John the Baptist is honoured here for his fidelity in the role of forerunner. ‘A man sent by God’ - high praise indeed.

V.9: John was not the true light; that was to come later – in Jesus, who said, ‘I am the light of the world.’ (John 8.12; 9.5)

Vv.10-11: Though Jesus was the creator of the world, and was in it, it failed to recognize him. This is a recurring theme in the Gospels, that Jews – his own - did not accept Jesus. Even his own relatives failed to: ‘Not even his brothers believed in him.’ (John 7.5) Isaiah has God say, ‘I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am,” to a nation that did not call upon my name.’ (65.1)

Vv.12-13: Those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God. Mark has Jesus

say, ‘Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’ (3.35) Family bonds are not what count with Jesus, but commitment to God. V.12 is the centre of the prologue and also central to the message of John’s Gospel.

V.14: ‘The Word became flesh.’ In v.1, we had an image of the Word as transcendent: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ Here the transcendent Word comes down to earth, becomes one with humanity, becomes ‘flesh.’ Not either-or, but both-and. Most distortions of God err on one side or the other of that picture.

It has been said many times that Christians have spent the last two thousand years turning the flesh back into words. God became man, entered into humanity; Jesus is literally the embodiment of God, the human face of God. But we have sometimes turned God into a theology, a system of ideas, or worse, an ideology. And where the Christian faith has been turned into an ideology, wars – sometimes with words and sometimes with swords - have been fought and people have died. Jesus was a man for all people; it is a mistake to make him into a “religion.”

V.15: This sounds like an interpellation, reverting back for a moment to John the Baptist once again proclaiming his subordinate role.

V.16: A beautiful phrase that needs no commentary.

V.17: This is an immensely liberating statement. It is a matter of great regret that this liberation is one which has been forgotten or suppressed innumerable times in Christian history, including the present. Perhaps more often than not we have opted instead for the Pharisees' view of things, the law as obligation, as burden, as a hurdle to be jumped under pain of sin, as an achievement to be merited through personal effort. Romans, Galatians and Luther tried reminding us that 'grace and truth come through Jesus Christ' but we reacted against them, especially the latter. We took the hard road instead, one which made the Christian faith for many people into a moral obstacle course to be cleared as a condition for loving God. We have merited the condemnation Jesus first spoke to the Pharisees, 'They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.' (Matthew 23.4) We clergy have followed so faithfully in the footsteps of the Pharisees that anyone might be excused for thinking that Jesus had held them up for us as role models to follow.

V.18a: 'No one has ever seen God.' The great saints and scholars have echoed this and were happy in their agnosticism: -

Saint Augustine said, ‘Beware of affirming the unknown as known,’ (*An Imperfect Work on Genesis*, 9.30), and, ‘If anyone thinks he understands God, then, whatever it was he understood, it was not God.’ (Sermon 52.6.26 in PL 38.360, and Sermon 117.3.5 in PL 38.663; ‘*Si comprehendis, non est Deus.*’)

Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote, ‘In the last resort, all we know of God is that we do not know, since we know that what God is surpasses all that we can understand of him.’ (*De Potentia*, ques.7, art.5 ad 14.) And, ‘God is self-evident, but what it is to be God is not self-evident to us.’ (*Summa Theologiae*, I, II, 1)

In the Orthodox tradition, which holds that for statements about God to be orthodox they must be paradox, Saint Gregory Palamas said of God, ‘He both exists and does not exist; he has many names and yet cannot be named; he is ever-moving and yet motionless; in a word, he is everything and yet nothing.’ And also, ‘We participate in the divine nature, yet it remains totally inaccessible.’ (*Theophanes*, PG 932.D)

An almost identical idea is found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, ‘You are the imperishable beginning, you are what exists and what does not exist, and you are beyond both.’ (Cited by Ninian Smart and Richard D. Hecht, editors, *Sacred Texts of the World: A Universal*

Anthology, Herder and Herder/Crossroad, New York, 2002, p.221)

The Protestant theologian Karl Barth wrote, ‘When I think of God, I blaspheme, and when I speak of God, I blaspheme twice.’

I think the Quran says something to the effect that only God understands God.

God is, and always will be, a mystery. We may know *that* God is; we cannot know *what* God is. ‘God is in heaven and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few,’ says Ecclesiastes. (5.2) ‘The Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God.... in the same way the depths of God can only be known by the Spirit of God.’ (1 Corinthians 2.10)

V.18b: ‘It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.’ The focus here is on the heart, not the intellect, a point made repeatedly by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

‘In the exercise of the power of knowledge God must remain for ever incomprehensible. Whereas in the exercise of love he may be fully comprehended.’ (From Robert Llewellyn, editor, *The Dart of Longing Love*: daily readings from *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Book of*

Privy Counsel, Saint Paul Publications, Bandra,
Mumbai, India, p.6)

A good start to knowing God is to love people;
that creates an opening for an intuitive resonance.

Christmas

26 December, Saint Stephen's Day

Matthew 10.17-22

17. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues;

18. and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.

19. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time;

20. for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

21. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death;

22. and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 13.9-13 and Luke 21.12-19; 12.11-12, with a not dissimilar warning in John 16.1-4.

V.17: There were small, local sanhedrins in Israel as well as the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. The word means a council, from the Greek *synedrion*. This reference to persecutions in sanhedrins suggests that, by the time Matthew's Gospel was written, the split between Jews and Christians had taken place. The specific mention of flogging has its "fulfilment" in Acts 5.40: 'when they called in the apostles, they had them flogged.'

V.18: Being called to account before councils and tribunals will be opportunities to bear witness to Jews and Gentiles. The book of *Acts* gives several examples of this.

Vv.19-20: Disciples are simply to trust in 'the Spirit of your Father' to speak through them, without preparing or rehearsing beforehand. That asks for a great act of trust on their part, but there are precedents: -

When Moses was told by God to ask Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go, he pleaded his inability: -

Moses, however, said to the Lord, 'If you please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past, nor recently, nor now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and tongue.'

The Lord said to him, 'Who gives one man speech and makes another deaf and dumb? Or who gives sight to one and makes another blind? Go, then! It is I who will assist you in speaking and will teach you what you are to say.'
(Exodus 4.10-12)

Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah pleaded his limitations:

'Ah, Lord God!' I said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am too young.'

But the Lord answered me, 'Do not say, "I am too young." To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak.

Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you,' says the Lord.

Then the Lord extended his hand and touched my mouth, saying, 'See, I place my words in your mouth!

This day I set you over nations and over kingdoms, to root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant.'
(Jeremiah 1.6-10)

And John's Gospel has Jesus say, 'When the Advocate comes... the Spirit of truth who comes from my Father, he will testify on my behalf.'
(15.26) *Acts* gives examples of the apostles speaking boldly, empowered by the Spirit, in contrast to their earlier timidity. (4.8, 31)

V.21: The saddest part of it is that betrayal may come from within, even from within one's own family. 'One's foes will be members of one's own household,' said Jesus in Matthew 10.36. He experienced this himself when Judas, one of his chosen twelve, turned against him. History affords many other examples, such as that of Blessed Margaret Ball of Dublin, betrayed by her son, Walter: -

In 1581, on his [Walter's] orders [as mayor of the city], his mother was arrested, drawn through the streets on a hurdle, and thrown into a dungeon in Dublin Castle where the harsh conditions of life wore her down. She was arthritic, and her cell was cold, damp, and lit only by a candle. She died there in 1584, aged about seventy.

V.22: Blind, cold, irrational hatred of the Christian faith and Christians is not unknown, whether in the past or the present, sometimes on the part of people who know little or nothing about them. 'Is there anything more stupid than hating what you do not know?' asked David Irvine (of the Progressive Unionist Party in Northern Ireland)? Maybe not, but the reality is that it is there.

'The one who endures to the end will be saved.' Repeated in Matthew 24.13, this is not a promise that the person's life will be saved, much less that the story will have a happy ending. It has to be taken

as a promise of eternal life for those who give their life in fidelity to God.

The passage is a stark, intimidating warning from Jesus that his disciples must expect persecution. ‘A servant must be as his master’ (Matthew 10.24); if Jesus was persecuted, so will be his disciples. Another consideration is that it illustrates the failure of the mission of Jesus (and later of the disciples) to Jews and the necessity of turning to Gentiles.

Christmas

27 December, Saint John the Evangelist

John 20.2-8 The Resurrection of Jesus

1. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.
2. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’
3. Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.
4. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.
5. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.
6. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,

7. and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

8. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 28.1-8, Mark 16.1-8 and Luke 24.1-11.

Vv.1-2: Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection. She did not go into the tomb, possibly because 'it was still dark.' The removal of the stone is mentioned without comment. Mary is mentioned only once in the Gospel before the crucifixion: -

The twelve were with him [Jesus], as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out... and many others, who provided for them out of their own resources.' (Luke 8.1-3; Mark 16.9)

Mary comes to the fore, uniquely among the disciples, at the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Mark 15.40, Matthew 27.56 and John 19.25 mention her as a witness to the crucifixion, along with other women.

In listing witnesses who saw where Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, Mark (15.47) and

Matthew (27.61) each name only two people: Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary,' who, in Mark, is 'the mother of James.' John mentions only Nicodemus as being involved in the burial, though he could hardly have done it by himself. (19.39-42)

In Matthew, Mark and John, Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the resurrection. John (20.16) and Mark (16.9) both say simply that Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance was to Mary Magdalene alone. Here verse 2 seems to imply that she thought the body of Jesus had been stolen; resurrection does not seem to have occurred to her. Indeed, that could hardly be expected, especially as it seems she had not been present when Jesus told his disciples that he would be killed but rise again, as the Synoptics, but not John, describe.

Mary's role as a witness is counter-cultural because, at the time, women were considered unreliable witnesses. They were so regarded as scatter-brained, or given to exaggeration, or simply lying. Only when Mary's report was confirmed by men was it taken seriously. Indeed, so startling was the news that some of the first male witnesses were not believed either.

After her disbelieved first report of a resurrection vision, Mary disappears from the New Testament, and her fate is unknown. There is no basis in the New Testament for regarding her as a (reformed) prostitute. *Pace* Dan Brown and other writers of

fiction, there is no evidence that Mary's relationship with Jesus was anything other than that of disciple and teacher. From the tenth century onwards, she was known as 'the apostle to the apostles.' (The word *apostle* means 'someone sent.')

No one saw the actual resurrection itself. People found the empty tomb, and, later, they saw Jesus. But the actual moment was without witnesses.

Vv.3-5, like vv.6-7, suggest an eye-witness who has a clear recollection of the event.

V.5-6: Sometimes inordinate importance has been attached to the statement that John did not go in but waited for Simon Peter and then followed him. It has even been used as an argument for the Petrine primacy! The explanation might have been fear, or deference on the part of a younger man to an older one in a culture where that mattered.

Vv.6-7: The attention given in these verses to the linen wrappings, at first sight a matter of insignificance, may, in reality, be the faithful recording of eye-witness memory. This applies especially to verse 7.

V.8: As in v.2, the indirect reference to a disciple is widely believed to have been to John himself. A similar reference is used in John 18.15, 'Simon Peter and another disciple...' There was a close bond between John and Simon Peter, exemplified in John

13.23-24, 'One of his disciples - the one whom Jesus loved - was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.' In these incidents, John is probably recalling events which were pivotal moments in his life, and, of course, of subsequent human history also.

Four times in his Gospel John refers to someone as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved.' (13.23; 20.2; 21.7, 20) It is widely believed from the context to refer to himself.

Christmas

28 December The escape to Egypt and the massacre of the Holy Innocents

Matthew 2.13-18

13. Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'

14. Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,

15. and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

16. When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed

all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

17. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

18. 'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

V.13: Joseph, like the Joseph of Genesis, is a man of dreams. He has three, all in Matthew. In the first of them, (1.20), he is told that the child to be born to Mary is from God; in the second, (2.13), he is warned to flee to Egypt, and, in the third, (2.19-20), he is told that it is safe to return home. (It is strange that the church discourages Catholics from trying to understand their dreams; they are significant in the Old Testament especially, involving such people as Jacob, Joseph, Daniel, Solomon, Samuel, Job, Jeremiah and the wise men among others.)

Vv.15, 18: The "fulfilment" that verse 15 speaks of refers to a passage in Numbers (23.22), spoken by Balaam and obscure in its meaning. In v.18, the original text, from Jeremiah 31.15, is quoted out of context: it is about the people of Israel longing for the return home from Babylon of the exiles. The links to the story of Jesus are forced.

The Christmas scene in the public mind is overlaid with images that come from sources other than the Gospel. For instance, in cribs we see figures of sheep, an ox and an ass. They are not mentioned in the Gospel – though they are perhaps borrowed from Isaiah 11.1-9. The account of the massacre of the Holy Innocents does not say about the wise men that they were kings, *pace* the carol, ‘We three kings of Orient are...,’ or that there were three of them, or that their names were Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, nor a fourth Artaban, or that they came from Persia; those are additions that crept into the story along the way, via Marco Polo’s *Travels*. There may be an echo in them of Psalm 71 (72), vv. 10-11, ‘The kings of Sheba and Seba shall bring him gifts. Before him all rulers shall prostrate, all nations shall serve him.’ The biblical Sheba is today’s Yemen.

For a long time, too, they were called *Magi*, (as in Simon Magus - plural Magi - of Acts 8.9-24), a word which led to the English words *magic* and *magician*, which have quite a different connotation from *wise*. And myrrh and incense were used in charms. They were astrologers; they followed stars. In a highly imaginative piece of exegesis, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote of the three gifts brought by them that the gold was to pay the expenses of the flight into Egypt, the incense was to overcome the smell of the ox, the ass and the sheep, and the myrrh was to clear Jesus’ intestinal worms! The *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* says of Matthew 2.1-

18 that, ‘around the core of fact is a good deal of inspired embroidery, whose message is not be learnt by feverish insistence on [the] historicity of every detail.’ (Nelson, London, 1953, 713d) In contrast to Matthew, Luke has no mention of the Magi, no massacre of infants by Herod, and no flight into Egypt. Mark and John omit entirely any reference to Jesus’ early years.

The King Herod of this story was called the Great, perhaps because he was a great builder: he built a large port on the sea-coast at Caesarea and also the temple in Jerusalem. (One may sometimes see on TV pictures of its Western wall, with Jews praying before it.) Herod blinded his mother-in-law, and murdered his wife, an uncle, a brother-in-law, an uncle and three of his sons. This led a Roman emperor to pun in Greek that you would be safer to be his pig than his son. In Greek, *hus* is a pig, and *huios* a son. As a Jew, Herod would not kill a pig; as a king, he had killed his sons. Today, Jews say that although there is no record in Jewish tradition of this massacre, Herod would have been well capable of it. They say also that he was as Jewish as he considered it politically necessary to be in order to maintain his position as King of the Jews. Half Idumaeian and half Samaritan, he probably did not believe or care but had to pretend to.

In looking at the Gospel story as it stands, we have to ask how wise were the “wise” men from the East to pay a courtesy call on King Herod and tell him

their story. They came to Jerusalem and let it be known around the city that they were looking for ‘the infant king of the Jews.’ (Matthew 2.2) The Gospel says that, ‘When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem.’ (2.3) How did they expect him to react? They had announced that they were looking for his replacement. Did they expect him to roll out the red carpet and say ‘Céad míle fáilte’? How would any king of the time have reacted, let alone one of Herod’s murderous propensities? How wise was it to take at face value his statement that, ‘When you have found him, let me know, so that I, too, may come and do him homage’? (2.8) Who would have believed that? And yet it took a special message from God to dissuade them from doing so. (Matthew 2.12) The result – predictably, in view of Herod’s record – was a massacre, with all boys in the region of Bethlehem ‘of two years old and under’ being killed. (Matthew 2.16) If he hadn’t hesitated to kill his own sons it would hardly have troubled him to kill other people’s. One can’t help asking: could the “wise” men not just have kept their mouths shut? ‘If a fool can hold his tongue, even he can pass for wise, and pass for clever if he keeps his lips tight shut.’ (Proverbs 17.28)

Is the passage a send-up of the “wise,” especially in contrast to the shepherds, people of no education or status, who said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us’? (Luke 2.15)

And, having done that, ‘The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.’ (Luke 2.20) They went, they saw, they listened, they glorified, they praised – and they left no dead bodies after them. *That* was wise. They lived as the Gospel teaches disciples to live – between ‘Come and see’ (John 1.39) and ‘Go and tell.’ (John 20.17)

The story expresses a theme common to the Gospels and about which Jesus exclaimed in Matthew, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants [which means not children but the unlearned]; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.’ (11.25-26) See also the story of the man born blind in John 9.1-41. And also, ‘God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.’ (1 Corinthians 1.23-25)

The passage (Matthew 2.1-12) concludes by saying that the wise men ‘returned to their own country by a different way.’ They had come by way of astrology, they followed a star; that’s what astrologers do. They went back ‘by a different way.’ Is that a hint that it was not by way of astrology that the “wise men” returned, but that, having met Jesus, their lives were changed? The book of Acts refers repeatedly to the Christian life as *The Way*. Among other more important things, is this passage saying,

‘Don’t look for God in the stars; he has come down to earth. Leave astrology and horoscopes behind you; Jesus is “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” (John 14.6) The stars – celestial or celebrity - will not lead you home.’

The American Catholic social activist, Dorothy Day, has a good word to say for the wise men: ‘The wise men’s... journey across half the world made up for those who refuse to stir one hand’s breadth from the routine of their lives to go to Christ.’ (From “Room for Christ”) If we take the story of the journey of the wise men as *midrash*, a traditional Jewish form of didactically motivated re-interpretation, then perhaps its best meaning may be that ‘pagans now share the same inheritance, they are parts of the same body, and the same promise has been made to them, in Christ Jesus, through the Gospel.’ (Ephesians 3.5-6)

Christmas

29 December

Luke 2.22-35 Jesus is presented in the Temple

22. When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord,

23. as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’,

24. and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'

25. Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.

26. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

27. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law,

28. Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29. 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,

according to your word;

30. for my eyes have seen your salvation,

31. which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

32. a light for revelation to the Gentiles

and for glory to your people Israel.'

33. And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

34. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed

35. so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

V.22: Luke’s introductory phrase, ‘When the time came,’ suggests more than merely keeping an appointment, but rather that the age of the Messiah had come. It is like ‘When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son...’ (Galatians 4.4)

“Purification” had a different meaning for Jews from the ordinary meaning of today. It does not imply that the one to be “purified” is impure in the conventional sense, that is to say, dirty and in need of cleaning. In a synagogue, when the cantor has finished reading from the Torah, he rolls up the scroll on which the Teaching is written, returns it to its place, and then “purifies” his hands. (The Hebrew word *Torah* means guidance, precept, teaching. The *Law* was primarily a teaching instrument, only secondarily an instrument of regulation.) Insofar as Jews might consider any *thing* to be holy, they would consider the Torah scroll to be such.

Something similar is found in the Mass. After Holy Communion, when the priest has drunk the Blood of Christ, he “purifies” the chalice, using a cloth called a purifier. For Catholics, there is nothing holier than Holy Communion: it is the Body and Blood of Christ.

In neither case does this “purification” imply impurity in the conventional sense. What is implied is contact with the divine. Similarly, a Jewish mother, after giving birth to a child, went for “purification.” She had been in contact with life, the life in her womb, and thereby had been in contact with the divine. So, as in the two cases above, “purification” was called for.

Vv.23-24: Luke is at pains to show that Mary and Joseph were observant Jews, faithful to the practice of their religion: ‘You shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb.’ (Exodus 13.12) This day, then, was the occasion of the presentation of Jesus, and of the purification of Mary in the temple. According to Jewish custom, this was to take place forty days after the boy’s birth. This ‘setting apart’ of Jesus to the Lord God was the day of a promise; Good Friday was the day of its fulfilment.

This is the origin of the liturgical feast of the Presentation of Jesus on 2 February, forty days after 25 December, counting inclusively, as Jews did. It was also known as the feast of the Purification of Mary, when Mary offered the two turtledoves for that purpose, in accordance with Leviticus: ‘If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or pigeons...’ (12.8) Mary made the offering of the poor. February 2 marks the close of the Christmas season in the church.

Vv.25-28: Simeon was one of those rare people, uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit with singular insight, and he recognized a moment of grace when it came. He is a pattern of those Jews who welcomed Jesus as ‘the Lord’s Messiah.’ Perhaps he had recalled the words of the prophet Malachi: ‘the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.’ (3.1)

Vv.29-32: The canticle of Simeon, known in Latin as the *Nunc, Dimittis*, and, like the *Benedictus* and *Magnificat*, used daily in the liturgy, is the joyful song of a man who has reached his goal in life, who has seen what his people have awaited for centuries: ‘my eyes have seen your salvation.’ Luke typically gives Simeon’s song a universalist character: Jesus is not only a light for glory to God’s people Israel, but also a ‘revelation to the Gentiles.’ This was to say that ‘the Gentiles had become fellow heirs... sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.’ (Ephesians 3.6) Jesus is Messiah and Saviour for all people; all are now the chosen people of God. ‘There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!’ (Colossians 3.11) The prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled: ‘all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.’ (52.10)

Vv.33-35: Jesus’ father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him, but must have been stilled to silence by Simeon’s haunting words of prophecy to Mary: ‘This child is destined for the

falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed - so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.' The shadow of the cross overhangs this joyous occasion, though years were to pass before the significance of Simeon's words would become apparent. Mary's faith was tested, moving from the high moments of the annunciation of his birth and this moment of his presentation in the temple, to standing at the foot of the cross, which must have seemed like a denial of all that God had promised. Calvary was her Abrahamic moment, her offering of Isaac, with no angel to stay the hand and save the son. (See Genesis 22)

Christmas

30 December

Luke 2.36-40 Anna, the prophetess

36. There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,

37. then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.

38. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

39. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

40. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Vv.36-38: Onto the scene comes Anna, or Hanna, an elderly woman made holy by years of fasting and prayer in the temple, night and day. A counterpart in the story to Simeon, she, like him, recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, and gives praise to God. Anna has her counterparts, too, in churches all over the world where women, often elderly, spend much time in quiet prayer in the presence of the Lord, who alone knows how much good they do.

Luke has an old couple - Simeon and Anna - and a young couple - Joseph and Mary - representing respectively the Old and New Covenants, marking the transition from the one to the other.

Vv.39-40: Luke concludes his account of the early days of Jesus, saying, 'When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.' Jesus grew physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually; he was a human being, and needed to learn, to be taught, and to make mistakes. He was not acting out a role, by, for example, asking

questions to which he already knew the answers; he was not exempt from the ordinary human process. He was ‘one who, in every respect, has been tested as we are, yet without sin.’ (Hebrews 4.15) And Saint Cyril of Alexandria wrote,

We have admired his [Jesus’] goodness in that, for love of us, he has not refused to descend to such a low position as to bear all that belongs to our race, included in which is ignorance. (PG 75.369)

In contrast to Matthew, Luke has no mention of the Magi, no massacre of infants by Herod, and no flight into Egypt.

Christmas

31 December

John 1.1-18 The Word became flesh

1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
2. He was in the beginning with God.
3. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being
4. in him was life.
5. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.
6. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

7. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.
8. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.
9. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
10. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.
11. He came to his own home and his own people did not accept him.
12. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,
13. who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.
14. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.
15. John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.""
16. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.
17. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
18. No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

For a commentary, see Christmas Day, 25 December,
Mass during the day.

1 January

Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God

Luke 2.16-21

16. So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

17. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;

18. and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

19. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

20. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

21. After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

V.19: ‘Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.’ To ponder the things of God in the heart - that’s a good description of prayer. After Jesus was lost and found again in the Temple at the age of twelve, an almost identical phrase is used again about Mary, that she ‘treasured all these things in her heart.’ (v.51)

The word ‘Christmas’ comes from ‘Christ’s Mass,’ or ‘Cristes maesse’ in Old English. The earliest known celebration of the feast of Christmas dates from Rome in the middle of the fourth century.

Jesus wasn't born in the year 1 A.D., (Anno Domini, in the Year of the Lord). Neither is there a year 0 between B.C. and A.D. More likely he was born in 4 B.C. (Before Christ!), if not as early as 8.

Early Christians followed local custom in calculating time. But, in the Roman Empire, the point of reference was the supposed founding of the city of Rome in 754 B.C. Years were designated as A.U.C. (Ab Urbe Condita), that is, since the foundation of the city.

When Christianity came to be recognized as the religion of the Empire, a sixth-century Scythian (Romanian) monk called Dionysius Exiguus (Little Denis) undertook the task of devising a new calendar for the empire, taking the birth of Jesus as its starting point. Unfortunately, he got his sums wrong, and forgot that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod, who died in 4 B.C. But his calendar was accepted, though it was not until the fourteenth century that all of Europe had adopted it. Even the papal court in Rome waited until the tenth century. The matter is insignificant: 'Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever.' (Hebrews 13.8)

This Gospel text powerfully turns upside-down our assumptions about God and God's ways of acting in the world. Jesus comes, not in power, but in weakness, not as a king or ruler but in the helplessness of a child. Jesus is God-made-vulnerable. The awkward Latin word Incarnation

means the enfleshment, or, better, embodiment of God in Jesus. ‘God became man that man might become God’, said Saint Athanasius. The incarnation means God entering into humanity, thereby investing everything that is human with an eternal and transcendent significance. It also means taking humanity into God, thereby lifting it up beyond itself, saying that it is not within its own limitations, but in God, that it finds fulfilment.

If Christmas is a birth it is also a death, death to old attitudes about a remote or impersonal God who acts through power, and makes people his playthings. It is death to coldness and unforgiveness, to the exaltation of riches and status, and to the devaluation of the child.

Christmas is a present as well as a past reality. It means that God is expressed through the human. Where people love or forgive, it is God who loves or forgives through them. The more human we are, the more God-like we are. Jesus is true God and true man – both. And what God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

Christmas is a challenge to rediscover the child in ourselves. The child, or, more accurately, the infant, means the authentic self, the self that is true to itself, before the fears, masks, image-building, posturing and pretence took over. ‘Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ (Luke 18.17)

A characteristic feature of this Gospel story is its silence. Nobody speaks. There is a sense of amazement and wonder. If we keep silence, silence keeps us. It leads to gratitude and thanksgiving.

V21: For Jews, circumcision was a sign of their commitment to the covenant God had made with them. It is one of their earliest traditions: -

This is my covenant which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: every male among you shall be circumcised... it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.... Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old. (Genesis 17.10-12)

The text follows closely that in Luke 1.59-63 about John the Baptist.

The day of circumcision was also the day of naming. 'Jesus,' or Joshua, (*Yeshua* in Aramaic) was a common name at the time, and no special significance would have been attached to it. It was with the benefit of hindsight that the Christian community saw it as indicative, since it means, 'the Lord saves.' A similar process applies to much else relating to Jesus; with later reflection new significance was read into matters that seemed mundane or routine when they took place.

Jesus was a Jew. He did not come into the world culturally naked. He is Jesus *of Nazareth*, not an anonymous, androgynous genus called Jesus. Sometimes, Jews say of Christians that we have turned Jesus into a Gentile. If we wish to understand him, we need to recognize and accept his Jewishness; it is through his - and our - humanity that God reveals himself. That is what Incarnation is about. Jews are Christians' older brothers and sisters in faith, looking back to a common father in Abraham. Spiritually, we are all Semites (to quote Pope Pius XI). And Jesus never renounced his Jewishness.

2 January

John 1.19-28 The testimony of John the Baptist

19. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'

20. He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.'

21. And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.'

22. Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'

23. He said,

'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord,"'

as the prophet Isaiah said.

24. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

25. They asked him, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’

26. John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,

27. the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’

28. This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 3.1-12, Mark 1.1-8 and Luke 3.1-20.

V.19: John was always humble; he made no claims about himself. He understood his role and accepted it. He was the fore-runner; his role was to prepare the way for the one Isaiah had spoken of.

‘The Jews sent...’ The Gospel of John was likely written later than the others, perhaps by thirty years or more, and after Jews and Christians had gone separate ways, a development accelerated by the judicial murder of Stephen. There is nearly always an edge to John’s references to Jews, especially to those in positions of authority, as if to say “that lot.”

Vv.20-21: ‘He confessed and did not deny...’ – a characteristically Jewish mode of emphasis in which the same thing is said in two different ways. Another

example is in, ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.’

John couldn’t have made it clearer: ‘I am not the Messiah.’ *Messiah* was not a divine title, so, if he had made such a claim, there would have been no blasphemy involved.

In a similarly emphatic way he denied being Elijah. There was a widespread expectation that the prophet Elijah would return before the Messiah’s coming. Elijah was the great prophet of the past; no other is mentioned so often in the New Testament. Of him the scriptures said, ‘How glorious you were, Elijah... whose glory is equal to yours?’ (Sirach 48.4) Malachi wrote: ‘I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.’ (4.5 in NRSV; 3.24 in JB) Elijah and John were similar in their presence in the desert, their sudden entry on the scene (1 Kings 17), their dress (2 Kings 1.8), and in the style of their preaching. Despite John’s disavowal, Jesus calls him Elijah in Matthew 11.14 and 17.12, and Mark 9.13.

‘Are you the prophet?’ This was a reference to the one spoken of by Moses who had said, ‘God will raise up a prophet for you like myself, from among yourselves, from among your brothers; to him you must listen.’ (Deuteronomy 18.18, 18)

Vv.22-23: A straight question to which John gives a straight answer. There weren’t too many of either

in the Gospel story, and we may regret it, as the truth would have gained by it. John applies Isaiah (40.3) to himself. His was indeed a voice crying in the wilderness. (See Mark 1.4)

V.24: Who are 'they' who want to know why John is baptizing? They are 'priests and Levites' (v.19), while here they are 'from the Pharisees.' The big guns from Jerusalem want something to put in their files.

V.25: They sense an innovation, and by someone who was not of the inner circle, but a man from the wilderness, an enthusiastic amateur, and such were suspect in the eyes of the establishment. Baptism was not a feature of mainstream Judaism, though a group such as that of Qumran practised it. The significance of their baptism is uncertain but it may have been nothing more than a symbolic gesture of repentance. In his reply, John again points beyond himself, saying that what he does is merely a pointer to the greater role of the one who comes after him, although already present, albeit unknown, among them. John the evangelist omits Mark's reference to baptism by Jesus being 'with the Holy Spirit.' (1.8)

V.26: John's baptism was 'with water.' He appears to downplay its significance, again pointing to the other, to the one who is already there, unknown.

V.27: To untie the thong of a visitor's sandal was a slave's job.

V.28: This must have been another Bethany, not the well-known one near Jerusalem, on “this” (Western) side of the Jordan.

3 January

John 1.29-34 Jesus is the Lamb of God

29. The next day he [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’

30. This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’

31. I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.

32. And John testified, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.’

33. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.”

34. And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.’

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 3.13-17, Mark 1.9-11 and Luke 3.21-22.

V.29: The Aramaic word *talya*, here translated as lamb, also means servant. Why does John call Jesus

Lamb of God instead of Servant of God? *Lamb* has substantial symbolic significance for Jews, especially through its use in the Passover meal and as a sacrifice for the expiation of sin (See Exodus 12.1-28, Leviticus 14.24-25, John 19.36 and 1 John 2.2), and again in Revelation 5.6, 12. Jesus would sacrifice himself for the sins of the world. But *servant* also has symbolic weight: the Suffering Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 53, and the priority Jesus gives to service in the washing of the feet in John 13.1-16 and throughout the Gospels.

V.30: Here John seems to refer to his encounter the previous day with the delegation from Jerusalem. He says, in a word-for-word repeat of v.15, that Jesus ranks ahead of him because he was before him. As John the Evangelist wrote, 'In the beginning was the Word' (1.1), and he also has Jesus say, 'Before Abraham was, I am.' (8.58)

Vv.31-33: The Baptist says twice - in vv.31 and 33 - that he did not know who Jesus was. This may be literally true, though Jesus was his cousin, because John may have grown up in the desert, or it may mean rather that he did not understand his significance or his mission. It was not until he saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove and remaining on him that he realized that this was the man who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. This refers to the baptism of Jesus as described by the Synoptics. (Matthew 3.13-17; Mark 1.9-11; and Luke 3.21-22)

The Spirit 'remaining' on Jesus was significant: -

The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord. (Isaiah 11.2)

Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights. I have sent my spirit upon him, he will bring fair judgement to the nations. (Isaiah 42.1)

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favour from the Lord and a day of vindication by our God, to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61.1-2)

V.34: This is characteristic of John: he wants to stress that the evidence he gives is true, that he was an eye-witness and knows what he has seen. See 21.24, for example: 'This is the disciple who is testifying to these things, and we know that his testimony is true.'

What is John's testimony? – That Jesus is the Son of God. Later, he says,

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (20.3-31)

And it is the coming of the Spirit which makes that possible. It was this coming that enabled John to know who Jesus was. The Spirit had already been recognized as characteristic of the messianic era. God had already said to his people: -

I shall take you from among the nations and gather you back from all the countries, and bring you home to your own country.

I shall pour clean water over you and you will be cleansed; I shall cleanse you of all your filth and of all your foul idols.

I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead.

I shall put my spirit in you, and make you keep my laws, and respect and practise my judgements.

You will live in the country which I gave your ancestors. You will be my people and I shall be your God. (Ezekiel 36.24-28)

4 January

John 1.35-42 The first disciples of Jesus

35. The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples,

36. and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'

37. The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

38. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi, where are you staying?'

39. He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

40. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

41. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah.'

42. He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas.'

There are similar passages in Matthew 4.18-20, Mark 1.16-20 and Luke 5.1-11. The Synoptics give the call of Peter and Andrew first, and of James and John second.

V.35: 'The next day' appears to be a standard introductory phrase for John: see 1.29 and 1.43 also.

V.36: Once again - see 1.29 - John calls Jesus by the title of *Lamb of God*.

V.37: Two of John's disciples heard John say this and followed Jesus. So, it appears, did others later. Was John an Essene? Was he from Qumran? Or did people simply go and follow him spontaneously in response to his call to them to live Jewish life more faithfully?

Vv.38-39: Jesus asks about one hundred and twenty questions in the Gospels. This one, like many others, may be taken on different levels. Here it may be a simple, 'What do you want?' But it may also have a deeper meaning of, 'Have you thought about what you want from life?' 'Do you know yourself well enough to know what you want?' 'Have you a sense of direction?' In common biblical fashion, they answer a question with a question: 'Where are you staying?' Perhaps it implicitly contained an answer to Jesus' question, namely, 'We want to know where you live.' He answered with an invitation, bringing them to his house, giving them, not a lecture, but an experience. We are told nothing of what they talked about, but they remained with him until about four p.m. It would have been good to have been a fly on the wall. Whatever happened, it changed them from enquirers to disciples. In their case, 'Come and see' quickly led to 'Go and tell' – the mark of a true disciple.

V.40: One of the two was Andrew. Who was the other? We are not told. Could it have been John himself? That seems likely in view of the detail he gives about the time of day.

V.41: (JB has this happen ‘Early next morning,’ another example of ‘the next day.’) Andrew tells Simon Peter, his brother, that he and his companion have found the messiah. Just like that? On John’s say-so, or, more likely, on the basis of their meeting with Jesus? It was a big first step.

V.42: Andrew brings his brother to Jesus, who looked at him. Jesus was to look at Peter later on also, after Peter had betrayed him (Luke 22.61) and it changed him, as it did here, too. Jesus gave him the name of Rock. Was it sardonic wit? Peter was to be an unstable rock. Could it possibly have meant as dense as a rock? Scripture scholars say they know of no other person being given that name. To give a person a name was to give them a mission, as when Abram becomes Abraham, and Saul becomes Paul.

5 January

John 1.43-51 Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael

43. The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’

44. Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

45. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’

46. Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’

47. When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’

48. Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you get to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’

49. Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’

50. Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’

51. And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

Jesus’ call of his closest disciples broke the usual mould. The pattern at the time was that a disciple would choose a teacher. Here, Jesus, the teacher, chooses the disciples. Later he was to say to them, ‘You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.’ (John 15.16) They were not chosen for their own sake, but for the sake of others.

A disciple was more than a learner, or student, even though the word has its origin in the Latin *discere*, to learn. It was a committed relationship. In Jewish tradition, the best disciple was the one who would be most like his master and repeat his teaching and tradition faithfully. With Jesus, it was different. His disciples could not hope to be like him, and, as anyone with even a modest familiarity with the Gospels will appreciate, word-for-word repetition of Jesus' teaching is not a feature of them. Each Gospel writer made the material his own – while remaining faithful to it. Their role was to be witnesses rather than reporters.

Vv.43-45: The process is made to sound very simple. Jesus called Philip and he came. Philip found Nathanael and, after a little hesitation, he came. Not only that, but he proclaimed Jesus to be 'the Son of God, the King of Israel.' (Nathaniel is probably the same as Bartholomew of the Synoptics.) Was it really so simple and quick? Hardly. Then why is it so presented? There is a joyfulness and hopefulness about this period of the Gospel; Jesus is beginning his mission and people are beginning to listen. It may be that the evangelists – the others make it seem even simpler (see Matthew 10.1-4; Mark 3.13-19 and Luke 6.12-16) – wanted to present it thus so as to heighten the contrast with the later rejection of Jesus by his people.

Vv.46-47: This is one of the few passages in the Gospel which make people laugh. Nathaniel's down-

to-earth bluntness in expressing his low opinion of Nazareth, the town of Jesus' childhood, was so un-PC that it was a breath of fresh air. And Jesus, evidently, saw it that way, welcoming it. This makes it all the more remarkable, and perhaps disturbing, that, in the Gospels, Jesus himself rarely gives a straight answer to a straight question. Indeed, 'He directly answers only three of the 183 questions that are asked of him in the four Gospels!' (Richard Rohr, *Adam's Return: the Five Promises of Male Initiation*, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 2004, p.112) One was: 'the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"' Jesus said, 'I am.' (Mark 14.61-62) A second was when he answered the question of the scribe, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' saying,

The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12.29-31)

But the Pharisees' (and Jesus') way of answering a question with a question was not evasiveness, or deviousness, but a way of continuing a debate, opening it up to other perspectives – as in *The Fiddler on the Roof*: 'on the one hand, on the other hand.' To make an assertion that this or that was *the*

definitive answer would close off further discussion and obstruct a vital process.

Vv.48-49: This is a strange episode. There is something quasi-magical about Jesus saying, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' It could simply mean that Jesus just happened to see him earlier, but, if that was all it meant, it would hardly have evoked the dramatic response from Nathaniel where, in an instant, he changes from skepticism to enthusiasm. It is made to sound miraculous, yet Jesus did not work miracles for effect or just to make an impression.

The Gospels often mention Jesus' understanding of what people were thinking. Examples are to be found in John 2.25 and 6.61.64; Matthew 9.4 and Luke 6.8. They do not suggest supernatural power, but rather that Jesus was observant, perceptive, a good listener and aware of his environment.

Vv.50-51: Jesus tells Nathaniel that he will see much greater things, things that will make it clear to him that he, Jesus, was not simply Messiah, but divine. The language used is evocative of Daniel 7 with its revelation of the Ancient One (God), and of Genesis 28.10-17 where the angels of God were ascending and descending and where God was present and Jacob did not know it.

The Jerusalem Bible uses an emphatic form in v.51, 'I tell you most solemnly...' The NRSV's

‘Very truly, I tell you...’ is perhaps not so strong. In either form, it suggests an eye-witness recollection of something dramatic and significant and therefore remembered accurately. It is a formula used twenty times in John.

6 January

Mark 1.6-11 The preaching of John the Baptist

6. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

7. He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

8. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

9. In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

10. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

11. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’

There are parallel passages in Matthew 3.1-12 and Luke 3.3-17.

Mark has nothing of the childhood, youth or early manhood of Jesus. He starts with John the Baptist,

and then goes on to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Vv.6-7: John's dress style, if it may be called such, was that of the prophet; it was similar to that of Elijah, the great prophet of the past. (2 Kings 1.8) He lived outside of ordinary society, was indifferent to its conventions and answered to a different call. He saw his role as that of preparing the way for the one chosen by God. For him nothing else mattered. His task was to do that, then stand back, get out of the way and let the chosen one take centre stage. Symbolic of this was his statement that he was not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of Jesus' sandals; to do that was the duty of a slave.

V.8: John freely acknowledges his subordinate, preparatory role. It is Jesus who comes with the power of the Spirit, while John's baptism is a pre-figuring, a sign of what was to come. When John spoke of 'the Spirit' he can hardly have meant the third Person of the Trinity. More likely he was thinking of the spirit of messianic times spoken of by Isaiah: -

The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord,
and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord. Not by appearance shall he judge, nor by hearsay shall he decide,

but he shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land's afflicted. (11.2-4)

V.9: The acceptance by Jesus (indeed his insistence – see Matthew 3.13-15) of John's baptism does not have great significance as it was simply a ritual of washing, without the sacramental character of Christian baptism which brings about what it signifies by the power of the Spirit. Believers, even at the time, did not see the two as being on a par. John himself shared this view; see v.8. And Jesus did likewise, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit...' (Acts 1.5; see also Peter in Acts 11.16)

The question remains: why was Jesus baptized? Likely, it was to associate himself with sinful humanity, saying, in effect, 'I'm with you.' It may be linked to the thought that, 'For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the sinlessness of God.' (2 Corinthians 5.21)

V.10 is probably an allusion to Isaiah, 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...' (64.1) The passage uses apocalyptic imagery and language.

V.11 is a combined quotation from Psalm 2.7, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you,' and Isaiah, 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.' (42.1) This latter

is used in adapted form in the transfiguration of Jesus, 'This is my Beloved Son; listen to him!' (Mark 9.7)

The focus of the whole account is on Jesus rather than John. It shows God's seal of approval on him from the beginning. It has also been seen in Christian tradition as having a Trinitarian character, with the presence of the Father (the voice in v.11), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit (the dove). It points towards Mark's principal theme as he stated it: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' (1.1) The occasion is perhaps remembered in Acts 10.38: 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; ... he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.'

7 January where Epiphany celebrated on 7 or 8 January.

John 2.1-12 The wedding feast at Cana

1. On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.
2. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.
3. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'
4. And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.'

5. His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’
6. Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.
7. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim.
8. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it.
9. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom
10. and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’
11. Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.
12. After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.

Vv.1-2: John is conscious of time - see 1.29, 35, 41 and 43 – both in the chronological sense and in terms of significance.

It is heart-warming to see Jesus and his disciples taking part in ordinary, down-to-earth human

celebrations, especially as this was the beginning of his public life.

Vv.3-4: Mary is present at the beginning and the end of Jesus' public ministry, here and in John 19.25-27. In this situation, she sees a need and makes it known to him. It is very difficult not to see his reply to her as a rebuff. The use of the title 'Woman,' while appropriate in addressing a stranger, was unknown when addressing one's mother. And saying, 'what concern is that to you and to me?' sounds like, 'Mind your own business.' NCCHS suggests something even stronger, 'What is there in common between you and me?' (803b) The conclusion seems inescapable that Jesus here, as elsewhere, such as in Matthew 12.46-50 etc., is making a break with his family in order to underline his commitment to doing the will of his Father who has a total claim on him.

'My hour has not yet come' could equally well be, 'My time has not yet come,' as JB has it. 'When the fulness of time had come, God sent his Son...' (Galatians 4.4) Timing matters, as every public figure knows. Jesus had a sense of the appropriateness of any given time, and John is faithful in recording this: 'My time has not yet come...', (7.6); 'his hour had not yet come' (7.30 and 8.20); 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified' (12.23); 'Father, save me from this hour' (12.27); 'Jesus knew that his hour had come...' (13.1); 'Father, the hour has come...'

(17.1) In John, the ‘hour’ or ‘time’ nearly always refers to Jesus’ passion or glorification. It has the sense of a decisive moment, a *kairos* rather than a *chronos* time.

V.5: Whatever the significance of the preceding verse, Mary here shows trust and confidence in Jesus – ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ Referring to the patriarch Joseph, this was the same instruction the Pharaoh gave the Egyptians. (Genesis 41.55) It is a blank cheque, like saying, ‘You can rely on him.’

Vv.6-7: It is significant that John points to the Jewish custom of having water available for guests’ ablutions. He has a Gentile readership in mind, and they would not know about it. Mark does likewise in 7.3-4.

Six times twenty or thirty gallons (Douai has ‘two or three’) makes between a hundred and twenty to a hundred and eighty gallons... a very large quantity. A characteristic of all of Jesus’ works of power is their generosity; there is no penny-pinching. The same is true also of nature: a single fruit, such as a maize cob, tomato or pawpaw, produces large numbers of seeds, any one of which has the potential to become a new plant. This generous outpouring at Cana has its counterpart in the miracle of the loaves and fishes in John 6.1-14. Both are signs that point to the Eucharist.

Some commentators see the change from water to wine as symbolic of the change from the Old to the New Testaments. The water is here explicitly associated with Jewish rites while wine has messianic significance. In his narrative of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, Mark has Jesus say, ‘Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’ (14.25) In this context, it is good to bear in mind what was said by Paul Williams: -

Cana is about ‘joyousness and affirmation of community, fun and the body. In comparison, our being able to break the code of an allegory is thoroughly *boring*,’ and, ‘Allegorical interpretations... can turn a beautiful but simple story into an esoteric code.’ (Paul Williams, *The Unexpected Way*, Continuum, London, 2002, pp.117, 115)

V.8: The servants did what Jesus told them to do, a not very common response in the Gospel. People often did the opposite. When people do as Jesus says, good things happen.

Vv.9-10: Like Nathaniel’s remark about Nazareth in John 1.46, there is a refreshing, down-to-earth frankness about the steward’s reaction. Clearly, he knows people’s habits. Is it possible that Nathaniel was the steward? He was from Cana. (John 21.2)

The point has been made that the steward thanked the wrong bridegroom; Jesus was the bridegroom who deserved thanks.

V.11: John sees this as more than simply an act of kindness on the part of Jesus to a newly-married couple embarrassed by the supply of wine for their guests running out. This was ‘the first of his signs.’ The words ‘works’ or ‘wonders’ are often used with the same meaning. A sign points to a reality beyond itself; its value is as an indicator. Here it ‘revealed his glory’ and the effect is that his disciples – they already have this title – believe in him. His signs are indicators that God is with him, and that what he does is done in God.

V.12: Capernaum is Jesus’ home since the move from Nazareth; this may have been after his baptism. Why he moved we don’t know. Could it be that Joseph had died, and there was a family reason behind the move? Was Capernaum perhaps Mary’s place of origin and she was returning to her people following her husband’s death? Perhaps she had never felt at home in Nazareth.

Or could it be that Joseph, for some reason, had divorced Mary and re-married? This is entirely speculative and there is nothing in the Gospels to suggest it, but it might help account for the intensity of Jesus’ rejection of divorce and re-marriage.

(See the following Gospel, Matthew 4.12-17 for another possible explanation.)

7 January or Monday after Epiphany

Matthew 4.12-17, 23-25 Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee

12. Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

13. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali,

14. so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

15. 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles

-

16. the people who sat in darkness has seen a great light,

and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death

light has dawned.'

17. From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'

23. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

24. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were

afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.

25. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 1.14-15 and Luke 4.14-15.

V.12: As the story unfolds, the fate of John the Baptist increasingly becomes a foreshadowing of Jesus' fate also.

Vv.13-16: Matthew liked to find, or create, "fulfilments" of Old Testament texts in the life of Jesus. Writing for a Jewish audience, he wanted to present Jesus as the one foretold by the Jewish prophets of the past. So, his move from Nazareth to Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee creates such a fulfilment of a text from Isaiah 8.23-9.1.

V.17: The kingdom of heaven was the central theme of the preaching of Jesus. It may also be called the reign, or rule, of God. And it has come with, in and through him. One way of looking at it is to say that it represents the world as it would be if God's will were done on earth as it is in heaven.

Vv.23a, 25: Jesus preached in synagogues. Galilee had a substantial Gentile population – Isaiah called it Galilee of the Gentiles – but it seems that Jesus

confined his mission to his fellow Jews. He said of himself, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15.24), and he instructed his disciples, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' (Matthew 10.5-6)

Jesus was a Jew. He grew up according to Jewish tradition and culture; the milieu in which he operated was Jewish. He never repudiated his Judaism, but saw his role as bringing it to fulfilment. He was to say, 'Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.' (Matthew 5.18) The great crowds that followed him from the ten Greek-speaking cities (they included Damascus) called the Decapolis, and from beyond the Jordan, that is, the Gentile territory to its east, were, most likely, Jews. If there were Gentiles among them, they were few in number and came later. Examples would be the Roman centurion in Matthew 8.5-13 and some Greeks in John 12.20-22.

You could say that a great part of Jesus' work was done for him by those who had gone before. He was not starting from a *tabula rasa*. Jews, perhaps uniquely in their time, were monotheists, giving no quarter to the pick-and-mix approach found elsewhere. They had a developed sense of conscience, embracing teachings which were breathtakingly radical in terms of their neighbours' culture, such as: -

‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself; I am the Lord’ (Leviticus 19.18);

‘Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land”’ (Deuteronomy 15.11);

‘If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them’ (Leviticus 25.35);

‘You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry.’ (Exodus 22.21-23)

Such ideas, even if observed only falteringly, as was likely the case – and ever since too, among Christians no less than Jews – were far ahead of their neighbours’ thinking. By contrast, one need think only of Greek practices towards their helots, or of Julius Caesar boasting in his *Gallic War* of the numbers he had slaughtered in his war of conquest for the glory of Rome and the advancement of his career. (Some historians estimate that he killed half the population of Gaul.)

It is tempting, if entirely speculative, to ask what Jesus would have done if he had been sent to a Gentile people with none of the prepared groundwork he found among Jews. The writer, G. K. Chesterton, with tongue in cheek, wrote,

‘How odd of God
to choose the Jews.’

Maybe not so odd. They lived in a country at the cross-roads of Asia, Africa and Europe, a good place for a world-wide religion to start, especially at a time when most travel was by land. They enjoyed a high degree of literacy relative to their neighbours. They valued education. Their sense of being a people chosen by God, called to a covenant with him, gave them coherence and solidarity. The expectation of a Messiah, the anointed messenger of God, gave them a sense of mission, and a dynamic, forward-looking expectation of a better future world that was worth working for. They might have been a hard nut to crack - a head-strong people, as Moses called them (Exodus 34.9) - but, if an opening were found among them for the faith, it would not easily be closed again.

Vv.23b-24: Jesus cured ‘all the sick’ with a substantial listing here of the variety of their illnesses. A prophet, to be credible as a messenger of God, had to be able to show that the power of God was at work in him. Anyone could claim to be a prophet but only the genuine could support their claim by such works. So Jesus’ works of power had that as perhaps their primary purpose.

“Syria” here most likely refers to the Roman province of that name, which included Israel.

8 January or Tuesday after the Epiphany

Mark 6.34-44 Jesus feeds the five thousand

34. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

35. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late;

36. send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.'

37. But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?'

38. And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see'. When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.'

39. Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.

40. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.

41. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all.

42. And all ate and were filled;

43. and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.

44. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 14.13-21, Mark 8.1-9, Luke 9.10-17 and John 6.1-14.

V.34: Jesus felt compassion for the people. Mark doesn't often give the content of his teaching, but uses it to point to his revealing who he was.

Vv.35-37: The people had to be fed, because most had come without food, and time was running out for them to go and buy some. The disciples make the problem known to Jesus; his response is to put it back in their hands. They bring it to him again, saying, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' Were they being sarcastic, or simply abrupt? They seem to have been so elsewhere, as with the question, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you: how can you say, "Who touched me?"' (Mark 5.31), and later again. (8.4; 10.26b)

Vv.38-40: Jesus answers in effect, 'There isn't much food, but start with what you've got, even if it's not enough.' Mark, always something of a statistician, has the numbers: it would cost two hundred denarii to feed the people; there were five

loaves and two fish; the people sit in groups of hundreds and fifties; the leftovers filled twelve baskets; and the men alone numbered five thousand. And he has an eye, too, for details: they sat on ‘the green grass.’ This appears to suggest that Mark was an eye-witness.

V.41: The wording is significant. In 14.22, at the institution of the Eucharist, Mark has Jesus say, ‘he [Jesus] took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them,...’ The similarity between the two passages is too great to be coincidental; a Eucharistic analogy is being created.

A similar link is apparent between Mark 8.6 and the account of the institution of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11.23b-24: ‘...the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said...’ Was the story created for that purpose? It is not in the normal style of a miracle story: there is no appeal for help at the start, and no expression of wonder by the onlookers at any point. If it was created for effect, it gives a different character to Mark’s writing, and raises questions about his other stories as well. Is it a mistake to take the story literally? Nearly all biblical scholars agree that the creation story in Genesis should not be so taken. Was the story composed perhaps a generation after Jesus’ time, in the light of a different understanding of who he was, and then projected back into his time so as to be a parable in action of the Eucharist? John

clearly gives the same story a Eucharistic significance. (6.1-14)

V.42: When they do as Jesus tells them, ‘all ate and were filled,’ one of several uses of the word ‘all’ in the text, perhaps a hint that God does not do things by halves. Perhaps there is also a reminder that when people do as Jesus says, good things happen.

V.43: The careful attention to the quantity of leftovers is a feature of the other evangelists’ telling of the story also, with all reporting a figure of twelve basketsful. This may be a link to the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, as may also be the case of the woman who suffered from a haemorrhage for twelve years, and the girl whom Jesus raised from death being twelve years old. These allusions we may mostly miss. When we are made aware of them, they may seem artificial, even contrived. They may seem like relentless, even annoying, punning, and raise questions about their purpose, about the style of the writer, and about the factual reliability of his narrative.

V.44: Mark gives a headcount of the men, making no mention of women and children; they literally didn’t count. He was a man of his time.

One theory about this story is that Jesus simply motivated people to share what they had, and, as a result, there was enough to go round. I recall the

occasion when Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass in the Phoenix Park in Dublin in 1979. When it was over, a million people shared their food freely. No one thought anything of it, much less considered it miraculous. But the theory seems to contradict both the point about two hundred denarii - a denarius, (Latin, plural denarii), was an average day's pay for a labourer - worth of food needing to be bought, and also the disciples' reporting back to Jesus that all they had were five loaves and two fish. The theory undermines the story.

The text has several allusions to figures and events in the Hebrew Bible. The 'sheep without a shepherd' of v.34 suggests Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd.' The hundreds and fifties in v.40 might evoke memories of Moses acting similarly in delegating authority to tribal leaders in Deuteronomy 1.15. The 'eating and being filled' of v.42 recalls the manna in the desert which the people 'ate and were well filled.' (Psalm 78.29)

Remarkably, only a little later, in 8.1-10, Mark has another story of a multiplication of loaves and fishes to feed a hungry multitude. The details are slightly different but the substance is very similar. Are they two accounts of one event, or accounts of two different events? The statements of Jesus in Mark 8.19-21 clearly suggest two different events. But, in either case, they raise the question: Why?

Mark wrote his Gospel with a lot of careful thought as to its structure. Far from presenting a day-to-day account of things as they happened, he selects and juxtaposes material with a purpose. For instance, in chapters 6 to 8, he set it out as follows: -

Feeding of the five thousand: 6.35-44;
Feeding of the four thousand: 8.1-9;
Crossing the lake: 6.35;
Crossing the lake: 8.10;
Controversy with Pharisees: 7.1-23;
Controversy with Pharisees: 8.11-13;
The children's bread: 7.24-30;
The leaven of the Pharisees: 8.14-21;
A healing at the lake: 7.31-37;
A healing at the lake: 8.22-26.

Ironically, near the end of this, Jesus asks, 'Do you not yet understand?' (Mark 8.21) Sorry, Jesus, no, not yet. But I find it unnerving: if the style is contrived, as it clearly is, that makes me fear that the substance may also be.

A basic question that needs to be addressed is: did it happen as described in this Gospel story at all? Are we reading the report of an actual event or is it a well-spun story crafted with a moral, catechetical or other didactic purpose? If someone had been there at the time with a camcorder and recorded it all, what would we see? The same questions might be asked of Jesus walking on the water of the lake, or the

many other works of wonder described in the four Gospels, including, most of all, his resurrection.

I think there is nothing inherently impossible about the story. Jesus had divine power and God is ever creative. John Duns Scotus might have said, as he did elsewhere, ‘It was possible; it was desirable; therefore God did it.’ (Potest; decet; Deus fecit.) No less remarkable things happen in nature all the time and we take no notice, or, if we do, we just say that they are natural, like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. Consider the following: -

Quantum mechanics, the branch of physics that describes events at the subatomic level, is a consistent, empirically proven framework that predicts how subatomic particles will behave and interact. But it is also “spooky”, to use Einstein’s description. His most famous experiment in this regard is so odd that, when Einstein devised it with two collaborators as a thought experiment in 1935, he called it a paradox. It goes like this. Let’s say that a radioactive atom decays. In doing so, it emits a pair of particles. The particles are linked forever in this way: the laws of nature dictate that if one of the particles is spinning in a way that we can call clockwise, then the other particle is spinning counter-clockwise.

Now, let’s say that you measure the spin of one of the particles. It turns up clockwise. By this

very act of measurement, then, you have *determined* the spin of the other particle – even if it is at the other end of the universe. Einstein called this “spooky action at a distance”, but it has been proven right time and again. What happens, according to physicists’ current interpretation, is that each particle exists in two states simultaneously, somehow spinning clockwise and counter-clockwise at the same time. Only when an observer makes a measurement on one particle does that particle settle down and choose one spin. This choice affects which spin its partner chooses. This suggests to some scholars a level of reality beyond the familiar everyday one, a reality in which spatial distance is meaningless (because the second particle receives the information about the first particle’s choice simultaneously and makes its own choice based on that instantaneously). (Michael Reagan, editor, *The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images reflecting the Spirit of the Universe*, Templeton Foundation Press, Philadelphia and London, 1999, pp.21, 24)

Or, ‘Light... is a particle, that is to say, point-like, of no extension, but it is also a wave spread throughout space.’ (R. Stannard, *The God Experiment*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993, p.223) There is an affinity, a resonance, between the natural and the supernatural. And why not? They come from the one Source.

9 January or Wednesday after the Epiphany

Jesus walks on the water: Mark 6.45-52

45. Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.

46. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

47. When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land.

48. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by.

49. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out;

50. for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

51. Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded,

52. for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 14.22-33 and John 6.16-21.

V.45 is sometimes cited as (another) example of Mark's faulty knowledge of Palestine's geography:

Bethsaida is on the same (Eastern) side as Jesus; he did not have to cross the lake to get there.

V.46: In the atmosphere of heightened messianic fervour following the miracle of the loaves and fishes, perhaps Jesus felt the need to pray because the people's adulation and expectation were a source of temptation to him.

The story recalls the stilling of the storm in Mark 4.35-41. The similarities between the two accounts are obvious: in both, the event takes place in the evening after saying farewell to the crowd; there is a crossing of the lake; a storm develops; the disciples are afraid; Jesus tells them not to fear; he calms the storm, and they express astonishment.

There are dissimilarities also: in 6.45-52, Jesus goes away to pray; the 'great windstorm' of 4.37, which nearly swamped the boat, is here just a strong headwind that made for hard rowing; Jesus is not in the boat, and 'intended to pass them by' (which has echoes of Luke 24.28: 'he walked ahead as if he were going on.')

As with the two multiplications of loaves and fishes (Mark 6.30-44 and 8.1-10), a question poses itself: are Mark 4.35-41 and 6.45-52 accounts of separate events, or separate accounts of the same event? What is the point being made by the repetition?

Vv.49-50: The disciples were terrified. Of what? Of drowning, if the boat sank, is an obvious answer, though Mark's account is that it was Jesus they were afraid of, thinking that he was a ghost. As always, Jesus calms their fear; he uses a phrase similar to that of Mark 5.36: 'Do not fear, only believe.' This part of the story is similar to Luke's account of a meeting between Jesus and some disciples after the resurrection: 'They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.' (24.37)

But there is another way of looking at their fear. Sometimes we are afraid of our strengths even more than of our weaknesses. We are afraid to believe in ourselves, our potential, or the possibilities that are already latent in us. We live below our best; we belittle ourselves, although we are capable of becoming much more than we are, since we are made in the image and likeness of God who is infinite. (Genesis 1.27)

Was Jesus implicitly saying to the disciples that not only he, but they, too, had capacities beyond what they had previously thought? Was it a call to leave the safety of where they were, the security of how they thought, and the familiarity of what they did? Was it this that scared them? In Matthew 14.22-33, Peter, despite his fear, has the courage to leave the safety of the boat and venture out into the deep.

V.51: Jesus calms the sea, and the disciples with it. In the similar story in Mark 4.35-51, the ending

reads, ‘They were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”’ In v.51, however, they seem to be left speechless.

V.52: Mark sees what happened in the multiplication of the loaves and fish as the explanatory key to this story. Is he making the point that a man who can do the first miracle is able also to do the second? He says of the disciples that their hearts were ‘hardened,’ a word he usually reserves for the Pharisees. Matthew gives a very different ending to the same story: Peter emerges as a man of courage, and, ‘those in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”’ (14.33) What are we to make of such a large difference in the ending? It suggests substantial editing of the story to make it meet whatever point the evangelist wished to make.

10 January or Thursday after the Epiphany Luke 4.14-22a Jesus in Nazareth

14. Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

15. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,

17. and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18. ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

19. to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.’

20. And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

21. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

22. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

It is surprising, perhaps, that this extract ends in the *Lectionary* half-way through v.22, giving the impression of a very positive encounter of Jesus with his people. As the text continues, however, it ends on a very different note, with his listeners filled with rage and trying to hurl him off a cliff. (Vv.28-30)

There are passages parallel to vv.14-15 in Matthew 4.17 and Mark 1.14-15, and to vv.16-22 in Matthew 13.54-58 and Mark 6.1-6.

Vv.14-15: The Spirit is the starting point of Jesus’ public life which begins in Galilee. He was not

“doing his own thing,” but going where God led him. In other places in the Gospel, he is ‘led’ by the Spirit. The evidence of this latter is in his healing and teaching ministry. He taught in the synagogues, which was normal practice, but in time went beyond it.

His fame spread; he became popular, and people began to speak well of him. With the benefit of hindsight, it’s hard not to feel, ‘How long will the good times last?’ From what follows immediately, it seems not very long. Rejection came from where one might least have expected it - his own.

Vv.16-19: Jesus was brought up in Nazareth, but moved to Capernaum. The Gospels give little hint of a reason for this, except that Matthew links it – obscurely - to the arrest of John the Baptist and to his (Matthew’s) desire to create a “fulfilment” of a prophecy. (4.12-13) Matthew has seven such: - 2.23; 4.14; 8.17; 12.17; 13.35; 21.4; 26.56. The two towns are not more than 30 km. apart, with Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee (also known as Lake Tiberias or Lake Gennesareth), and Nazareth to its south west. Jesus went to the synagogue, ‘as was his custom.’ It was a matter of custom, not of obligation binding under pain of sin; that was good. From Isaiah 61.1-2, he read what might be called the mission statement of a servant of God. It is about freeing people from what weighed them down: poverty, captivity, blindness and oppression. The interpretation of these need not be limited to the literal; they are works

associated with the Messiah. ‘Being saved’ means being delivered from whatever diminishes a person’s humanity, especially sin.

Jesus was literate. Probably a higher proportion of Jewish men was literate than of most of the surrounding peoples. With the Torah occupying such a central position in Jewish life, this is not surprising.

Vv.20-21: Having read the text in Hebrew, Jesus probably gave an Aramaic version of it, as classical Hebrew was no longer understood by most people; they spoke Aramaic as their day-to-day vernacular. (Aramaic is still spoken today in parts of Syria.) Then he sat down and the eyes of the people looked on him expectantly. His statement, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’, does not necessarily imply a claim to be the Messiah, but implies that he makes the mission statement his own; he puts himself in the Messianic tradition.

V.22: ‘All... were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.’ Whether that refers to this particular occasion or more widely is not clear. People were surprised that a local man, one whom they knew as the son of Joseph, spoke so well. There is something very human about this: an expert is someone from far away carrying a briefcase, while a local person is never expected to be much good. The unfamiliar is exotic; the familiar is routine.

His statement, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,' does not necessarily imply a claim to be the Messiah, but implies that he makes the mission statement his own; he puts himself in the Messianic tradition. The Hebrew word *Mashiach* (English, Messiah) is translated into Greek as *Christos*, a title meaning anointed. The word carried varying connotations for Jews. It included the idea of a future kingdom of Israel which would be God's kingdom; this became especially prominent with the establishment of the monarchy. Among post-exilic writers, the future Messiah was seen as a returning King David. But Zechariah scales down this grandiosity with a different image: -

Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy,
O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall
come to you; a just saviour is he, meek, and
riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.
[See Matthew 21.1-6; Mark 11.2-6 and Luke
19.30-34]

He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim, and
the horse from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow
shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace
to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to
sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.
(9.9-10)

The ambiguity around the meaning of the term with its heavy political overtones explains Jesus' reticence in claiming the title for himself and his insistence on silence from those he healed.

Later, when he was asked by the disciples of John the Baptist, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (Luke 7.20), his answer drew on Isaiah: -

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offence at me. (Luke 7.22-23, drawing on Isaiah 35.5-6; 26.19 and 61.1-2)

These are signs that the Kingdom of God is present.

11 January

Luke 5.12-16 Jesus cleanses a leper

12. Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.'

13. Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean.' Immediately the leprosy left him.

14. And he ordered him to tell no one. 'Go,' he said, 'and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them.'

15. But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases.

16. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 8.1-4 and Mark 1.40-45.

Vv.12-13: This healing follows a fairly standard pattern: a person approaches Jesus and makes a request, usually for healing; seeing the person's faith, Jesus heals.

V.14: Jesus tells the healed man to go and make the offering after healing as prescribed in the law of Moses (Leviticus 14.1-32). In Jesus' mind, this seems to have had a double purpose: firstly, to bring about the re-integration into the community of someone ostracized because of his condition; secondly, the conversion of the priests, the representatives of the temple. They needed conversion in order to come to see who Jesus was. The leper, the healed one, becomes a minister of healing to a community which needed it but did not acknowledge its need for it.

V.15: Jesus' reputation spreads. This is noted elsewhere also: Luke 4.14, 37, 44 and 7.17.

V.16: Jesus prays. In addition to communal prayer in the synagogue, which he customarily did on the Sabbath (see Luke 4.16), he often prayed alone. See Luke 3.21; 6.12; 9.18, 28-29; 11.1; 22.41.

A question arises. Are these acts of healing - there are many of them in the Gospel - unique to Jesus, or are his disciples meant to do likewise? It seems clear that the latter is the case. Mark has Jesus say,

And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.' (16.17-18)

Clearly, the disciples of Jesus are not able to do such things except perhaps in the rarest of cases. Healing now takes place in hospitals, and is down to the work of doctors, nurses, medical researchers and many others, only a few of whom might be believers, and who, in any event, see their work simply as the normal use of their human talents.

So, where does that leave the Gospel statement? In Mark 6.7, Jesus '... began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.' In Luke 10.17, '[They]... returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!"' Was this a temporary phenomenon? If so, is

such work now marginalized or simply redundant? I don't know, though it looks like it.

12 January

John 3.22-30 Jesus and John

22. After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized.

23. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized

24. John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison.

25. Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew.

26. They came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.'

27. John answered, 'No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven.'

28. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, "I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him."

29. He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.

30. He must increase, but I must decrease.'

V.22: In 4.2, however, John seems to correct this, saying, ‘it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized.’

V.23: What was the difference, if any, between baptism by Jesus’ disciples and by John the Baptist? Did the people see or experience a difference, or did they see them as being essentially the same? They probably saw them as the same, and they probably were so in fact. In John 1.33, the Baptist says, ‘I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.”’ The same point is made in Matthew, ‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’ (3.11)

This baptism with the Spirit takes place after the resurrection of Jesus and with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

V.24: This reference to John the Baptist not yet being thrown into prison is perhaps surprising, as the Gospel of John has nothing more to say about it. It does not give an account of the Baptist’s death as found, for example, in Matthew 14.3-12 and Mark 6.17-29, and referred to by Luke in 3.19-20.

Vv.25-26: The ‘purification’ spoken of here probably refers to baptism. The verse suggests that people were moving away from John the Baptist to Jesus.

Vv.27-29: The Baptist replies with the humility that characterized every statement of his about his relationship to Jesus. He had spelled this out clearly in John 1.19-34. His role was to prepare the way for Jesus, and, if Jesus was now becoming more prominent, that is what was meant to happen. Jesus would not be doing any of it if it had not been given to him in the first place by God. So John is happy that his mission is reaching its fulfilment. His use of the messianic image of bride and bridegroom recalls that of a marriage as symbolic of the relationship between God and his people.

V.30: This is John’s mission statement. It finds its counterpart in Mary saying, ‘I am the servant of the Lord; let what you have said be done to me’ (Luke 1.38), in Paul saying, ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2.20), and in Jesus saying ‘not my will but yours be done.’ (Luke 22.42) John was true to the end.

Week 1, Monday

Mark 1.14-20 The beginning of the Galilean ministry

14. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,
15. and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'
16. As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea - for they were fishermen.
17. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men.' (*Jerusalem Bible* version)
18. And immediately they left their nets and followed him.
19. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.
20. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

There are passages parallel to vv.14-15 in Matthew 4.12-17 and Luke 4.14-15, and to vv.16-20 in Matthew 4.18-22 and Luke 5.1-11.

V.14: If the story of the temptation of Jesus ends with a hint of trouble, this account of the beginning of his Galilean ministry starts with another: 'after John was arrested.' The word used here for arrested is the same as that used later about Jesus: 'arrest him and lead him away under guard.' (Mark 14.44) John had been arrested by Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee,

because he objected to John's preaching and specifically to John's condemnation of his taking his living brother, Philip's, wife as his own. The reference to his arrest is probably a reminder of the fate of so many of the prophets, and a hint that a similar one awaits Jesus.

Galilee 'of the nations' (Isaiah 8.23 {9.1}) was on a trading route between the surrounding peoples and was an area of mixed population. It was where Jesus spent most of his life and ministry, but was looked down upon by Jews of Jerusalem and Judea: 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (John 1.46), and, 'no prophet is to arise from Galilee.' (John 7.52) But after the defeat of the Jews in the war against the Romans from 66 to 70 AD, it became a centre of Jewish settlement and learning. Outsiders becoming insiders is a motif that runs through the Gospel. Against a parochial background, the mention of Galilee suggests a universalist vision.

V.15: 'Believe in the good news' is a summary of the Christian faith. Jesus proclaims 'good news,' not good advice. Good news is always welcome; good advice is another matter. Good news we are glad to hear and to share; good advice we often wish the pedantic bore who offers it would keep to himself. Good news is to be enjoyed, good advice endured.

Receptiveness to the good news requires repentance. To repent means to think again (Latin *re*, again, *pensare*, to think), to take a second look at

things, to have second thoughts. It is about awareness, opening the eyes, seeing the world and oneself in a new way, and adopting new standards and priorities. It is not reducible to moral conversion, but such may be a sign that it is authentic.

What is the ‘good news’ that Jesus invites people to believe in? It is that the period of waiting is over, ‘the time is fulfilled,’ and God has intervened in the world in a unique way through and in the person of Jesus. In him humanity finds forgiveness and reconciliation with God. The Rule of God has come. God is not impersonal or remote, but has come among humans, and become one of us. Jesus is the way to God. For those seeking God, the good news is that their search is over, because God has come to them; in Jesus, he has visited his people. In the words of Saint Athanasius, ‘God became man that man might become God.’ (*On the Incarnation*, n.12; and Saint Augustine, *Sermon 13 on the Nativity of the Lord*)

John proclaimed ‘a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.’ (Mark 1.4) In effect, he said, ‘Repent, and you will be forgiven.’ Generations of Jewish preachers before him, and Christian preachers after him, have said the same. They make repentance a pre-condition for forgiveness: no repentance, no forgiveness. But where John preached repentance which leads to salvation, Jesus preached salvation which leads to repentance. He

said, ‘repent, and believe in the good news.’ (Mark 1.15) What is the good news? It is that ‘the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come.’ (1.15) The kingdom of God means that God is present in the world, and that God’s presence is a saving one. It means that forgiveness is a present reality; for John, it was something to be hoped for in the future. The former is what Jesus invites people to believe in. Belief in a forgiving God leads to repentance; the knowledge that one is loved unconditionally is what leads a person to turn from what is unloving, to turn from the un-freedom of self-love to the freedom to love the other.

There is a different chain of cause and effect in John’s and Jesus’ preaching. This may have marked a break between them. It is not difficult to imagine John scandalized by Jesus’ tolerant attitude towards sinners. The Pharisees certainly were, as pharisees have been ever since. Is it that they see religion as being about getting “sinners” into line, making them sort themselves out, pulling their socks up, and that they saw Jesus as permissive, courting popularity by lowering standards? After all, he loved all sinners, not just repentant ones; it was never part of his mission to turn sinners into pharisees. Jesus knew that love, not compliance, is what matters, and love cannot be forced. No amount of moral persuasion, law, or “holy” blackmail can evoke it. For their admission to God’s kingdom, he asked for repentance, understood as acceptance of him; that scandalized the Pharisees.

I recall a discussion on the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15.11-32. The question was asked, ‘At what point in the parable did the father forgive the son?’ Various answers were suggested, usually related to significant turning points along the path of the story. Then an elderly man, the father of thirteen children, spoke up, saying, ‘The father never forgave him.’ This was greeted with astonishment, and he was asked to explain. He said, ‘The father never forgave him. He knew his son so well, and loved him so much, that he never took offence in the first place.’ The elderly man was saying, in his way, that God is always forgiving, that love and forgiveness are inseparable from God’s nature; they are not dependent on any human factor, such as the presence or absence of repentance. The initiative lies with God, not with humans. Where God is present, love and forgiveness are present.

V.16: The phrase ‘passed along’ sounds casual, as if Jesus just happened to be taking a stroll. But it has significant earlier usage, where God says, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you,’ and ‘while my glory passes by.’ (Exodus 33.19, 22) And the phrase is widely used in the Gospels where a significant moment is intended, e.g. in Mark 2.14: ‘As he [Jesus] was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus...’ and the passage continues with the call of this significant disciple.

These fishermen were not poor; in a country almost devoid of trees, they had boats, probably built of imported wood, and they could afford to hire workers. (v.20)

V.17: I have chosen the *Jerusalem Bible* version of this verse, 'Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men,' instead of the RSV's, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people' which sacrifices a happy phrase to political correctness.

There is a touch of humour in Jesus' saying to Simon and Andrew, the fishermen, 'I will make you into fishers of men.' Word-plays and puns appeal to biblical writers. A Jewish acquaintance once told me he could tell from the Gospel that Jesus was a Jew, just by his sense of humour. Jesus sometimes played with words, and sometimes with people. He spoke of: -

- generous givers hiring trumpeters to advertise their charity (Matthew 6.2);
- people picking from another person's eye the speck of sawdust they can see through the plank in their own (Matthew 7.3);
- guests of honour deliberately sitting far from the top table in order to attract attention to themselves when moved up (Luke 14.10);
- people filtering out a gnat, while swallowing a camel (Matthew 23.24);
- people putting a lamp under a bed instead of on a table (Matthew 4.21);

- oppressive rulers demanding to be called benefactors. (Luke 22.25)

He mocked useless teachers, calling them ‘blind guides.’ (Matthew 23.16)

He asked his hearers what they went out into the desert to see – was it a reed shaking in the wind, or a man wearing fine clothes. (Matthew 11.2-11)

Two of his followers, tied to their mother’s apron strings, who then got exaggerated notions about themselves, he nicknamed ‘sons of thunder.’ (Mark 3.17)

He enjoyed the lively repartee of the Canaanite woman. (Mark 7.24-30)

He may have laughed in surprise at Nathanael’s shock at his statement about seeing him under the fig tree: ‘Do you believe just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree?’ (John 1.50)

His humour sometimes had an edge to it. Much, of course, depends on the tone with which something is said. Irony, spoken with gentle firmness, can be a wake-up call. Humour can dissolve tension, and free us from stubbornness and self-importance. It helps us to laugh at ourselves, and to accept a difficult truth. A sign of healthy religion is when we can laugh about it; a need to be poker-faced betrays a nervous uncertainty. We learn about and appreciate more readily what we can laugh at.

Vv.18-20: Mark’s account of the calling of the first disciples underlines the promptness and the totality of their response. There are two “immediatelies” in

the account (vv.18, 20). It is a “get up and go” response; there are no ifs or buts or maybes, or “I’ll think about it.” There is energy, freshness and vitality here, the sense of a brave beginning. The response was made with actions, not words. Twice (vv.18, 20) it says, ‘they left...’, underlying the need for renunciation in the following of Jesus. (By contrast, John’s account suggests a less speedy, more reflective response in which Andrew takes the initiative: 1.35-42.)

Yet there must have been more to it than Mark implies. How likely is it that men, probably married and with families, working in a reasonably prosperous family business, would - or even could or should - drop everything and immediately follow a stranger at his invitation? What provision did they make for their wives and families? What about Zebedee, the father of James and John? Where did this leave him? Jesus had an attractive and engaging personality, but Mark gives no hint that the four men he called already knew him, so would they really have upped and left just like that? It seems unlikely, but, as with other Gospel writers, Mark probably felt free to adapt his account significantly to his religious purpose: to show that the apostles followed Jesus unconditionally, that they were with him from the beginning of his mission, and that they accepted that being a disciple of Jesus involved renunciation.

For Mark, the heart of discipleship is the following of Jesus, not the observance of commands, however

important, nor membership of a religious institution, nor attendance at worship. Those called did what counts; they ‘followed him.’ (v.20)

Week 1, Tuesday

Mark 1.21-28 The man with an unclean spirit

21. They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

22. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

23. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

24. and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’

25. But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’

26. And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

27. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching - with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’

28. At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 4.31-37.

Vv.21-22: Who are ‘they’? The context suggests that it was Jesus and his new disciples. Maybe they stayed with him in Capernaum. ‘They’ were astounded at his teaching. This is probably the same ‘they,’ together with the local people. Why astounded? Perhaps because they saw Jesus simply as the local carpenter and knew he had no official position in the synagogue. So they might well have asked themselves, ‘Where did he get all this knowledge?’ (See Matthew 13.54-56)

Vv.23-27: This story is one of many similar ones in Mark, for whom they have great significance. The demons were the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the Holy One of God. (See also Mark 1.34; 3.11; 5.7.) The title ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ was common among early Christians: Matthew (2.23) and Luke (24.19) also use it, while Acts has it seven times. The afflicted man spoke in the plural, perhaps to highlight the contrast to the One who was present: ‘What have you to do with us?.... Have you come to destroy us?’ (The *Jerusalem Bible* has the demons, not the man, speaking.) But he then added, ‘I know who you are...’ It is puzzling.

‘Jesus rebuked him.’ The *Jerusalem Bible* has, ‘Jesus said sharply.’ Jesus was emotional. In Mark 1.43; 3.5; 5.39-40; 7.6; 8.12, 17-21; 9.19, 23, 25, 36; 10.16; 12.24, his emotions range from gentleness and affection to anger and impatience. He was not dispassionate and aloof like a Greek model teacher,

disdaining emotion as indicative of weakness and loss of control.

Jesus acted with authority: ‘He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ Mark twice (vv.22, 27) emphasizes his authority. It came from his personality, not from an official position, for he had none. His authority, like his teaching, is exercised in action; his works of power were parables in action. Mark points to it again in Jesus’ claim to forgive sins (2.10), and to have authority over the Sabbath (2.28). Mark is building up his case that Jesus is from God and that the power of God is at work in him. His teachings and actions came with authority because he was their author. (The Latin word *auctoritas* has its origin in *augere*, to grow; *auctoritas* is the capacity to make things grow. To make it mean laying down the law is to belittle it.) And this authority was attested to by the evil spirit who said to him, ‘I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ (v.24) Ironically, the evil spirits tell the truth about Jesus while the religious leaders refuse to accept it.

What was the problem that troubled the man in the synagogue? Was it a mental illness of some kind, or a brain disorder such as epilepsy? In the Hebrew Bible, there are no instances of demonic possession. The episode may be a way of dramatizing the contrast between the forces of evil, which could not but recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and the leaders of his own people, who refused to do so.

When Jesus cured someone suffering from mental illness, what vocabulary did Gospel writers have to describe such illness? Perhaps no more than a popular vocabulary based on inadequate medical knowledge, namely, the language of possession. Jesus was truly a man, a man of a particular time and place, which is not our time and place. He accepted the psychology, the medical understanding, and the folklore of his *milieu*. If he were on earth today, the kind of unclean spirits (“demons”), he would want to free people from what might be addictions, such as to money, power, sex, alcohol or drugs, or from the spiritual addictions of unforgiveness, hatred, self-pity, the nurturing of grievances and chips on the shoulder, martyr complexes, fear, etc.

This story has a broadly similar character to others in Jesus’ early ministry. Jesus meets a human need, and draws people to himself in a personal way. He challenges people, especially religious authorities, to re-think their ideas and attitudes.

V.28: Jesus is becoming known more and more widely, firstly in Galilee, later further afield.

Week 1, Wednesday
Mark 1.29-39 Jesus heals and preaches

29. As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.
30. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.
31. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.
32. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.
33. And the whole city was gathered around the door.
34. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.
35. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.
36. And Simon and his companions hunted for him.
37. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.'
38. He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.'
39. And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 8.14-17 and Luke 4.38-41.

This sounds like the presentation of an average day, insofar as there was such a thing, in the early days of Jesus' ministry; it is noticeable how significant a part healing plays in his service to people.

V.29: In similar private situations, Jesus often gives his disciples a fuller explanation of his actions and teaching, or they take the initiative in asking him a question. (Matthew 17.19)

V.31: The words 'he lifted her up' may also mean 'he raised her from the dead.' This latter usage is found in Mark 5.41; 8.31; 9.9-10; 10.34; 14.28 and 16.6.

V.30: There is a tradition that Simon Peter and the other apostles, except perhaps John, were married. It is based in part on this passage of the Gospel, and in part also on the fact that it was unusual for a man in Jesus' time not to marry. 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1.22) was the first of God's commands to his people - the only commandment man ever kept, say some! - and a man or woman without a child was considered an incomplete person. The same is true in many parts of the Third World today. It was almost inconceivable for a person to choose not to marry; it was, and is, seen as a denial of one's humanity, or even a refusal to fulfil one's primary duty as a human being, to reproduce, and, implicitly,

therefore, seen as a rejection of family, community and society.

Celibacy was not part of mainstream Jewish tradition, although communities such as the Essenes may have included celibates. The celibacy of Jeremiah (16.1-13) is probably unique in the Hebrew Bible, both as to the fact and to its significance. He was told not to take a wife, and not to go into any house of mourning or feasting. This was intended as a warning to the people of Israel that their day of doom was coming, because they had abandoned God, and were about to be expelled from the land.

The Catholic church bases its exclusion of women from the ministerial priesthood on the principle that the church cannot do other than Christ did. Since he did not ordain women, neither can the church, so the argument goes. But Jesus chose married men, such as Simon, as his closest disciples. Yet the church excludes married men, allowing only celibates. In this respect, it not only does other than Christ did, but it actually excludes those he included. One of the characteristics of Jesus that is so sharply in contrast with the Pharisees is that, while they were exclusive, he was inclusive.

Did Jesus ordain bishops, priests and deacons? Did he ordain anyone, as ordination is understood today – making a priest of someone who was not a priest before? He chose disciples and gave them a mission, or commission, but is that the same? Was Jesus

himself a priest? The letter to the Hebrews creates an elaborate theological construct in the language of metaphor and *midrash* about the priesthood of Jesus, but also states, ‘If he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are [Jewish] priests who offer gifts according to the law.’ (Hebrews 8.4)

V.31: Something of the status of women in Jesus’ time is expressed in that we are not told the name of the woman Jesus healed. She was simply, ‘Simon’s mother-in-law’; she was defined in relation to the men in her life. Probably her husband was dead at this stage; otherwise she would likely have been described as So-and-So’s wife. And the moment she rose from her sick bed, she was back at work without a break, serving the visitors. This seems to have been taken as a matter of course. Perhaps it was also a matter of pride for her: she may have wanted to show that she was not going to allow her illness, now gone, to stop her from being a good hostess in a culture where the guest was king. Maybe it also makes the point that the healing of an individual is a step on the road to that person’s service to the community. Healing is a gift for others as well as for the one healed.

V.34: Mark makes Jesus’ acts of healing seem easy: ‘He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her...’ ‘He cured many who were sick... and cast out many demons.’ It seems as effortless as, ‘Let there be light... and it was so.’ (Genesis 1.14, 15) Was it really so easy, or

did it tire Jesus? There are suggestions elsewhere that it did, Mark 5.30 being a possible example.

Jesus repeatedly enjoins silence on demons, on his disciples and on those he healed. See Mark 1.44; 3.12; 5.43; 7.24, 36; 8.23, 26, 30; 9.9, 30. 'He would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.' The demons, or evil spirits, were the first to recognize who Jesus was, in contrast to his disciples who were slow to understand and to the religious leadership who rejected him. Jesus commanded the evil spirits to silence, perhaps because the less they said about anything the better. For Mark, what was of central importance about Jesus was his suffering, death and resurrection. Until the disciples understood that, they had nothing to say, so he required silence of them. It was not until they experienced the reality of the resurrection that they were able to speak truly of who Jesus was. An exception to the above is in Mark 5.19-20 where Jesus tells a man freed from possession, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you.' And the man went and did it.

There are passages parallel to vv.35-39 in Matthew 4.23-25 and Luke 4.42-44.

V.35: Jesus prayed, as, for example: -

- when his mission from his Father was revealed (Luke 3.21-22);
- before calling the apostles (Luke 6.12);

- he blessed God at the multiplication of the loaves (Matthew 14.19; 15.36; Mark 6.41; 8.7; Luke 9.16; John 6.11);
- he was transfigured on the mountain (Luke 9.28-29);
- he healed the deaf-mute (Mark 7.34);
- he raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11.41 ff.);
- he taught his disciples to pray (Luke 11.1);
- the disciples return from their mission (Matthew 11.25 ff. Luke 10.21 ff.);
- he blessed children (Matthew 19.13);
- he prayed for Peter (Luke 22.32) and before asking for Peter's confession of faith. (Luke 9.18)

Jesus went into the desert and the hills to pray (Mark 1.35; 6.46; Luke 5.16; Matthew 4.1; 14.23);

- he rose early in the morning to pray (Mark 1.35);
- he spent the night in prayer (Luke 6.12);
- he prayed for long periods (Matthew 14.23, 25; Mark 6.46, 48);
- he customarily prayed in the synagogue (Luke 4.16);
- he prayed in the Temple, which he called a house of prayer. (Matthew 21.13)

He prayed: -

- the customary prayers of the Jewish people, such as a blessing over meals (Matthew 14.19; 15.36);

- at the last supper (Matthew 26.26; John 17.1-26);
- at the meal in Emmaus (Luke 24.30);
- he sang the psalms with his disciples (Matthew 26.30);
- at the approach of his passion (John 12.27 f.);
- during his agony in the garden (Matthew 26.36-44);
- on the cross (Luke 23.34, 46; Matthew 27.46; Mark 15.34).

‘In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.’ (Hebrews 5.7) Now, raised from the dead, ‘He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.’ (Hebrews 7.25)

The desert is a place of identification with the outcast, the rejected. It is also a place in which one can stand back from the daily routine and gain a broader vision of reality.

Vv.36-39: If Jesus found rest in prayer, it was soon ended. People came to see Jesus, probably in the hope of healing; this appears to have been their main motive. For Jesus, preaching the message was what he came to do. He preached in the synagogues, though later he went into open places in the

countryside. And he cast out demons, a major feature of Mark's Gospel.

Week 1, Thursday

Mark 1.40-45 Jesus cleanses a leper

40. A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.'

41. Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!'

42. Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

43. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once,

44. saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.'

45. But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 8.2-4 and Luke 5.12-16.

V.40: The leper knelt, not only as a sign of the earnestness of his plea, but so that his shadow would

not fall on Jesus' shadow and thereby make him (Jesus) ritually unclean. Such was the extent of the exclusion of the leper by the law of Moses that even that "contact" was regarded as defilement. What had begun as a sanitary measure, a way of containing a communicable disease, gradually came to acquire a burden of negative social and cultural connotations. But it went further: leprosy was seen as punishment by God for sin, and so led to religious rejection. The leper, however, was desperate, so he came to Jesus on his knees; desperate people are not worried about their decorum. Or it could also be that he didn't have feet to walk with; leprosy can destroy toes so that lepers have to shuffle on the stumps of their feet or else walk on their knees.

There is still analogous exclusion today: in India, members of lowest castes are required to get out of the way of a high caste person to avoid polluting them with their shadow, thus necessitating a ritual of purification. (In Dublin, Leopardstown was originally Lepers' Town, until someone decided to sanitize the address, though the place never saw a leopard! There was leprosy in Sweden, Greece, Korea and Australia until the Nineteen Fifties or later.)

The leper said, 'If you choose.' It was a pitiful remark, suggesting despair. Maybe he had lost hope and given up expecting anything.

V.41: The first thing Jesus did was to stop doing whatever it was he had been doing, give his attention to the man, look at him and listen to him. He was moved with pity for him. Then he touched him; he did not keep him at arm's length, or out of smelling range; he touched the untouchable. Jesus seemed stung by the man's remark and replied, 'Of course I want to!' And then he healed him. Jesus looked, listened, pitied, touched and healed; that was how he treated the outcast.

V.44: Jesus therefore not only healed a man of a skin disease; he re-integrated an outcast into the community. He succeeded where the priests and the law had failed. The man's offering of the prescribed gift would remind them that, in Jesus, God's grace was present, and that the community was in need of healing.

Vv.43-45: Jesus sternly warned the healed man to say nothing to anyone. Was it to forestall the enthusiasm for the spectacular which might cause people to miss the essential, in this case, a message about welcoming outcasts, illustrating the point that, through Jesus, God was intervening in the world to overcome evil?

There was an incident in the life of the seventeenth-century Spanish Carmelite friar, John of the Cross: -

While he was in Lisbon, the other friars urged him to come with them to visit a famed stigmatic of that city, but he refused; drawn by the ocean, he remained on the shore reading his Bible while the others went off to observe the curious phenomenon. (*The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, revised edition, ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, DC, 1991, p.28)

For Jesus, what mattered was not to have people standing gaping in amazement, but to show them that God wants to overcome evil, whatever its form.

Did Jesus order the healed man to silence so as to keep secret who he [Jesus] was, on account of expectations that might be aroused of a political Messiah who would drive out the Romans and restore the kingdom of Israel, expectations that were no part of his mission? That seems likely, and it is a point that Mark repeats several times. It could also be that Jesus simply did not wish to be what today we call a celebrity; he did not wish to be co-opted to others' agenda, whatever that might be. He was God's man and nothing would deflect him from that.

But was it realistic to ask the leper to say nothing to anyone? How could a person keep quiet about such a healing? It goes against human nature; we want to tell people good news, especially news about ourselves as good as that. And, in any event, his

family and friends could hardly help noticing, and asking questions. But, by doing what Jesus had asked him not to do, the man made Jesus an outsider: ‘Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country.’

Roles were reversed, but it may have meant that instead of Jesus going to people, they now came to him: ‘people came to him from every quarter.’ Perhaps outcasts recognized in him a kindred spirit and felt an affinity for him. Maybe also, in this reversal of roles, there is here a hint of Jesus being rejected through taking on himself the sin, evil, pain and suffering of the world.

Between 2.1 and 3.6, Mark recounts five incidents, in each of which objections are raised to Jesus and his actions: -

First: forgiving sins, 2.1-12;

Second: eating with sinners, 2.15-17;

Third: a question about fasting, 2.18-20;

Fourth: the pronouncement about the Sabbath, 2.23-28;

Fifth: the man with the withered hand, 3.1-6.

Among the religious leaders present on those occasions, negativity and cynicism were out in force, posing as orthodoxy, wisdom and fidelity. Ordinary people react differently: ‘they were all amazed and

glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”” This division between the religious leaders, only a few of whom accepted Jesus, and the general population, many of whom accepted him, is a recurring theme of Mark’s Gospel. The religious establishment was intolerant of Jesus because: -

- he was the non-conformist who would not toe the party line;
- in their terms he was often unorthodox;
- he was an amateur challenging the professionals, an outsider challenging the insiders; in Judaism, the prophet and the priest always had a tense relationship, the desert versus the temple;
- in argument, he beat them at their own game;
- he was not prepared to do a deal and accommodate them.

Judaism is not the only place where such tensions are found.

Week 1, Friday

Mark 2.1-12 Jesus heals a paralytic

1. When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.
2. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them.

3. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.
4. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.
5. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'
6. Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts,
7. 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'
8. At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?'
9. Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk?"
10. But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins - he said to the paralytic -
11. I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.'
12. And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 9.2-8 and Luke 5.17-26.

Vv.1-2: Jesus experiences the problems of celebrity status – a lack of privacy or time to one’s self, and people constantly calling looking for something. Even so, he spoke the word of God to them.

Vv.3-4: Houses had flat roofs made of compacted mud. To dig an opening through the roof is not as drastic as it sounds since the hole could be repaired without great difficulty. The ill man had good friends; they were prepared to go to some trouble for him. NCCHS states that the term ‘paralytic’ could be used of anyone who was bedridden. (750a)

V.5: ‘When Jesus saw their faith...’ Faith, or trust, is always a key point in the Gospels. Miracles are not holy magic; they always involve the cooperation of the person and do not take place without it. In Matthew 13.58, it is said that Jesus, in Nazareth, ‘did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.’

Jesus said to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ not ‘I heal you of your illness.’ Why? This raises the difficult question of a relationship between sin and suffering. Clearly, there isn’t a simple causal effect from one to the other, as Jesus himself was at pains to point out in the story of his giving sight to the man born blind:

His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’ (John 9.2-3)

In Mark’s story, though, Jesus seems to make such a link. (This applies also in John 5.14) Clearly enough from human experience, there is sometimes a causal effect between sin and suffering: a person who over-indulges in alcohol may cause cirrhosis of the liver; someone who is sexually promiscuous may bring about sexually transmitted illness. It is not impossible, too, that sins of other kinds, such as a refusal to forgive, or the determined nurturing of grievances or self-pity, might result in illness. Body, mind and spirit interact on each other; the person is one. Indeed, if there were more forgiveness, it is likely that counsellors, psychologists and therapists might have less to do.

Vv.6-7: The defenders of orthodoxy have picked up a heresy on their antennae: who does this fellow think he is? How does Jesus – a mere local at that – make such a statement? Where does he get these notions from? He should be more careful before he over-reaches himself. Their questions, as was usually the case, were either not voiced at all, or were murmured on the quiet to those of like mind who would nod agreement in a holy huddle of the mutually approving.

V.8: Jesus didn't need a supernatural gift to know what they were thinking – shrewdness sufficed. (There are similar situations in Matthew 12.25 and Luke 6.8; 11.17) He brings the matter out into the open. An open discussion was probably the last thing his critics wanted; they would then have to defend their position and that would call for more courage than sniping from the wings. So he throws a question to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?' Typically, they make no reply, too cowardly to commit themselves, the fence less risky than the field. And they thought of themselves as leaders - defenders of truth, no less! When truth is politicized, it suffers. The Gospels – and life – offer examples.

Vv.9-11: When Jesus cured someone, it was more than an act of compassion to an individual sufferer; it had wider significance. Here Mark spells it out. The conclusion to be drawn is that, since it is only God who can forgive sins, then Jesus, who does something greater than simply telling a person that his sins are forgiven, is God among us. Here also Mark has Jesus speak of himself as the Son of Man, and exercising the divine power of forgiving sin. This is an evocation of Daniel: -

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

To him was given dominion and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting kingdom that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.
(7.13-14)

The Hebrew title 'son of man' - it could equally well be 'son of a man' or 'son of the man' - means a human being. It was the only title Jesus claimed for himself; the Gospels use it over eighty times, and of him alone; it is not used in the Letters. It is a title that underlines Jesus' humanity. In Mark - apart from here - the title is used only in the second half of the Gospel, where it is linked to the theme of suffering. It is as Son of Man that Jesus suffers and dies. The title has a messianic character, and came to be fused with that of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.

But in Daniel above, the title has an apocalyptic character; the one who bears it is not one who suffers. The title 'the Ancient One' means God. For Daniel, who did not have the idea of a personal Messiah, the son of man of the vision is a person given power by God to rule over the nations, something strongly suggestive of a political role. Jesus' use of the expression - which would have brought Daniel to the minds of his hearers - in reference to himself, seems strange if he wanted to avoid the role of political messiah. When, in Mark 14.62, Jesus accepted it and referred to this text from

Daniel, it evoked a condemnation of blasphemy from the high priest. Did Jesus actually say it here, or was it put into his mouth by the early Christian community to meet a purpose of its own, namely, to say that Jesus was not only the Messiah but the Son of God? This seems likely. The text reads more naturally if v.10 is omitted; and the 'you' of that verse seems to refer to readers rather than the scribes. Having so shortly before sternly warned the healed leper to say nothing to anyone (Mark 1.43-44), it would now seem at variance with that for Jesus to proclaim the matter so emphatically.

V.12: The man stood up and went out; there is no mention of a word of thanks from him. Illness may make a person self-absorbed, and that can be a difficult frame of mind to shake off.

The people are amazed, as recorded elsewhere also: Matthew 7.28; 9.33; Mark 1.28, 33, 45; Luke 2.20, 47 and John 7.15.

Between 2.1 and 3.6, Mark recounts five incidents, in each of which objections are raised to Jesus and his actions: -

First: forgiving sins, 2.1-12;

Second: eating with sinners, 2.15-17;

Third: a question about fasting, 2.18-20;

Fourth: a pronouncement about the Sabbath, 2.23-28;

Fifth: a man with a withered hand, 3.1-6.

Week 1, Saturday

Mark 2.13-17 Jesus calls Levi

13. Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them.

14. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

15. And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples - for there were many who followed him.

16. When the scribes and the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'

17. When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 9.9-13 and Luke 5.27-32.

V.13: Jesus' popularity continues to grow. The sea in question is not the Dead Sea, which never features in the Gospels but the "Sea" [Lake, in fact] of Tiberias, also known as Lake Gennesareth, or the Sea of Galilee.

Vv.14-15: In the time of Jesus, Palestine was under occupation by the Romans, who operated a privatized system of tax collection. They contracted the work out to collectors, stipulating what revenue they (the Romans) wanted from a particular piece of territory. It was up to the collectors to raise that revenue, by whatever means they found workable. Anything they raised over and above that was their fee.

Such a system gave the collectors every incentive to be as extortionate and unscrupulous as they could get away with, since that was how they would make their money. The more they raised above the amount laid down as the Roman slice of the pie went into their pocket. The system also had a substantial political benefit for the Romans: it was the locals who did their dirty work for them. Romans were not directly involved in the collection process; its visible face was local. This system divided the people against themselves, while providing the Romans with the revenue necessary to control the territory. ‘Divide and conquer’ was the motto of Rome’s imperial rule, and this was one application of it. As a result, the tax-collectors were despised and hated by the Jewish population as collaborators with the occupying power.

It was from this group that Jesus called Levi. And Levi followed him, apparently as readily as had Simon, Andrew, James and John before him. (Mark

1.16-20) What a choice! Why did Jesus choose him? Was it that he saw in him a worst case scenario – if I can do something with him, there’s hope for the rest? Or had there been a lot going on under the surface in Levi that Jesus identified in some way? We can only surmise, but what came about was that Levi, while he lost a job, found a mission; he may be the same person as Matthew, the writer of the first Gospel. In Matthew 9.9, the calling of a tax collector is strikingly similar to Mark 2.14 above: ‘As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.’ Many Jews had two names. Some say he could be the same person as James son of Alphaeus named as an apostle in Matthew 10.3, Mark 3.18 and Luke 6.15. This seems unlikely as Matthew 10.3 specifies ‘Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus...’ clearly suggesting that they are two separate persons. (See also notes on Simon the Zealot at Mark 3.13-19 below.)

Vv.15-17: What is in question in the story of the dinner in Levi’s house is two different views of what faith is about. For the scribes and the Pharisees, religion seemed to have for its goal making people moral. Its object was to get people to observe God’s teaching. Jews had 365 proscriptions (one for every day of the year), and 248 prescriptions or laws of direction (one for every bone in the body, it was said), making 613 in all. Each of these precepts was analysed in detail as to what was forbidden or not.

“Sinners” was a term for those who either did not know the teaching or did not observe it, or whose conduct or profession made them outcasts. The Gospels usually join ‘tax-collectors and sinners’ together as a pair, sometimes with the addition of prostitutes. (Matthew 21.31 and Luke 5.30) The Pharisees and scribes were the religiously rigorous, who made it their life’s passion to know and observe the teaching as fully as possible. They avoided the company of “sinners.” For them, righteousness before God was an attainment, something to be brought about by study of the Torah and unrelenting effort. They were mostly dedicated people who sincerely wanted to do what was right. But they were also blinkered, unable to see beyond their own understanding, and judgmental about those who did not share their passion for the observance of the teaching. They were unable to see that the person is radically unable to please God by personal effort alone.

Jesus stepped outside that box and saw religion in terms of relationships: between oneself and God; between oneself and other people; with oneself; and between oneself and nature. Righteousness before God was a gift, not an achievement. Good moral conduct was the effect, not the cause, of being right with God. All are sinners, some of whom recognize the fact, and ask for forgiveness.

When Jesus said, ‘I have come to call not the righteous but sinners,’ he did not mean that he

wanted tax collectors to become Pharisees; nor did he mean that those who observed the law of Moses had no place with him. But it was a fact that those who walked with him were predominantly from among those regarded as sinners - see v.15. Jesus had the same message for both: God is infinitely loving, full of compassion for human weakness and sinfulness. That message found a home in the hearts of those who knew they were sinners. In the case of the Pharisees, scribes and lawyers, it was another matter. Jesus often had to use different, even harsh, language with them; he had to try to break through the hard shell of complacency and self-approval which found security in fidelity to observances.

For the sinners, God was their ruler; for the Pharisees, rules had - unwittingly - become their God. That is a story which has been re-enacted in every generation of Christians since Jesus.

Week 2, Monday

Mark 2.18-22 A question about fasting, and more

18. Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him [Jesus], 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?'

19. Jesus said to them, 'The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.'

20. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.’

21. ‘No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.

22. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.’

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 9.14-17 and Luke 5.33-39.

V.18: Prayer, fasting and alms-giving were three pillars of Jewish devotional life. John’s disciples fasted, as he did, and perhaps also in protest at his death at the hands of Herod Antipas. The Pharisees fasted in keeping with Jewish custom. So it must have puzzled them that Jesus’ disciples, who, after all, were Jews, and some of whom - like Andrew (see John 1.35, 37, 40) - had been disciples of John’s, did not. (The reference to ‘the disciples of the Pharisees’ is puzzling, as the Pharisees are not known to have had disciples.)

Vv.19-20: In reply, Jesus says that guests don’t fast at a wedding. Using messianic imagery, he presents himself as the bridegroom and his disciples as his guests. There is probably a link here with John 3.29, where the Baptist said, ‘The friend of the

bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.' Jesus is the 'bridegroom' who is with them, so it is a time for rejoicing. The time for fasting will come when Jesus is no longer with them.

Vv.21-22: Jesus said that an old cloak can't be patched with new cloth; it would simply tear it more. He called for, and created, a new situation, new facts on the ground. There is more than one way of killing Jesus: stultifying his message through lack of vision, courage, or imagination will do it as effectively as crucifixion.

From its starting-point in the question about fasting, Jesus widens the discussion to make a point of his own. By implication, he is saying that his disciples should do as he does, their actions should be like his, and they should take their cue from him. He also indirectly claims authority over the Law of Moses.

But he goes further than that. By setting himself in the role of bridegroom, Jesus is claiming something greater than his hearers likely understood, at least at the time. The prophets had spoken of God as Israel's bridegroom:-

'Your Maker is your husband; the Lord of hosts is his name' (Isaiah 54.5);

Jeremiah is told to call Israel to repent, saying, 'I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride' (2.2); Hosea depicts Israel as God's unfaithful wife, who deserts him but whom he calls back, 'I will take you for my wife forever... in righteousness and in justice... in faithfulness.' (2.19-20)

These verses may originally have been set in other contexts, but inserted here because they help to underline that, with Jesus, there is a break from the past. Jesus is saying that, whether in regard to fasting or anything else, in him something new has begun.

Almost from the beginning of his public life, Jesus encountered opposition and misunderstanding. What is remarkable about this is that most of it came, not from atheists or agnostics - there were few of those at the time - but from religious leaders. He was killed by an alliance between them and what might today be called the forces of law and order. It was a coalition of religious and secular powers that saw him as such a threat that they believed his death was called for. The people who should have been the first to receive him were instead the first to reject him.

This wasn't because the Pharisees and other religious leaders were a malicious body of people. On the contrary, they were mostly devout, conscientious people who sincerely wanted to follow

the law of God, and were committed to it. But they had too limited a vision.

For them, religion was a matter of rituals and routines, of practices and observances. Jesus wanted it to be a celebration, like a wedding party. Why don't Jesus' disciples fast? Because there's a wedding on. Jesus saw faith as something new and fresh, with all the power and danger that this involves. When he taught, people said, 'Here is a teaching that is new – and with authority.' (Mark 1.27)

The Pharisees were cautious, careful conservatives: their signature tune was, 'Give me that old time religion; it's good enough for me.' For the religious leadership, Jesus was too risky. He spoke of putting new wine into new wineskins, knowing that new wine, still fermenting, could, perhaps, burst old, desiccated skins. A new spirit needs new structures. They said, 'The old is better.' (Luke 5.39) For them, every ideal had to be ring-fenced by law and sanction; it could not be left alone: that was to trust people too much. For them, absolute values required absolute rules, and agreed values could point only to agreed conclusions, duly approved by lawfully constituted authority.

For them, order and discipline were dominant values rather than occasional helps in moments of need. They had reduced religion to a control system. Religious people sometimes become active and

willing accomplices in that process. John Main OSB has written: -

Religious people have so often pretended to have all the answers. They have seen their mission as being to persuade, to enforce, to level differences and perhaps even to impose uniformity. There is really something of the Grand Inquisitor in most religious people. But when religion begins to bully or to insinuate, it has become unspiritual because the first gift of the Spirit, creatively moving in man's nature, is freedom and frankness; in Biblical language, liberty and truth. The modern Christian's mission is to resensitize his contemporaries to the presence of a spirit within themselves. He is not a teacher in the sense that he is providing answers that he has looked up in the back of a book. He is truly a teacher when, having found his own spirit, he can inspire others to accept the responsibility of their own being, to undergo the challenge of their own innate longing for the Absolute, to find their own spirit. (*The Inner Christ*, DLT, London, 1994, p.38)

Religious systems are sometimes road-blocks instead of road-signs on the way to God. They take away freedom, while affirming a commitment to it; they take away joy and celebration, leaving only the dead hand of formalism. What of today? The Pharisees are dead, but is pharisaism?

Week 2, Tuesday

Mark 2.23-28 A teaching arising from the Sabbath

23. One Sabbath he [Jesus] was going through the grain-fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.

24. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?'

25. And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food?'

26. He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.'

27. Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath;

28. so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 12.1-8 and Luke 6.1-5

Vv.23-24: The Sabbath was (and is) of immense importance in Jewish tradition: -

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
Six days you shall labour and do all your work.
But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord
your God; you shall not do any work.... For in

six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and consecrated it. (Exodus 20.8-11)

Sabbath, or Shabbat, is derived from the Hebrew word for rest. Rabbis listed thirty-nine different categories of work which were forbidden on it.

The disciples of Jesus clearly infringed these regulations by plucking heads of grain on their way. The objection was not that they were stealing: Deuteronomy stated, 'If you go into your neighbour's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand' (23.25), but the Pharisees held that to do so on the Sabbath constituted threshing.

Vv.25-26: Jesus defends his disciples by referring to an incident recounted in 1 Samuel 21.3, 4, 6, when David said to the priest, 'Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.' The priest answered David, 'I have no ordinary bread at hand, only holy bread.... The priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence.' The bread of the presence is described in Leviticus: -

Regularly on each Sabbath day this bread shall be set out afresh before the Lord, offered on the part of the Israelites by an everlasting agreement. It shall belong to Aaron and his

sons, who must eat it in a sacred place, since, as something most sacred among the various oblations to the Lord, it is his by perpetual right.’ (24.8-9)

(The priest in the incident was not Abiathar, but Ahimelech, his father.) The point Jesus is making is that, according to Leviticus, the bread should be eaten only by priests but David gave it to his soldiers simply because they were hungry and had nothing else, and that was a sufficiently good reason.

Vv.27-28: As he did elsewhere, Jesus, starting from a single and sometimes simple issue, such as Sabbath observance, goes on to formulate a teaching which was basic to his understanding of morals: ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.’ The law was made for the person, not *vice versa*. The person always has priority.

I remember an elderly priest telling me that, in his student days at the seminary, he and his colleagues were forbidden to talk on their way to Mass one Christmas night lest a snowflake – it happened to be snowing - fall into their mouths and melt, thereby breaking the Eucharistic fast, and rendering them unable to make Holy Communion. A handbook of moral theology widely used in Catholic seminaries up to the Nineteen Sixties had this to say about the fast prescribed before receiving the Eucharist: - ‘Communion is forbidden under grave sin even

though one has taken only the *smallest amount* of food or drink, e.g. a few drops of medicine.’ It went on to elaborate: -

Swallowing blood from bleeding gums does not break the fast. However, if one swallowed the blood sucked from a bleeding finger the fast would be broken.’ It further explained, ‘That which is taken must, according to the common opinion, be digestible. Hence, the fast is not broken by smoking, swallowing a hair, a few grains of sand, a piece of chalk, glass, iron, wood, and probably not by swallowing pieces of fingernails, paper, wax or straw.

The book added that the fast was not broken by chewing tobacco unless one swallowed the juice, nor by inhaling dust, steam, raindrops or an insect, nor by a priest who swallowed a piece of cork from the wine bottle in the split second before drinking from the chalice. It also dealt with the problem of particles of food caught between the teeth, and sucking cough-drops or lozenges before midnight the night before receiving the Eucharist. (Heribert Jone, *Moral Theology*, translated by Urban Adelman, Mercier, Cork, 1961, nn.507-508. The italics on *smallest amount* are in the original. The book went through eighteen editions in English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Polish and Arabic.)

There is a tendency among Christians for the Pharisees to be those that everyone loves to hate. No one has a good word to say for them. They are popularly seen as two-faced hypocrites, saying one thing and doing another, not practising what they preached, and being scrupulous over trivia while missing the essentials. It might be more accurate, more faithful to the historical truth, to see them as narrow and legalistic, seeing righteousness before God as an achievement rather than a gift. But it seems to be a facet of human psychology that we become like those we hate. Throughout history, Christians have replicated the attitudes of the Pharisees. We have created a caricature, misrepresenting and distorting them. This enables us to avoid facing the Pharisee in ourselves, the one who reduces religion to rituals and observances, as, for instance, in - ‘Go to Mass, say your prayers and you’ll get to heaven!’ That’s good pharisaism.

As with the question about fasting (Mark 2.18-20), Jesus takes up the issue at hand, but then goes beyond it to make his own point. The story is not essentially about the Sabbath; it is about what religion means, and – more significantly - who Jesus is. The punch-line, ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath’ (v.27) states a basic principle: religion is there to serve people, not the other way round. ‘Individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution.’ (Pope John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra*, nn.218-219)

It is difficult for people living in the twenty-first century to grasp the significance of Jesus' claim to be 'lord even of the Sabbath.' (v.28) In Jewish tradition, only God was lord of the Sabbath. To say that such a claim was far-reaching is an understatement. It was a hint, at least, of a claim to divine authority, and must have shocked and disturbed Jesus' hearers. Some scholars hold that, as v.28 does not follow logically from v.27, it was an addition by the early Christian community to reflect their developed understanding of who Jesus was, and is here put into his mouth. Whether that is so or not, the implication of the text is that Jesus has divine authority over the law.

Week 2, Wednesday

Mark 3.1-6 The man with a withered hand

1. Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand.
2. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.
3. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.'
4. Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent.
5. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the

man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

6. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 12.9-14 and Luke 6.6-11.

One point being made here is similar to that in the previous passage: meeting human needs takes priority over observance of the law, the religious teaching. Only in danger of death did Jewish tradition allowed healing on the Sabbath. Clearly, the man with the withered hand was not in such a situation, so, in terms of Jewish law, Jesus should not have healed him then but waited till later. Jesus’ compassion for the man would not allow such a delay so he healed him, even if a spurious “prudence” might have counselled delay so as to avoid trouble.

Vv.1-2: The story has the sound of something written with significant editorial work. Right at the start, Mark says, ‘they watched him... *so that they might accuse him.*’ That points to v.6, with its conspiracy to destroy Jesus. There is a deep contrast at the heart of the story between Jesus who heals, and the Pharisees and Herodians who conspire to kill - both on the Sabbath. Hence Jesus’ question, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ To that question, they were

silent. As before – in Mark 2.1-12 and Luke 14.4 for example – when faced with the challenge to be honest, they play dumb.

It is likely that the man in the story was planted, used as bait. In the name of religious law, it was considered wrong to help him on the Sabbath – but alright to use him as a trap. Jesus was angry at this: bad enough not to help a person in need; worse to use his condition as a trap for another; worse still to demand that the victim not be helped because the day in question was the Day of the Lord. This was a perversion and distortion of God who wants us to help people in need in any time or place.

V.5: Jesus restores the man's hand, and 'looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart.' Jesus was emotional; there was nothing impassive, cold, or aloof about him. Mark, alone among the Gospel writers to mention his anger, has other instances of his emotions. In him, Jesus: -

- 1.41: was moved with pity;
- 1.43: sternly warned a man;
- 3.12: sternly ordered evil spirits;
- 5.40: ordered a group of mourners out of a house;
- 5.43: strictly ordered people;
- 7.6: called people hypocrites;
- 8.12: sighed deeply in his spirit;

8.17-21: berated his disciples for stupidity in a barrage of nine questions, culminating with, ‘Do you not yet understand?’

8.33: was savagely angry, ‘Get behind me, Satan!’

9.19: was impatient: ‘How much longer must I put up with you?’

9.23: was vehement, perhaps sarcastic: ‘If you are able!’

9.36-37; 10.16: was gentle and tender;

12.24: spoke bluntly: ‘Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?’

14.32-39: prayed to his Father in grief and distress.

Jesus showed a full emotional range of tenderness, anger, impatience, weariness, frustration, toughness, even sarcasm. He was a real person.

V.6: There is a perverse twist in a conspiracy linking Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees’ priorities were spiritual; they wanted to be zealous followers of the law of God. The Herodians were described by the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, as ‘those who think with Herod.’ Perhaps they wanted to see the Herodian dynasty become rulers of a united Israel under Rome, with which the Herods had always kept favour. Priorities for them were political. The Pharisees despised the Herodians as opportunists, with only a pretended commitment to Judaism, while the Herodians likely saw the Pharisees as self-righteous fanatics. The two were at opposite ends of the spectrum, yet here they make

common cause. Probably neither wanted a Messiah who might upset the existing system, so they begin to form an alliance on the basis that, 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.' When religion becomes an end in itself, with people as a means to that end, then it is no longer religion but mere ideology. It can develop in any age of history to any religion.

This passage is the climax to a series of controversies between Jesus and Jewish religious leaders: -

- Jesus forgiving sins in 2.1-12;
- Jesus eats with sinners in 2.15-17;
- a question about fasting, and more in 2.18-22;
- the issue of Sabbath observance in 2.23-28.

There is a sense that a turning point has been passed, and that, in a manner of speaking, from here on, for Jesus, the road leads to Calvary.

Week 2, Thursday

Mark 3.7-12 A multitude at the seaside

7. Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him;

8. hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon.

9. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him;
10. for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him.
11. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’
12. But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

There are passages similar to this in Matthew 4.23, 25; 12.15-21 and Luke 6.17-19.

V.7: The “sea” in question is the Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Tiberias, or Lake Gennesareth, a body of water no more than 21 km at its longest and 13 km at its widest.

V.8: Idumea (Edom) was a territory south of Judea, which is itself south of Galilee. It was united with Judea about one hundred and fifty years before Jesus’ birth, and its population made to convert to Judaism.

Tyre and Sidon are coastal towns north of Galilee in present-day Lebanon. They were in Gentile territory, but with a significant Jewish population; the people who came from there to see and hear Jesus were probably Jews. But the mention of them

indicates a wider reach for Jesus' mission than the merely local.

'Beyond the Jordan' River means to the east; to the west lies the Mediterranean Sea.

Mark is saying that people were coming to Jesus from south, north and east, that is, from every populated area. It was significant that people also came from Jerusalem, which was the religious and political capital. Perhaps this was all the more significant in that Jesus had not yet preached in any territory except Galilee. The list of place-names hints at a wider, more universal, reach in this mixed audience.

Vv.8-9: The people came to see Jesus because they heard 'all that he was doing.' It was his works of power perhaps more than his teachings that drew them. This would be the case especially with those who were ill. Where medical services are dangerous, primitive or non-existent, people will travel great distances to anyone who gives them hope.

How many people would have come to listen to Jesus if he had not exercised healing powers or fed them in the desert with a handful of food? Likely not many.

Vv.10-12: these are similar to Mark 2.34: 'And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit

the demons to speak, because they knew him’, with the added detail that they ‘pressed upon him to touch him.’ Contact matters, especially human contact, and Jesus did not stand apart from it. He did not come to bring a philosophy or an ideology aimed only at the head; he literally touched the whole person, including the body. In this context, see also the following: -

Matthew 8.3, 15; 9.20-21, 29; 14.36; 17.7; 20.34.

Mark 1.41; 5.27-31; 6.56; 7.33; 8.22; 10.13.

Luke 5.13; 6.19; 7.14, 39; 8.44-47; 18.15; 22.51; 24.39.

John: in this, perhaps the most cerebral of the Gospels, Jesus also touches people – the man born blind (9.6) – and, significantly, in the washing of the feet of his disciples in 13.1-14. There are also several instances where people touch him, e.g., 12.3; 13.23. Jesus was at home with the bodily, the physical.

Vv.11-12: The presence of evil spirits is a prominent element of Mark’s Gospel. They recognize who Jesus is, proclaim him, often aloud, but are ordered to silence by him, e.g. 1.32-34. Here they call him ‘Son of God,’ a phrase which recalls the opening of Mark’s Gospel: ‘The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ Mark appears to be making two points: one is that evil spirits, unencumbered by the social, cultural, religious and other pressures that humans face, are able to see reality as it is with unique clarity; the

other is to contrast their recognition of Jesus to the rejection he experienced by humans.

Mark is not alone in giving unclean spirits, demons, Satan, or the tempter – various names are used - a considerable role in the public acknowledgement of Jesus. Matthew has it in 8.29 and Luke in 4.41, but John omits such references.

Week 2, Friday

Mark 3.13-19 Jesus appoints the twelve

13. He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him.

14. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message,

15. and to have authority to cast out demons.

16. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter);

17. James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder);

18. and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean,

19. and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 10.1-4 and Luke 6.12-16.

V.13: The normal process in the master-disciple relationship was that the disciple, after making enquiries about the merits of various teachers, chose the master, much like parents nowadays trying to find the best school for their child. Here Jesus reverses this; he chooses them. Elsewhere he says, ‘You did not choose me but I chose you.’ (John 15.16) He invited; they responded. The call was to himself, not to a teaching, a theology, a church, a moral system, or an ideology. A disciple is a follower of Jesus, not a student of Christianity; discipleship is a personal commitment, not a mere academic enquiry. Unlike the disciples of the rabbis, whose task was to remember as faithfully as possible what the rabbi taught, the disciples of Jesus were to be, in the first place, witnesses to his life, suffering, death and resurrection. And his use of parables and questions drew them into the learning process, getting them to think. He used to ask them, ‘What do you think?’ (Matthew 17.25; 18.12; 22.42)

Vv.14-15: Jesus appointed twelve, whom he named apostles, ‘to be with him, to be sent out to proclaim the message and to cast out demons.’ (Some early manuscripts omit the phrase ‘whom he also named apostles.’) The word *apostle* means *someone sent*, from the Greek *apostolos*. For Mark, this was virtually a definition of discipleship.

‘It was the *number* of twelve rather than the *identification* of each member that was important to the early Church.’ (NCCHS, 751c) There were

twelve prophets, and the twelve apostles will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matthew 19.28; Luke 22.30) Later, the book of Revelation (21.14) spoke of the new Jerusalem: ‘the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.... the twelve gates are twelve pearls...’ (21.21) A link is being established. Twelve has a connotation of super-abundance in Matthew 26.53 – twelve legions of angels – and in the twelve baskets of scraps left over from feeding the five thousand in Matthew 14.20.

Vv.16-19: Matthew (10.2-4) and Luke (6.14-16), as well as Mark, give a list of the apostles’ names. Those in common to the three lists are: -

Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, James and John, sons of Zebedee, Philip and Bartholomew, Matthew and Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

If Simon the Cananaean and Simon the Zealot are one and the same person then his name is also in common; this probably is the case, as Luke translated the Aramaic word *kan'an* as Zealot. The Zealots were a sect of fanatical nationalists whose ideas of the messiah were limited to the pursuit of Jewish independence. They were assassins, who, in Rome, acquired the nickname of “the stabbers,” for their practice of concealing daggers beneath their clothes for use on their victims in crowded areas. If

Simon was one of them, he would likely have been happy to use his dagger on another apostle, Matthew (also known as Levi), the tax collector and collaborator with Rome. Does it say something about the personality of Jesus that he was able to have two such hugely differing people in his chosen group?

Mark and Matthew have Thaddaeus, while Luke has Judas, son, or possibly brother, of James.

All three Gospel lists of the apostles' names describe Judas Iscariot as the one who betrayed Jesus. It is thought that 'Iscariot' may come from *is sakariot*, meaning, the man in charge of payments, or treasurer. That is supported by John's depiction of Judas: 'he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.' (12.6, and also 13.29) There is a suggestion that Simon the Cananaean (or Zealot) and Judas Iscariot may have been a pair, like Peter and Andrew, James and John.

The apostles form a distinct group known as 'the twelve.' Following the death of Judas Iscariot, they were known as 'the eleven,' before reverting to the original title when he was replaced by Matthias: 'they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles.' (Acts 1.26) Yet, when James the son of Zebedee died (Acts 12.2), no replacement was sought. The Gospels do not consider the twelve to be a perpetual institution, since the conditions for membership could not be met except by the first generation of Palestinian

Christians: they were to have been members of the group from the baptism of John to the ascension of Jesus, and to be witnesses to his resurrection. (Acts 1.21-26) The twelve were, first and foremost, disciples who were chosen by Jesus to be with him. In 20.17, Matthew refers to the twelve as disciples. The term *apostle* did not become a title in the Gospels, still less an office. Luke uses it often in his Gospel and in Acts; Matthew and Mark use it only once each, and John not at all.

In the Gospels, the apostles' task was to preach repentance, to make disciples, to baptize, to cast out demons. In Luke (10.1-12), the mission given to 'the seventy' is very similar to that given to the twelve in 9.1-6.

In Acts, they preside over the Christian community; they speak in the name of Jesus; they perform works of wonder in his name; they have the ministry of the word; they impose hands on the seven 'deacons'; they exercise leadership in the church.

'The twelve' and 'apostles' are not synonymous. The term 'apostle' was applied to, among others, Paul and Barnabas, and to Andronicus and Junia (or Julia), 'prominent among the apostles, who were in Christ before I [Paul] was.' (Romans 16.7) Paul mocks 'super-apostles' in 2 Corinthians 12.11, and denounces 'false apostles' in 2 Corinthians 11.13.

Other prominent workers in the early church, such as Timothy or Apollos, were not given the title of apostle, probably because they lacked the prime requisite, to have been a personal companion of Jesus.

Paul had been given a mission by the church at Antioch with the laying on of hands (Acts 13.1-3), but did not consider this to make him an apostle. His claim to the title he based on his conversion experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9.1-22; 22.3-16), and the twelve accepted this. (Galatians 1-2)

The mission of the twelve came into operation with the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. (Acts 2.1-4)

Were the twelve baptized? Did they receive it from John the Baptist, from a disciple of his, from Jesus, or not at all? The Gospels do not say.

Week 2, Saturday

Mark 3.19b-21 Jesus' family think he is out of his mind

19b. Then he [Jesus] went home;

20. and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.

21. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’

Vv.20-21: Jesus ran into trouble, and from where we might least expect it - his family. The *Jerusalem Bible* translation is even stronger than the NRSV above: they were ‘convinced he was out of his mind.’ *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, however, give the text a different turn, stating that its meaning is that it was the *crowd* which was beside itself and Jesus’ relatives were trying to bring *it* under control. (751e) The *Douai Bible* translates it as, ‘his friends... went out to lay hold on him. For they said: He is become mad.’

‘They went out to restrain him’ – restrain him from what? From healing people? Hardly. From preaching? – wandering rabbis were nothing new. From gathering a following, and choosing companions? There were risks in that, from the authorities of both the synagogue and the empire. From making claims about himself, such as being lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2.28), which they might feel went beyond being pretentious and into the blasphemous? Does the passage suggest that the family were afraid that Jesus was going too far, losing the run of himself, becoming deluded? Insanity and diabolic possession were closely linked in the minds of Jesus’ contemporaries. Mark reinforces this suggestion by placing a charge of

possession in the next verse (22). John's Gospel does not hesitate to spell out the rejection of Jesus: it has people say about him, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' (10.20), 'not even his brothers believed in him,' (7.5) and, 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.' (1.11) That Jesus was rocking the boat was undeniable, and the powerful neither like that nor overlook it. The powerless know that, and are afraid. Fear for Jesus' future may have underlain his family's anxiety.

The passage reminds me a little of a young Catholic man I knew in New Zealand who stopped going to Sunday Mass. This caused his family much worry: was he losing the faith? After two or three years, he came in contact with a charismatic prayer group, re-discovered joy in prayer, and started going to daily Mass. This also caused his family worry! Was he becoming a fanatic? It seems they wanted him to settle for safe mediocrity. And, in recent years, the Irish poet, Séamus Heaney, was advised by his mother, 'Séamus, whatever you say, say nothing.' She was afraid he might rock the boat; there were 'boats' that needed rocking to get them unstuck from the mud, but that involved high risk in Northern Ireland at the start of the Troubles. He did rock the boat - and went on to win the Nobel Prize for literature. But what may have been uppermost in the minds of Jesus' relatives was the message in the Japanese saying, 'The nail that stands up is the one

that gets hammered down,' and, in the longer term, of course, they were proven right.

A spin doctor would have cut this story with Jesus' family from the Gospel, calling it bad PR. It must have been tempting to Mark to do so to forestall potential embarrassment. To report that his family thought Jesus was going crazy, even possessed, and needing to be restrained, must have been difficult. Was Mark urged by those who read a first draft of his Gospel to omit it? They might have said: 'The story will lose nothing without it'; 'It could be misinterpreted'; 'Why take an unnecessary and avoidable risk?' Matthew and Luke, both of whom draw on Mark as a source, and record the story which follows, omit it. (Matthew 12.22-32; Luke 11.14-23) But the fact that Mark includes it, when he could easily have omitted it and no one be the wiser, strengthens his credibility. For him, this story of Jesus' rejection by his family illustrates a constant theme: Jesus' rejection by the family of Israel; the insiders become outsiders, while those on the outside - the Gentiles - become insiders.

The story also illustrates what has been called "the scandal of the ordinary." Was it the "ordinariness" of Jesus that people found an obstacle? If he had had a showman's personality, been a "celebrity," indulged people's liking for the dramatic, they would have followed him. Instead they asked about him, 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon,

and are not his sisters here with us?’ (Mark 6.4) So why take any notice of him? How could an ordinary local man have such gifts? We prefer the divine to keep a safe distance where we don’t have to engage with it. Jesus on the pedestal of divinity is easy to cope with; Jesus, the human like us, can’t be so easily kept at arm’s length.

Week 3, Monday

Mark 3.22-30 Jesus and Beelzebul

22. And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’

23. And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan?’

24. If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.

25. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.

26. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.

27. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

28. Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter;

29. but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’ -

30. for they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 12.24-32 and Luke 11.15-23.

V.22: Beelzebul (or Beelzebub) was a god of the northern Philistine city of Ekron. (Baal, or Bel, was a god widely venerated in the Middle East and elsewhere. The Irish word for the month of May is *Bealtaine*, meaning ‘the fire of Baal’, and refers to the practice of child sacrifice by burning as part of a fertility rite.) The name is translated as ‘lord of the flies’, though ‘of the flies’ may be a Hebrew pun belittling the Philistine god, the meaning of whose name has now been lost.

A high-powered delegation from the capital has arrived, and begins with a conclusion: ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ The evidence of Jesus’ remarkable power is overwhelming; its source has yet to be determined, but the religious establishment has already decided for itself.

Vv.23-27: Jesus turns their case against them, pointing out that if he was ejecting Satan by means of satanic power, then Satan was fighting against himself. Since this is most unlikely, it follows both that Jesus is other than Satan, and stronger than Satan. Is Jesus here voicing an appeal for unity in the house of Israel?

V.28: The phrase, 'Truly I tell you' is emphatic, and is usually understood to introduce an accurate citation of the words of Jesus. Any sin, even the most serious, may be forgiven, but someone who is so malicious as to attribute good to evil would neither recognize sin as such, nor ask forgiveness. There is something particularly perverse about witnessing good works done by a power which could only have come from God - and then attributing them to 'an unclean spirit.' Cynicism or negativity may reach a point where it becomes impervious to goodness, to persuasion, or to reason; its hardened shell may then be broken only by great personal suffering, or by someone doing what Jesus did, which was to bring it out into the open and force it to look itself in the face. There is in Jesus a powerful moral sense which is outraged by the wilful refusal of good.

There is a sharp contrast between the cynicism of his opponents' pre-determined conclusion (e.g., in v.22 and 3.6), and the enthusiastic response of ordinary people, e.g., in 2.12. There cannot be forgiveness where a person wilfully refuses to acknowledge having done wrong and denies any need for forgiveness.

Week 3, Tuesday

Mark 3.31-35 The true kindred of Jesus

31. Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him.
32. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’
33. And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’
34. And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’
35. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 12.46-50 and Luke 8.19-21.

Vv.31-32: ‘Brothers and sisters’ are loose terms which may mean ‘relatives,’ not necessarily siblings. In Africa, the terms are used widely not only of relatives but of friends, people of the same tribe, etc. Among African-Americans, the term “brother” is used widely of other African-Americans, who may be unrelated to the speaker except for a common African heritage. There was also a widespread belief in the early centuries that Joseph had had children by a previous marriage to a woman called Salome.

Mary’s perpetual virginity is suggested, though not demonstrated, by scripture, and not here. (NCCHS, 663d) It is an ancient Christian tradition.

Vv.33-35: When Jesus made a choice, it was a choice *for* rather than *against*. What he said here was not a choice *against* his mother and relatives, though it likely reflects disappointment at their attitude as expressed in vv.20-21. It was a choice *for* whoever does the will of God. Up to this point in the Gospel, an underlying theme has been the acceptance or rejection of Jesus by various groups. Here he is saying that commitment to God takes priority over blood relationship. That is the basis of acceptance by him.

Some scholars see significance in the phrase ‘standing outside,’ and suggest that it may mean those who are outside the community of faith, even though they may call themselves ‘brother’ or ‘sister.’ In 1 Corinthians 5.11-13, Paul urges Christians ‘not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister’ but is immoral, and then twice refers to them as ‘those outside.’ Clearly some of Jesus’ relatives did not believe in him - ‘not even his brothers believed in him’ (John 7.5) - and were among those who wanted to restrain him, thinking that he had gone out of his mind. (Mark 3.21) But Jesus was not to be tamed or domesticated. He said, ‘Truly I tell you [a phrase denoting emphasis], no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.’ (Luke 4.24) Was he speaking from personal experience? Whatever one makes of this interpretation, it is clear that, for Jesus, spiritual kinship is first in the kingdom (kindom) of God.

Was it the case that Mary, as well as other members of his family, simply did not understand him at this stage of his life? Was Mary perhaps a mother who wished her son would just do the ordinary things, like getting a regular job, marrying, having a family and “settling down”? Perhaps she had to go through a learning process, and, like others, come to understand who he was and what his mission was, and to make the difficult adjustment of accepting that his mission had a claim on him which had priority over the ties of family and blood? It is difficult for a mother to acknowledge that she does not know her son when she thought she did. This difficulty finds expression in the incidents of the loss and finding of Jesus in the Temple as a child (Luke 2.41-52), his seeming bluntness towards her at the beginning of his public ministry in Cana (John 2.3), and now at this point in his life and ministry.

V.35: The phrase ‘the will of God’ is one of the most loaded - and abused - terms in religious vocabulary. Here are some examples: -

On 27 November 1095, Blessed Pope Urban II, a reforming pope [!], preached on a hillside at Clermont in France the first part of a campaign for a crusade: ‘You must hasten to carry aid to your brethren dwelling in the East, who need your help for which they have often entreated.... The Turks, a Persian people, have attacked them.... [Muslim and Christian Arabs had lived together peacefully in the Byzantine Empire for

centuries prior to the arrival of the Seljuks].... They have seized more and more of the lands of the Christians, have already defeated them seven times in as many battles, killed or captured many people, destroyed churches, and have devastated the kingdom of God.... I, not I, but God exhorts you as heralds of Christ... to hasten to exterminate this vile race from our lands and to aid the Christian inhabitants in time.....' He went on to describe the Turks as 'despicable, degenerate and enslaved by demons.' The assembled knights responded to his call with shouts of *Dieu le veult!* [God wills it!] The Crusaders entered Jerusalem on 15 July 1099. Jews were burnt alive in the synagogue, and the bishop of Pisa wrote to Pope Urban that 'in the portico of Solomon and in his Temple, our men rode in the blood of the Saracens up to the knees of their horses.' (From *Fulcher of Chartres: a History of the Expedition to Jerusalem, 1095-1127*, English translation by Frances R. Ryan and H. S. Fink, University of Tennessee Press, 1969.)

In the Hermitage museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, is a suit of armour belonging to Czar Boris Godunov. It is made of 9,000 steel links of chain mail, each stamped with the words 'God is with us' in Old Slavonic, the liturgical language of Russian Orthodoxy. When the emperor went into battle, he wanted to know that God was with him and his army. I have

heard a Russian Orthodox priest defend killings by Czar Ivan the Terrible on the grounds that 'he killed people's bodies in order to save their souls.' And similarly, German soldiers in World War I wore a buckle on their belt embossed with the words, *Gott mit uns* (God is with us.)

The *Souldiers Catechisme* composed for Parliament's "armie" in England in 1642 was part of Parliament's moral ammunition in its coming war against King Charles. It included the following: -

Question 2. Is it lawfull for Christians to be soldiers?

Answer: Yes doubtlesse: we have Arguments enough to warrant it: God calls Himself a man of war, and Lord of Hosts.

Abraham had a regiment of 318 Trained men.

David was imployed in fighting the Lord's battels.

The Holy Ghost makes honourable mention of David's worthies. [Etc.]

(*Chronicle of the World*, edited by Derrick Mercer, Dorling Kindersley, London, 1996, p.543.) The 1500 people of Drogheda, Ireland - Irish civilians, English royalists, Catholic priests and surrendered soldiers - slaughtered on Cromwell's orders by his worthies on 11 September 1649, might have wished to dissent. Or those of Wexford, similarly slaughtered later.

Ten minutes' drive from where I lived in Belfast was a mural depicting the coat of arms of the Ulster Freedom Fighters, a paramilitary group with a history of sectarian murder. Its motto is 'Quis separabit?' a Latin abbreviation of, 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ?' (Romans 8.35)

Members of Catholic religious orders can recall injustices and cruelties carried out in obedience to what was called 'God's holy will.'

Much more aptly, Abraham Lincoln said that before people can say, 'God is on our side,' they must first ask the question, 'Are we on God's side?'

In his Christmas sermon of 2003, Rowan Williams, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, said that: -

religious faith has too often been the language of the powerful, the excuse for oppression, the alibi for atrocity. It has appeared as... intolerant of difference... as a campaigning, aggressive force for uniformity, as a self-defensive and often corrupt set of institutions indifferent to basic human welfare.

"Holy" people, when they believe they are doing God's will, can be unstoppable in their determination and unscrupulous in their methods, seemingly thinking it unnecessary to assess their conduct by

ordinary criteria of decency and humanity, once they have the supposed sanction of “the will of God.” Richard Dawkins of *The God Delusion* has a valid point in saying that good people do good things and bad people do bad things, but, if you want to get good people to do bad things, give them a religious motive. He might have added ‘or an ideological one.’ Religion has many times been the excuse, the occasion, or the cause of violence and oppression - in the name of God’s will. Recognizing this, one Catholic religious congregation which had as its motto *Dieu le veult* (God wills it) has dropped it.

God’s will is not a plan mapped out for us in heaven, which we must obey under pain of sin. The real challenge is truly to know, accept and love ourselves, and heal the divisions within us. The struggle is not between us and God, but between our true self and the false selves that we, or others, impose on us. If we truly know ourselves, and understand our deepest needs, then we will know God’s will. ‘Find the door of the inner chamber of your soul, and you will discover that this is the door into the Kingdom of heaven.’ (Saint John Chrysostom, quoted by Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer*, DLT, London, 1975, p.108) It is possible to say with virtual certainty that God’s will is that we should love one another and be true to ourselves. A simple but helpful rule of thumb in matters of doubt is to ask the question, ‘What would Jesus do?’

Week 3 Wednesday

Mark 4.1-20 Parables and their purpose

1. Again he [Jesus] began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.
2. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:
3. ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow.
4. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up.
5. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil.
6. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away.
7. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.
8. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.’
9. And he said, ‘Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!’
10. When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.
11. And he said to them, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables;

12. in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.””

13. And he said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?’

14. The sower sows the word.

15. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.

16. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy.

17. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

18. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word,

19. but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing.

20. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.’

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 13.1-23, and Luke 8.4-15.

V.1: Here, as elsewhere, Jesus shows himself familiar with the practicalities of life. Maybe, knowing that sound carries well over water, he chose

a boat as a speaking platform to reach a very large crowd.

V.2: Jesus taught in parables. Was this a new teaching method, or not? Opinions differ: -

- 'Jesus' parables are something entirely new. In all the rabbinic literature, not one single parable has come down to us from the period before Jesus.' (Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, SCM Press, London, 1966, p.10)
- 'When Jesus chose to speak in parables he was following a convention familiar to his hearers.' (Wilfrid J. Harrington O. P., *Mark: Realistic Theologian*, Columba Press, Dublin, 1996, p.49)

Jesus did not treat his hearers as babies to be spoon-fed. (Hitler is quoted as saying, 'Fortunately for me, most people don't think,' and he was happy to keep it that way. By contrast, Jesus wanted to wake people up.) Part of the purpose and process of a parable, like a riddle, symbol or *koan*, is to engage the hearers, to draw them into the story, so that they work at discovering its truth for themselves. A feature of this way of teaching is that, unlike an allegory, a parable makes only one point. Allegories are meant to convey many points, and each element in them has significance, even if sometimes forced or artificial.

Here Jesus draws pictures in people's heads from the difficulties of farming. In Palestine, seed was first scattered on the ground, and then ploughed in. Any pathway through the fields made by people using short cuts would be ploughed. The ground is often rocky. The farmers' work is necessary, but is no guarantee of success; yet, despite the difficulties, it may produce an abundant harvest. The figures of thirty, sixty and a hundredfold are sometimes dismissed as exaggeration, but try, if you have time on your hands, counting the grains on a cob of maize, or the seeds in a paw-paw (papaya) fruit! And one maize plant may have two or three cobs, while one paw-paw tree may have up to ten fruits.

The farmer ploughs and plants, but God, the creator of soil, seed and sun, of air and rain, gives the growth. The point of the parable seems to be that, despite the inadequacy of human effort, God will bring success. Perhaps it was a message for Jesus' disciples to encourage them in the face of the misunderstanding and opposition he experienced, or an attempt by the early Christian community to explain to itself why Jews, as a whole, had not accepted Jesus. It is an assertion of confidence in the triumph of God's work at harvest-time, that is, the end of time.

V.10: His disciples ask Jesus in private for a further explanation. This is quite common in Mark's Gospel: see 4.34; 7.17; 9.29, 33; 10.10-12 and 13.3.

Maybe they needed it because they were slow, and didn't want to make that public! Or was it a literary device created by Mark to offer the reader further insight?

V.11 has a Gnostic flavour, but there is another sense which may offer a better understanding. Saint Anselm wrote, 'I do not seek to understand in order to have faith, but I have faith in order to understand. For I believe even this: I shall not understand unless I have faith.' (*Proslogion*, 1) Stained glass windows mean nothing when seen from the outside; from the inside, they are clear and expressive. To understand matters of faith requires more than the exercise of intelligence; there is a listening with the heart that goes beyond it. It is like what Blaise Pascal meant when he wrote, 'The heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing.' (*Pensées*, n.423, Krailsheimer edition.) Similarly, Saint Bonaventure spoke of being receptive to God with 'the eye of the body, the eye of the mind, and the eye of the heart', roughly, information, understanding and perceptiveness. When people make the leap of entering into the mystery, they appreciate its sense and coherence; it resonates with them.

V.12 is a quotation from Isaiah 6.9-10. It suggests that the purpose of parables is to prevent understanding, in case people might be converted and forgiven. This is irreconcilable with the nature and purpose of the Gospels. Indeed, it is exactly the opposite of one of the main thrusts of Mark in

particular, which is that outsiders accept Jesus, while insiders reject him. Maybe, in some inverted way, the verses are an attempt by later Christians to explain why so few people had followed Jesus. Or perhaps the verse has been misplaced; in reading the Gospels, context is (almost) everything.

V.13: Not for the first or last time, Jesus seems impatient with the slowness of his disciples. It is a point so emphasized by Mark above the other evangelists that it must be seen as his editing of the data to suit a point that is primary to him: the rejection of Jesus by his own, leading the way to his acceptance by the Gentiles.

V.14: The sower sows seed, which is the word. But, in the explanation offered in vv. 15-20, the seed becomes people of four different types.

Vv.14-20 takes the story as an allegory, exhorting people to examine themselves on their response to the word, and an encouragement to persevere in the face of persecution. It has the character of a moralistic sermon, which was not Jesus' way of teaching. It suggests a community on the defensive, seeing its relationship with others in terms of 'we the insiders' and 'they the outsiders.' This frame of mind is closer to that of the Pharisees than to the type of community Jesus was set on creating with its motif of including the excluded.

The vocabulary used in vv.14-20 contains seven words not found elsewhere in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark or Luke; they are Pauline and come from apostolic preaching. This suggests that what we have here is a re-working of the parable by the early Christian community - perhaps in the form of a pre-baptismal instruction - which then placed it in Jesus' mouth. It illustrates well the three-stage process by which the Gospels were formed, namely, Jesus' words and actions; the understanding of them by the Christian community; and the committal to writing of that understanding. The Christian community of the present time is no less under the influence of the Holy Spirit and therefore no less under a responsibility to interpret the words and actions of Jesus. In addition, the text illustrates the virtual impossibility of identifying any Gospel passage as "the very words of Jesus."

Week 3, Thursday

Mark 4.21-25 The parable of the lamp

21. He said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand?

22. For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.'

23. 'Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!

24. And he said to them, ‘Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you.

25. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.’

There are passages linked to parts of this in Luke 8.16-18, 11.33, 12.2 and 19.26, and in Matthew 5.15-16, 7.2 and 10.25-26.

Vv.21-22: This sounds like a saying from another context. If it is linked to the preceding, it is by way of contradiction: whereas vv.11-12 speak of secrecy and knowledge from which others are excluded, this says ‘there is nothing hidden except to be disclosed, nor is anything secret, except to come to light.’ Is it saying that the meaning of the parables will eventually become clear, even to those who did not then understand them?

The text makes the obvious point that it is useless to light a lamp and then cover it. Was it a response to a question? Answering a question with a question was not uncommon, then or now. (See John 1.38: ‘What are you looking for?’ answered by, ‘Where are you staying?’) What gave rise to such a response? Is it saying that the truth will out? If so, when? It doesn’t always come out in the human lifespan. Is it saying that, before God, there are no secrets, and that all will be revealed later, perhaps at

judgment, or in heaven? Was it a rebuke to some who, aware that knowledge is power, wanted to reserve it to themselves, to be, so to speak, the keepers of the lamp, and that Jesus was saying that truth, like light, is for everyone? Was the saying directed at religious leaders, accusing them of hiding the light of God's truth from people?

Without knowing the context - and we don't - it is difficult to go beyond speculation.

Matthew 5.15-16 turns the saying into an exhortation to give good example, while Luke 8.16-17 takes it to mean that just as light shines by its own power, so does truth persuade by its own power. Saint Thomas Aquinas said, 'The truth imposes itself on the mind only by virtue of being true.'

Vv.23-24: The Gospel is always a wake-up call: 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!... Pay attention...' Much of what Jesus did was to wake people up and get them to think. He not only taught people what to think, but also how to think, or - perhaps more accurately - to think. He did not pour ideas information or ideas into people's heads like someone pouring water into an empty bucket. To do that is to treat people with contempt; he treated them with respect. Parables do not spoon-feed ideas into people as if they were babies, incapable of anything more than passive gulping. If it sometimes seems that people have minds like an empty bucket, it is

because they have been trained by others not to think; but that is not the natural human condition.

V.24: Is it not true that generous people evoke generosity in others? There is reciprocity between giving and receiving; they are not opposites, but complementary. It is in giving that we receive. The same point appears to be made in Matthew 7.2: ‘the measure you give will be the measure you get.’

V.25: Against the seeming recommendation of social injustice, it may be asked, ‘To whom would you rather give a gift, to a person who would use it or one who allowed it go unused? Would a woman prefer to bake a cake for someone who ate it and enjoyed it, or for a person who put it in a cake tin and left it to go stale?’ Gifts or talents which are used grow and develop; left unused, they fade away. We use them or we lose them. Is it saying, to use the language of Christian theology, that God’s life in a person is not static, that grace unused will be lost while grace used evokes more? Matthew 13.12 says the same thing: ‘For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.’ To the person of goodwill more understanding will be given; whereas the person without goodwill, in the end, will lose everything.

Week 3, Friday

Mark 4.26-34 Parables about seeds

26. He [Jesus] also said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,
27. and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.
28. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.
29. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’
30. He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?
31. It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;
32. yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’
33. With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it;
34. he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

There are passages linked to the above in Matthew 13.31-32 and 13.34-35, and in Luke 13.18-19

Vv.26-29: This parable opens with a standard formula: ‘The kingdom of God is as if...’ The kingdom of God is the central theme of the preaching of Jesus. It is a difficult reality to pin down, and probably necessarily so. It is a present and yet a future reality, without spatial limitations. It

is not a political institution of any kind, so the translation of the Greek *basileia* as 'kingdom' is unfortunate. Rule, or kingly rule, is regarded by scripture scholars as better. God's kingdom is the power of God actively, if quietly, present in all reality. It is sometimes loosely, though happily, described as, 'the world as God would like it to be, God's view of the big picture.' It is about the presence and action of God in the universe, and its best expression is in the life and ministry of Jesus, who is its King. 'Where God is accepted, where Gospel values are lived, where the human being is respected, there is the Kingdom.' (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Office for Evangelization, Conference at Hua Hin, Thailand, November 1991)

In this parable, we may ask: who is the sower – God, or Jesus, or anyone? Is the kingdom of God, the seed, the growth or the harvest? Is it the parable of the seed growing in secret, or of the patient farmer? One thing may be said of it: it is a parable of growth, and it is God who gives that growth. Humans should resist the temptation to force the issue. Once he has done his job, the role of the sower is passive. All he has to do is sleep and rise and wait until the harvest. The parable contrasts the insignificance of the beginning with the triumph of the end.

One interpretation is that God is the sower, the seed is the word, the harvest is in the present, that is

to say, the kingdom of God is present in Jesus, the long period of waiting is over, the climax has come. God has intervened definitively in the world in and through Jesus. God's purpose has not and will not fail.

Another interpretation is that this parable may not have come from Jesus himself but rather from an early Christian community disappointed at its slow growth and at a loss to explain it. The story was meant to offer encouragement, saying, in effect, 'Take your time; it's all God's work, and results will come when God wants them.' The image of the day of the harvest, a common messianic one, looks also to the end of things, the fulfilment when all things come to a conclusion in the day of the Lord.

Vv.30-32: The mustard seed is not, in fact, 'the smallest of all the seeds on earth,' nor does it grow to become 'the greatest of all shrubs.' It may have seemed so to Jesus and his hearers, but then he was not teaching botany; he was using a figure of speech based on day-to-day observation.

The point seems to be about small, seemingly insignificant, beginnings leading to something great. It is another parable of growth being brought about by God's power. It draws on Ezekiel, 'On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures

of every kind.’ (17.23) And it finds a later echo in Paul saying, ‘I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.’ (1 Corinthians 3.6)

Vv.33-34: Parables are like icons in words. Just as an icon is more than a religious painting, so a parable is more than a story. As with icons, we are meant to look, not so much at them, as through them. Parables are symbols, not concepts; they point beyond themselves, beyond the limits of the rational and the logical; they appeal to the imagination. They open up horizons; they do not fence in a teaching or seek to define anything in propositions. In reading one, a question worth asking is, ‘Is this parable about God or about us?’ Often they are like a mirror held up in front of us, asking, ‘Where are you in the picture? Who do you identify with?’ They are open-ended, inviting questions and searching.

‘He explained everything in private to his disciples.’ This is a strange phrase in a Gospel like Mark’s which emphasizes so much the failure of his disciples to understand Jesus. When we reflect, too, that Mark three times describes Jesus as foretelling his passion, death and resurrection, and though the disciples ‘questioned what this rising from the dead could mean’ (9.9), they totally failed to see it coming or even believe in it after it had happened. How could this be if Jesus had explained everything in private?

It underlines a separation between the disciples, who saw themselves as his followers, and the general body of those who came to see and hear him, who may have been motivated by nothing more than curiosity or a desire to get something. John has Jesus say to people, ‘You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.’ (6.27) Perhaps it makes the point that God is not accessible to the merely curious; God is Father for believers.

It may also be that what is said by Mark to have been explained in private to the disciples, here and elsewhere (in 7.17; 9.29, 33; 10.10-12; 13.3, for example) was, in reality, the understanding that the Christian community of Mark’s time had as to the meaning of what Jesus said, their understanding of him rather than what he actually said. Mark re-wrote the story to take account of later developments, a risky procedure. Why should it stop with his community? Indeed, it could be said that it has not. Jews say that Christians have turned Jesus into a Gentile, and they are probably right. Christians for a long time have domesticated Jesus, editing out his passion, including his anger, and also his humour, among other features. We make and re-make him in our own image and likeness. But whatever else he was, Jesus was never a role model of middle-class respectability.

The series of five parables (4.1-4.32) is now followed by a series of three miracles. (4.35-5.43)

Week 3, Saturday

Mark 4.35-41 Jesus stills a storm

35. On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.'

36. And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.

37. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

38. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'

39. He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.

40. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'

41. And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who, then, is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 8.23-27 and Luke 8.22-25.

Jews, unlike their near neighbours, the Phoenicians, were never famous as mariners; they were afraid of the sea. For them, it was a place of destructive power, evoking images of dread: ‘Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.’ (Psalm 69.1, 2) But it was also a place where God asserted his saving power: -

Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the Lord,
his wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded and raised the stormy
wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven,
they went down into the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits’ end.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
Let them extol him in the congregation of the
people,
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

(Psalm 107.23-32)

Mark, in this story, has Jesus asserting calming power over the sea. His point seems to be that, if Jesus does works which are proper to God alone, as described above, then there is a conclusion to be drawn: Jesus is God in human form.

Is the account to be taken literally? Is it credible as it stands? Did Jesus truly calm the sea with a word? Or did Mark create the story, leaving his hearers to make the association between the action of Jesus and that of God, with its corollary? Jews have a long tradition of story-telling.

When I was a missionary in Zambia I remember hearing of how the first bishop of the diocese was said to have raised a dead man to life. I inquired about this of a friar in the mission where it was said to have happened. He explained that the bishop had left the house early in the morning to go to his car in the garage. Walking across the garden, he found a man lying motionless on the ground. 'Was he dead?' I asked. 'No', replied my informant, 'but he was dead drunk.' The bishop shook him to see if he was alright; the man woke, stood up, having slept off the worst of his hangover, and went home. Some people saw this, put 2 and 2 together, and made 22 of it.

I can also recall being hailed as a miracle-worker when a man whom I anointed with the sacrament of the sick recovered promptly. His family were

surprised, delighted and grateful. They attributed it to me. I was embarrassed by their adulation, and said I thought a more likely explanation was that he had taken the right medicine; but that did not diminish their acclamation of me.

Was the incident on the Sea of Galilee like this? It is known that storms blow up suddenly there, and calm down again as quickly. Was it such an incident, and that Jesus was wakened just when the storm was about to abate, and then a creative imagination went to work on the incident, possibly recalling Psalm 107 above: 'he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed' - and the story grew as it was re-told, until it came to be accepted as fact? Or, alternatively, did it happen simply as the Gospel passage describes it?

The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* says that, 'the event has been so re-worked in its transmission that it is all but impossible to isolate the brute fact from its credal interpretation in the church.' (*The Gospel according to Mark*, n.30, iii, A) That interpretation was usually motivated by catechetical (instructional) concerns.

The whole of life is one; all things are interconnected. We differentiate between them for the purpose of analysis, teaching, or writing, for instance, but, in reality, life is like a tapestry: all is interwoven, and everything depends on, and affects, everything else. Instead of a tapestry, some have

used the (better) analogy of a symphony, where the harmony of the music is the product of the relationship, or indeed is the relationship, between the notes. Try to analyse them separately, and you reduce the music to meaninglessness.

This is implied in what has been (inaptly) called chaos theory. Small actions within a system may have very large consequences, if, for example, they happen at a tipping point. Jesus' relationship with nature is all of a piece with his relationship with God, with others, and with himself. Relationships are at the heart of everything, and, ultimately, all relationships are one.

The German Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Max Planck, wrote,

As a man who has devoted his whole life to the most clear-headed science, to the study of matter, I can say, as a result of my research about the atoms, this much: there is no matter as such. All matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force which brings the particles of an atom to vibration and holds the... minute solar system of the atom together.... Mind is the matrix of all matter. (Cited in Diarmuid Ó Murchú, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1997, pp.102-103)

Relationships are at the heart even of matter.

A person who was as integrated as Jesus was, as whole, complete, and self-possessed, is in harmony with nature. I recall a friar, a gentle soul, who would sit in a garden, and birds would come, land on him, and feed from his hand. Buddhists say that, like Jesus, Siddhartha Gautama - the Buddha - calmed the sea. This is not about “mind over matter,” to quote the cliché, but rather acknowledging that the distinction we make between them, while necessary for practical purposes, may obscure an inner unity. What, for instance, is the relationship between mind and brain, between spirit and body? ‘The mind is not only in the brain.... It is also in the... glands, and immune system.’ (Joel L. Swerdlow, “Quiet Miracles of the Brain”, *National Geographic*, June 1995, p.26) For practical purposes, we distinguish between space and time, yet physics tells us that they form a continuum. Maybe it is possible to speak also of a mind-matter continuum.

Jewish hearers of this story might have seen it as an example of Jesus restoring the original order of nature as established by God in creation: ‘The Lord formed every animal of the field and bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.’ (Genesis 2.19) Giving creatures their name is a poetic statement of power over them. This original order of nature was disrupted by Adam’s sin: -

cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and unto dust you shall return. (Genesis 3.17-19)

Jesus, in his calming of the sea, his healing of the sick, his feeding the hungry crowds, his giving sight to the blind and raising the dead to life, etc. is seen in the Gospels as the new Adam, restoring the harmony disrupted by the first.

This Gospel passage has long been seen by Christians as an image of Jesus saving people in time of distress. He might seem to be oblivious to their danger - 'asleep on the cushion' (v.38) - but he woke, rebuked first the sea and then the disciples for their lack of faith. One message of the story is: in time of trouble, have faith in Jesus' saving power.

Week 4, Monday

Mark 5.1-20 Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac

1. They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes.
2. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him.

3. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain;
4. for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him.
5. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.
6. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him;
7. and he shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.'
8. For Jesus had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!'
9. Then he asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.'
10. He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country.
11. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding;
12. and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.'
13. So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.
14. The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened.

15. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid.
16. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it.
17. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood.
18. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him.
19. But Jesus refused, and said to him, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.’
20. And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 8.28-9.1 and Luke 8.26-39

V.1: Mark emphasizes the crossing to ‘the other side.’ (4.35; 5.1) It was the other side of the sea, literally and metaphorically. ‘The country of the Gerasenes’ was across the Sea of Galilee, east of the River Jordan, the territory of a pre-Israelite Gentile people, about whom little is known. This was Jesus’ first “foreign mission.” His first work of power among the Gentiles is similar to his first among his own people. (See Mark 1.21-28) In each case, he heals a man possessed by an evil spirit; the spirit was the first to recognize who he was and to make him known; and the incident leads to Jesus’ fame

spreading throughout the region. (Mark 1.28 and 5.14, 16, 20)

Vv.2-7: In this story, a powerful contrast is drawn between the disturbed state of the man before the healing, and his calm, settled state after it (vv.2-5 and 15). Jesus' power over nature, if that is the way to describe it, was healing, not destructive. Also, his healings were more than acts of kindness to suffering individuals, but point to something greater, and it is that which most interests the Gospel writers. The story may be considered a parable in action. What is its point? It seems to be to announce to the Gentiles who Jesus is. The demoniac had been explicit, calling Jesus, 'Son of the Most High God.' (v.7)

V.9: Jesus asks the man, 'What is your name?' This was like demanding that he come out into the open and declare himself, the name symbolizing the reality of the person, their identity. The man's reply is in the plural, 'we are many,' perhaps suggesting that the ordinary rules don't apply to demons.

Vv.11-13: The story, in Mark, Matthew (8.28-9.1) and Luke (8.26-39), all mention the herd of swine into which Jesus expelled the legion of evil spirits. Mark, the statistician among the evangelists, has a detail: the herd numbered 'about two thousand.' They run into the lake and are drowned – though swine can swim! The mention of them underlines that this happened among Gentiles; Jews do not keep

swine, seeing them as unclean: ‘the pig... is unclean for you.’ (Leviticus 11.7)

What is the significance of this matter of the swine? It is difficult to understand, unless perhaps it represents Jewish prejudice against a Gentile people and their customs: unclean spirits finding a congenial home in unclean animals. Maybe their drowning represents Jesus making a clean sweep of the whole situation, like the use of the phrase ‘not one of them remained’ describing the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea as the Israelites made their escape. (Exodus 14.28) Or is it to suggest that evil is self-destructive?

Vv.15-17: Why were the people afraid? Why fear someone who exercises power in the service of good? Why did they ask Jesus to leave? Is it reducing matters to absurdity to ask whether it was the owners of the swine that wanted him to leave? - he had destroyed their livelihood. Is it stretching matters too far to see in their attitude an allusion to Isaiah, ‘I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am,” to a nation that did not call on my name? (65.1) Perhaps not, since Isaiah 65.4 speaks of a people who ‘sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places, who eat swine’s flesh...’

Vv.19-20: In contrast to Mark 1.34, 1.43-44, 3.11-12, and 5.43, where Jesus enjoins silence, here he

instructs the man to tell people about it. Maybe it was because, in those instances, he was among Jews and wanted to prevent misunderstanding of his mission by a people who, at the time, saw the Messiah in political terms. Among Gentiles, where there was no expectation of a Messiah, his name could be freely made known without such risk. The healed man, transformed from fury to calm, now becomes the first missionary to the Gentiles.

The Decapolis was a loose federation of ten Palestinian cities of Greek culture but Roman rule, on the east of the River Jordan, stretching as far north as Damascus in Syria. Jesus' fame was beginning to spread outside his own country, and among the Gentiles.

A parable, unlike an allegory, makes only one point, and always at the risk of creating a new difficulty. This story of the healing of the demoniac sounds like one of those children's stories where someone has a problem, but a fairy godmother comes, waves her wand, says the magic words, puts things right, and then goes away leaving everyone happy. Human experience tells us that, while we all, from time to time, need and welcome a helping hand, essentially, we have to face and deal with our problems alone. While Jesus' action must have come as a great relief to the suffering man - he wanted to stay with Jesus (v.18) - and while it also demonstrates that Jesus wanted to free people from whatever diminished their humanity, it could have

had the effect of reinforcing in people a sense of dependence and helplessness, so that they looked to outsiders to solve their problems. But, if it is good to give hungry people fish, thereby providing them with a meal, as Jesus did on more than one occasion, it is better to teach them how to fish, so that they may provide themselves with a lifetime of meals.

Week 4, Tuesday

Mark 5.21-43 Jesus raises a girl to life and heals a woman

21. When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea.

22. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came, and, when he saw him, fell at his feet

23. and begged him repeatedly, ‘My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.’

24. So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.

25. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years.

26. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.

27. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak,

28. for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’

29. Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

30. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’

31. And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, “Who touched me?”’

32. He looked all around to see who had done it.

33. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.

34. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’

35. While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?’

36. But hearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, ‘Do not fear; only believe.’

37. He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James.

38. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.

39. When he had entered, he said to them, ‘Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.’

40. And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was.

41. He took her by the hand and said to her, '*Talitha, cum,*' which means, 'Little girl, get up!'

42. And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.

43. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 9.18-26 and Luke 8.40-56.

Vv.21-24: The story starts with Jesus back in Jewish territory, having returned from his visit east of the Jordan. As he has often done before, Mark points to the size of the crowd; he is interested in quantities and numbers. Jairus, the leader of the local synagogue approaches Jesus, seemingly with confidence, suggesting that not all the religious leadership had adopted a negative attitude to him. He tells of his fears for his daughter's life, and asks Jesus to 'lay your hands on her,' so that she may be made well, and live. The expression is unusual, since healing by imposition of hands is found nowhere either in the Hebrew Bible or rabbinic writings. But the intensity of his plea is obvious, and Jesus' response is immediate: 'he went with him.'

Vv.25-34: Then, as elsewhere, (3.19b-21; 6.6b-13; 11.12-14; and 14.54), Mark interposes something different, creating a “sandwich story.” He does this seemingly to heighten the dramatic effect, to keep people waiting to see what happens, or to set the “inner” story in a particular context.

A woman suffering from a haemorrhage approaches him, and Mark, in his usual way, is frank: ‘She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.’ (v.26) (By contrast, Matthew omits any mention of physicians, while Luke, himself a physician and likely wanting to be loyal to his colleagues, omits Mark’s statement that the physicians had made her worse!) She touched Jesus’ cloak, seeming to think her healing would be automatic, through touch. The text suggests she was right in this, for, ‘Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.’ Jesus’ reaction initially must have seemed to reinforce her understanding, for, ‘Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”’ It is as if it happened automatically, without his consent, like a person touching an electric fence. But Mark then has him reinforce the essential message that it is faith that counts: ‘He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”’ (V.34)

There are different kinds of touches, varying in significance. They can mediate gentleness, desire, correction, anger or love; they may draw attention. Even a baby can tell the difference: you don't wash a baby like you wash a plate. Her touch had a poignant significance: because she was suffering from a loss of blood, and it was a symbol of life and of the divine, it made Jesus ritually unclean.

A normal reaction to this at the time would have been outrage, but Jesus seemed untroubled by it, and turned the occasion into an opportunity to make his own point, saying, 'your faith has made you well.' It was her faith - which she had shown in her approach - not a mere touch that had healed her. This is a constant theme with the Gospel writers: without faith, there are no miracles. Mark links the two repeatedly: 5.36; 6.5-6; 8.22-26; 9.25; 10.52; 11.22-24. This incident provides one example among several in which Jesus showed that where religious or societal conventions were an impediment to his mission he ignored them.

Vv.35-36: Following the interruption, Mark resumes the story of the young girl. Jairus is told that she is dead. Overhearing (other texts read 'ignoring') what they say, Jesus said to him, 'Do not fear; only believe.' He returns to the heart of the matter: faith. Fear, rather than doubt, is the enemy of faith. Doubt is faith's necessary complement, preventing it from degenerating into credulity. Faith and doubt are like

the two poles of a battery, the positive and the negative; they need each other. ‘We come to the house of faith only after we have travelled through the forest of doubt.’ (Peter Abélard)

V.37: Jesus brings with him Peter, James and John, his closest associates. (They were also with him at his transfiguration: Mark 9.2-8.) This is probably part of their training.

V.38-39: He comes to the house, and there is a commotion, ‘people weeping and wailing loudly.’ This recalls to me memories of Africa, where the same custom existed. Apart from the immediate family, whose grief was genuine, it was mostly a performance, expected as a sign of sympathy, and a request for silence would bring a prompt response. There was a highly expressive word – *Kuza!* – in the local language, Silozi, and it worked wonders on such occasions.

V.39: Jesus then said, problematically, ‘The child is not dead but sleeping.’ If she really had only been sleeping, the story becomes pointless. In the Bible, the word ‘sleep’ sometimes means just that; at other times, it means day-dreaming, unawareness, stupidity, or death, but no clarification is offered here. Did Jesus mean that, in the sight of God, death was nothing more than sleep? The mourners’ laughter at him shows they believed the girl was dead. (In Matthew’s account, 9.18, the girl is dead

from the beginning.) It is a difficulty, and hard to resolve.

Vv.40-41: Then Jesus cleared the people from the house. There is a hint of anger in this as if he was offended that people doubted God's power. But it was necessary to have some calm. Having a crowd of agitated people in the sick room was no help to anyone. He went in, taking only the girl's parents and his three disciples. He took the girl by the hand and said to her, 'Little girl, get up!' 'And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about.'

Vv.42-43: Mark, as is common with him, has an eye for details: 'she was twelve years of age,' and then adds a practical – and very human – touch: Jesus 'told them [the parents] to give her something to eat.' As so often elsewhere, Jesus 'strictly ordered them that no one should know this.' What chance was there of that in view of the size of the crowd, referred to four times in the story? (vv.21, 24, 30, 31) Sometimes, in the Bible, the word 'crowd' is less concerned with numbers than with attitude; it may suggest something like a mob, or like saying 'that lot.'

In three miracle stories – the storm, the Gerasene demoniac and this one - Mark paints a picture of Jesus as one with power over nature, over evil spirits, and over death. Who could such a man be?

Mark leaves the reader to draw the conclusion: Jesus is God in human form.

Week 4 Wednesday

Mark 6.1-6a Jesus is rejected at Nazareth

1. He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.
2. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!
3. Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him.
4. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.'
5. And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.
- 6a. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 13.54-58 and Luke 4.16-30.

Vv.1-2: Jesus' relationship with his extended family was troubled: -

‘His family... went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”’ (Mark 3.21)

And in Mark 3.31-35: -

Then his mother and his brothers came; and, standing outside, they sent to him and called him.

A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you,’

and he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’

and looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!

Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’

John says, ‘not even his brothers believed in him.’ (7.5)

Here in Nazareth, his hometown, tensions arise again. Although those who heard his teaching were astounded, their sense of wonder soon turned to rejection. Instead of pride in the local man who makes good, it sounds like, ‘Who does he think he is? He’s getting beyond himself. He’s no better than the rest of us.’

It recalls an incident from Nicaragua in the early Nineteen Eighties, when a Capuchin friar was

invited to paint a mural in a church, in an area called Bluefields. The church was closed while he worked. When the day of the re-opening came, everyone crowded in to see the figure of Jesus on the wall behind the altar. On seeing it, the people made plain their disappointment. The figure, they said, looked just like an ordinary man, like someone you'd meet as you walked down the street. Jesus had been depicted as short, with black hair, yellowish skin and brown eyes, wearing jeans and a shirt, just like the local men. They said he should have been shown as tall, handsome, with long, fair hair and blue eyes, wearing a flowing white robe and gazing off into the distance, contemplating eternity. What the people of Bluefields wanted was not Jesus of Nazareth or of Nicaragua, but of Hollywood.

V.3: It is notable that Jesus is referred to as the son of Mary, not the son of Joseph, suggesting that Joseph might have been dead by then. For notes on the 'brothers of Jesus,' see Week 16, Tuesday, Matthew 12.46-50 below.

V.4: The rejection of Jesus by the people of his home town of Nazareth at the close of his ministry in Galilee is in contrast to the welcome given him by the people of his adopted town of Capernaum at the start of his ministry. (Mark 1.21-27) It is a foreshadowing of his rejection at a wider level by Israel, his own people. 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.' (John 1.11) The rejection of Jesus is a mystery which

never ceases to hold Mark's attention. He sees it as part of God's plan, not in the sense that God caused it, but that God anticipated it - similarly anticipating human sinfulness - took it into account, overcame it, and made it the springboard for a plan of salvation in which Jesus would ultimately be accepted by humanity. God 'destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.' (Ephesians 1.5)

Vv.5-6: Jesus 'could do no deed of power there.' Not, 'he did no deed,' but 'he could do no deed.' It was not a refusal, but an inability. And the verse that follows supplies the explanation: 'he was amazed at their unbelief.' The "failure" of Jesus to work miracles in Nazareth is analogous to the "failure" of God to forgive those who do not ask for forgiveness or who wilfully refuse to acknowledge their sins as such. Had the appropriate disposition - faith in him - been present in his audience, Jesus would have healed. But 'God who created us without us, did not wish to save us without us.' (Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 169.11.13; PL 38.923)

Were Jesus' healings sometimes examples of the *placebo* effect? Where the "healer" and patient both believe in the efficacy of a treatment, the desired result may follow, even if there is no clinical cause-and-effect relationship between treatment and result. What Jesus said - 'only believe' (e.g. Mark 5.36) - describes how the *placebo* effect works.

That effect takes place independently of the spiritual or moral qualities of the “healer.” The Siberian *staretz*, Grigory Rasputin (1871-1916), a not very moral man (though he was generous to the poor) - his slogan was ‘sin that you may obtain forgiveness’ – seemed able to stop haemorrhages in the haemophiliac Czarevich Alexei, even by phone at a distance of several hundred kilometres, *because* the Russian imperial family, and he, believed in his power. The *placebo* effect is applicable in modern medicine also, for instance, in testing the effects of medication.

The Nazarenes’ attitudes hardened from skepticism, to opposition, to disbelief. What was behind this? Was it jealousy? Was it the pettiness of the small town? Did they think little of their village, perhaps because of hearing it said, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ (John 1.46) Or was it a refusal to believe that what is ordinary and everyday may be a channel of grace? Was it an association of God’s power with the dramatic and exceptional rather than with the mundane and routine? One can sense the feeling, ‘He’s just one of us. What’s so special about him?’ In the Hebrew Bible, Jacob says, ‘Surely God is in this place – and I did not know it!’ (Genesis 28.16)

Week 4, Thursday

Mark 6.6b-13 The mission of the Twelve

- 6b. Then he went about among the villages teaching.
7. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.
8. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts;
9. but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.
10. He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.
11. If any place will not welcome you, and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.'
12. So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.
13. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 10.1, 5-14 and Luke 9.1-6; 10.4-11.

Vv.6b-7: *Mission* means *sending* from the Latin, *missus*, sent. This was not an "ordination," in the sense of making a priest of someone who was not one before. Jesus did not ordain bishops, priests or deacons. He called people to discipleship, to follow him; he had them travel with him on his journeys – in-service training – and sent them out to do as he had done. The word "disciple" originally meant "learner," (Latin: *discere*, to learn), but here it signifies more. It implies a discipline, a

commitment. These were men who had followed when Jesus called them: ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you.’ (John 15.16) He gave them a mission, a commission, and they remained disciples in it; mission is about receiving as much as it is about giving.

Jesus ‘began to send them out two by two.’ I recall a situation on the border between Zambia and Angola where three Christian communities were left isolated by war in the late Nineteen Seventies and early Eighties. They advised their priest not to come from the mission, which was several hours drive away, because roads were mined and vehicles were sometimes attacked by aircraft. The leaders met and considered their situation. They faced the fact that, if they did nothing, the faith would die among them. The priest could not help them, so they had to help themselves. They decided to do as Jesus had told his disciples so they went out two by two to the villages roundabout, proclaiming the Gospel. Many of those they spoke to were hearing it for the first time. Many of those who brought it were catechumens, that is, people preparing for baptism. After their four years of isolation, the priest returned, and found that the three communities had grown to twenty-one. When people do as Jesus says, good things happen.

The phrase ‘two by two’ also suggests collaboration in ministry: it’s not for Lone Rangers, not a DIY job.

Vv.8-10: These instructions seem to say, ‘Travel light; move fast; don’t worry about accommodation; you’ll be alright.’ By contrast, how much institutional baggage of every kind has the Christian church encumbered itself with over the centuries, and how much energy is devoted to maintenance rather than mission! In this passage there is a sense of urgency, that time is precious, not to be wasted. There is also a sense of enthusiasm, of hopeful expectation at the start of a new venture.

Perhaps on the basis of his own experience of rejection, Jesus prepared his disciples for the same possibility. If people did not welcome them, and refused to hear them, they should ‘shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them,’ and go elsewhere. That was done by some missionaries in Zambia in the late nineteenth century, and its memory has passed down in folklore since then. It is said that, when rejected, the missionaries, leaving a village, removed their sandals, shook off the dust, and told people they did this because they had rejected their message. (Paul and Barnabas did likewise in Antioch: see Acts 13.51.) People recall it today with a mixture of embarrassment and fear. The region where it was done is today a thriving centre of faith.

Following Jesus’ instruction, the twelve preached repentance, exorcized, ‘and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.’ Christians continue

this practice today, following the example of Jesus and the early community: -

Are there any among you who are sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. (James 5.14-15)

Pastoral experience suggests that very few people, if any, are physically cured by such anointing, but that many who receive it with faith are strengthened or healed in other ways, such as by being helped to forgive enemies, to accept illness, or to face calmly the reality of impending death.

The content of the mission of the twelve is like that of John the Baptist, but we are given here no idea of its outcome. Neither are we told where they went, but Mark, with his universalist outlook, omits the exclusionary phrase found in Matthew: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' (Matthew 10.5-6)

Week 4, Friday

Mark 6.14-29 The killing of John the Baptist

14. King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.'

15. But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.'

16. But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

17. Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her.

18. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'

19. And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not,

20. for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

21. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.

22. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.'

23. And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.'

24. She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.'

25. Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'

26. The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for his guests, he did not want to refuse her.

27. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,

28. brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.

29. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 14.1-12 and Luke 9.7-9; 3.19-20.

Vv.14-16: The 'it' that Herod Antipas had heard of was, presumably, the mission of the twelve. He would make it his business to know about popular preachers such as John and Jesus, in case they became a focus of discontent, or of popularity. The question, 'Who is Jesus?' is one that many people were asking. None, seemingly, said he was the Messiah. That is not surprising, since these were still early days in his mission.

The text also indirectly raises the question: What kind of man was Herod? He was Jewish (after a fashion); he had to be, in view of his position, but here he sounds superstitious rather than religious,

with his, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’ (It is not uncommon to find that people who are not religious are superstitious, and they sometimes think the two are the same.) He sounds worried. His manner of life, with its mixture of war and women, luxury, spying and killing, shows little evidence of commitment to Judaism. He was, likely, a petty local puppet of Rome’s, who would do whatever he felt he had to do to stay in power, and who needed all the political skills he could muster in a dangerous world of power-games and intrigue.

Vv.17-19: The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, author of *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*, suggests that Herod’s reason for arresting John was that he was popular, and therefore a potential source of opposition. John’s rebuke to him may have provided a convenient excuse. Mark has got the details of Herod’s matrimonial entanglements wrong. That is not surprising - complicated they surely were - and the Herod family’s habit of giving different members combinations of just a few names made matters more difficult. Philip was the husband of Salome (the dancer), not of Herodias. Salome was a daughter of Herod Philip and Herodias, who had first been married to another Herod, who was a half-brother of Herod Antipas who possibly also had the name of Philip. Not simple.

V.20: ‘Herod feared John.’ People, perhaps especially the powerful, fear, and yet are fascinated by, those rare souls who are not afraid to tell them

the truth. Something similar is recorded in Acts where, as Paul ‘discussed justice, self-control and the coming judgment, Felix [the Roman procurator of Palestine] became frightened and said, “Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will send for you.”’ (24.25) Czar Ivan of Russia, a megalomaniac autocrat who fully merited his nickname of “The Terrible,” accepted blunt rebuke from Vasily “the Holy Fool,” after whom Saint Basil’s cathedral in Red Square in Moscow is named. Similarly, the Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his address accepting the Nobel prize for literature in 1970, pointed out that a dictatorship, no matter how seemingly secure, is vulnerable to truth, and can feel safe only when there is not even one person who will speak one word of truth: ‘One word of truth outweighs a whole world of lies.’ (From *One Word of Truth*, Geoffrey Bles, London) John was courageous, Flavius Josephus describing him as ‘someone wholly dedicated to the truth;’ that is a good description of a prophet.

Mark says of Herod, ‘when he heard him, he was greatly perplexed.’ Herod danced to a different tune from John, and likely had little idea of what John was talking about; they operated on different scales of values and priorities. And yet he ‘liked to listen to him.’ Surrounded as he likely was by sycophants, it might have come as a welcome relief to listen to someone who spoke frankly.

Vv.21-28: When Herod's birthday party got going, it is easy to imagine that he became drunk and made a stupid promise, which he then regretted but did not have the courage to withdraw for fear of losing face. The vindictiveness of the girl and her mother is startling, even by the standards of the despotic rule of the day.

V.29: Perhaps the story of the unjust killing of a popular hero has been embellished; indeed it is very likely. It shows signs of heavy editorial work undertaken with a view to creating an impression. 'When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.' In Mark 15.45-46, Jesus' disciples do the same for him. Ironically, it was Herod who spoke of John's 'resurrection', saying, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.' (v.16) This may have been intended by Mark to foreshadow the resurrection of Jesus in 16.6. The sense that Mark is suggesting a parallel between John and Jesus is reinforced by noting that he calls John 'a righteous and holy man'; Jesus is called 'the Holy and Righteous One' in Acts 3.14. Mark says of John that Herod 'liked to listen to him' (v.20); and, of Jesus, that 'the large crowd was listening to him with delight.' (12.37) By doing so, Mark may have been suggesting that John's fate will be that of Jesus also.

It seems likely that Mark had in mind the story of King Ahasuerus (Greek, Xerxes) in the Old Testament book of Esther. Six times in vv.14-26,

Mark calls Herod king, although he wasn't. He was tetrarch, ruler of a quarter of a kingdom, and Mark must have known that. In Esther, King Ahasuerus 'gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers' (1.3); 'drinking was by flagons without restraint' (1.8); 'when the king was merry with wine' (1.10), he quarrelled with his queen, Vashti, and dismissed her. Then Esther comes on the scene: 'the girl pleased him (2.9); 'she won his favour and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen.' (2.17) Another banquet, called "Esther's banquet", followed: 'As they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.'" (7.2) Esther asks for the life of her 'foe and enemy' (7.6), and her wish is granted; he is killed. (7.10)

The parallels between the stories are too strong to be coincidental. The book of Esther is unusual: it makes no mention of God; alone of Old Testament books, no remains of it in Hebrew were found among the Dead Sea scrolls at Qumran. Modern biblical scholars describe it as a historical romance. Why did Mark introduce allusions to such a problematic source? They diminish the credibility of his account as history, an account which some regard as 'evidently legendary.' (Harrington, p.24)

Why did Mark insert the story between the sending of the twelve (6.6b-13), and their return? (6.30-32)

Was it to demonstrate dramatically the cost of discipleship?

Week 4, Saturday

Mark 6.30-34 Jesus teaches the crowd

30. The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.

31. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

32. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

33. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

34. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 14.13-14 and Luke 9.10-11.

Vv.30-32: There is something warm and homely about this gathering of Jesus and the apostles. It may have been a post-mission re-assessment, but, more likely, it was firstly a coming together, a renewal of friendship, a celebration of each other's company.

Jesus calls them away by boat to a deserted place all by themselves to rest a while. This was what he himself had done earlier: ‘he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.’ (Mark 1.35) Mark draws attention to the pressure the disciples were under: ‘So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them’ (2.2); ‘the crowd came together again so that they could not even eat.’ (3.20) It is noticeable, too, that, where Mark has Jesus go to the desert, it is followed by a significant event: -

1.35: Jesus begins a preaching tour through Galilee;

6.31, 32 is followed by a miracle of loaves and fishes;

8.4 is also followed by a miracle of loaves and fishes.

The desert or similar quiet places are not marginal to Jesus’ life and ministry; it is in them that he rests, meets his companions, prays and launches into something new.

This call to rest and eat meals in peace suggests a practicality in Jesus that is reminiscent of his telling the parents of the girl he had raised from death to give her something to eat. (Mark 5.43) Jesus was a Jew, and showed it in his recognition of the importance of meals in family- and community-building. There is a sense, too, that the apostles had become his family in view of his being

misunderstood by his own. Maybe he needed them just as they needed him.

Vv.33-34: But their quiet and rest was short-lived. The people follow them, driven mostly perhaps by the desire for healing, but also, surely, by the desire to hear someone speak who was able to breathe new life into their faith, who said things that were ‘new and with authority’ (Mark 1.27), who was able to re-interpret their reality, to assign meaning, to motivate and enthuse. Such people are rare and worth going to trouble to meet and to listen to.

The reference to sheep and shepherd recalls Ezekiel 34 and John 10. Perhaps Mark had in mind Ezekiel 34.23: ‘I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them and be their shepherd.’ Jesus, of the tribe of David, feeds and pastors ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ (Matthew 15.24) He has come ‘that they may have life and have it to the full.’ (John 10.10)

Week 5, Monday

Mark 6.53-56 Jesus heals the sick at Gennesaret

53. When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.

54. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him,

55. and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

56. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 14.34-36.

V.53: Mark refers to the boat and its crossing the lake. This is a feature of his Gospel: he mentions boats again, principally in 3.9; 4.1, 36; 5.1-2, 21; 6.32, 45 and 8.10, 13. Is this anything more than evidence of Mark's eye for detail? Is it a literary device to make a break and introduce a new scene? Or is it something extra, suggesting, perhaps, that life is a journey more than an arrival, a fluid movement more than a fixed point, dynamic more than static?

Gennesaret is a plain near Capernaum, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (which is also called Lake Tiberias or Lake Gennesaret.)

Vv.54-56: Jesus' fame as a healer had spread, so people came to him in large numbers. Some were perhaps afraid, as people tend to be in the presence of those they regard as greater than themselves or who evidently has power they do not have. They

‘begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.’ Their attitude was like that of the woman in Mark 5.25-34, who said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ And Jesus healed her because of her faith: ‘your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’ (Mark 5.34) They seemed afraid to touch *him*, as if that would be rash or presumptuous, but felt that touching his clothes would be both permissible and effective, because power went out from him. This touching of Jesus’ clothing is the origin of the Catholic practice of having relics of the saints, usually of pieces of their clothing.

Mark states of Jesus’ cloak that ‘all who touched it were healed.’ He does not actually say, though he clearly implies, that Jesus healed them. It is a characteristic of his that he uses the passive voice, as here, to speak of the action of God. (C. H. Dodd)

The longing for something to touch, to take hold of, as a way of making contact with something or someone greater than ourselves seems to be deep-seated in us. People pay big money for a dress that belonged to Jacqueline Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe or Princess Diana, for the shades of Bono of U2, or for President John F. Kennedy’s rocking chair. They like to have their photo taken with the high and mighty. Elvis Presley has the cult following of a demigod. TV celebrities, soccer heroes and film stars have the status formerly given to saints: they are idolized, paid millions and are followed

everywhere by autograph hunters. It was, or is, the same with the relics of the saints. In the Middle Ages, towns fought wars for the possession of them. In 2001, half the population of Ireland turned out to touch a casket containing a bone of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, and mittens of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina are passed around in hospitals in the hope of a healing. People, many of whom don't normally attend church, still come on 3 February, the feast of Saint Blaise, to have their throats blessed by having two crossed candles held against them, on Ash Wednesday for ashes to be placed on their forehead, or to kiss the cross on Good Friday. Those are frequently the days of the year with the largest number of people in attendance in the church. Among the early Christians, there was a similar attitude: in Acts, we read that 'great numbers of men and women... carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by.' (5.14-15)

Is it evidence of insecurity and perhaps also a search for greatness by proxy, a vicarious fulfilment through contact with the high and mighty? Is it saying, 'I'm nothing; I'm no good; but if I can just get a toe-hold, a contact with this great person, then that will give me some status, some position, something that will lift me out of my insignificance'? (Who, for example, would remember Lee Harvey Oswald if he had not killed John F. Kennedy?) Is this testimony to the extent to

which people have low self-esteem, thinking and living below their best, even imagining that it represents modesty or humility to do so, and feeling that to think well of oneself is to “have notions,” “getting beyond yourself,” “getting too big for your boots”? How many people there are who are afraid even to express an opinion unless they are sure it will win approval! Yet we were not born that way; there is nothing self-deprecating about children; on the contrary, they celebrate themselves, they are delighted with themselves. Jesus constantly made it clear to people that it was their faith which saved them: ‘your faith has made you well.’ (Mark 5.34) Was he saying, ‘You are great; you are good; realize the greatness which is already in you. Bring your potential to life’? He said elsewhere, ‘I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.’ (John 10.10)

In this text, as elsewhere, (in 3.20-22, for instance), Mark contrasts the enthusiasm of the people with the hostility of the authorities in the passage that immediately follows.

Week 5, Tuesday

Mark 7.1-13 The traditions of the Pharisees

1. Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him,
2. they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.

3. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders;
4. and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they purify themselves, and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)
5. So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’
6. He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,
"This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
7. in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”’
8. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’
9. Then he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!
10. For Moses said, "Honour your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.”
11. But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban" (that is, an offering to God) -
12. then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother,

13. thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.’

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 15.1-9.

Vv. 1-8 deal with washing, and 9-13 with Corban.

Vv.1-2: Mark, as before, in 3.22, creates the atmosphere of an inquisition: ‘some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him.’ A high-powered delegation had come from the capital on a fault-finding mission. And, of course, they found it: some of the disciples of Jesus did not observe the prescribed rules of ritual purification. (v.2)

Vv.3-8: Mark offers his Gentile readers an explanation of Jewish customs. When Jesus was asked why his disciples did not follow the tradition, he quotes Isaiah 29.13. The customs about washing had probably developed out of concern for hygiene, and were given religious authority to reinforce them. Leviticus 15 gives an example of such rules, introduced with, ‘The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them....”’ (15.1) Jesus himself, not simply his disciples, was scolded for his failings in this matter in Luke 11.37-38.

Captain James Cook, the eighteenth-century British explorer of the South Seas, is said to have given pigs to tribal leaders of one of the Pacific islands, and asked them to lay a *tapu* (taboo) on them, prohibiting their killing for a generation. The pigs flourished; then the *tapu* was lifted; people were free to hunt them, and had a reliable source of protein for generations to come. This was Cook's way of undermining cannibalism - a simple idea, which, it seems, was effective.

Both situations raise the question of invoking the name of God over something which does not come from God. They seem to have been situations in which God was said to have laid down rules which came, in fact, simply from human authority. However desirable the goals - obviously hygiene is preferable to dirt, and eating pigs preferable to eating people - is there not in them a violation of the commandment, 'You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God'? (Deuteronomy 5.11) Is it not a matter of using religion as a means of social control? Where that is done, religion is valued, not for its truth, but for its functional utility. It amounts to saying, 'It doesn't matter whether it's true, as long as it achieves a worthwhile goal.' Once such a principle is admitted, religion is negated: 'You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.' (v.8)

Vv.9-13: In an age without pensions, insurance, or social welfare there was a covenant: parents look

after children in their youth; children look after parents in their old age. What Jesus was referring to was a practice which allowed a son to evade the responsibility of caring for his parents. A loophole was created whereby a son (the responsibility rested with the sons) could dedicate to the temple the money or other resources he would have used to provide for his parents. It was known as *Corban*, an Aramaic word, meaning *offering to God*. This promise of his bound *them*. While thus dedicated, he still retained its ownership and its use, so he lost nothing by doing it. This made the temple into a kind of bank, with the resources offered in *Corban* as part of its reserve. But it meant abandoning the elderly to fend for themselves.

This devious and selfish practice violated the commandment of God to care for parents that Jesus quoted in v.10. (Deuteronomy 5.16; the second quotation is from Leviticus 20.9.) Jesus denounces the violation of God's commandment; it is one of many instances where he shows a powerful concern for justice. The *Corban* practice is believed to have died out in the first century because of popular opposition. Jesus cites this as just one example of many similar things the Pharisees did. It is a recurring temptation: to turn means into ends and ends into means.

Week 5, Wednesday

Mark 7.14-23 Clean and unclean

14. Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand:
15. there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’
16. ‘Let anyone with ears to hear listen.’
17. When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.
18. He said to them, ‘Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile,
19. since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?’ (Thus he declared all foods clean.)
20. And he said, ‘It is what comes out of a person that defiles.
21. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder,
22. adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.
23. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 15.10-20.

Vv.14-17: The setting described here is fairly frequent in Mark (e.g. 4.1-20; 9.14-29). Jesus teaches publicly, and then later expands on the topic privately with his disciples. (In Jewish tradition,

various things could defile a person, such as eating certain foods, or touching a corpse. Jesus takes up this point, perhaps in answer to a question, and reverses the usual understanding, saying that it is not things which come from without, but those that come from within, that defile a person.

V.17: ‘His disciples asked him about the parable.’ What parable? It is not clear what is meant by this.

V.18: To ‘see’ Jesus means to believe in him; there are hints of this in Mark 7.18; 8.24-25; 10.51; 15.32; 16.7.

Vv.18-23: Jesus takes his disciples to task for their failure to understand; this is commonplace in Mark (e.g., v.18 and also 4.13). He explains and elaborates, taking up a point about foods considered unlawful, and says that they cannot defile a person. If there is anything wrong with them, the body will discharge them. He makes the point that real defilement comes from within, from the human heart, and gives a list in vv.21-22; they defile a person.

The phrase, ‘Thus he declared all foods clean’ (v.19) is, most likely, an addition by Mark, or a later copyist. The story has a universalist character: Jews would have been surprised, perhaps shocked, that Jesus, either explicitly or implicitly, would declare all foods clean. What about *kosher* and non-*kosher*? Surely not pig-meat? Perhaps Jesus was looking to a

wider Gentile audience, to whom Jewish prescriptions would have been a mystery. He is speaking about ‘the human heart.’ (v.21) The same message about all foods being clean is the thrust of the story in Acts 10.9-16: ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ (v.15) And it is part of the freedom which Paul proclaims in Romans 14, e.g., ‘all food is clean.’ (v.20)

In these three teachings – about washing, Corban and foods - relating to Jewish tradition, Jesus rejects man-made additions and alterations that claim God’s sanction. He re-asserts the primacy of the Ten Commandments; he focuses on the essentials, especially the primacy of the person; and he breaks out of the limitations of Jewish tradition into something more universal.

Is Jesus also implying that not only the Jewish religion, but all religion, though limited and provisional, has a propensity to self-aggrandizement that needs checking? He rejected the word of men claiming to be the word of God. For instance, he set aside the notion of “clean” and “unclean” things; holiness was not about such matters but about wholeness. The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, Dei Verbum*, states, ‘Sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the *magisterium* [teaching authority] of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others.’ (n.10.) The statement recognizes a need for checks and balances.

The same passage also states, ‘This Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant....’ However, it is not difficult to think of examples of teaching which have little support in scripture or tradition, but nonetheless are presented as binding on the faithful - ‘*Roma locuta est; causa finita est.*’ (‘Rome has spoken; the matter is closed’), or ‘*Ipse dixit,*’ (‘He said it,’ “he” usually referring to the pope.) This is to suggest that *solum magisterium* is self-validating. To state or to assume that it is to make self-justifying power the issue behind every issue, (and the use of the language of service in its support does not change that). People react to this, not with obedience, but by walking away, leaving *magisterium* talking to itself; people prefer the authority of experience to the experience of authority. There is more than a hint of anger in Jesus’ saying, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand.... Do you not see...?’ (vv. 14, 18; and also vv. 6-7.) His anger is often related to the abuse of religion.

People create the technology they need: the Inuit of North America invented the fur coat, not the refrigerator. And people create the religions they need; religion is a creation of the human mind. Religion is a system of meaning and values, of motivation, and of control: -

Meaning and values: humans have a need for direction and purpose, especially ultimate purpose regarding the perennial questions on the

meaning of life, on evil, suffering and death, and for shared values to give coherence, stability and continuity to society; the cult is the basis of the culture.

Motivation: humans need motivation that enables them to look beyond the self, and to reach out to the other, or to the Other.

Control: individuals and societies need control; self-control through a developed conscience is the most effective, the most up-building and the most humanizing.

There needs to be critical solidarity between those three elements. If, for example, the third comes to predominate, then religion becomes a control system, imposing directions which the believer is expected to assimilate and internalize as having come from God. Napoleon Bonaparte recognized the political value of this when he said, 'If France were a nation of Jews, I would re-build the temple of Solomon....' 'I regard religion, not as the mystery of the Incarnation, but as the secret of the social order.' (Cited by Robert Aubrey Noakes, 'Napoleon's Attitude towards Religion', *The Month*, Vol. CLXXVII, No.919, January-February 1941, p.33) Such religion becomes an ideology, a substitute for God, a complete system which renders God redundant, saying, in effect, 'Believe in the system; that's all you need do.' 'Most religious institutions have been more comfortable when people stay within a church-reliant faith rather than progress to the normal adult language of faith-as-decision.'

(Fowler, quoted by Michael Paul Gallagher S.J., *Free to Believe: Ten Steps to Faith*, DLT, London, 1988, p.57) If one accepts the basic premises, the rest follows. Religions have attempted to do this, to parse and analyse the mystery, thereby neutering it and falling into idolatry, where a man-made understanding of God becomes a substitute for the reality of God.

To say that religions are creations of the human mind is not to say that they are untrue, or fabrications; nor does it mean that God does not self-reveal. God can, and does, self-reveal through prophets, including non-Christian ones (the Buddha, Mohammed, Guru Nanak, Gandhi, and others), and especially through Jesus, who, most powerfully of all, is (not merely teaches) the message (the Word) that God communicates in and through the human. And the human is limited, imperfect, and dependent.

This means that no religion can claim an absolute value for itself. There is only one absolute - God. If we make an absolute of religion, then we turn it into an idol, faith into an ideology, and the church (or mosque, synagogue, temple, etc.) into a puppeteer working the levers of a control-system; fear and guilt are commonly used as such levers. We thereby make religion into a substitute for God. That is to ignore the commandment: 'You shall not make for yourself an idol.... You shall not bow down to them or worship them...' (Deuteronomy 5.8-9) The real idols are not those that are external to us, such as

statues or figures, but the internal ones, the ideas, systems and ideologies we create in our image and likeness. Maybe that frame of mind was what Jesus set out to correct in these three challenges to his religious tradition.

Week 5, Thursday

Mark 7.24-30 Jesus and the Syrophenician woman

24. From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,

25. but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

26. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

27. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

28. But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

29. Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter.'

30. So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 15.21-28.

V.24: The opening phrase ‘From there he set out and went away,’ underlines that this was a point of departure for Jesus, this venture from his own land. A similar phrase is used in Mark 1.35, where Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, and in Mark 10.1, where he leaves Capernaum for the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. The hinterland of the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon was the predominantly Gentile region of Phoenicia, though it also had a Jewish population and it was probably to it that Jesus was going.

There is also a reference, common in Mark, to Jesus’ frustrated desire for secrecy.

Then Mark develops the story in a circular pattern:

Tyre	v.24
Into a house	v.24
Demon	v.26
Out of the daughter	v.26
Children	v.27
Bread	v.27
Dogs	v.27
Dogs	v.28
Bread	v.28
Children	v.28
Out of the daughter	v.29
Demon	v.29

Into a house v.30

Tyre v.31

Perhaps this was a memory device, or a literary style Mark favoured. He uses the same method in 1.1-15 and 13.5-23. The word repeated at the centre of the story – in this case *dogs* - is its focus.

Vv.25-29: The woman was a Gentile. In the situation described, she was probably embarrassed: she was a woman taking the initiative, addressing a man of a different race and religion, a Gentile asking a Jew for a favour, all of these contrary to accepted social mores. Then, to make matters worse, Jesus virtually calls her a bitch, a term even more insulting in the Middle East than in the West. The word “dog” was used by Jews of the time as a term of contempt for Gentiles. Scripture scholars point out that the position of the word at the core of the story, and its repetition, heightens its impact.

The woman was an outsider, but, in the first place, and above all, she was a loving, courageous, and “liberated” mother, prepared to risk humiliation in the hope of her daughter being healed. Jesus at first refused her request, but seems to have been won over by her quick-witted repartee; she had got the better of him. He knew it, and appeared to enjoy it; he granted her request.

But why did he refuse her - and so brutally - in the first place? Was it that he had some growing to do,

to grow out of a narrow racial and religious background and learn to look at the bigger human picture? He had said of himself, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15.24) and had instructed his disciples in the same way, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' (Matthew 10.5-6) The woman was an outsider - by religion and race, a pagan and Syrophenician. This story, and the one of the healing of the centurion's servant in Matthew 8.5-13, are the only works of power performed by Jesus for a Gentile, unless the following story of the cure of a deaf man was also one - it took place in Gentile territory.

In this story, Jesus is led to move beyond his first understanding of his mission, and it was an awareness of human need that moved him. Human need always has primacy: 'The Sabbath was made for the person, not the person for the Sabbath.' (Mark 2.27) This could be called a story of Jesus' conversion from a narrow, "parochial" outlook to a universalist one. To acknowledge the possibility of growth and development in Jesus is to do no more than give value to his humanity: 'He increased in wisdom.' (Luke 2.40, 52) The Gentiles, the outsiders, were the ones who accepted him when his own, the insiders, did not.

V.30: The story has a happy ending, with Mark, in his own personal style, giving the details.

Week 5, Friday

Mark 7.31-37 Jesus cures a deaf man

31. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

32. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

33. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.

34. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’

35. And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

36. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

37. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’

There is a similar passage in Matthew 15.29-31.

V.31: This describes Jesus going from one Gentile area to another. Tyre is a coastal town to the south of Sidon in present-day Lebanon; in Jesus’ time, the region was known as Phoenicia. It is strange that Mark describes Jesus as returning ‘from the region

of Tyre... by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis,' since that would involve moving north, when the Sea of Galilee and the Decapolis were to the south-east. Maybe it is another example of Mark's inaccurate geography.

V.32: The laying on of hands in healing is found also in Mark 6.5: 'he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them,' and in 8.23: 'He took the blind man... and laid his hands on him.' People may have seen this done before as, 'they begged him to lay his hand on him.' Other healers did likewise, using also a foreign word and spittle. In some cultures, spittle is seen as having special significance. In Zambia, illiterate people of the older generation would sometimes 'sign' a letter with spittle, and the note, 'This is my spittle.' (Mati a ka ki ao.) A distinguished visitor might be greeted by a gentle - and respectful - spray of spittle towards the face.

V.33: Jesus 'took him aside in private, away from the crowd...' Was this out of consideration for the man's privacy, or for secrecy? The latter seems more likely, in view of Mark's preoccupation with it (see v.36), and Jesus' elsewhere healing people openly. It is like, 'He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village.' (Mark 8.23)

V.34: Mark preserves the word 'Ephphatha,' as he did with 'Talitha, cum' in 5.41. Was this to suggest

an eye-witness presence, or that the wording was considered to be of particular significance? The Catholic liturgy of baptism retains something akin to this, in a prayer known as the *Ephphatha*, where the priest touches the baptized on the ears and mouth, saying, ‘The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.’ The people in this story received and proclaimed the word of Jesus, and gave praise and glory to God the Father.

‘He sighed’ - a prayer from the heart, an unspoken thought, a deep-felt wish, an earnest appeal to God. And, ‘Immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.’ The language Mark uses is that of liberation: ‘opened’, ‘released’, ‘spoke plainly.’ Jesus wants people to hear and speak plainly. He is concerned to free people from whatever diminishes their humanity or limits their potential, and this applies to the social order as well as to the individual.

There is no mention here of an evil spirit, or of faith. Perhaps the fact that the healing took place in Gentile territory might account for this.

V.35: It is surprising that Mark, who is concerned to show Jesus as the Messiah, did not refer here by name to Isaiah, who wrote: ‘the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like the deer, and the tongue

of the dumb sing for joy.’ (35.5-6) He was surely aware of the text, as the words for ‘who had an impediment in his speech’ (v.32) are used in the Bible only in these two instances. Being in Gentile territory may explain the matter.

V.36: The preoccupation, one might say obsession, Mark shows for secrecy is again evident here. The other Gospel writers differ from him in this. Taken in its context, both here and elsewhere, it sounds unrealistic. Could anyone expect such a matter to remain unspoken of? Is it not asking people to act in a way that is contrary to normal human behaviour?

V.37: People said, ‘He has done everything well.’ This is a little like, ‘God saw everything that he [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good.’ (Genesis 1.31)

As elsewhere, Mark records people’s joyful admiration for Jesus with a response more enthusiastic than anywhere in his Gospel. An alternative translation is even more effusive: ‘They were more than excessively astonished.’ (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*) Was it that a Gentile audience did not have the preconceptions, and possibly the prejudices, of a Jewish audience and therefore responded without inhibition? Mark, with his openness to the Gentiles, may here be saying that they, who were once deaf and silent about God, now hear and speak of God joyfully.

A point of some significance about this story is that the man's name is not given. The same is true of other characters in Mark's Gospel, such as Simon's mother-in-law, 1.29-31; the leper, 1.40-45; the paralytic, 2.1-12; the man with the withered hand, 3.1-6; the Gerasene demoniac, 5.1-20; the girl and woman healed, 5.21-43; the Syrophenician woman, 7.24-30; the blind man at Bethsaida, 8.22-26, and the boy with a spirit, 9.14-29. (An exception is the blind man, Bartimaeus, 10.46-52.) In Jewish tradition, to leave people un-named would be understood as saying, 'They're nobodies.' Mark's audience was Gentile, and they might, or might not, see things in the same way. Perhaps this is Mark's way of showing that it was the nobodies, the outsiders, some of them Gentiles, who received Jesus, and, in consequence, were blessed by him - healed, enabled to see, speak and hear, freed - in contrast to his own people, who rejected him. The "nobodies" were the ones who understood.

There is a striking parallelism of content and sequence in the passages from Mark 6.35 to 8.26: -

Jesus feeds five thousand:	6.35-44
Jesus feeds four thousand:	8.1-9
Crossing the lake:	6.45-52
Crossing the lake:	8.10a
Landing from the boat:	6.53
Landing from the boat:	8.10b
Controversy with Pharisees:	7.1-23
Controversy with Pharisees:	8.11-13

Dialogue about bread:	7.24-30
Dialogue about bread:	8.14-21
Healing a man at the lake:	7.31, 37
Healing a man at the lake:	8.22-26

What significance has this? One obvious interpretation is that the same stories are being re-told, though with variations. Saint Augustine suggested that one series was for Jews, the other for Gentiles. This is reinforced by the language used: the terms used for *basket* denote two different types, one Jewish, the other Greek. The implication may be that Jews and Gentiles find a common table in the Eucharist.

Week 5, Saturday

Mark 8.1-10 Jesus feeds four thousand people

1. In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them,
2. ‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat.
3. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way - and some of them have come from a great distance.’
4. His disciples replied, ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?’
5. He asked them, ‘How many loaves do you have?’ They said, ‘Seven.’

6. Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd.

7. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed.

8. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

9. Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away.

10. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Magdala.

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 15.32-39.

A comparison of this passage and Mark 6.35-44 shows substantial similarity, but with some differences: -

In 6.35-44: five thousand men are fed;
there are five loaves, two fish and twelve baskets of leftovers;

it is the disciples who notice the people's hunger.

In 8.1-10: four thousand people are fed;
there are seven loaves, a few fish and seven baskets of leftovers;

it is Jesus who notices the people's hunger.

Elaborate - some might say far-fetched - interpretations have been put on the differences by numerologists, among others, such as that the seven (4+3) baskets of leftovers in 8.1-10 symbolize abundance (the numbers 4 and 3 having special symbolic significance), while, in 6.35-44, twelve (4x3) are left over, symbolizing superabundance.

Is this account another version of Mark 6.35-44? If it describes a different event, why did the disciples ask, 'How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?' having already seen Jesus do it? But, in 8.19-20, the two are spoken of by Jesus and his disciples as separate events. There is probably no definitive answer.

The account seems directed to a Gentile audience of which there is a hint in 8.3: 'some of them have come from a great distance.' The language, idiom and focus of the passage are Hellenistic (Greek).

The suggestion has been made that Mark's point in the double insertion is that Gentiles have an equal share in the Eucharist with Jews. This is strengthened by the similarity between v.6: Jesus 'took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them,' and Paul's description of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11.23b-24: Jesus 'took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it...' It may be that the story came from a Eucharistic teaching of an early Gentile church influenced by

Paul, and was included by Mark because of his universalist outlook.

The Eucharistic link is too strong to ignore. The use of bread (loaves) in the story is an obvious example. With the benefit of hindsight, there may be significance in the use of the word fish also. The Greek word for a fish is *ichthys*. Later Christians used the symbol of a fish as a kind of identity badge, seeing it as an anagram for the essential core of the Christian faith: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour. (See Mark 1.1) In Greek this is **I**ésus **C**hristos **T**héou **u**ios **s**otér. The letters in bold type make up the word *ichthys*, a fish.

V.10: Dalmanutha - Matthew's version of the story calls it Magadan (15.39), a name which may be the same as Magdala or Mageda. None of them is known, and it is possible that they may not even be place-names but an expression of some kind.

Week 6, Monday

Mark 8.11-13 The Pharisees ask for a sign

11. The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him.

12. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, 'Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.'

13. And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

There are passages parallel to, or similar to, this in Matthew 12.38-39; 16.1-4; Luke 11.16,19 and John 6.30-31.

V.11: Were the Pharisees thinking of what they were saying? They asked for a sign. Had they not been present when Jesus healed the man in the synagogue with the withered hand? (Mark 3.1-6) Had they not heard of other healings and of the storm stilled? The wording of this verse – ‘the Pharisees came and began to argue’ - suggests that they had just come from the preceding event, the feeding of the four thousand with a few loaves and fishes? Were those not signs? If they were not signs what would be? What did the Pharisees want? Gimmicks? Miracles on demand to satisfy their curiosity or their sense of being placed in judgment over Jesus? Did they see him as a performing puppet ready to jump when they pulled the strings? They asked him for a sign... *to test him*.

People look for signs, and run after them when they find them. The moment someone shouts ‘Apparition!’ people run in droves, to see a moving or weeping statue, and the gloomier and more threatening the accompanying message, the better. Are Jesus and the Gospel not enough? Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.

Clearly, the Pharisees had dug themselves into the trenches in a combative frame of mind. They ‘came and began to argue with him’; to argue, not to dialogue. In argument, truth is an early casualty, with justice and courtesy following soon after. A person may win an argument but lose the truth. Argument divides, hardens positions, and makes listening less likely. It sometimes involves posturing and bluffing, but people see through that, so the one who does it loses credibility. Argument distorts relationships and makes people unreceptive.

Dialogue is about listening, about trying to find what is true, just, or good in the other's position. It means seeing the other person as a fellow human being rather than an opponent. It requires clarity of expression, and a refusal to be drawn into personal attack or offensive bitterness. It recognizes that we might have something to learn from the other. It unites. It knows that those who listen are usually listened to. Dialogue recognizes that communication is more about the ears and the heart than the mouth and the mind.

Vv.12-13: Scripture scholars say that the wording of Jesus’ refusal was an oath formula. The expression, ‘this generation’ is used in a context of blame: ‘this adulterous and sinful generation’ (Mark 8.38), or ‘you faithless generation.’ (Mark 9.19) ‘Jesus sighed deeply in his spirit.... left them... and went across to the other side.’ Jesus’ message had to go to ‘the other side’ that is, to the Gentiles, to win a

hearing. Perhaps, as in his temptation in the desert (Luke 4.12), he recalled the saying, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' (Deuteronomy 6.16) Perhaps he was angry with a wilfulness which, on the one hand, demands evidence, but, on the other, refuses to accept it when given.

The episode is reminiscent of the story of the frog and the scorpion. They meet on a river bank, and the scorpion, which couldn't swim, asks the frog for a lift across the river. The frog is suspicious and refuses. But the scorpion puts his case, 'Why would I want to harm you? If I were to sting you half-way across the river, that would kill you, and then I'd drown. I'm not going to do that. But I promise, that if you give me a lift, I'll be your defender in the future and come and sting any creature that attacks you.' Reluctantly and with some fear, the frog agrees. The scorpion climbs on its back and the frog begins to swim. Half-way across the river, the scorpion lifts its venomous tail and stings the frog. As he dies, the frog asks, 'Why did you do it?' The scorpion answers, 'Because I'm a scorpion.' And then it, too, dies.

V.13: A point of some significance is Mark's preoccupation with a boat. He ends this story, and the previous one (v.10), with mention of it, and it occurs seventeen times up to this point in his Gospel. Is it a symbol of life as a voyage, a journey? Of Jesus being on the move? Or, more likely, is it that Jesus, in these many crossings of the lake, is moving

between Jewish and Gentile territory? His works of power on one side correspond to those on the other. Is there it this an implied message of universalism, of inclusiveness?

Week 6, Tuesday

Mark 8.14-21 The yeast of the Pharisees and Herod

14. Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat.

15. And he cautioned them, saying, ‘Watch out - beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of the Herodians.’

16. They said to one another, ‘It is because we have no bread.’

17. And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?’

18. Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?’

19. When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ They said to him, ‘Twelve.’

20. ‘And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ And they said to him, ‘Seven.’

21. Then he said to them, ‘Do you not yet understand?’

There is a parallel passage in Matthew 16.5-12.

Vv.14-15: This is a story that begins with bad faith and dull minds. In popular usage, yeast was seen as an agent of corruption, and a symbol of bad faith. The story flows from the demonstration of the Pharisees' bad faith in vv.11-13, while the inclusion of the Herodians is possibly a reference to Mark 3.6: 'The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.' Jesus is saying that where people are in bad faith, determined not to be convinced, no miracles will change their mind. His signs did not seek to force assent, but to elicit faith.

V.16: Mark portrays the disciples as sleep-walking through life, day-dreaming, unthinking, unaware, and learning nothing from experience. Their response illustrates this: 'It is because we have no bread.' (Christopher Clark's book, *The Sleepwalkers*, about Europe's leadership leading up to World War I, comes to mind.)

V.17: 'Hardened' is a word normally used only of the Pharisees, though Mark used it before in a similar context: 'they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.' (6.52) It implies an obstinate stubbornness.

Vv.17-21: The phrase ‘Do you still not perceive or understand?’ begins and ends Jesus’ series of questions; the duplication is probably for emphasis. V.18 draws on Jeremiah 5.21, ‘Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear’, and a similar text in Ezekiel 12.2, both referring to the faithlessness of God’s people.

In this passage, Mark shows Jesus as an emotional person, with feelings of impatience and frustration mounting to a crescendo of anger. In v.12 also, his anger is evident. To some, this is scandalous: Luke, the writer of another Gospel, smoothes things over, censoring anger. It is better to see Mark’s openness about it as recognition that Jesus was truly a human being, with human emotions. He was God-made-man, not God-acting-a-part.

Mark’s portrayal of the disciples as dim-witted is not without difficulty. While their attitudes may have been distorted by the politicized understanding of Messiahship then prevalent, that can hardly be a full explanation. After all, the crowds, most of whom would have seen Jesus only a few times, responded with enthusiasm. How, then, is Mark’s representation of the disciples - who were with Jesus constantly and saw many more miracles - as being dull and unresponsive to be regarded as credible? This is all the more problematic, not only in view of their evident good-will, but also that Jesus had earlier said to them, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.’ (Mark 4.11) It is hard

not to suspect that Mark has his own agenda, and is giving the evidence an angle. Is the over-drawn, or even contrived, background of dullness intended to highlight the disciples' later profession of faith in Jesus in vv.27-29? Or are they cast in the role of dullards in order to create opportunities for Mark to provide fuller information and explanations for later hearers or readers who live outside the context and for whom much of that is unfamiliar?

One suggestion is that, except for v.15, the piece is of Mark's construction. It has his vocabulary, his themes of the disciples' failure to understand and of Jesus' rejection of the role of political messiah. This raises a larger question: what, in the Gospel, is truly from Jesus, and what has been put into his mouth by the Gospel writer - Mark, in this case - or the faith-community he represented? Some say that question is irrelevant, arguing that the text we have today is inspired by God, and whether it comes directly from Jesus, or Mark, or through whatever editorial process involved the early community, does not matter. But, especially in an age of "spin" and PR, people may find that argument difficult to accept.

In an extreme form, the same approach is found in Islamic attitudes towards the Qur'ân. Muslims see it, in its totality, as having come directly from God through Muhammad, and that every littlest part of it is divinely inspired. To undertake a critical examination of the text, whether as literature, or history, or otherwise, is seen by them as

blasphemous. This all-or-nothing approach may account in part for the crisis in Islamic countries today between the so-called fundamentalists who are clearly in the ascendant and the modernizers. It is Islam's "Modernist" crisis.

The point being made in Mark 8.14-21 seems to be that Jesus, who fed thousands with bread, is the Messiah, able to give spiritual food to his followers. He is not a political Messiah, but a spiritual one. There are five direct or indirect references to bread in the passage; the text, taken with others starting from 6.35, may well have Eucharistic symbolism.

Jesus fired a volley of nine questions at his disciples, without waiting for answers. He sounds angry, impatient, frustrated at their slowness, especially in his last question, 'Do you not yet understand?' ('Are you still without perception?' *Jerusalem Bible*)

Why is he angry? He spoke to them about the 'yeast' of the Pharisees and Herodians. Yeast is used in turning dough to bread and fermenting beer, among other things. It was, and is, seen as a process of corruption. He meant, 'Beware of their corruption.' But the disciples took it literally, thinking, 'It is because we have no bread.' Jesus seems to be saying, 'Don't take such a woodenly literal meaning out of what I say. Use your imagination; extend your minds.' When we open our Bibles we are not meant to close our minds.

A fundamentalist view of scripture is not a more faithful one; it is a victory for stupidity. It mistakes certainty for truth; it has the rock-like assurance of the closed mind. It is suspicious of risk, discovery, invention and creativity. It needs bogeymen: anyone from the devil to its critics will do. It needs someone to blame for all that's wrong, someone to point an accusing finger at. Self-criticism it sees as treason. It sees religion as an inheritance to be preserved, more like a museum exhibit than a pilgrimage of faith. In the final analysis, fundamentalism is a form of intellectual suicide. And the Gospel writers were themselves far from "fundamentalist" in their use of scripture!

It is noticeable how often the word bread, or associated terms such as crumbs, loaves and yeast, occurs in these passages. This enhances the case for seeing an underlying Eucharistic understanding.

Week 6, Wednesday

Mark 8.22-26 Jesus cures a blind man

22. They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him [Jesus] and begged him to touch him.

23. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?'

24. And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.'

25. Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

26. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not tell anyone in the village.'

There are clear similarities between this story and the healing of the deaf man with the speech impediment in Mark 7.31-37: -

- geographical locations are given: 7.31 and 8.22.
- people bring the sufferer to Jesus: 7.32 and 8.22.
- he takes him away from the crowd: 7.33 and 8.23.
- he uses spittle: 7.33 and 8.23.
- the effects of the cure are described in three phases: 7.35 and 8.25;
- Jesus commands silence: 7.36 and 8.26.

Unusually there is no mention of demons or faith in either story. This is not to say that there was no faith; it is implicit, both in the crowd and in the sufferers. Mark's point is that faith opens eyes and ears to the power of God at work in the person of Jesus.

There are differences also: -

- with the deaf man, the cure is immediate (7.35);
- with the blind man, it is gradual (8.23-25), the only such case in the Gospels.

It may be that Mark is recording two separate events, not local variants of the one, and sees the healing of the deaf and the blind as a fulfilment of Isaiah: 'On that day the deaf shall hear... and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.' (29.18)

More significantly perhaps, the story is a link between what precedes and what follows. What precedes was about the "blindness" of the disciples: 'Do you have eyes, and fail to see?' (v.18) What follows is about their gradual growth in faith (v.28) - gradual like the healing of the blind man - culminating in Peter's 'You are the Messiah.' (v.29) Here faith is seen as a process. The stages of this story correspond to the stages of the one that follows: -

- Jesus moves away from a populated area, vv.23a, 27a;
- he asks a question, vv.23b, 27b;
- he receives an inadequate answer, vv.24, 28;
- Jesus takes the initiative again, vv.25a, 29a;
- full sight (understanding) is given, vv.25b, 29b.

For Jesus, to see means to understand: Mark 7.18.

It is surely not a coincidence that the healing is described as taking place in Bethsaida, ‘the city of... Peter.’ (John 1.44) But Mark, in describing it as a ‘village’ (v.23), although it had a large population, may be revealing his ignorance of geography, or perhaps has deliberately located the event there in order to create a link with Peter because of v.29.

In any event, the story is a transition from the instruction of the disciples, starting at Mark 6.34, about Jesus being the Messiah, to a new understanding, starting at 8.31, of the nature of that messiahship as expressed, not in power, but in suffering.

There is a parallel also with the story of the healing of the blind man, Bartimaeus, in Mark 10.46-52. Both stories mark the end of a teaching about Jesus’ messiahship, and include a personal declaration about him. The story of the healing of the blind man is a parable in action about the disciples gradually coming to understand who Jesus was.

Week 6, Thursday

Mark 8.27-22 Peter’s profession of faith in Jesus

27. Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?'

28. And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'

29. He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'

30. And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

32. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 16.13-16, 20 and Luke 9.18-21.

There are similarities between the story of the healing of the blind man and this one: -

- both begin by giving a location: vv.22 and 27
- Jesus moves away from the crowd: vv.23a, 27a
- he asks a question: vv.23b, 27b
- the answer is incomplete: vv.24, 28
- he pursues the matter: vv.25a, 29a
- full recognition follows: vv.25b, 29b

- he commands people to secrecy: vv.26, 30.

The setting of this story is significant. It takes place at Caesarea Philippi, a place associated with the gods of Greece and Rome, which had their shrines that drew their devotees. The god Pan was a primary focus, though Herod the Builder dedicated a temple there to Caesar Augustus which his son, Philip, re-named to include his own and to distinguish it from the port of Caesarea his father had built. It was a predominantly Gentile area. It might seem an unlikely setting for the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah, unless the purpose was, as it were, to wave goodbye to Pan and his companion politician-gods.

There is in this story an abrupt change - so abrupt as to seem artificial - from the incomprehension formerly so strongly emphasized by Mark to Peter's new and emphatic profession of faith in v.29. Did Mark exaggerate the disciples' failure to understand, in order to lend greater force to Peter's breakthrough declaration? Mark seems to have exaggerated Jesus' demands for secrecy up to the point of unrealism, as in 1.44, 7.36, and 8.26. Was this to draw attention dramatically to the turnaround from, 'he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him' (v.30), to, 'He said all this quite openly' (v.32)?

This story marks a defining moment. Until this point, Jesus had been rejected by some, regarded by others as John the Baptist (Mark 6.14), a prophet

(6.15), or Elijah. (6.15) Only the demons had fully acknowledged him. (Mark 1.24, 34; 3.11; 5.7) Now, in this passage, the disciples come to see him as Messiah. Jesus orders them 'not to tell anyone about him.' While Peter now acknowledges him as Messiah, his understanding of that title is distorted; therefore, he and the rest should be silent, as they would have had nothing to communicate about him except their misunderstandings.

The title of Messiah - *Christos* in Greek, Christ in English; the word means *anointed* - was not a divine one, but had royal connotations: -

Jeremiah wrote,

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.' (23.5-6)

Ezekiel wrote similarly,

I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be

prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.’
(34.23-24; also 37.24)

For Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Messiah is a returning King David, the ideal ruler, the shepherd of his people.

In Zechariah, the royal character of the Messiah is modified by the idea that, although victorious, he is humble: -

your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.... He shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. (9.9-10)

By the time of Jesus, this idea had been reduced to the political. Jesus never used the title Messiah of himself, preferring instead Son of Man (Mark 2.10, 28), or Servant. (Mark 10.45)

Mark 8.30 signals the end of the first part of his Gospel. It gives his answer to the question about Jesus, ‘Who then is this?’ (Mark 4.41) He now moves on to the second part, which portrays Jesus as the messiah who will suffer, die and rise again.

Vv.31-32a: Mark has Jesus here foretelling his death and resurrection. There is a second such foretelling in 9.30-32, and a third in 10.32-34. The

background against which it takes place is that of the disciples' constant misunderstanding of who Jesus is, and of the nature of Messiahship. In vv.27-30, there was a breakthrough with Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah.

These predictions have been substantially influenced by the events they describe. While Jesus clearly said to his disciples that he was to suffer, die, and be raised again, it appears that Mark, writing his Gospel many years later, builds into the prediction something of what had happened.

In speaking of the Messiah, Jesus linked the title of Son of Man with that of Suffering Servant (of Isaiah). This is followed – in Mark 8.34 - by the assertion that those who wish to follow Jesus must also be prepared to suffer. The triumphalistic, politicized notions of a Messiah who is a powerful ruler or judge, sitting in glory, Jesus repudiates.

It seems that Mark, in the light of various factors operative in his time, such as conflict between Christians and Jews, gives Jesus' predictions an anti-Jewish slant, adding to them details which draw on events that came after Jesus' statement.

Jesus' understanding of Messiahship may be better understood by referring to Isaiah's passage about the Suffering Servant of the Lord: -

52. 13. See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.

14. Just as there were many who were astonished at him – so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals –

15. so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

53.1. Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

2. For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

3. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

4. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

5. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

6. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way,

and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

8. By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

9. They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him
with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his
days;

through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

11. Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many
righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

12. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the
great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,

and made intercession for the transgressors.
(Isaiah 52.13-53.12)

What did Jesus actually say at this time? Perhaps it was like this: ‘The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and die, and be raised again.’ This was his understanding, and therefore, in contrast to his earlier demands for silence, ‘He said all this quite openly.’ (v.32a) The ‘must’ of v.31 is echoed again in 9.11; in both cases it represents God’s will.

Vv.32b-33: Peter had come to see Jesus as Messiah, but did not yet know what that meant. His misunderstanding gives Jesus the opportunity of emphasizing yet again the difference between their view and his. His repudiation of Peter’s statement is powerful, even savage. It is reminiscent of Jesus saying, ‘Away with you, Satan!’ in Matthew 4.10, at the end of his temptations in the desert. The rebuke was intended for the disciples’ ears: ‘turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter.’ One can’t help feeling sorry for Peter; he must have felt crushed. Did Jesus have to be so hard on him? Could he not have found a way of rejecting the idea without wounding Peter so deeply?

There may perhaps be something comically absurd in Peter’s “rebuking” Jesus, telling him what his mission should be, as if he knew best. Or was it that he was afraid, thinking, ‘If that’s what happens to Jesus, they’ll get me, too’?

On reflection, how understandable is the disciples' misunderstanding! Who would have expected a suffering saviour? Who could have expected God to become man, not to command and control, but to serve and suffer? The disciples' expectation is how most people see God - a Supreme Lord, in full control, ruling with sovereignty, putting matters right, settling injustices by the assertion of omnipotent power. But God-as-Superman disempowers humanity. Perhaps that is why Jesus rejects such a view so emphatically. Jesus, the human being, is the embodiment of God. He is God-in-humanity, humanity-in-God. He is God's way of saying, 'It's humanity that matters.' God the Sufferer empowers humanity. Is the whole human race for the past two thousand years in a slow learners' class, still making the same mistake as the disciples, still waiting for God to intervene like Superman to rescue us from our difficulties? Such a view of God becomes impossible after Auschwitz.

It may also be said that the disciples' view of God is a masculine image. The God their Messiah suggests is perhaps the ultimate symbol of male assertiveness and self-sufficiency. The God revealed in Jesus comes in weakness; he suffers and dies like the rest of humanity. He is 'one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.' (Hebrews 4.15) The God that Jesus reveals has a feminine dimension.

God in Jesus may also be called God-who-fails. The Gospel account of Jesus' mission is far from

being a success story. He failed to persuade even his own family, and his disciples deserted him. ‘He came to his own and his own received him not.’ (John 1.11) Perhaps the commonest of all human experiences is that of failure. And Jesus has been there before us.

Mark’s constant stress on the disciples’ misunderstanding of Jesus may have been his way of asking the readers’ questions for them. Is Jesus a teacher, an exorcist, a prophet, a healer, Elijah returned, Son of David, Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, or Messiah? What does his self-designated title of Son of Man mean? Mark raises these questions through the literary device of the disciples’ misunderstanding, thereby enabling him to say, in effect, ‘Yes, Jesus is all of those. But he’s more than any or all of them.’ So, who then, is Jesus, in the final analysis? Mark’s answer is, ‘the Son of God.’ (1.1)

Week 6, Friday

Mark 8.34-9.1 Carrying the cross after Jesus

34. He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

35. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it.

36. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

37. Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

38. Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

9.1. And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.’

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 16.24-28 and Luke 9.23-27.

This passage is generally regarded as a collection of sayings, spoken elsewhere, and inserted here by Mark who saw it as an appropriate context. The message is: as Christ, so also the Christian.

V.34: The expression, ‘take up their cross,’ may or may not be a reference to Jesus’ crucifixion. It may refer to a Jewish penitential practice whereby a person was anointed, or marked, by a cross (+) or T (the Hebrew letter *tau*) as a sign of conversion and dedication. (There is a relic of this in the Catholic practice of marking the forehead with ashes on Ash Wednesday as a sign of penance.) But crucifixion was not uncommon under Roman rule. For Jesus’ hearers, reference to it would not be a literary cliché but a possibility which would fill them with dread and fear, since crucifixion was, and was intended to

be, humiliating, painful and prolonged. In either case, the phrase means that, unless a person is prepared to commit themselves to God, they cannot be a disciple of Jesus.

Vv.35, 38: The phrases ‘for the sake of the Gospel,’ and, ‘of my words’ in v.38, and ‘when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels,’ also in v.38, are almost certainly later additions.

V.38: The phrase ‘this adulterous and sinful generation’ refers to infidelity to God, of which adultery was a symbol. In Jeremiah, Israel is rebuked for it: ‘you have the forehead of a whore, you refuse to be ashamed.’ (3.3)

The passage as a whole underlines forgetfulness of self for the sake of following Jesus as the one who leads us to God. Its message is very different from philosophies of self-improvement, or a search for spiritual enlightenment, or a feel-good factor. Jesus is looking, not for dabbling dilettantes, but for committed followers. The focus of the passage is not on a teaching, a wisdom, or an ideal, but a person; not on the self, but on the Other, namely, God. Its motivation is not knowledge, but love. The least intelligent person is capable of it, because it is an act, not of the intellect, but of the will. It orientates the follower outwards, beyond the limitations of the self. And it is this forgetfulness of self which secures and saves the self. What benefit will it be to a person

to gain everything, even the whole world, at the cost of their life, their self, their integrity? By letting go of the self for the sake of another, one discovers the self: ‘It is in giving that we receive...’

9.1: This phrase, repeated closely in Matthew 16.27 and Luke 9.27, finds echoes elsewhere: -

‘Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place’ (Luke 21.32);

‘the Day is drawing nearer’ (Hebrews 10.25);

‘brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short.... the present form of this world is passing away.’ (1 Corinthians 7.29, 31)

And Mark has Jesus say it again, ‘Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.’ (13.30) In both cases, an emphatic form, ‘Truly I tell you...’ reinforces the expression. Seemingly only a moment later, Jesus was to add, ‘About that day or hour no one knows...’ (Mark 13.32), but that does not undermine what he had said.

There was a widespread belief among early Christians that the world was coming to an end, that Jesus would return in their lifetime and bring everything to completion; they would not ‘taste death’ until it happened. This shaped their outlook on many matters, such as marriage and celibacy, as in 1 Corinthians 7.

Clearly, that did not happen, and that fact must also have had an impact. Is it possible that Jesus simply got it wrong? He said that ‘the mustard seed... is the smallest of all the seeds.’ (Matthew 13.31-32) It isn’t, but that hardly matters, since he had not come to teach botany. Speaking of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus said, ‘they will not leave within you one stone upon another.’ (Luke 19.44) But they did; they are still there today in the Western Wall where Jews gather to pray. That’s hardly an issue; what Jesus said was substantially true – the Temple was destroyed – and his (or Mark’s) wording in this instance may have been simply a rhetorical flourish. But if he was speaking of the world ending in the lifetime of his generation, when it didn’t, that would be an error on a different scale of significance. It is difficult to work out, but is worth exploring. ‘The truth shall make you free.’ (John 8.32)

One side-effect was to suggest that the Christian community, the church, is ‘the kingdom of God... come with power.’ That misunderstanding has had damaging effects in the life of the Christian community down to the present time, lending itself to the cultivation of power in place of service, to the church becoming self-serving instead of Gospel-serving. The church is not the kingdom; the kingdom is not the church. The kingdom is wider than it, and the church is only a sign pointing to it. When the church points to itself, instead of to the kingdom, it has nothing to say, and is not listened to. When it

sees itself as an end in itself, instead of as a means to an end, it has lost its way. Jesus did not preach himself but the kingdom of God. In the fifty years between 1960 and 2010, some forty per cent of Latin Americans, formerly Catholics, have become Protestant. Is that because Catholics were offered the church, while Protestants offered them Jesus?

Week 6, Saturday

Mark 9.2-13 The Transfiguration and the coming of Elijah

2. Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them,

3. and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.

4. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

5. Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’

6. He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

7. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him!’

8. Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

10. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

11. Then they asked him, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?'

12. He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt?'

13. But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.'

There are passages parallel to this or otherwise related to it in Matthew 17.1-13, Luke 9.28-36; and 2 Peter 1.16-18.

V.2: Traditionally, the transfiguration is said to have taken place on Mount Tabor, but there are difficulties about that. There was a village on its summit in Jesus' time, so he and Peter, James and John would not there be 'apart, by themselves.' Neither is Tabor 'a high mountain' - it is only 570 metres in height - though it may seem so, as its slopes are steep and it stands in isolation on the Plain of Esdraelon.

Peter, James and John are with Jesus in key moments of his ministry: -

- at the raising to life of the daughter of Jairus, (Mark 5.37);
- they question him about when the end of things will come (Mark 13.3);
- in the garden at Gethsemane (Mark 14.33).

The story alludes to a key narrative of the Hebrew Bible, the revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai: 'Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain.' (Exodus 24.15-16, 18) The cloud is a symbol of God's presence: 'The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of God filled the tabernacle.... For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle.' (See Exodus 40.34-38 and 13.21-22) Peter's 'dwellings' in v.5 employ the same word as the 'tent' here; the *Douai Bible* uses the word 'tabernacle.'

Vv.2-3: The 'six days' of Exodus 24.16 may be reflected in Mark's 'six days later,' though the phrase is probably meant in the first instance to serve as a link to the events that took place at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8.27-29), and the passage itself a confirmation of them.

‘He was transfigured before them.’ He was changed in appearance, his clothes dazzling white, like those of the young man in the empty tomb on the morning of the Resurrection. (Mark 16.5)

V.4: The reference to Elijah and Moses is significant. Key figures of the Hebrew Bible representing respectively the prophets and the law, their presence serves as confirmation of Jesus and his mission; their absence at the end of the narrative suggests that they have given way to Jesus: ‘when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.’ (v.8) Jesus is greater than they and is all anyone needs.

Vv.5-8: Peter is again taking trying to “manage” Jesus. His heart is in the right place, but he cannot resist the temptation to sort people out “for their own good.” He is often seen in the Catholic church as an image of the pope or even as the first pope. His words are a reminder of a perennial temptation, to “correct” Jesus, to nudge him in the right direction, to tell him who he is and what his mission should be (Mark 8.32b), to try to capture his vision in a structure. (Religious people sometimes show a desire to manage people’s lives for them in ways they would resent deeply and reject firmly if the roles were reversed.) But you cannot capture, or analyse, a mystery, whether in an institution, or a system of ideas such as a dogmatic definition or a theology; and the attempt to do so is idolatrous. Peter wanted to make the mystical experience last, to

take hold of it and lock it up safely, but it is not amenable to that. However, he may be excused, as ‘He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.’ (v.6) (The Douai Bible has, ‘he knew not what he said,’ while another translation gives, ‘He hardly knew what to say.’) He, James, and John had been in communion with God, an overwhelming experience. When the vision had passed, ‘they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.’ The Gospel says no more; perhaps there was silence, an end to words. But Peter remembered,

For he [Jesus] received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard his voice coming from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1.17-18)

The voice from the cloud evokes memories of the baptism of Jesus: ‘a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”’ (Mark 1.11) It recalls also Isaiah on God’s servant, ‘Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.’ (42.1)

V.9: Until Jesus had risen, the disciples could proclaim only their own view of the Messiah, which was not that of Jesus, so he ‘ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen.’

While Mark looks back to the Hebrew Bible, he also looks forward to the passion of Jesus in Gethsemane, on the Mount of Olives; there also Peter, James and John accompany Jesus. (9.2; 14.33) The disciples did not know what to say to him (9.6; 14.40); and Jesus, spoken of by God as his Son in 9.7, speaks to God as his Father in 14.36. The transfiguration is a message to the disciples, a foretaste of the resurrection.

Is this story a description of a visible and audible event or of an inner experience? Virtually everything points to its being a mystical encounter experienced by Jesus and the disciples. It describes something analogous to the experiences of some saints; in those experiences, time, place and language are of no consequence; the experience transcends those. The story is an example of apocalyptic writing. To say that is not to say that it is a figment of the imagination, or mere fiction. The experience may be real. How does one describe the indescribable, except by using the language of imagery? And what imagery are writers most likely to use, except what is familiar to them and their readers from their own tradition? So Mark drew on the imagery of the Hebrew Bible in an attempt to say something rather than nothing about an experience which is essentially subjective and not amenable to critical verification. ‘The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice... light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright of heart. Rejoice in the Lord, you

righteous, and give thanks to his holy name.’ (Psalm 97. 1, 11-12)

A vision need not necessarily be visible to the human eye to be real, any more than a healing has to be physical to be real. The message is one of divine approval for Jesus, the Suffering Servant who is the messiah, his beloved Son.

The passage concludes with the familiar injunction to silence, and a further hint - the second - about Jesus rising from the dead; the first was in Mark 8.31. Belief in a general resurrection of the dead at the end of the world was common in Jesus’ time. What his disciples could not understand was his particular resurrection after his death. The passage underlies the idea that Jesus’ resurrection is the time when they will understand; it is the moment of breakthrough.

Saint Ephraem of Syria wrote: -

Moses and Elijah rejoice to see the Son of God standing before them in human form, someone they had never known.

Peter, James, and John rejoice to see the Son of Man revealed to them in divine form, someone they had never known.

The prophets look to the apostles, the apostles to the prophets.

The authors of the Old Testament behold the authors of the New.

Moses, the steward of God's mysteries, sees Peter who will become the Vicar of Christ.

Elijah, who ascended to heaven in a chariot of fire, sees John whose head will rest on Jesus at the Last Supper. (*Homily on the Transfiguration*, para. 9.)

V.10: The disciples – for once! – did what Jesus told them. But among themselves they questioned what rising from the dead could mean. How strange then, that, when it came, it took them so much by surprise!

Vv.11-13: Elijah was the great prophet of the past; no other is mentioned so often in the New Testament. Of him the scriptures said, 'How glorious you were, Elijah... whose glory is equal to yours?' (Sirach 48.4) There was a widespread belief that he would come again before the Messiah. Malachi wrote: 'I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.' (4.5) If Jesus is the Messiah, the disciples ask where Elijah is. In v.13, Jesus is understood as implying that John the Baptist was Elijah. The two were similar in their presence in the desert, their sudden entry on the scene (1 Kings 17), their dress (2 Kings 1.8), and in the style of their preaching.

Jesus implies that, just as John was executed, so will he. John is the forerunner of Jesus in life and in death. 'After John was arrested,' Jesus had said, "the time is fulfilled.' (Mark 1.14-15)

The end of the passage, ‘as it is written about him’ may be an addition, either by Mark or by another hand, because there were no scriptures which foretold that John would be put to death.

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6.1-6; 16-18 Almsgiving, prayer and fasting

Jesus said: -

1. Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.
2. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

3. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

4. so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

6. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

16. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

17. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

18. so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

This passage is used also in Week 11, Wednesday.

Alms-giving, prayer and fasting were traditional elements of Jewish piety. But they were seen as pointing to things that were greater and more fundamental: -

Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with justice. A little with justice is better than wealth with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold. For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. (Obadiah 12.8-9a)

Isaiah made a similar point, extending the meaning of fasting to give it wide social application, beyond an act of personal piety: -

Day after day my people seek me and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness,
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.
They say, 'Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress your workers.
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a fist.
Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday. (58.2-10)

Jesus took this up and continued it.

Here he is concerned that these should not be done for the sake of drawing attention to oneself and winning approval; that would empty them of value in the sight of God. Three times the key phrase,

‘your Father who sees in secret will reward you’ (vv.4, 6 and 18) is used to underline this.

Christian tradition has built on this Jewish foundation – Jews are our older brothers and sisters in faith – and extended it in new situations. Some extracts from the writings of the saints will illustrate this point: -

Do not limit the benefits of fasting merely to abstinence from food, for a true fast means refraining from evil. Loose every unjust bond, put away resentment against your neighbours, and forgive them their offences. Do not let your fasting lead to wrangling and strife. You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother or sister; you abstain from wine, but not from insults, so all the labour of your fast is useless. (Saint Basil the Great, *On Fasting*, 1.10)

What the Christian should be doing at all times should be done now [in Lent] with greater zeal and devotion, so that the Lenten fast enjoined by the apostles may be observed not simply by abstinence from food but above all by the renunciation of sin. (Pope Saint Leo the Great, *Sermon 6 on Lent 1-2*; PL 54.287)

Let us extend to the poor and the afflicted a more open-handed generosity, so that God may be thanked through many voices, and the relief of the needy supported by our fasting. No act of

devotion on the part of the faithful gives God more pleasure than that which is lavished on his poor. Where he finds charity with its loving concern, there he recognizes the reflection of his own fatherly care. (Pope Saint Leo the Great, *Sermon 10* in Lent 4-5; PL 54.300-301)

‘Fasting is the soul of prayer; mercy is the lifeblood of fasting.’ (Saint Peter Chrysologus) Voluntary fasting from food is an act of solidarity with the poor, who fast every day of necessity. Fasting is a reminder to ourselves that following Christ on our way to God is not something that’s just in the head; it’s for the body, too. We follow Christ in every aspect of our life. Fasting is an act of self-discipline, a choice of self-denial, which strengthens us to fight against self-indulgence. To be able to say *No* to oneself opens up the possibility of saying *Yes* to others.

Repentance and conversion are integral to the Gospel, so the tradition of penance, while including the triad, goes beyond it. For example: -

Fast from indifference, self-centredness, not caring. Give your family extra love each day.
Fast from judging others. Before making judgments, recall how we wish Jesus to overlook our faults.
Fast from discouragement. Hold on to Jesus’ promise that he has a mission for us. Whatever we give up for Lent, don’t let it be hope.

Fast from complaining, from self-pity. When we are about to complain, let us stop and recall the good things that happened to us in our life.

Fast from resentment and bitterness. Work on forgiving those who may have hurt us.

Fast from spending too much money on ourselves, from self-indulgence. Set out to reduce our personal spending and to give instead to the poor.

Fast from beating down on yourself; you're better than you think you are; take the risk of loving yourself. Jesus said, 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'

In Lent, we don't just give up, we take up. We give up sin; we take up prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We take up repentance – and grow!

Pope Paul VI, in an Apostolic Constitution, *Paenitemini*, dated 17 February 1966, wrote: -

Penance... in the Old Testament, is a religious, personal act which has as its aim love and surrender to God.

'Repent and believe in the Gospel': these words constitute, in a way, a compendium of the whole Christian life.

Since the church is closely linked to Christ, the penitence of the individual Christian also has an intimate relationship of its own with the whole ecclesial community.

The duty of doing penance is motivated above all by participation in the sufferings of Christ - the necessity of an asceticism which chastises the body and brings it into subjection is affirmed with special insistence by the example of Christ himself.

The church.... insists first of all that the virtue of penitence be exercised in persevering faithfulness to the duties of one's state in life, in the acceptance of difficulties arising from one's work and from human coexistence, in a patient bearing of the trials of earthly life and of the utter insecurity which pervades it. (End of quotations from *Paenitemini*.)

In the spirit of the above, Saint Paul wrote that,

I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith to know him and the power of his resurrection and (the) sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (From Philippians 3.8-11)

Lent

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Luke 9.22-25 Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection

Jesus said to his disciples: -

22. 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'

23. Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.'

24. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

25. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 16.24-27 and Mark 8.31-38.

V.22: This was the first time in Luke that Jesus spoke of his coming suffering, death and resurrection; the other two are in 9.44-45 and 18.31-34. Similarly, Matthew and Mark, the other two synoptic Gospels, also have three each.

Jesus elsewhere speaks in similar tones: -

‘I have a baptism of fire with which I am to be baptized and how I wish it were already kindled!’ (Luke 12.50)

He said the Son of Man, ‘must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation.’ (Luke 17.25)

‘Then he [Jesus] took them [the twelve] aside and said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.”’ (Luke 18.31)

After his resurrection, in Luke 24, Jesus three times referred back to what he had earlier said on the subject: -

The angel said, ‘Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again’ (vv.6-7);

‘Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ (v.26);

‘Then he [Jesus] said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”’ (v.44)

Vv.23-24: The message is a summary of the Gospel, renunciation of self and the following of

Jesus. Addressed to all disciples, it is repeated many times: -

‘Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it’ (Matthew 10.38-39);

‘Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14.27);

‘Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it’ (Luke 17.33);

‘Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.’ (John 12.25)

The point is impossible to miss, though challenging – at the least – to apply. Like the commandment to love God and neighbour, it is easy to understand, demanding to do.

The phrase in v.23 ‘take up their cross daily...’ likely came from later use in the Christian community. Jesus himself would hardly have used it: it would have been difficult to understand for people who saw crucifixion as a once-off fatal punishment, not as a daily ascetical exercise. Alternatively, it might simply have terrified people and put them off following Jesus.

V.25: This verse was for many years the opening line of mission sermons on the first night, and it set

the tone for everything that followed. It sets an unmistakable challenge about priorities – what matters most? It calls for serious soul-searching followed by commitment.

Lent

Friday after Ash Wednesday

Matthew 9.14-15 Fasting at the appropriate time

14. Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’

15. And Jesus said to them, ‘The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 2.18-22 and Luke 5.33-39.

V.14: Fasting was one of the pillars of Jewish devotional life, the other two being prayer and almsgiving. It probably surprised the disciples of John and the Pharisees, maybe even shocked them, that Jesus’ disciples, apparently, did not fast. What could be the explanation?

V.15: Jesus’ reply points in a different direction, moving the question away from fasting towards

asking them to consider who he might be. No one fasts at a wedding ceremony, he said. He was the bridegroom, so why would his followers fast?

His hearers would have been aware of the significance of Jesus' allusion to a bridegroom. They would have known that in Jewish tradition, the analogy of Messianic times to a marriage-feast was common. The prophets had spoken of God as Israel's bridegroom:-

‘Your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name’ (Isaiah 54.5);

Jeremiah calls Israel to repent, saying, ‘I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride’ (2.2);

There is probably a link here with John 3.29, where the Baptist said, ‘The friend of the bridegroom [John himself], who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's [Jesus'] voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.’ Jesus is the ‘bridegroom,’ so it is a time for rejoicing. John is happy that his mission is reaching its fulfilment. His use of the messianic image of bride and bridegroom recalls that of a marriage as symbolic of the relationship between God and his people. There is an allusion to it also by Jesus in the parable of the bridesmaids in Matthew 25.1-13.

Messianic times were seen as a time of feasting, when God himself would prepare a banquet for his

people. Isaiah speaks of a banquet for all peoples, in which God is the host and the best of food and drink is prepared for the guests. But, further than that, God removes a burden of some kind from all people (“the veil”) - perhaps death - and restores harmony, removing tears and shame: -

On this mountain, for all peoples, Yahweh Sabaoth is preparing a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines, of succulent food, of well-strained wines.

On this mountain, he has destroyed the veil which used to veil all peoples, the pall enveloping all nations;

he has destroyed death for ever. Lord Yahweh has wiped away the tears from every cheek; he has taken his people's shame away everywhere on earth, for Yahweh has spoken. (Isaiah 25.6-8)

By hinting that he is the bridegroom and that feasting rather than fasting is appropriate while he is present, Jesus is leaving his hearers to draw the conclusion that he is the Messiah who has come among them.

There is also a hint of his coming passion when he says that ‘The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’ (v.15)

Christianity is a religion of incarnation: Jesus not only was with us; he is with us. And so, rejoicing and feasting are close to the living of the Christian life. The English Catholic writer, Gilbert Keith Chesterton (or was it Hilaire Belloc?) wrote, ‘Wheree’er the Catholic sun doth shine, there’s music and laughter and good red wine. At least I have always found it so, Benedicamus Domino.’

And Saint Francis of Assisi used to say that, on Christmas Day, even the walls should have meat rubbed into them, so great was the cause for celebration. For a Christian, every day gives grounds for celebration because God is *always* with us – even if we are not with God.

In this passage, Jesus did not give a straight answer to a straight question. Indeed, he rarely did: one estimate is that, in the four Gospels, he gives a straight answer to a straight question just three times. What he did here was to take a question of secondary importance and give it an answer of primary importance. The question was about fasting; his answer was to direct their attention to who he was. In effect, he asked his questioners a question – answering one question with another was a favourite technique of his, probably to get people to think – namely, ‘Who am I? Am I the bridegroom spoken of by the prophets? Are my disciples not fasting because, with my presence, the time of the messianic banquet has come?’

Jesus was a teacher who did not feed answers into people's heads to save them the bother of thinking. Very likely he knew that an answer which people discover for themselves has a deeper and more lasting impact than one they are served up on a plate, leaving them with nothing to do but nod their heads in assent. So his reply is an attempt to get them to think. Not everyone likes that; sometimes people are like sleeping dogs, they prefer to be left to lie in comfort.

Lent

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Luke 5.27-32 For whom has Jesus come?

27. After this he [Jesus] went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.'

28. And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

29. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them.

30. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'

31. Jesus answered, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick;

32. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 9.9-13 and Mark 2.13-17.

V.27: In the parallel passage, Matthew calls Levi Matthew; it is generally thought to have been himself.

V.28: The phrase ‘got up, left everything, and followed him’ is virtually a formula in these invitations from Jesus to those who became his first disciples: Luke 5.11, 28; 18.22, 28; Mark 1.20; 2.14; 10.28 and Matthew 4.20, 22.

V.29: Accepting an invitation to a meal is universally seen as an opening to companionship, an ice-breaker in frozen relationships. Jesus would have been well aware of the likely reaction to his acceptance of it: the “virtuous” complain.

The Pharisees and scribes saw the tax collectors as sinners and shunned them. Theirs was a guillotine approach: ‘You’re on the wrong side of the line; you’re not one of us; you’re out.’ They stopped at that point and went no further.

Jesus saw no less clearly that the tax collectors were sinners. (Indeed they were: they were collaborators with an enemy army of occupation, and they exploited their own people in the interests of their personal enrichment.) But he didn’t stop

there. He saw not only what they were but what they could be – with the help of some human solidarity. So he engaged with them.

The result of doing so was that Luke could later say, ‘all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him [Jesus].’ (15.1) *They* listened to him; the scribes and Pharisees did not. And it went further: in Luke 19.7, Jesus invited himself to dine at the house of another tax-collector, Zacchaeus, who had repented of his actions and made generous reparation for them. (19.8) By going to meet the sinners on their ground Jesus had won a hearing and won them.

V.30: Luke uses the word ‘others’ to describe those whom Matthew and Mark explicitly call ‘sinners.’

Vv.31-32: Jesus tells his questioners that they have missed the point: he has come to those who need him and are open to him. He has not come to invite sinners to become Pharisees. Those who see themselves as having made the grade, as being virtuous, are closed to him; they don’t get what he is about. They are too full of themselves to have room for him.

These two verses could be called Jesus’ mission statement. In them, as elsewhere, Jesus takes a question about a matter of secondary importance and

uses it to give a teaching about a matter of primary importance.

Lent, Week 1

Monday

Matthew 25.31-46 The basis of judgment

Jesus said to his disciples: -

31. When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

32. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

33. and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

34. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

35. for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

36. I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

37. Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

38. And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

39. And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

40. And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

41. Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;

42. for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

43. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

44. Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

45. Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

46. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

One of the obvious features of this passage is how much repetition there is in it; this is in contrast to the rest of the Gospels which are brief and to the point. Is it that Jesus is re-iterating the same basic point several times, as if to say, 'This is essential; make sure you get it right, even if you forget everything else'?

Bishop Donal Murray, commenting on the passage, states,

In the judgment scene in Matthew's Gospel the one thing that both sheep and goats have in common is their utter surprise. They had not realized, or had not admitted to themselves, the real meaning of their actions. The Lord's judgment is a complete overturning of expectations.... This is a replaying on a cosmic scale of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. [Luke 18.9-14] The Pharisee was an expert on the law of God but he had seriously misunderstood it. The tax collector had broken the law, but he understood that its essence was to be found in the mercy of God. (*Where the Heart is: How the Gospel transforms our Lives*, Veritas, Dublin, 2014, pp.137-138)

This is a parable of the kingdom; there is nothing churchy about it – there isn't a mention of religious observances. The kingdom of God is wider than the church. The church does not exist for its own sake; it is not an end in itself. It is a signpost, pointing to the kingdom. 'There are many whom God has and the church does not have. And there are many whom the church has, and God does not have them.' (Saint Augustin, *On Baptism*, 5.27.38; CSEL 53.174-175)

The text is a parable of judgment, an unpopular theme at the present time, where it is sometimes assumed that everyone will "go to heaven" without a

judgment. Matthew, especially but not exclusively among Gospel writers, repeatedly speaks of God's judgment: -

10.15: 'Truly, I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town;'

11.24: 'on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you;'

12.36-37: 'I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned;'

13.40-42: Just as weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth;'

13.49-50: 'Thus it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth;'

16.27: 'The Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what he has done;'

18.9: 'If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to

enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire;’

19.28: ‘Truly, I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’

It is impossible to airbrush these texts aside without devaluing the Gospel. It is noticeable that they all refer to what people have *done* for their fellow human beings, not what they have said, believed or thought.

Who is “in” the kingdom of God? Jesus said, ‘Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’ (Matthew 12.50) Anyone who cares about truth, goodness, freedom, justice or beauty; anyone who cares about people, especially outcasts or the needy, regardless of race, class, colour, creed, sexual orientation, economic or social condition; anyone who is compassionate – they are in the kingdom of God. Those who unite rather than divide, who build up rather than knock down, who include rather than exclude, who give rather than take – they are all part of God’s kingdom.

Some examples come to mind: a journalist who cares enough about the truth to be politically incorrect; those who are good listeners, enabling someone who is burdened to talk out their problems;

those who work for community where there is individualism or selfishness; those with the moral courage to go against the flow of current opinion; those who try to create beauty in the middle of ugliness, such as planting a tree in a slum. Jesus said of such people that they are ‘not far from the kingdom of God.’ (Mark 12.34) The kingdom of heaven is close at hand – as close as the hand that serves.

Those rejected at the judgment did not do anyone any harm; they just looked after number one. They get what they sought – themselves – an eternity on their own. Living without love, they were already in hell – without knowing it.

The future lies with those who can give hope to humanity, those people of all faiths, and of none, who care about their fellow human beings. In the parable, Jesus’ point is that the basis of our judgment by God is whether we have, or have not, recognized and respected the humanity of the other. He says it three times to make sure we get it.

God will more readily forgive our sins against him, whom we don’t see, than against our fellow humans, whom we do see: ‘Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.’ (1 John 4.20) Most of our sins against our neighbour are sins of omission – not the wrong we do but the good we don’t do. The fulfilment of human needs is a sign that the kingdom

of God is present; it is helping to make the world the kind of place God wants it to be. We express our commitment to bringing that about every time we say in the Our Father: 'Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done.' (Matthew 6.10)

Lent, Week 1

Tuesday

Matthew 6.7-15 On prayer

Jesus said: -

7. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

8. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

9. Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

10. Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

11. Give us this day our daily bread.

12. And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13. And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

14. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;

15. but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 11.2-4.

V.8: ‘Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.’ Prayer of petition often sounds like trying to cajole God into doing what we want. Jesus is saying God already knows what we want, so there’s no need to bombard him. Prayer of petition sometimes comes close to superstition, which is trying to subordinate the divine to the human. Maybe prayer of petition should be about bringing our will into line with God’s; then we will get what we ask. ‘We do not pray in order to change a divine decree, but, by asking, people deserve to receive what the all-powerful God has decreed from all eternity to give them.’ (Saint Gregory the Great, quoted by Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, II, question 83, article 2.) That sounds a bit like shooting an arrow, following it, drawing a ring in the ground around it, and then announcing ‘Bull’s eye!’ Meister Eckhart said something similar, ‘If God does not want what I want, then I must want what God wants.’ Both are clever, and maybe true. But they are very poor consolation to, for example, a mother who prays in vain for her child’s recovery.

Matthew has seven petitions in his rendering of the Our Father. He also has seven parables (13.3ff.); forgiveness is to be given seventy-seven times (18.22); and there are seven “Woes” for the

Pharisees. (23.13ff.) It may be that his version – substantially longer than Luke’s - has its origin in liturgical use in the growing Christian community.

V.9: God is here spoken of as Father. In John, the word Abba, meaning Daddy or Papa, is used twice of God. (1.17-18; 1 John 4.9) Here Matthew adds ‘in heaven,’ maybe because people felt that Abba was excessively familiar. Luke 11.2 simply has ‘Father.’

Thinking of God as father was already part of Jewish tradition. In Hosea, God says, ‘When Israel was a child I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt.... I was like someone who lifts an infant close against his cheek; stooping down to him I gave him his food.’ (11.2-4) And in Deuteronomy (1.31), ‘The Lord carried you as a man carries his child, all along the road you travelled...’ God is also thought of as a mother, in Isaiah, where God asks, ‘Does a mother forget her baby at the breast or fail to cherish the child of her womb? Yet, even if these forget, I will never forget you.’ (49.14-15)

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks of God as Father. Some fear this as an endorsement of patriarchy. Thus the American theologian, Mary Daly wrote, ‘If God is male, then the male is God.’ (Quoted by James M. Byrne, *God: Thoughts in an Age of Uncertainty*, Continuum, London, 2001, p.67) God, of course, is neither male nor female.

Patriarchy elevates domination and control into guiding principles: -

‘the patriarchal urge to dominate and control may be understood as an attempt to reduce the awesomeness of life to manageable proportions. Our problem now is that we consider the primary reality to be that which has ensued from our reductionist exploits. And this is beginning to prove deeply dissatisfying to the human spirit. Intuitively we know there is so much more to understand and experience.’ (Diarmuid Ó Murchú, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1997, p.29)

Patriarchy makes God into *the* role model for male self-sufficiency: -

The single, greatest betrayal of the vision of Christ has been the manner in which the feminine face of God has been subjugated and rendered secondary. (Linda Rainberry and Patrick Treacy, *Integritas*, p.35)

Feminism opposes machismo and patriarchy, not masculinity.

Patriarchy has a hierarchical mindset: -

The hierarchical worldview is classically male and patriarchal. It understands the organization

of life in terms of more advanced forms of life building on lower forms and become increasingly rare as the level of complexity and knowledge heightens. Power and decision-making is enjoyed by the more advanced, and is dispensed downwards in a manner that subjugates the lower orders upon which the hierarchy has evolved. (Linda Rainberry and Patrick Treacy, *Integritas*, p.11)

The Church... has... declined greatly by placing a false God, namely, the clerical power of the institution, before the honouring of the movement of the Spirit. (Rainberry and Treacy, *ibid.*, p.29)

Diarmuid Ó Murchú wrote, ‘Our human desire for neatness, precision, and clarity seems to be a misleading delusion, an inherited “controlling” device of the patriarchal mindset...’ (*Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1997, p.29) This is especially noticeable in the creation of dogmatic formulae. But ‘... patriarchal dualisms and distinctions are seen for what they really are: destructive, controlling devices that fragment and alienate.’ (Ó Murchú, p.77)

The term “Abba” for God is adult language, not baby-talk. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, writing in *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the*

Teaching of Jesus, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1979), states: -

Jesus' conception of the fatherhood of God is critical of human patriarchy.' (p.114)

Far from being a sexist symbol, the "father" was for Jesus a weapon chosen to combat what we call "sexism." (p.103)

In his setting, Jesus' use of the term 'Father' meant something similar to 'mother' in developed modern society. (p.81)

The Father is spoken of as 'Our'. In Christian prayer, we always use a plural, e.g., 'We make this prayer through Christ our Lord', not, 'I make this prayer through Christ my Lord.' We pray as members of a community of faith; we don't do solo runs. There is one exception: when we confess our sins, we take responsibility for them; we don't try to offload the blame onto someone else. We say, 'I am sorry for *my* sins...' 'through *my* fault...'

'Hallowed by your name': the name of God is synonymous with God. Jews commonly use the word *Hashem*, meaning name, for God. God is present wherever his name is invoked, and to call on God is to invite his presence. The phrase is like saying, 'May you, God, be held holy.'

V.10: 'Your kingdom come.' May God's plan for the universe be accomplished. May God's rule be present. The 'kingdom' has been described loosely as the world as God would like it to be. To pray this

verse implies a commitment on our part to help bring it about.

‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ This is essentially a repetition of the previous prayer. Like the previous phrase, it is not simply a wish but a commitment. To do God’s will is, for Matthew, the special mark of the disciple of Jesus, e.g., in 5.19, 7.21 and 12.50. ‘Your will be done’ was the commitment of Jesus to God his father in the garden of Gethsemane (26.42) But it involves more than human cooperation. Essentially it is God’s work, and it has a more than human character since it applies to heaven and to earth.

The will of God is not to be spoken of lightly, as if we could say at the drop of a hat what God wishes or thinks about anything that comes into our head. ‘The will of God is a curse for demons [and slaves]; it is law for the servants of God, and freedom for the children of God.’ (Alexei Khomiakov)

It seems appropriate to interpret the phrase, ‘Thy kingdom come’ as also expressing a wish for the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ.

The first three petitions are prayers that God’s will may be done; the next four are prayers for meeting human needs.

V.11: ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’ Give us what we need; we do not ask for luxuries, or even wants, just for needs.

V.13: ‘Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil,’ or ‘Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.’ These are two different ways of saying the same thing. God does not incite us to evil, but he does sometimes put us to the test, just as Jesus himself was tested in the agony of his passion. The test is hard to endure while we undergo it, but ultimately it is a sign of God’s favour and brings a blessing. But we pray that evil may not have the victory over us.

Vv.12, 14 and 15: These need to be taken together. V.15 may sound like God playing tit for tat, but there is a sense in which we cannot receive what we are not prepared to give. If we close the door against giving forgiveness, can it be open to receiving it? Giving and receiving are reciprocal: ‘It is in giving that we receive...’ Life is larger than logic.

The Russian Orthodox Archbishop Anthony Bloom says that when we say the Our Father we take our salvation into our hands because we make God’s forgiveness of us conditional on our forgiveness of others. ‘To forgive one’s enemies is the first, the most elementary characteristic of a Christian; failing this we are not Christians at all.’ (*Living Prayer*, DLT, London, 1975, p.31)

In Russian Orthodox tradition, the Lord’s Prayer is occasionally recited backwards: -

Deliver us from evil and lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Your Kingdom come.
Hallowed be your name,
our Father who art in heaven.
(See Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer*, DLT, London, 1975, chapter 2)

In the *Major Life of Saint Francis* by Saint Bonaventure we read that ‘When the friars asked him to teach them how to pray, Francis said, “When you pray, say the Our Father.”’ (Chapter 4, section 3, p.655, in Marion A. Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, Franciscan Press, Quincy College, Illinois 62301-2699, USA)

Saint Francis of Assisi’s paraphrase of the Our Father

Our Father: most holy, our Creator and Redeemer, our Saviour and our Comforter.

Who art in heaven: in the angels and the saints. You give them light so that they may have knowledge, because you, Lord, are light. You inflame them so that they may have love, because you, Lord, are love. You live continually in them and you fill them so that they may be happy, because you, Lord, are the supreme good, the eternal good, and it is from

you all good comes, and without you there is no good.

Hallowed be thy name: may our knowledge of you become ever clearer, so that we may realize the extent of your benefits, the steadfastness of your promises, the sublimity of your majesty and the depth of your judgments.

Thy Kingdom come: so that you may reign in us by your grace and bring us to your Kingdom, where we shall see you clearly, love you perfectly, be happy in your company and enjoy you for ever.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven: that we may love you with our whole heart by always thinking of you; with our whole mind by directing our whole intention towards you and seeking your glory in everything; and with all our strength by spending all our energies and affections of soul and body in the service of your love alone. And may we love our neighbours as ourselves, encouraging all to love you as best we can, rejoicing at the good fortune of others, just as if it were our own, and sympathizing with their misfortunes, while giving offence to no one.

Give us this day our daily bread: your own beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to remind us of the love he showed for us and to help us understand and appreciate it and everything that he did or said or suffered.

And forgive us our trespasses: in your infinite mercy, and by the power of the Passion of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the merits and

the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all your saints.

As we forgive those who trespass against us: and if we do not forgive perfectly, Lord, make us forgive perfectly, so that we may really love our enemies for love of you, and pray fervently to you for them, returning no one evil for evil, anxious only to serve everybody in you.

And lead us not into temptation: hidden or obvious, sudden or unforeseen.

But deliver us from evil: present, past, or future. Amen.

Being sincere with God

Do not say *Father* if you do not behave like a son or daughter.

Do not say *Our* if you live in isolation and selfishness.

Do not say *who art in heaven* if you think only of the things of earth.

Do not say *hallowed be thy name* if you do not honour it.

Do not say *Thy kingdom come* if you confuse God's kingdom with material success.

Do not say *Thy will be done* if you do not accept it when it is burdensome.

Do not say *Give us this day our daily bread* if you are not concerned about people who have no food, education, or means of a decent living.

Do not say *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us* if you maintain anger against your neighbour.

Do not say *Lead us not into temptation* if you intend to continue sinning.

Do not say *deliver us from evil* if you do not fight evil.

Do not say *Amen* if you do not take seriously the words of the *Our Father*. (Anonymous)

Johannes Tauler, the fourteenth century German Dominican mystic said, 'No prayer is as full of love and worship as the sacred *Our Father* which our sovereign master Christ Himself taught to us, and it conduces to true essential prayer better than any other. It is a heavenly prayer, which the blessed sing and meditate upon without ceasing.' (*Meditations on the Life and Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*, Burns, Oates and Washbourne, London, no date, p.84)

Saint Teresa of Ávila was once asked by a person what to do about contemplative prayer. She replied: 'Say the *Our Father* - and spend an hour at it!' And also, in *The Way of Perfection*, she said, 'It is very possible that while you are reciting the *Our Father* or some other vocal prayer, the Lord may raise you to perfect contemplation. By these means His Majesty shows that He listens to the one who speaks to Him.' (Chapter 25, section 1) 'You do much more by saying one word of the *Our Father* from time to time

than by rushing through the entire prayer many times.’ (Chapter 31, section 13)

Lent

Week 1, Wednesday

Luke 11.29-32 The sign of Jonah

29. When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, ‘This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.

30. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation.

31. The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!

32. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!’

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 12.38-42, while Mark 8.11-12 and Matthew 16.1-4 are similar.

V.29a: A sign is a demonstrative wonder which points to the action of God. (Mark 16.20; John 3.2) Jesus himself is such a sign (Luke 2.12, 34), but one that ‘will be opposed.’ (Luke 2.34) In Luke 11.16,

the people kept demanding a sign, though they had just had one. (11.14) The people ask for a sign to indicate when the destruction of the Temple was coming. (Luke 21.7) Herod wanted to see Jesus perform a sign (Luke 23.8), as if he thought of him as a circus performer. It is like putting God in the dock and demanding that he establish his credentials to our satisfaction, like saying that we will accept God – but only on our terms. In Luke 1.18, Zechariah had such an attitude, was punished for it and no sign was given to him. Asking for a sign is close to violating the precept of Deuteronomy, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ (6.16)

Vv.29b-30, 32: Jesus points to the story of Jonah and the fish. The book of Jonah, the Hebrew prophet, like the Gospel parables, is intended to teach, without any implication that its story is to be regarded as historical. If it also amuses people in the telling, so much the better. It has a serious message, however, namely, that God will readily forgive at the first sign of repentance. In the book of Jonah, the people of Nineveh, the capital of Israel’s arch-enemy, the Assyrians, repent at his preaching and are forgiven. This ‘lesson of humility and sincere repentance comes to the Chosen People from their bitterest foes.’ (*Jerusalem Bible*, reader’s edition, p.1141.) It is a theme familiar from the Gospels: the outsiders get the message which the insiders either do not or will not see.

Part of the humour of the story is that everyone repents – except Jonah, the preacher of repentance! It did not occur to him that he needed it, despite his refusal in Jonah 1.1-2 to obey God, and his sulky anger in 4.9 at God forgiving too readily in his view. In this, Jonah mirrors the people Jesus addressed: except for prostitutes, publicans and “sinners,” they did not see that they needed repentance. They lived by a religion of law and they had met its requirements, so there.

Matthew’s interpretation (in 12.40) is different. He focuses on Jonah’s being in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights (Jonah 2.1), seeing it as indicative of the presence of Jesus in the tomb from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. This has led the American Franciscan, Richard Rohr, to write: -

Without the sign of Jonah - the pattern of new life *only* through death (‘in the belly of the whale’) - Christianity remains a largely impotent ideology, another way to ‘win’ instead of the pain of faith. Or it becomes a language of ascent instead of the treacherous journey of descent that characterizes Jonah, Jeremiah, Job, John the Baptizer and Jesus. After Jesus, Christians used the metaphor ‘the way of the cross.’ Unfortunately, it became ‘what Jesus did to save us’ - or a negative theology of atonement - instead of the necessary pattern that is redemptive for all of us.

Rohr's point is, I think, that as for Christ so also for the Christian: we must *all* make the descent into suffering, obscurity and nothingness, if resurrection is to mean anything.

V.31: The reference to the Queen of the South draws on the story in 1 Kings 10.1-10 where it describes how the Queen of Sheba came a great distance to learn from the wisdom of Solomon. Jesus says, in effect, that if she went to the trouble of undertaking such a great journey to listen with humility and respect to [a pedantic bore like] Solomon, then Jesus' own people ought to listen to him with respect, since he is greater than Solomon.

Running through the two stories – Jonah and the Queen of Sheba – is the clear understanding that there will be a judgment (vv.31, 32) in which people will be called to account for their response to Jesus.

Lent
Week 1, Thursday,
Matthew 7.7-12 On prayer

Jesus said to his disciples: -

7. Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

8. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

9. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?
10. Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?
11. If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!
12. In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 11.9-13.

Vv.7-8: The phrasing is passive: 'it will be given'; 'the door will be opened.' This was a type of speech used by Jews in referring to God. Rather than say, 'God will give you.... God will open the door,' which was considered unduly familiar, the passive voice was used but understood as referring to God. The hearers would know well it was God who was meant.

The repetition of the words, 'knock and the door will be opened' in both verses is also a not uncommon usage, though not usually as explicit as this. Another example would be, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.'

The one who does not ask, search, or knock will surely not be given, find, or have the door opened. The dreary and weary advice not to hope for anything and then you won't be disappointed is far

removed from the confident trust in God that Jesus calls for here and throughout the Gospel. Life affords many examples of those who kept trying against seemingly hopeless odds and eventually won out. The Jewish saying, 'If you're looking for a helping hand, there's one at the end of your arm,' has an earthy realism about it; it expresses a truth, not the whole truth but a truth nonetheless, and one which is complemented by the asking, searching and knocking Jesus here commends. This teaching is complemented by the firm persevering in prayer recommended by Jesus in the story of the widow and the judge in Luke 18.1-8.

These verses help illustrate another point, namely, that in reading the Bible, it is never good to try and build a teaching on a single text; related texts need to be considered to gain a complete picture of what is taught.

Vv.9-10: Jesus illustrates his point by examples from home life. Parents give their children what they need in response to their requests.

V.11: 'If you then, who are evil...' The phrase jars; the congregation sometimes winces with shock on hearing it. Jesus appears to be saying that ordinary parents may routinely be considered evil. Like most people, they often suffer from low self-esteem anyway and this does nothing for them except knock them down further. One could wish for a quiet word with Jesus, a whisper in his ear, asking him to re-phrase it.

Scripture scholars say it is a matter of idiom, of the use of language, a mode of expression widely used and understood in Jesus' time. They say that Hebrew was weak in expressing comparatives and that it was necessary linguistically to overdraw a picture in order to make an *a fortiori* type of contrast such as is intended here. Another example is in Matthew, where Jesus says, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.' (19.17, note e) It is as if he says, 'If you who are good, but not perfect, give your children what they need, do you think that God, the great and good, will be less generous? Of course not.'

V.12: In this, his "Golden Rule", Jesus put positively what many other religious leaders had put either less strongly or negatively: -

Baha'i: 'Blessed is he who prefers his brother before himself.' (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, 71)

Buddhism: 'Do not hurt others in ways you yourself would find hurtful.' (*Udana-Varga*, 5.18) The Buddha said, 'Love all that lives.' (Ven. Dr. Walpola Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Haw Trai Foundation, Bangkok, 2002, p.108, *Vatthupama-sutta*, *Majjhima-nikaya*, Sutta no.7)

Confucianism: 'Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.' (*Analects* 15.23) And, 'The moral law is not distant from us... The wise man.... has as his principle: "Do

not do to others what you would not wish done to you”.' (Chung Yung, *Equilibrium and Norm*, 13)

Hinduism: ‘This is the sum of duty: do nothing to others which would cause pain if done to you.’ (*Mahabharata* 5.1517)

Islam: ‘None of you believes (completely) until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.’ (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*, no.13)

Jainism: ‘A man should... treat all creatures in the world as he himself would be treated.’ Sutrakrtanga. And ‘In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self.’ (Lord Mahavira, 24th Tirthankara)

Judaism: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ (Leviticus 19.18)

Native American: ‘Respect for all life is the foundation.’ (*The Great Law of Peace*)

Shinto: ‘Be forgetful of self, be doers of good to others: this represents the summit of friendship and compassion.’ Dengyo Daishi (also called Sacho) who lived 767-822 AD. (See W. T. De Bary, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, New York, 1958, vol.1, p.127)

Sikhism: ‘Don’t create enmity with anyone, as God is within everyone.’ (*Guru Arjan Devij* 259, *Guru Granth Sahib*)

Taoism: ‘Regard your neighbour’s gain as your gain, your neighbour’s loss as your own loss.’

Zoroastrianism: ‘That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.’ (*Dadistan-I-Dinik*, 94.5)

Elsewhere Jesus went further than he did here. In John he says, ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’ (15.12) That love was self-sacrificial to the point of death.

Indirectly, Jesus here is also implying that a person does not need to be an intellectual to be a Christian. The faith isn’t a system of knowledge. What it calls for is love, and that is something everyone can do, through an act of free will. The least intelligent or educated, the mentally defective or ill, can love. And that is what is asked.

Lent

Week 1, Friday

Matthew 5.20-26 Going beyond the Pharisees

20. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

21. You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’

22. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to

the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

23. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,

24. leave your gift there before the altar and go and first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

25. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.

26. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 12.57-59.

V.20: Jesus is calling his disciples to a higher standard. His critique of a legalistic approach to the Torah is not a cloak for an easy way out. His teaching goes further and deeper than mere observance of laws and rules; it reaches to the human heart and calls for conversion.

Vv.21-22: Jesus is here looking at attitudes, at the underlying frame of mind that leads to murder. Clearly, murder usually involves premeditation and follows when a person has not checked feelings of anger, hatred or bitterness towards another. Anger must have a large part in it. Jesus acknowledges

different kinds or degrees of anger and lists them, ‘if you are angry,’ ‘if you insult’ and ‘if you say, “You fool.”’ There is the anger that flares up in a sudden outburst but calms down again quickly; there is the anger that smoulders beneath the surface, growing more intense, like a volcano preparing to erupt. Of this latter, the Desert Fathers used to say that it is better to meet the devil than not to meet him, which, in this context, meant that it is better to face your anger, acknowledging and naming it than suppressing it, as that only tightens the screws of repression, making the explosion more violent when it comes.

Jesus is surely not talking of the righteous anger which has often served as a spur to working for justice and ending oppression. He himself showed this anger on occasion, as, for example, in Matthew 16.4; 17.17 and 23.1-36. And this may have been what Saint Augustine had in mind when he wrote, ‘Hope has two beautiful daughters – anger and courage.’

But there is another side to the matter of righteous anger. The sixteenth century Spanish writer, Luis de Granada, wrote,

An angry man thinks that in whatever he does... he always has justice on his side; indeed, he is often deceived so far as to imagine that the very heart of his anger is nothing but zeal for justice, and so vice hides itself under the colour of virtue.

Experience confirms the truth of what was said by the eighteenth century English writer, William Law: ‘As anger produces angry words, so angry words increase anger.’

There is still another dimension to it: -

‘As long as we live in hatred of our neighbours we are hating our own selves, because hatred deprives us of divine charity. How stupidly blind not to see that with the sword of hatred of our neighbour we are killing ourselves!’ (Saint Catherine of Siena, Letter 78, from *The Letters of Saint Catherine of Siena*, Suzanne Noffke OP, Vol.1, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 1988, pp.238-239.)

Vv.23-24: With Jesus, reconciliation with brother or sister is a precondition for worship. In the example Jesus gives, it is the other who has a grievance against us, not we against him. But we should take the first step, not wait for the other. It is not dissimilar to Mark 11.25, where Jesus says, ‘When you stand in prayer, forgive whatever you have against anybody, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your failings, too,’ or to the Old Testament teaching, ‘Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven.’ (Sirach 28.2) They are complementary.

Masters of self-deception that we humans are, we may feel that the above does not apply to us, thinking, 'I have no enemies.' Really? Is there no one the mention of whose name does not give us a jolt? Is there nothing at all in our lives that does not arouse in us feelings of anger, resentment, hurt, a desire for revenge, etc.? Unless we are living in cloud-cuckoo land, we must acknowledge that there are such people in our past or present. And it is to that situation that the teaching is addressed.

We are not good at doing it. In the Church of Ireland Communion service they sometimes issue the invitation to Communion by saying, 'Let all who have forgiven their enemies come forward to receive.' That might shorten the queue dramatically! It is easy to imagine someone responding to this by saying, 'But surely Jesus never meant that to be taken literally!' Really? More of that way of thinking and the Gospel will be reduced to platitudes, saying nothing.

Suppose we asked ourselves the question, 'If it were a crime to be a Christian, and I was brought before a court charged with being one, would there be enough evidence for a conviction?'

Vv.25-26: Jesus is here presented as offering practical advice: settle out of court if you can, rather than take the route of litigation. It is an inescapable reality that actions have consequences. In taking a case to court, we may expect to win but find that we

lose. Going to court has only two certainties – a verdict, and a bill.

However, NCCHS states (717f) that vv.25-26 were probably inserted into the discourse by Matthew. The Gospel is good news rather than good advice; Jesus didn't offer homely nostrums.

In Matthew 5.20-48, Jesus introduces a series of sayings with the words, 'You have heard how it was said...' and he quotes a saying, which is nearly always from the Bible. And then he goes on to offer his own comment, explanation or extension, by saying, 'But I say this to you...' This was a revolution. No one else would have dared to say such a thing. It was no wonder that people would say of him that, 'Here is a teaching that is new – and with authority.' (Mark 1.27) Jesus taught with authority; he could do that because he was the author of the teaching. No one else, no teacher of his time, would have dared to teach by saying, 'You have heard how it was said, but I say to you...' Just a little while before he had said, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5.17-18)

But clearly Jesus felt a freedom to push the boundaries of teachings. While there was substantial

continuity – he did not repudiate the Old Testament or any of his Jewish heritage - there were also significant extensions, and he was just about to make one.

Lent

Week 1, Saturday

Matthew 5.43-48 Love your enemies

43. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'

44. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

45. so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

46. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

47. And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

48. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 6.27-28, 32-36.

V.43: Jesus quotes what may have been a popular saying of his time. While it is not found in the Bible,

it expressed an attitude found among the Essenes, who regarded non-Essenes with hatred. (It reminds me of the “Love Celtic, hate Rangers” sticker I saw on the back of a car in Belfast.) The first half of the quotation is from the book of Leviticus, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.’ (19.18) And, in his parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus interprets the term “neighbour” to include traditional enemies. (Luke 10.25-37) The Catechism taught: ‘My neighbour is all mankind, even those who injure me, or differ from me in religion.’ (*A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine approved by the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland*, Gill and Son, Dublin, 1951, Q.279)

Jesus taught us to love our enemies, and also to love our neighbours; sometimes the two are one and the same. Nowhere in the Gospel does Jesus say we must be nice to people. Neither does he say we must *like* our enemies. Their personality and ours may simply clash and we will never like them. That doesn’t matter. To love means to will the good of the other. That means to treat them with respect as human beings, to act justly towards them, to speak truthfully about them, and to do whatever good we can towards them. Would you give your enemy a blood transfusion? If you would, then you love them, even if you still don’t like them.

Vv.44-47: This teaching must have seemed to Jesus’ hearers revolutionary, extraordinary in its radicalness, setting a standard not only impossibly

difficult but even beyond reason. In their tradition, the duty of love extended to one's co-religionists and fellow-countrymen, but not beyond.

V.44: Can love be commanded at all? If by love we mean an emotion, the answer must be No. If by love we mean a decision, a choice, a commitment, an act of free will, then the answer must be Yes. If to love is to will the good of the other – to will means to wish *effectively* - then we can make a decision to do good to the other, even if that other is one who evokes in us emotions of revulsion, hatred or anger. The person who perseveres in doing good deeds will become a loving person.

Vv.45-47: Jesus illustrates the non-discriminating character of the love he calls for by pointing to the way God loves in causing the sun to rise, and the rain to fall, on all people, whether good or evil, just or unjust. He points out that even tax-collectors and Gentiles will greet their friends, so what merit is there in doing no more than that? The tax-collectors (or publicans) were widely despised and hated as collaborators with the Roman imperial occupation of Palestine. Gentiles (non-Jews, *goyim* in Hebrew) were seen as outsiders, of whom little or nothing could be said that was good; they were sometimes described as “dogs.”

V.48: And then, to cap it all, Jesus says, ‘Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.’ This is a wrap-up phrase, concluding not just this passage but

the whole series of antitheses in 5.17-47. This may be an echo of, 'Be holy as I the Lord your God am holy.' (Leviticus 19.2) And later in Matthew, Jesus said to the rich man, 'If you wish to be perfect...' (19.21) His hearers might have thought that this really eclipsed his previous extravagance. Who can possibly be perfect, if perfection means being faultless? No one. Jesus himself had said, 'No one is good but God alone.' (Luke 18.19) So, does Jesus ask the impossible?

One view is that the word 'perfect' is essentially misleading. It translates the Greek word *telos*, meaning a goal or end, and the adjective *teleios* deriving from it. They don't refer to perfection in a moral sense. They mean reaching our goal, achieving our end or purpose. So the verse could mean, 'Become what you were meant to become.' In an adult it would mean mature, grown. And what is that? To be an adult son or daughter of God, 'coming to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.' (Ephesians 4.13) For Matthew that means living by the supreme law of love.

This verse may be linked with Jesus' saying, 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.' (Mark 12.31) To love ourselves means first that we need to know and accept ourselves. Many people don't do that; they are ashamed of themselves, dumb themselves down, and no good comes of that. It is an acquired condition, not a natural one. The American psychologist, John Powell, said,

We have laboured so long under the delusion that corrections, criticism, and punishments stimulate a person to grow. We have rationalized the taking out of our unhappiness and incompleteness in many destructive ways.

That is linked to what has been called musturbation, or hardening of the oughteries, where the words must, ought, should, have to, etc. exercise an inquisitorial control over a person, working through their sense of guilt and hollowing out their potential for growth from the inside, leaving them feeling useless and empty. The Irish author, Seán Ó Conaill, wrote, 'The thing that most separates us from God is self-dislike.' (*Scattering the Proud*, The Columba Press, Dublin, 1999, p.38) Self-dislike is a long way from, 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.' (John 10.10)

Lent

Week 2, Monday

Luke 6.36-38 On judgment and mercy

Jesus said to his disciples: -

36. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

37. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;

38. give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running

over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

There are passages parallel to part of this passage in Matthew 15.14; 10.24-25 and John 13.16; 15.20.

The focus is on not judging others. It echoes Matthew 7.1, 'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged' and James 2.13, 'Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.'

This would seem to apply to judging people's attitudes, or states of mind. We may and must judge people's actions, especially our own. As children we were taught by our parents, 'Do this; don't do that. This is right; that's wrong.' That was how we learned the difference between right and wrong. The Psalms, to cite just one example in the Bible, have a powerful sense of right and wrong, of the need to do one and shun the other. The principle, 'Do good and avoid evil,' which is perhaps the most basic and absolute moral principle, presupposes the ability to make a judgment between good and evil. But what we may not do is judge someone's attitude or motive. It's one thing to say, 'What X did was wrong'; it's another to say, 'What X did was wrong, and he did it because he is selfish, lazy, irresponsible, etc...'. It is hard enough to understand our own motives for action, so how could we claim to understand another's?

V.38: The image is drawn from wine production, but has wider application. ‘The measure you give will be the measure you get back’ is a message based on human experience: generosity evokes generosity. I once knew a man who was remarkable for his generosity; he was always active in looking for ways to help people, and he didn’t count the cost to himself in terms of time, effort or money. People responded to him in the same way; they gave generously to him, knowing that their help would be used for those in need.

It is easy to understand the practical application of this teaching if we look at two examples, first a negative one, then a positive, and the difference: -

In 1968, civil war broke out in Nigeria. The south-east of the country, rich in oil, broke away from the rest, setting itself up as Biafra. As is usually the case in war, issues were not clear-cut. Though oil was the main issue, the south-east was predominantly Christian, and feared dominance by the overwhelmingly Muslim north. To complicate matters further, the civilian government had been overthrown in a military coup led by northern officers.

Initially, Biafra had great military success, and came close to capturing Lagos, the then federal capital. But it gained little international recognition, except from France, which was interested in the oil,

Zambia and Tanzania. Eventually, the federal army, through its access to military supplies, turned the tide of battle. Biafra was squeezed by a blockade imposed by the federal government. Food supplies began to run out. The federal army saw this as an opportunity and intensified the blockade. Two million people, half of them children, died of starvation and disease. (The world watched it on TV, but, apart from Ireland acting through *Concern*, did nothing.) Biafra surrendered.

The federal government leader, General Yakubu Gowon, a humane man and admirer of Abraham Lincoln's, pursued a policy of reconciliation, but was soon overthrown by other officers with their eyes on the oil. The south-east was marginalized in the political settlement that followed.

Today, the situation there has not changed greatly. The war, the blockade, and the deaths by starvation, have not been forgotten; oil is still a contentious issue; there are many kidnappings of oil company staff; there is huge environmental degradation, and frequent fatalities resulting from fires when people try to siphon fuel from pipelines. In short, the legacy of bitterness is still strong. People cannot write off the death by deliberate starvation of a million children.

For a positive example, move from there to the Middle East. In 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973, Israel and Egypt fought each other in war. Israel won each

round. Egypt suffered heavy losses in men, money, and military material. Then, a new president in Egypt, Anwar Sadat, tried a different approach. He went to Israel, addressed the Knesset, and proposed peace between the two countries. After years of tough negotiations, a peace treaty was signed in 1979 between Sadat and Menachem Begin, the Israeli Prime Minister, at Camp David in the USA, with President Jimmy Carter as mediator. Since then there have been no wars between the two countries, no soldiers' deaths, and no squandering of resources on military equipment. Despite the persistent negative background of the Palestinian situation, the peace treaty has held, and both sides have benefited.

These stories illustrate different ways of dealing with political animosities. They could be called the way of revenge and the way of reconciliation.

How can people move beyond the cycle of attack and counter-attack, aggression and retaliation, the blame game, the whataboutery? It begins when individuals of generosity, imagination, and courage stop being prisoners of their own propaganda, climb out of their self-made mental trenches, stop thinking in clichés and slogans, and start creating a new relationship.

It boils down to the F words – F for forgiveness. Forgiveness is a decision to let go of hatred, to reach out to the other person as a human being.

That involves another F word - freedom. Forgiveness is an act of freedom. It flows from a free choice and it leads to freedom. Those who forgive free themselves *from* the anger of the past, and *for* a future unburdened by resentment.

The process ends with yet another F word - friendship. Reconciled enemies can be closer than those who never quarrelled in the first place. They have shared in the pain of division and in the peace of reconciliation.

Lent

Week 2, Tuesday

Matthew 23.1-12 Woe to scribes and Pharisees

1. Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,
2. 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat;
3. therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.
4. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.
5. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.
6. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,
7. and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

8. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.
9. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father - the one in heaven.
10. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.
11. The greatest among you will be your servant.
12. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

There are passages similar to 23.1-12, in whole or in part, in Mark 12.38-40 and Luke 11.43-46, 20.45-47, with an echo in Romans 2.17-24.

It is possible for Christians, in reading Matthew 23, to become pharisaical towards the Pharisees, to point the finger at them in judgment or condemnation and to assume, unwittingly perhaps, that 'This doesn't apply to us. It was directed against the scribes and Pharisees, and we are not they. What a pity they're not around to hear this! They needed it!' The Pharisees are the people everyone loves to hate, universally accepted as the bad guys, two-faced hypocrites, saying one thing and doing another. But, glasshouses and all that....

The Gospels were written for everyone. It is possible for religion – creed, code, cult and community – to become not merely narcissistic but idolatrous, in which the idol it worships is itself. This is a recurring temptation from which no

generation can claim exemption. It is possible for the synagogue to become the religion of the synagogue, for the church to become the religion of the church, for the mosque to become the religion of the mosque. Each may become an enclosed system, self-referencing, self-justifying, self-validating, an end in itself instead of a means to an end. It is possible for it to become self-serving instead of God-serving or people-serving. If that happens it has truly lost direction; it will die and, in such a state, it needs to, so that a resurrection can take place and create something that will serve the purpose of religion, which is to bring people to God. If the church has lost credibility it will regain it when it loves Jesus and the Gospel more than it loves itself.

In this context, the following is stimulating: -

I am a Jew

I am a Jew, because my faith demands no abdication of the mind.

I am a Jew, because my faith demands all the devotion of my heart.

I am a Jew, because, wherever there is suffering, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew, because, whenever there is despair, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew, because the message of our faith is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew, because the promise of our faith is a universal promise.

I am a Jew, because, for the Jew, the world is not complete; people must complete it.

I am a Jew, because Judaism places humanity above nations, above even Judaism itself.

I am a Jew, because Judaism recognizes that, above humanity, which is the image of God, there is the all-embracing one God. (Adapted from the Jewish prayer-book, *Siddur Sim Shalom*.)

Could Christians truthfully substitute “Christian” for “Jew,” and “Christianity” for “Judaism” in the above declaration, especially, perhaps, the second last one?

Chapter 23 is a sustained blast by Jesus against the scribes and Pharisees. He takes them to task on many grounds. What is noticeable, though, is that it cuts close to the bone. As in the past, so the Christian community of today faithfully does all that Jesus here told it not to do. It is as if he had never said anything. The Pharisees are dead; pharisaism is not. It is a constant presence in the church and probably always will be – *Ecclesia reformata est, sed semper reformanda* (the church has been reformed and is always in need of reformation.)

A notable feature of Judaism is that it embraces a substantial element of self-criticism. Indeed, there were few more severe critics of Jews than the Jewish prophets. Take Jeremiah, for example: -

How dare you say, ‘We are wise, and we possess the law of the Lord?’ But look at how it has been falsified by the lying pen of the scribes! The wise shall be shamed, caught out, confounded. Look how they have rejected the word of the Lord! So what use is their wisdom to them? (8.8-9; or, similarly, against priests in 7.1-15)

Vv.1-2: Insofar as scribes and Pharisees teach what Moses taught, they are to be followed. But, as Jesus made clear elsewhere – in Matthew 5.20-48, 12.1-14, 15.1-20, 16.6, 11-12 and 19.3-9, for example - much of what they taught was such that he found fault with it.

V.3: ‘they do not practice what they preach.’ This was a long-standing complaint, as in Jeremiah 8.8-9 above, and in Romans 2.17-24: -

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector to the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob

temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” (Ezekiel 36.20)

V.4: ‘They tie up heavy burdens...’ In Luke 11.46, this applied to lawyers also. Jesus had said of himself, ‘My yoke is easy and my burden light.’ (Matthew 11.30) But it is hard to avoid the question whether Jesus himself did not lay a heavy burden on people’s shoulders when he entirely excluded divorce and re-marriage. (See Matthew 5.32; 19.9; Mark 10.11-12; Luke 16.18) Living in a loveless marriage must be the nearest thing to hell on earth.

The Catholic church tied up a heavy burden on people’s shoulders when it taught in the encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, of 25 July 1968, that ‘each and every use of the marital act [quilibet usus matrimonii] must remain open to the transmission of life.’ (n.11) For couples wishing to limit the size of their family for all sorts of good reasons, that is a next-to-impossible requirement. (It was taught as being based on natural law, and therefore applicable not just to Catholics but to all people.) Did clergy lift a finger to move the burden? What is noticeable is that, of the 100,000 or so priests who left the priesthood between the end of Vatican II in 1965 and the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005, the great majority married and had two

children. Did they follow *Humanae Vitae* while so limiting their families?

Vv.5-7: Phylacteries and tassels were outward symbols of faith. But these, like VIP seats, special forms of dress or titles, may easily become status symbols of or claims to special position. They are steps, so to speak, on the pyramid of esteem. The verses have a familiar resonance as they correspond so closely to what actually happens in the Christian community. In Matthew 6.1-8, Jesus gave similar warnings.

Vv.8-10: These are regarded by many scholars as an addition to the original discourse. Jesus' disciples are not to be called Rabbi, Father or Teacher. Why? Because 'you have only one Master and you are all brothers' (JB), 'you have only one teacher, the Christ.' Should a disciple not call a teacher teacher, or a child call its father father? Can this teaching have been meant literally? Hardly. But at the least it is a call to reject status-seeking, even, or perhaps especially, if an attempt is made to justify that by saying that it is appropriate to the office rather than to the office-holder. The phrase 'you are all brothers' [and presumably sisters] should not be explained by explaining it away.

Mediators are meant to be a help, not a hindrance, meant to lead people to God, not to themselves. To many people, the church is a hindrance, an obstacle, or, in theological language, a scandal, not only by

reason of abuses of power, real though they are, but also because of some of its teachings. Someone wrote, 'Nothing so obscures the face of God as religion.' That statement, attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Buber and others, is one which should give any religious leader pause for thought.

To be able to see God as father (an idea which has its roots in the Hebrew Bible), and to have direct access to him is what Jesus points to here. He himself, especially in John, constantly speaks of God as his Father. Early Christians quoted not the apostles but Jesus in their writings, and yet I heard an archbishop say that he had been told off by the papal nuncio for not quoting the pope often enough in his sermons. There is something incestuous about the popes all quoting and canonizing one another, or the church's 1917 *Code of Canon Law*, which, in its 2,414 canons, never quoted the Gospel or used the words God, Jesus or Holy Spirit!

V.11: Such a saying would have won Jesus no friends among the elite of his time and place, among groups like the Sadducees or the rabbis. (The word *rabbi* literally means *my great one* so this verse is probably a pun on that.) They wanted the servants to remain servants and for themselves to remain at the top of the pile. People like Nano Nagle, Edmund Rice and John Baptiste de la Salle, founders of teaching congregations, were viewed with suspicion by many precisely because they were educating the poor, a process which would inevitably lead to those

poor challenging their inferior status in society. It's not hard to imagine someone thinking of Jesus, 'Why can't he just leave things alone?'

In the church, regrettably, the word *service*, like *communio*, when used in the context of relations between the local churches and Rome has become a code-word for the exercise of power and control by the latter over the former. The spirit of service enables; the spirit of power and control disables.

V.12: This verse is echoed in Matthew 20.25-28: -

Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' (See also Matthew 18.4, Luke 1.52-53, 14.11 and 18.14.)

A message repeated so often must be regarded as a priority.

The entire passage, but vv.8-12 in particular, have an egalitarian character which does not rest easily with the almost obsessive hierarchism of the Catholic church. In an age when humanity is

moving, however fitfully, towards more democratic models of government, this is something we could helpfully take on board rather than react against defensively. Wilfrid J. Harrington writes,

‘.... Jesus ... envisaged a discipleship of equals. He surely did not have in mind (given his distinctive view of authority) a patriarchal model of authority, with its pattern of domination.’ (*Mark: Realistic Theologian*, Columba Press, Dublin, 1996, p.66)

Lent

Week 2, Wednesday

Matthew 20.17-28 Jesus predicts his passion, and James and John’s mother’s request

17. While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way,

18. ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death;

19. then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.’

20. Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him.

21. And he said to her, ‘What do you want?’ She said to him, ‘Declare that these two sons of mine

will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.’

22. But Jesus answered, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?’ They said to him, ‘We are able.’

23. He said to them, ‘You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.’

24. When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers.

25. But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

26. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,

27. and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave;

28. just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

There are passages parallel to vv.17-19 in Mark 10.32-34 and Luke 18.31-33, and to vv.20-28 in Mark 10.35-45 and Luke 22.24-27.

V.17: The Gospel – Luke’s especially – presents Jesus’ life and ministry within the setting of a journey towards Jerusalem. The national and religious home of the Jews, it is the place where everything reaches a conclusion.

Jesus takes his disciples aside by themselves and teaches them. This is a not uncommon pattern. Examples are to be found especially in Mark: 4.34; 7.17; 9.28, 33; 10.10 and 13.3, but also in Luke 10.23 and Matthew 17.19, where it is the disciples who take the initiative in asking Jesus in private for further explanation. They were a chosen group with special responsibilities, so more than ordinary teaching was required.

Vv.18-19: This is Jesus' third forecast in Matthew of his suffering, death and resurrection. The other two are in 16.21-28 and 17.22-23, but this is the most detailed. It expresses a firm determination on Jesus' part to see it through.

Mark and Luke also have three. Were they three separate prophecies or just one told three times? There has been much inconclusive debate on this; see notes under Mark 4.33-34; 9.30-32; 10.32-34 and 16.11. It is possible to see symbolic meaning in the Gospels' use of the number three - Saint Bonaventure sees it as Trinitarian - but this often seems strained or even far-fetched.

V.20: Matthew has the mother of James and John make the request. In Mark, they make it themselves, and none too modestly, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' (10.35) Mark's is the more likely version, as Jesus' reply, 'You do not know what you are asking' is in the plural.

V.21: Here is *chutzpah* in abundance, whether it is the mother's or the sons.' The two top places in the kingdom, no less! It seems the early disciples thought that the coming of the kingdom in its fulness was imminent. Throughout the Gospels Jesus is working to wean his followers away from a political or earthly understanding of the kingdom.

V.22: Jesus' reply, 'You do not know what you are asking' is one which he might make to many prayers. C. S. Lewis it was who wrote that we will spend much of our time in heaven thanking God for those prayers of ours which he did not answer! The unrealism of their attitude became apparent later.

And then Jesus tries to wake them up, as he commonly did by answering a question with a question: 'Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' and their answer was, 'We are able.' It would be funny if it wasn't tragic. They were brimming with self-confidence, without, it seems, a shadow of doubt as to their sticking power. But what actually happened when the moment came? Mark (14.50) has it: 'All of them deserted him and fled.' (Collegiality among the Twelve at last!)

V.23: Jesus tells the two men that they will indeed 'drink my cup.' Matthew uses 'the cup' as symbolic of self-offering again when Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me...' (26.39) James and John must have missed the significance of this as they

appear not to have reacted to it. In view of what Jesus had just said about himself in vv.17-19, they should have been more aware. According to tradition, John did not die the death of a martyr, but James did, about 44 AD, at the hands of Herod Agrippa who 'had James the brother of John killed with the sword.' (Acts 12.2)

Jesus takes a subordinate role and assigns primacy of place to the Father, as he did more explicitly elsewhere: 'the Father is greater than I.' (John 14.28) He disclaims the role of judge (John 3.17; 12.47); he does not enter into disputes about human primacy (Luke 12.13-14), or allocate rewards or places to anyone. While his disciples were anxious to claim the top places, Jesus assigns himself a lower one.

V.24: The other ten now kick up a row when they hear about the brothers' request. The behaviour of James and John is matched in its childishness by that of the ten. It is so childish that it is almost embarrassing. But it is true to life: I remember, when chaplain in a university in Wellington, New Zealand, how childish were the squabbles and tantrums of academics as they jockeyed for pre-eminence.

V.25: Jesus refers to the Gentile way of exercising authority. His disciples didn't have to look far to see Gentile authority for what it was: the Romans were arrogant and cruel, and the disciples must have seen that at first hand.

Vv.26-27: Jesus sets a different standard before them. For him, authority is the power to serve, not the power to dominate. At the present time, the words *service* or *servant* are seen as demeaning or belittling, and perhaps that has always been the case. But Jesus embraces them whole-heartedly. Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to say to her sisters, 'Let the people eat you up.' They will, too.

V.28: Jesus points to himself as an example, especially in the passion and death which he is soon to undergo. Another dramatic example of Jesus turning upside down the prevailing (then and now) ideas about the exercise of power is when he washed the feet of his disciples. (John 13.1-17)

The use of the words 'for many' is not statistical; Jews understood it as meaning 'for all.'

The passage has strong, and probably deliberate, echoes of Isaiah speaking of the Suffering Servant of the Lord: -

If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life, and the will of the Lord shall be accomplished through him.

Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days. Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.

Therefore I will give him his portion among the great, and he shall divide the spoils with the

mighty, because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; and he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses. (53.10b-12)

As he often does, Jesus, in this passage, takes up a question put to him, sometimes one about secondary matters, and turns his reply into a teaching of significance about fundamentals.

Lent

Week 2, Thursday

Luke 16.19-31 The rich man and Lazarus

Jesus said to his disciples:

19. There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

20. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores,

21. who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

22. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

23. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

24. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in

water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’

25. But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.

26. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’

27. He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house -

28. for I have five brothers - that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’

29. Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’

30. He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’

31. He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’

V.19: The rich man has no name. Throughout the story, he is described as rich – in other words, he is defined by his riches.

Vv.20-21: The poor man, Lazarus – this is not the brother of Martha and Mary in John 11 - is presented as a figure to be pitied: he is an outcast, living outside at the gate; he is covered with sores, and

hungry as well, while knowing that the rich man has more than enough to eat. In the Middle East, then, as now, dogs are despised, so to have one's sores licked by dogs, which probably were scavengers, would be seen as deeply degrading. But the dogs have more compassion than the rich man; at least they try to help.

What is noticeable is that there is no interaction between the two men. If Lazarus was at the rich man's gate, he must have been plainly visible. Yet the rich man appears not to have noticed him; it was as if Lazarus were like the dust of the streets, not worth a thought. If the rich man had told him to clear off and not come back, that would at least have acknowledged his existence and recognized that he was a human being deserving of *some* attention, even if only to be dismissed.

The rich man wasn't hostile; he was simply indifferent. Hatred is not the opposite of love; indifference is. Hatred is love that has turned sour and sick, but it can be healed and become whole again. Indifference gives a shrug of the shoulders and says, 'I can't be bothered...' That is corrosive and is much harder to heal. Like a cancer, it destroys its host.

A visual image of indifference that comes to mind is a shrug of the shoulders. Sometimes we say, 'I don't care what you do; do whatever you like', as if, by saying so, we respect the other person's freedom

of choice. But sometimes it simply and literally means, 'I don't care,' full stop. That is to say that the other person does not matter to us. Shouldn't every human being think twice before beginning a sentence with the words, 'I don't care'? Can a human being ever say that, with respect, about another?

Clearly Jesus finds fault with the rich man. In what way? Was it simply that he was rich? It is hard to read that in the text. A rich person could be generous; a poor person could be mean. Jesus did not romanticize poverty. Was it that the rich man didn't share anything with Lazarus? That was surely part of it, but only part. What did he say to Lazarus? Nothing. What did he do to him or for him? Nothing. In his eyes what was Lazarus? Nothing. Did he notice Lazarus? Probably not. In short, he did not recognize Lazarus as a fellow human being.

In 1981, I spent a few days in Egypt. I did the tourist thing, visiting the pyramids at Giza and the Sphinx, and then went south to Luxor and Karnak, to the valleys of the kings and the queens. The weather was hot and dry. A local man was selling ice-cream and cold drinks, but, for whatever reason, the line of tourists walked past him. No one bought anything, and, it seems, no one made eye contact with him either. Suddenly he shouted, 'Look at me! I am a man!' He woke us up. He was not asking us to buy anything; he did not beg, or plead, or wheedle. He simply demanded to be treated with the respect that is due to a human being. He was right.

The parable doesn't say that the rich man was bad and Lazarus good. It is a wake-up call; it asks us to be aware of what is going on around us and within us. If asked, the rich man might have answered truthfully, 'I never noticed him; I didn't think.' He may have been self-centred more than selfish, so self-absorbed and self-sufficient that he was oblivious to Lazarus.

V.22: The two men die, but the description of what happens next illustrates the gulf between them. Lazarus is carried away by angels to be with Abraham, while the rich man 'died and was buried.' In his case the description is blunt and unceremonious; he is despatched. The phrase 'to be with Abraham' is like to 'go to your ancestors,' as, for example, in Genesis 15.15.

V.23: The roles of the two are now reversed. The rich man is in Hades, the abode of the dead, while Lazarus is seated beside Abraham. Hades in Greek, Sheol in Hebrew, was seen as a kind of neutral zone of inactivity where all the dead went, both good and bad. Gradually, and especially in the time of Jesus, Jews – but not Sadducees - came to believe in the resurrection and eternal life, and then Gehenna became the abode of the damned, distinct from Sheol.

Vv.24-25: The rich man asks for mercy – a drop of water to relieve his agony. Abraham, not Lazarus,

replies by reminding him of how things used to be. The use of the title, 'Child,' sounds taunting; it is not affectionate anyway. Is there a touch of Schadenfreude here? – You had it coming to you?

V.26: Abraham seems to say, 'What you ask is not possible; it cannot be done.' That sounds as if Hades is here the abode not of the dead but of the damned.

Vv.27-28: The rich man thinks of his brothers and wants to spare them his suffering – has he had a conversion experience? He is thinking of others; often it takes the experience of personal suffering to wake us up to the needs of others. Or is that reading too much into the story and making an allegory of it?

V.29: Abraham follows a hard line, giving no ground.

V.30: The rich man continues to plead for his brothers, saying that if Lazarus (not he himself) could go to them, then they would believe.

V.31: But Abraham is having none of it. The sting is in the tail of the story: for Christians, someone *has risen* from the dead – Jesus - but maybe we are so attached to wealth, or to ourselves, that we still are not convinced that we will be called to account for our care of the poor. We don't have the excuse the rich man offers in v.30.

The point of the parable is not essentially about riches; it is about relationships and it is meant for everyone - whatever their wealth or lack of it. It may be phrased as a question: do I care about anyone other than myself? Is there anyone whose needs I put before my own? Do I recognize and respect the humanity of those around me? To fail to recognize and respect the humanity of the other person is *the* basic sin. (See Matthew 25. 31-46) It comes down to hard-headed, basic choices about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, etc. Love is about how you spend your time, effort and money.

Here is a prayer from Celtic tradition that suits the parable above: -

Among the sleek and wealthy, the poor are regarded as fools.

Once I was wealthy, and flocks of friends thronged to my door; I grew poor, and none came near.

In summer, people wanted to walk in my shadow; now as I pass in my coarse clothes they avoid me.

The person they saw when I was rich was not me, but my wealth; now they see nobody, pretending I no longer exist.

If I were rich again, their eyes would brighten when they saw me, and their arms reach out to embrace me; now they can watch me collapse without lifting a hand to help me.

The world jibes at me because my barns are bare and my house empty; the proud look down their noses at me, the rich curl their lips.
Lord, let everyone know both poverty and wealth in their lives; then all would be happy to share what they have. (*Adapted from the Celtic*)

Lent

Week 2, Friday

Matthew 21.33-43, 45-46

33. Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

34. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.

35. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

36. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way.

37. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

38. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'

39. So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

40. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

41. They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

42. Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?

43. Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

(44. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.)

45. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.

46. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 12.1-12 and Luke 20.9-19.

Vv.33ff.: The story is a parable, but it has characteristics of an allegory, with detailed meaning attached to each character. The owner of the vineyard represents God. The vineyard (of the Lord) is the house of Israel. The slaves (servants) represent the prophets. The son represents Jesus. The tenants represent the chief priests and scribes.

The image of Israel as a vineyard is a familiar one. Isaiah has it: -

Let me now sing of my friend, my friend's song concerning his vineyard. My friend had a vineyard on a fertile hillside;

He spaded it, cleared it of stones, and planted the choicest vines; within it he built a watchtower, and hewed out a wine press. Then he looked for the crop of grapes, but what it yielded was wild grapes.

Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard:

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done? Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?

Now, I will let you know what I mean to do to my vineyard: Take away its hedge, give it to grazing, break through its wall, let it be trampled!

Yes, I will make it a ruin: it shall not be pruned or hoed, but overgrown with thorns and briars; I will command the clouds not to send rain upon it.

Yes, I will make it a ruin: it shall not be pruned or hoed, but overgrown with thorns and briars; I will command the clouds not to send rain upon it. (5.1-7)

V.34: 'The harvest' – the fullness of time which is present with the coming of Jesus, the Messiah and

Son of God. At this late stage in his ministry – he is already in Jerusalem for the Passover prior to his Passion – things are moving quickly to a climax.

Vv.34-36: A succession of slaves (‘servants’ in JB; the terms are usually inter-changeable) is sent to the vineyard but in turn are beaten, killed or stoned. Stoning was the classic death of the prophets.

V.37: The owner (God) sends his son (Jesus). But he will be treated even worse.

V.38: The proprietorial instincts of the tenants come to the fore: they want the inheritance to be theirs. There is something of this in the church when the hierarchical and institutional elements subsume the charismatic and prophetic. Forgotten from time to time, too, is the teaching that,

The Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant.... Sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, n.10)

V.39: ‘They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.’ This is likely an allusion to Jesus being driven out of Jerusalem and killed outside its walls.

Vv.40-41: Jesus asks a question about what the owner of the vineyard will do when he comes. This may be a reference to the final judgment by God, or, more likely, the leasing of the vineyard to others in v.41b suggests that there will be an intervening period before that. It is not immediately clear who 'they' are, though v.45 points to the chief priests and the Pharisees. Those in v.41 who answer Jesus' question condemn themselves out of their own mouths.

V.42: The internal quotation is translated in *The Grail* version as: -

The stone which the builders rejected has become the corner-stone.

This is the work of the Lord, a marvel in our eyes. (Psalm 118 (117). 22-23)

The Hebrew *eben* means stone and *ben* means son. This was one of Jesus' puns: the stone and the son were rejected.

Redmond ("Mundy") Prendiville, a Kerry student in All Hallows seminary in Dublin, was selected for his county's GAA team in the All Ireland football final of 1924. He asked for permission to play but was refused. But his loyalty to his county was strong, so he went anyway. The college dean who had refused him later had second thoughts and decided to allow him to go. He sent for Mundy to tell him but he couldn't be found. He was gone. On

his return to the college he was expelled for going to the match without permission. He still wanted to be a priest, however, so he applied to Saint Kieran's College in Kilkenny and was accepted. Years later he became Archbishop of Perth, Australia, one of the youngest bishops in the church. On a subsequent visit to Ireland he called to All Hallows, and, at a reception for him, the college president said, 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the corner-stone,' to which Prendiville replied, 'This is the work of the Lord, a marvel in our eyes.' Peace was made.

V.43: This is the punch-line, the key teaching: the kingdom of God will be taken from the people of Israel and given to a new people (of Jews and Gentiles) who will produce the fruits of the kingdom. The use of the passive forms of the verbs - 'taken' and 'given' - deliberately emphasizes that this is God's work. God was not spoken of directly.

This turning from Jews to Gentiles is a major theme of Matthew's Gospel which he wrote primarily for a Jewish audience. Jesus is rejected by his own, by the people God had chosen, so the grace offered to them is now to be offered to others. (But, at the same time, 'the gift and the calling of God are irrevocable.' Romans 11.29)

V.44 is omitted from some texts as a later addition.

Vv.45-46: Foremost among those who rejected Jesus were the chief priests and the scribes. They (rightly) saw the parable as directed at them. They are the ‘tenants’ but they had acquired the mind of proprietors. It is a constant risk to the guardians of Gospel truth that they come to see themselves as its owners, the holders of the registered trade mark, of the copyright, so to speak. With their intention of arresting Jesus (and their subsequent actions), they showed that they did not understand that they were merely earthenware vessels, containers, not sources. They need to ask themselves the question posed by Saint Paul, ‘Do you think the word of God came out of yourselves? Or that it has come only to you?’ (1 Corinthians 14.36)

The attitude of the chief priests and elders reminds me of a conversation I once had with a woman I met on holidays. In the course of conversation, she said, ‘I believe in God but not in religion.’ Considering what a mess the “tenants” of religion make of it, I felt myself very much in sympathy with her. It also recalls the statement that, ‘Nothing so obscures the face of God as religion.’ (I have been unable to trace the source of the quotation; I have seen it attributed to Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, and Reinhold Niebuhr, the German Lutheran theologian.)

They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet. They politicized the truth; they could not defeat

Jesus in argument, so they decide to silence him. But, for tactical reasons – his popularity: ‘they feared the crowds’ – they decide to hold off for a while. Timing is (almost) everything in politics but the politicization of truth is its destruction.

Lent

Week 2, Saturday

Luke 15.1-3, 11-32 The parable of the prodigal son

1. Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.
2. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’
3. So he told them this parable:
 11. Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons.
 12. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them.
 13. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.
 14. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.
 15. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

16. He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

17. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!

18. I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

19. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

20. So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

21. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired servants."

22. But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe - the best one - and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

23. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

24. for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

25. Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

26. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

27. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound."

28. Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

29. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

30. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

31. Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

32. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

The story is usually known as the parable of the Prodigal Son. But it has the character of an allegory, or, at least, has many allegorical details which cannot be ignored. It has also been well said that it was the father who deserved the title of prodigal because of his prodigious prodigality towards his son.

Vv.1-2: The scene opens with what we may have come to recognize as the usual petty grouching by small-minded people unwilling to look beyond their prejudices. The religious elite looked down their

noses on sinners and tax-collectors. Earlier in Luke, Jesus had accepted an invitation from Levi, a tax-collector, to dine in his house and this brought similar complaints (5.29-32), and later, again in Luke, Jesus invited himself to dine at the house of another tax-collector, Zacchaeus, who had repented of his actions and made generous reparation for them. (19.7-8) There brought more complaints from the “virtuous.”

Vv.11-12: The younger son’s request was outrageous: it amounted to saying to his father, ‘I can’t wait for you to die; I want the money now.’ His conduct was very selfish and deeply offensive. Unthinkingly, he assumed as a matter of course that the father would give him a share, even though, in the culture of the time, the father was free to do whatever he wished with his money. It is not an overstatement to say that the younger’s son’s attitude towards his father was one of casual contempt, all the more so for (likely) being unthinking. But there was no “Good riddance” from the father when he left, despite the hurt he must have felt.

There is another view: Jean-Luc Marion, in *God without Being*, says that the young son asked for his share of the father’s *ousia*, (or was it *bios*, life? – Pagola) a Greek word which means substance, as in property, but meaning also a share in his nature (as in the word *consubstantial*). This means that he is making a declaration of independence, he wants to

do his own thing, in a sense to disown his father, to reject the idea that his life and the property are a gift from his father. He wants to become self-referencing, the autonomous individual as his ideal, and good-bye to family and community. He sounds like a child of the late twentieth or twenty-first century. This is in contrast to Jesus, who always refers everything to his Father.

V.13: As the father very likely foresaw, the younger son went off on a trip of wine, women and song. It is significant that he went ‘to a distant country.’ His sense of shame would not allow him to do at home what he intended doing; he wanted to be where no one would know his actions. The ‘distant country’ could be taken as a metaphor for alienation, being away from one’s roots, values or culture. Spiritually, a person could be in ‘a distant country’ without ever leaving home, by, for example, living in the past, or in dreamland, or in a rejection of one’s origins.

The outcome was predictable. The money didn’t last long; his new-found “friends” would have helped him spend it, and left him when it was gone. As they say in Kerry, ‘A fool and his money are soon parted.’

In recent years, a survey of lottery winners in countries with a national lottery showed that, in eighty percent of cases, the winners were financially back to where they started five years after winning,

and likely not in a good place in terms of family and other relationships, or work and education.

(It is said that a priest, preaching on this parable, once said that, ‘Half the money the son spent on wine, women and song – and the other half he wasted!’)

V.14: From a feast to a famine – that was the son’s progression.

Vv.15-16: The parable takes place in a Jewish context, and, for Jews, the pig was an unclean animal. The son was reduced to looking after pigs, and became so hungry that he would willingly have eaten pigswill. It would be hard to imagine a greater comedown – from the darling of the family to hired swineherd in a foreign land!

A redeeming feature is that he retained a sense of honesty: ‘He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.’ Yet he did not simply take it.

V.17: The experience of suffering wakes him up, as it often does. He ‘came to himself’; at last he begins to think, and to come back from flights of fancy to his real self. What brings him to this point is simple hunger – not the highest of motives, nor the worst either, but enough to make a start. Maybe it was his mother’s cooking that did it – she is not

mentioned in the story (though the father had a maternal heart).

Vv.18-19: He decides to go home, but how will he face his father? He feels so ashamed. So he prepares a speech. It is a good one, beginning with an open admission of guilt. (A sense of guilt is to conscience as a sense of pain is to the nervous system, a good servant but a bad master. Lepers have no sense of pain in their hands and feet and so may be hurt or burned without being aware of it, but nonetheless with serious injury.) The son acknowledges his responsibility and does not try to offload it onto someone else; that was good. In terms of their culture he shouldn't have returned at all; he had put himself beyond the pale by what he did, and had a hard neck even to think of going back.

V.20: He sets out. Now the focus switches from son to father. The father, who clearly had been watching, waiting and hoping, sees him coming 'while he was still far off.' In the culture of the Middle East, at present as in the time of Jesus, where there are "honour" killings by family members of young women who become pregnant outside of marriage, the younger son might have been killed for bringing disgrace on the family. Maybe that was why the father went looking out for him, because, if the older brother had seen him first, he might have killed him to restore the family "honour."

The father understood the younger son. He probably foresaw that he would squander the money and come home when he was broke. But he was so overjoyed to see him that he threw aside all considerations of patriarchal dignity and ran to meet him. He hugged and kissed him; the picture is one of joyous love; nothing is held back. The father has pity, affection, generosity; he gives the best of everything and is happy to do it because his son is home.

V.21: The son begins his prepared speech, but before he has gone half way through it, his father interrupts him. Words don't matter to him; his son is back home safe; that's all that counts.

Vv.22-24: The father calls for clothing to be brought – the best they have - and footwear, because, while servants went barefoot, members of the household wore sandals; he calls for a ring for his finger, this a symbol of his restored status as son. He orders a party with the best of food. They're going to celebrate; they have reason for it: 'this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' The party begins. The younger brother made the wrong choices with his freedom, but he still remained a son.

We hear no more from the younger brother but clearly he has found his roots, is no longer an alien; he is at home.

V.25: There's another shift of focus, this time to the older brother, the one who would normally have had a larger share of the inheritance because, being the older, he would have extra responsibilities on his father's death, such as caring for their mother and sisters. He is at his duties, working in the fields. And, it seems, no one thought of letting him know that his brother was home. The first inkling he gets of it is when he hears the sound of a party.

It is hard not to see him as someone taken for granted, the steady, solid, reliable man who can be depended upon to do what duty requires of him, a safe pair of hands to look after mother and sisters, and succeed to the family estate. He may also have been unimaginative, dull, a plodder.

Vv.26-27: He asks what was happening and is told.

Vv.28-29: He becomes angry - understandably. His father hears about this and goes out 'to plead with him.' But the older son lets loose a tirade, the pent-up resentment - perhaps of many years - finding an outlet. He points to his fidelity to work, to his obedience, and to his father never having given him 'even a young goat to have a party with his friends.' (v.29) Clearly, he feels that his younger brother is Daddy's favourite, while he got a raw deal. He has the mind of a Pharisee: 'I kept the rules and get no reward for it. My brother breaks one of the most fundamental of all, to treat his father with respect -

hugely important in a patriarchal culture – and on his return he’s treated like a king.’

The older son is unforgiving, ungenerous, self-centred, and worried about the property. He hid behind the word 'never' and was trapped by it: he never disobeyed, never squandered, never asked for anything, but he also never forgave, never celebrated, never really lived - and never grew.

V.30: In terms of the attitudes of that society, the older brother had gone too far. He should have said those things in private, not in public, out in the fields; he should have spoken without the anger and with respect. But now he goes further still. With bitter words that must have wounded the father deeply, he speaks of his brother, not as a brother, but as ‘this son of yours.’ He disowns his brother. And he goes on to hit even harder; he speaks of him as having ‘devoured your property with prostitutes.’ He was right; that was what had happened: the ‘dissolute living’ of v.13 hardly excluded whoring. They both knew it, but he needn’t have said it. He wanted his younger brother “named and shamed” and made himself a prisoner of his own resentment.

V.31: Attention switches back to the father. If the older brother had done what the younger brother did, he would have welcomed him as warmly. He is distraught; the happy family re-union has exploded in a blazing row, one so serious that it jeopardizes everything. He doesn't stand on his dignity; he

appeals with all his heart to the older brother, saying they could not do otherwise than rejoice because of the return of the missing son.

Is it taking the text in too allegorical a sense to question the truth of the father's statement to the older brother, 'all that is mine is yours'? In the new situation created by the prodigal's return, would there not need to be a fresh division of the property? Could the younger brother be left out of the father's will completely on the grounds that he had already had his share? Is the older brother, who had never been given even a young goat to celebrate, to lose out once again? The father's behaviour implies that there would have to be a new division of property which could only be at the expense of the older brother.

The father wants his two sons at home and living in peace. The younger son's selfishness precipitated a crisis. But the older son was heartless and preoccupied with property. The father, in solving one problem had created another. His "confidence-building measure" won the younger son but lost the elder. What did the story reveal of the father's attitude towards his older son, if the latter could truly say, 'You never once offered me so much as a young goat....'?

The dynamism of the younger son was in exuberance and wastefulness; of the older son in anger and resentment, devouring himself; and of the

father in giving and forgiving, welcoming, pleading and celebrating. He is the hero and he suffers greatly at the hands of both his sons.

We need to return to the context. Like the other two parables in Luke 15, the lost sheep and the lost coin, the opening two verses create the setting. The younger son represents the tax collectors and sinners of v.1, the older brother represents the Pharisees of v.2, while the father gives us an image of the unconditional forgiving love of God the Father. The measure of his love is that it is without measure.

I was on a pilgrimage to Rome in 1987. One day at Mass, in introducing this Gospel, I asked the congregation, as they listened to the story, to ask themselves the question, 'At what stage in the story did the father forgive the son?' Afterwards, people put forward their answers. There was an elderly man in the group, a father of thirteen children, seven girls and six boys - he said the girls were just as much trouble as the boys - stopped us all in our tracks by saying, 'The father never forgave the son.' We asked him what he meant, and he answered, 'The father never forgave the son, because he understood him so well, and loved him so much, that he never took offence in the first place.'

Forgiveness and love share little common ground with logic. The loving father becomes powerless: he doesn't compare the two sons. All he can do is love them both unconditionally.

A general point about parables is that they are like mirrors held up before us in which we may see something of the truth about ourselves. Who do we identify with in the parable? That's a good question to ask.

Lent

Week 3, Monday, alternative reading

John 4.5-42 Jesus and the woman at Jacob's well

5. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

6. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

7. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.'

8. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

9. The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

10. Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'

11. The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?'

12. Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’
13. Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,
14. but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’
15. The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’
16. Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’
17. The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’
- Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, "I have no husband”’;
18. for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’
19. The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet.
20. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’
21. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.
22. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.
23. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit

and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.

24. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

25. The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.'

26. Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

27. Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?'

28. Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,

29. 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'

30. They left the city and were on their way to him.

31. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.'

32. But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.'

33. So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?'

34. Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.'

35. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.

36. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

37. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps."

38. I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

39. Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.'

40. So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

41. And many more believed because of his word.

42. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

V.5: Jesus is away from his familiar path, because 'he had to go through Samaria.' (John 4.4) It lies between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south, and he was going from the latter to the former. (4.3)

He came to Jacob's well at Sychar, a Greek name which may have been a corruption of the Hebrew Shechem. The patriarch Joseph, of Egypt, was said to have been buried there. (Joshua 24.32) Wells were significant places in patriarchal stories, as in Genesis 24 and 29. Their water could be life-saving and life-giving, powerful symbols of God giving life to his people. Wells were associated with the messianic age, Isaiah singing a song of thanksgiving: 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation'

(12.3), and also, ‘Come to the water all you who are thirsty; though you have no money, come.’ (55.1) Jesus was later to speak of himself as living water. (John 7.38-39)

V.6: ‘Jesus was tired out by his journey.’ He was not Superman, and did not try to be. The strong are not afraid to let their weaknesses be seen. He felt hunger, cold, thirst, frustration, anger, etc. just like the rest of us. Besides, ‘it was about noon,’ approaching the hottest part of the day. It is surely significant that Jesus did not first reveal himself to her as a counsellor, adviser, or saviour, but as a fellow human being in need.

Jesus had said of himself, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ (Matthew 15.24) and he had sent out the twelve with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ (Matthew 10.5-6) But here he was in Samaria, sitting at a well. (In some parts of Africa, it is considered bad taste to sit beside a well, especially to sit on the protective wall around it. Maybe there was no such taboo among Jews, or maybe there was and he ignored it.)

Vv.7-9: The Samaritan woman had chosen an unusual time to draw water, when the sun was close to its hottest. Carrying water is heavy work – a litre weighs a kilogram - and choosing such a hot time to do it would add to the effort. (A possible explanation

for this is offered later.) She expresses surprise that Jesus, a Jew, would ask her such a favour, in view of the long-standing animosity, on both religious and political grounds, between Samaritans and Jews. John explains, ‘Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.’ That was an understatement: when some Jews really wished to express anger towards Jesus they said to him, ‘Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and possessed by a devil?’ (John 8.48) Furthermore, since drawing water was seen as women’s work, men usually kept away from wells and, even if she had been Jewish, it would have been regarded as inappropriate for a man to be seen talking to a woman he did not know. The fact that he was a religious teacher made matters worse. But, in Luke 8.2-3, women unrelated to them accompanied on their journeys Jesus and the twelve, who were nearly all married men who had left their wives at home. That was an even more serious breach of social etiquette. They underline the fact that, when it came to fulfilling the mission his Father gave him, Jesus let nothing stop him.

Her tone was unwelcoming, perhaps even hostile.

V.10: Jesus begins a process of gradually opening her up to consider whether there might be more to this situation, and this man, than a casual encounter with a stranger about a drink of water.

Vv.11-12: She seems to be thinking simply at a functional level of the practicalities of drawing a

flow of water ('living water') from a deep well without a bucket. Clearly, it couldn't be done, and she seems to be saying, in effect, 'If you're so special, as good as Jacob who gave us the well, why don't you do it without a bucket.' She was a sassy lassie.

Vv.13-14: Jesus explains that he is talking about more than simply drawing water from a well. He means the "water" that gives eternal life – his word – which quenches the thirst of the human spirit.

V.15: The woman becomes playful, or was it coquettish; was she flirting? She pretends to think that he is offering some magic water that will make it unnecessary for her to keep coming back to the well again and again.

V.16: Jesus needs to bring her to stop messing and get serious. He asks her to call her husband. One can imagine she felt deflated by that, and wondering, 'How did he know?'

Vv.17-18: Her voice now begins to sound sad. Husbands are a touchy topic with her; she acknowledges that her current hubby is number five. Jesus commends her for speaking the truth in admitting it.

Could it be that she was childless and had gone from one man to another in the hope of having a child? Was she shunned by other women because of

her childlessness, which, at that time, like leprosy, was seen as a curse by God? In Genesis 30.23, when Rachel, previously childless, became pregnant, she said, ‘God has taken away my shame.’ In 2 Samuel 6.23, Michal, the daughter of Saul, pours scorn on King David, and the text adds, ‘to the day of her death, Michal, the daughter of Saul, had no children.’ It is presented as punishment. Elizabeth, who became the mother of John the Baptist late in life, said, ‘This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.’ (Luke 1.25)

Was that why the woman went to the well at midday? The other women would not be there then; they would draw water in the relative cool of the morning or evening, and she would not have to endure their jibes, the nasty remarks about how she had lots of husbands but no children. Like crossroads, wells were places of gossip and, likely, some nasty nattering.

Vv.19-20: Now she begins to understand that Jesus is more than just another tired, thirsty traveller asking for a drink of water. Perhaps she sees him as a proselytizing Jew who wants Samaritans to recognize Judaism and Jerusalem. The mountain she refers to is Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans had built a temple to rival that in Jerusalem, but which was destroyed in 129 B. C. by John Hyrcanus, the Jewish leader and high priest.

Vv.21-24: Jesus raises her gaze higher. He tells her that God is not located either in Samaria or Jerusalem. While re-iterating the pre-eminence of the religion of Jews over that of Samaritans (v.22), Jesus goes on to imply that, with him, there is present something greater than either, and that people who are neither Jewish nor Samaritan will be able to worship God in spirit and in truth. He is breaking down the walls of parochial, localized religion, the religion of “our” God. “Our” God is always an idol. He does not advocate the abandonment of Judaism – ‘salvation is from the Jews’ (v.22) – but going beyond it so that *all* people are invited to become the Chosen People of God.

V.25: She states her belief in the coming of the Messiah. Is she silently asking herself if Jesus is he?

V.26: With unprecedented directness, Jesus says to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’ (He was similarly direct in later answering the question of the High Priest, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ Jesus said, ‘I am.’ (Mark 14.61-62) One feels a sense of relief at the simple directness of both.

V.27: His disciples arrive back from the city where they had gone to buy food. (v.8) Their sense of propriety is bothered by this breach of etiquette – Jesus should not be talking to a strange woman in a place like this. But they were afraid to question him.

Jesus did not suffer fools gladly, and they might have received a sharp rebuke if they had. (In Mark 8.16-21, when the disciples put their foot in it about the lack of bread, they received a searing blast from Jesus that must have singed them!)

Vv.28-30: The woman goes back to the city to tell everyone what has happened. This is one of the most universal of human experiences: when we hear good news we want to share it. This woman, the ultimate outsider – Samaritan, childless, with multiple husbands – becomes perhaps the first herald of Jesus the Messiah. She learns faster, responds quicker and preaches better (see vv.30, 39) than the Twelve. She learned the truth about Jesus, but only after first facing the truth about herself.

V.30: Drawn by what the woman said, people begin to go out to see for themselves; this is reinforced in v.39.

Vv.31-35: Jesus' disciples want him to eat; they have an affectionate care for him. He, however, has other preoccupations which perhaps have been reinforced by the dialogue with the woman. 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and complete his work.' In v.35, he quotes what may have been a popular saying about planting and harvesting. His disciples' concern is for bodily food and a harvest of food; his is for people. Using the messianic image of a harvest, he urges his disciples

to look around them at the harvest waiting to be reaped, a harvest of people called to be disciples.

Vv.36-38 are difficult. It is not clear who 'the reaper' of v.36 is. Perhaps Jesus is saying that the prophets have sown, and John the Baptist, too, but they did not reap the harvest. He is reaping it now, among the approaching Samaritans. And the disciples, especially the Twelve, will sow but others will reap in their place.

V.39: The woman had told her story; she was a witness more than a teacher. She spoke from experience: 'He told me everything I have done.' And this gave her message an impact it would not otherwise have had.

Vv.40-41: From the sound of it, the Samaritans give Jesus a better reception than many of his own people. They made him welcome and believed in his word.

V.42: Having heard Jesus at first hand, they come to believe in him as 'truly the Saviour of the world.' John is here perhaps heightening the contrast between the Samaritans' positive reaction to Jesus and that of his own people: 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.' (1.11) The Samaritan outcasts, drawn to Jesus by an outcast woman, do accept him. In similar fashion, the Good Samaritan is held up as an example above that of the Jewish priest and Levite (Luke 10.29-37),

and the Samaritan leper, the ‘foreigner,’ was the only one of the ten healed who gave thanks to Jesus. (Luke 17.11-19)

The underlying message seems to be: God is for everyone; Jesus is God’s messenger whose word is like a spring of living water. His servants will preach his word but it is God alone who will assign success and reward.

Could it also be said that the Samaritan woman “converted” Jesus from a narrow understating of his mission - ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matthew 15.24) - to a more universalist one?

Lent

Week 3, Monday

Luke 4.24-30 Jesus is rejected at Nazareth

Jesus came to Nazara and spoke to the people in the synagogue: -

24. And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.

25. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land;

26. yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

27. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’

28. When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

29. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

30. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 13.54-58 and Mark 6.1-6.

Vv.24-27: Jesus’ response to this mixture of adulation and - was it resentment or envy? - is strange. It seems provocative, as if he set out to annoy them. He seems dismissive of their praise, as if to say that he never expected them to accept him. Is there here a throwback to his move from Nazareth to Capernaum? Did something happen in Nazareth that caused him to move and which left a lasting mark?

Vv.25-30: these verses are seen by some scripture scholars as coming from a later period, although inserted at this stage. They hold that they are from the end of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, and are a way of saying that he was rejected by his own people both at the beginning and end of his ministry, leaving the apostles free to turn to the Gentiles.

It is in keeping with Luke's universalist outlook that the catalyst for the rejection of Jesus by his own people was his reference to God's works of power among the Gentiles. In v.26, he refers to a widow who lived at Sidon in Lebanon; her story is described in 1 Kings 17.7-24. In v.27, he refers to Naaman, a Syrian, his people then, as now, enemies of Israel; his story is in 2 Kings 5.1-19. Both were Gentiles.

Jesus is saying that God is God, not only of Jews, but of Gentiles, too. He is calling on his people to look beyond the local, but they were locked into it, bound by narrow loyalties. Try to open people's minds, and you may find that they want to keep them closed. The poet, T. S. Eliot wrote, 'Humankind cannot bear much reality.' (Burnt Norton, I, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber and Faber, London, 1974, p.190) Challenge people's sense of identity and you may expect a reaction, even a violent one. There is a Japanese saying, 'The nail that stands out is the one that feels the hammer.' The message from the people of Nazareth was: 'Conform, or be rejected.'

It is not difficult to see parallels to that parochialism today. People make themselves prisoners of their own propaganda, coming to believe their clichés, slogans and catch-phrases. Loyalty to "our" religion, tradition, culture, language, ideology, sexual orientation, politics, social class, educational background, race, flag,

sports team etc. may be idolatrous - closed, sectarian, petty and excluding.

The reaction to Jesus was furious. Tangle with people's sense of their identity, no matter how childish its basis may be, and it often is, and they react with anger. You have questioned their sense of themselves. Irrational it often is, but it's there. Try to wake people up, to get them to look to broader horizons, and they may see you as a traitor to the cause.

V.29: The details of this story pose a problem, a minor one. While Nazareth is hilly, there is no cliff there. But a lot may happen in two thousand years: - earthquakes, landslides, soil erosion, cultivation, building, demolition and re-building.

V.30: Everything about Jesus suggests a powerful personality; he was self-possessed in all circumstances. His many encounters with opponents show a man who was strong-minded, not open to manipulation, whether by deceit, flattery, or threat. He was his own master – and totally a servant of God.

Lent
Week 3, Tuesday
Matthew 18.21-35 Forgiven is for giving

21. Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’
22. Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’
23. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.
24. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;
25. and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.
26. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."
27. And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.
28. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe."
29. Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you."
30. But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.
31. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.
32. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

33. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"

34. And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

35. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

There is a passage parallel to Vv.21-22 in Luke 17.4.

Vv.21-22: Peter probably thought he was being pretty good when he suggested forgiving as many as seven times; it was further than many would have been willing, or are willing, to go. But implicit in his question was another, 'At what point may I begin to retaliate?' And Jesus' answer, 'Seventy-seven times' or, in other texts, 'seventy times seven' have the same meaning – there is no limit. There is never to be a point at which one may say, 'No more forgiveness.'

Matthew goes further than Luke (17.4), in that, while Luke speaks of the offender repenting and forgiveness then being given, no such precondition is attached here. Offenders should be forgiven regardless of their attitude.

Vv.23-35: And then a parable elaborates on this. The figure of ten thousand talents in v.24 is an exaggeration, a fantastic sum beyond anyone's

reach; the taxes paid in Galilee and the neighbouring area of Perea in 4 B. C. were one fiftieth of that amount. The denarius (Latin, plural *denarii*) of v.28 is a labourer's wage for a day. The first figure is greater than the second by a factor of 600,000! The numbers are deliberately exaggerated to heighten the effect.

The slave who was forgiven refuses to forgive. He received but was unwilling to give, even though the appeal of his fellow-servant (v.29) was couched in the same words he had used in making his appeal. (v.26) The adjective used to describe him in v.32 has the connotation of miserly.

A point of some significance is that the sale of a person for debt (v.25), and the torture of debtors (v.34) were forbidden in Jewish tradition, although practised widely in the pagan world. Matthew writes for a Jewish audience and perhaps did not want to offend their sensibilities, so he sets the story in a pagan context.

Jesus said, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' (Matthew 6.12) In his Gospel, Luke has a similar message, 'If he [your brother] wrongs you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you and says, "I am sorry," you must forgive him.' (17.4) Sirach spoke of those like the unforgiving servant, 'Showing no pity for a man like himself, can he then plead for his own sins?' (28.4) And James likewise, 'There will be judgment

without mercy for those who have not been merciful themselves, but the merciful need have no fear of judgment.’ (2.13) Forgiveness – giving and receiving it, and the two are inseparable – is at the heart of the Gospel, and there is no understanding it without that.

This is something that Pharisees of the past and the present do not understand. The tabloids are part of that tradition. They carry headlines like, ‘Rot in hell,’ ‘Monster pervert,’ about whomever it is that people love to hate at the moment. They scream “Shock Horror” at someone’s crimes, demand that wrongdoers be named and shamed, and pour hatred on anyone who dares speak of forgiveness, as if to do so were to condone evil. Lord Longford, for example, was heaped with abuse for suggesting that Myra Hindley, the media-designated Moors murderer, was truly sorry for her crimes and deserved compassion. Their own sins – bugging phones, intercepting emails and text messages, and how much else besides – they furiously deny, then “vigorously contest” in court, before admitting them on conviction. And then, with an air of righteous anger, they gear up for an assault on their next victim, claiming to do so in the public interest. Is pharisaism dead?

The world-renowned scripture scholar, Raymond E. Brown, wrote, ‘the number of people who turn away from the church where they have not found forgiveness is legion.... To the extent that the

churches listen to Jesus speaking to his disciples in this chapter, they will keep his spirit alive instead of memorializing him.’ (*Christ in the Gospels of the Ordinary Sundays*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1998, p.33)

Matthew makes the point of the story clear in the final verse. It is not merely a matter of wiping the slate clean; it is forgiving ‘from your heart.’ That is a gift.

Lent

Week 3, Wednesday

Matthew 5.17-19 Doing and teaching

17. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.

18. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

19. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

V.17: Jesus never renounced his Jewishness, and likely never had any thought of doing so. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew is anxious to show

Jesus fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. If someone had asked Jesus, ‘Are you founding a new religion?’ it is probable that he would have answered by saying something like, ‘No. The work my Father has given me is to bring Judaism to fulfilment.’ He might have referred to the Covenant, and said (in some manner), ‘God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice.’ (Romans 11.29) Jesus was a Jew by race, religion, culture, language and upbringing. (Jews sometimes say of Christians that we have turned him into a Gentile. That probably has much truth in it, and, if so, it is a loss to us. We cannot appreciate the humanity of a culturally naked Jesus.) Jews were, and still are, the chosen people of God, but not in an exclusive sense, because, since Jesus, all human beings are, at least potentially, the people of God. ‘There is not, there never has been, and there never will be a single person for whom Jesus Christ did not die.’ (The Council of Quiercy, 835 AD)

V.18: This cannot be taken as literally true, though the introductory phrase, ‘Truly, I tell you...’ is usually understood to indicate an accurate citation from Jesus. ‘Letter’ (NRSV), ‘dot’ (JB), ‘jot’ (Douai) translate the Greek letter *iota*, (Hebrew *yod*), the smallest letter of the alphabet. ‘Stroke of a letter’ (NRSV), ‘one little stroke’ (JB), ‘one tittle’ (Douai) refer to the tiny marks – serifs - used in Hebrew to help with pronunciation or to decorate letters. It’s like talking in English about, ‘dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s.’ Jesus was not concerned

with the minutiae of the Torah – far from it, he was no fundamentalist; he had shown that clearly in his many controversies with scribes and Pharisees. Is the saying in this verse from Jesus or from Matthew, or from Matthew's source, common to him, Mark and Luke, the unknown one that scripture scholars call Q from the German *Quelle*, a source?

Jesus will indeed, in a broad and deeper sense, bring the Torah to fulfilment, not with the moral sense of a slave motivated by fear but of a son motivated by love. Being a son means growing up, being responsible, making choices and taking decisions and being accountable for them. The prodigal son took the wrong decisions, but he remained a son all the same. 'I tell you solemnly, everyone who commits sin is a slave. Now the slave's place in the house is not assured, but the son's place is assured.' (John 8.34-35)

This means having the courage to speak openly; the loyalty to look beyond one's self to the needs of the other, being ready to walk the extra mile, and to give without counting the cost.

The son is not *bound* by rules, not because he ignores or disobeys them, but because he goes beyond them. He doesn't say, 'I make my own rules' (the attitude of the adolescent) but 'I make the rules my own' (the attitude of an adult). He assimilates and interiorizes their meaning and purpose, so that

while being faithful to their spirit he is able to be flexible with the letter... responsibly.

He is able to think of freedom not only as freedom *from* but also, and more importantly, freedom *for*, e.g. freedom *from* selfishness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency, self-indulgence or a childish refusal to grow up and take responsibility for ourselves to freedom *for* service to others.

There is a need for mental adjustment before we are able to grasp what Jesus was saying. The moment one begins to assert that law is not primary, as Jesus did, there are those who fear this as the slippery slope to irresponsibility and anarchy. They cannot grasp that there is only one source of security for a Christian, and that is faith in Christ; he alone is the way, the truth, and the life. (John 14.6) Systems are no substitute; on the contrary they may become an obstacle to union with God, especially if they are imposed in a way which lacks respect for human freedom. We need order and discipline as 'occasional crutches to our weakness' but not as dominant values. When they dominate, we have reduced religion to 'a handy form of social organization.' (John F. X. Harriott, *The Empire of the Heart*, Templegate & Gracewing, Springfield & Leominster, 1990, p.37)

V.19: 'whoever does them and teaches them...' In the end, we will be judged on what we have done, not on what we have taught, or said we have

believed in. There is an element of the (Protestant) Reformed tradition which puts great store on getting the right statement of belief. If you can say you believe in Jesus as your personal Saviour, you're home and dried; if not, you are on your way to perdition. But here Jesus gives the priority to *doing*, and then to teaching. (Matthew 25.31-46 also gives the highest priority to doing.)

Here is one of many references to the kingdom of heaven. Sometimes the term used is the kingdom of God. Both are common, in Matthew especially, kingdom of God seven times and kingdom of heaven thirty-nine times. Jewish reverence for God meant they often used substitutes, such as heaven (as in 'Heaven help us!'), or The Name (*Hashem*) rather than the word God (which they often spell G-d in English). Kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven are different ways of saying the same thing. Some scripture scholars say that a better translation of the phrase would be the Rule or Reign of God, which avoids problems associated with a political term like kingdom. One loose way of describing the Rule of God is to say that it is the world as God would like it to be, the world as it would be if God's will were done on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6.10)

Feminists point out that *kingdom* is a patriarchal term; they suggest the alternative word *kindom*.

Lent

Week 3, Thursday

Luke 11.14-23 Jesus and Beelzebul

14. Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed.

15. But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.'

16. Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven.

17. But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house.

18. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? - for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul.

19. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

20. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

21. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe.

22. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder.

23. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 12.22-32 and Mark 3.19b-30.

V.14: This story is, in part, a study of human reactions to Jesus. He gives speech to a man who was dumb. To those present, familiar as they likely were with the scriptures, prominent among them the messianic writings of Isaiah, this should have rung a bell: -

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame leap like a deer and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy... (Isaiah 35.5-6)

These actions were associated with the work of the Messiah, so what did that indicate about Jesus? The question was staring them in the face - but either they missed it or chose not to see it.

V.15: The name Beelzebul, or, less accurately, Beelzebub, means Lord of the Flies. It may have been a contemptuous Hebrew pun on the name of the god Baal. Some of those present said of Jesus' action, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.' Cynicism, sneering, readiness to belittle, attributing good to evil, are perverse. But one doesn't need to go back to the New Testament to find them.

V.16: 'Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven.' In the Gospels, it is noticeable how often such a request immediately follows on Jesus giving one! Hadn't they just had a sign? What more were they looking for? If the

power of speech given to a dumb man is not a sign from heaven, then what would be?

This reminds me a little of when I was in West Belfast and people became excited over the back of a fireplace in someone's house. (!) Part of it was covered by carbon in a pattern which someone said showed the face of Jesus, and this was held to be miraculous. People went from a wide area to see it. I have also seen pictures of melting snow on a mountain which left black rock exposed against the white background. Again, someone "saw" the face of Jesus in it. Some people love the bizarre and the strange, and fail to value the obvious and ordinary, even though they form the great bulk of human life. The search for the bizarre is an unhealthy manifestation of religiosity.

Vv.17-19: Jesus 'knew what they were thinking.' He knew what people had in them. He understood human nature and his own people. For that he needed only ordinary human experience and some shrewdness.

Jesus makes the rejoinder that if it is by the power of Beelzebul that he casts out Beelzebul, then Beelzebul is divided against himself. He goes on to challenge his critics by asking by whose power their exorcists cast out demons.

Vv.20-22: Jesus presses his point further. He has not cast out the demon by the power of Satan, since

that would imply division in Satan. It follows, therefore, that it is by the power of God that he has done it. He has shown that his power is greater than Satan's. That being the case, why do they not accept him?

The expression 'finger of God' is significant; it means the power of God. The Ten Commandments are described as 'the two stone tablets written with the finger of God.' (Deuteronomy 9.10, and similarly in Exodus 31.18) In Exodus 8.19 (NRSV), the expression is used by Pharaoh's magicians to acknowledge the power of God working through Moses and Aaron. Jesus' use of that expression should also have rung a bell with his hearers.

V.23: In view of the above, Jesus challenges them – and us - to make up their minds: are they for him or against him? He doesn't want fence-sitters who wait to see what way the wind is blowing before making up their mind.

Lent

Week 3, Friday

Mark 12.28-34 The greatest commandment

28. One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?'

29. Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

30. you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”
31. The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.’
32. Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other”;
33. and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and "to love one's neighbour as oneself”, - this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.’
34. When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 22.34-40 and Luke 10.25-28.

V.28: In contrast to previous episodes, a scribe comes forward, clearly acting in good faith, posing an honest - and important – question. Jesus treats him and his question with respect.

V.29: In reply, Jesus quotes the Shema (*Hear*), the daily prayer of Jews from Deuteronomy 6.5. He gives a direct, straight answer to the scribe’s question.

V.30: This is the most fundamental of all the commandments.

Vv. 29-31: Jesus was asked about one commandment, but answered about two, because, for him, the two were inseparable. Love is indivisible. This conjunction of the two in one seems to have been unique to Jesus. It signals the freeing of the followers of Jesus from the multitude of laws and rules of Jewish tradition. It focuses on the basics, emphasizes priorities, and, by implication, relegates other regulations to history. And love is about invitation, not obligation.

Vv.32-33: The scribe's summary of the law in two commandments was not a novel idea at the time; Rabbi Hillel, leader of one of the two principal rabbinical schools in the decades before Jesus, had taught it.

V.34a: This is like Mark 10.21, where Jesus says to the rich man, in effect, 'You're almost there.' As with him, one more step remains to the scribe, and that is to accept Jesus and follow him. Whoever accepts Jesus is "in" the kingdom of God.

V.34b: This is strange; it doesn't appear to fit the context. Why would no one dare ask him any question, when he had just (v.34a) commended the wisdom of the scribe who had asked one? Perhaps it refers to the hostile questioning of the four previous

episodes, and signals a change in which it is Jesus who begins to ask them.

The teaching in this passage is surely one of the easiest of all in the Gospel to understand - and one of the most challenging to follow. And yet, perhaps, it requires more reflection. It raises the question: what is love?

Here is a selection of what writers from various traditions have said about love: -

‘Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.’ (1 John 4.7-8)

‘Perfect love casts out fear.’ (1 John 4.18)

‘To love is to will the good of another.’ (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I. II. ques.26, art. 4 corp. art.)

‘If you love a thing for its beauty, you love none other than God, for he is the Beautiful Being. Thus, in all its aspects, the object of love is God alone.’ (Muid ad-Din al-Arabi, *The Meccan Revelations*, 2.326)

‘Love does the job of destroying the ego, not in a binge of self-hatred or contempt, but by leaving its limitations behind for the sake of the other. In gentleness it transcends the ego. But you cannot

decide to love another in order to achieve this or to bring about its good effects for oneself.’ (Karen Armstrong, *A History of God. From Abraham to the Present: the 4000-year Quest for God*, Heinemann, London, 1993, pp.260-261)

‘Love is God's Holy of Holies.
Love alone is salvation.
Only in the Temple of Love do I worship God.
Love alone introduces God to us.
Where love is, there God is.’
(Toyohiko Kagawa, Japanese Christian trade unionist and pacifist, 1888-1960)

‘There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.’ (Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Albert & Charles Boni, USA, 1927, last words of the book.)

‘Do you know what makes the prison of loneliness and suspicion disappear? Every deep, genuine affection. Being friends, being brothers, loving, that is what opens the prison, by some magic force. Without these one stays dead. But wherever affection is revived, there life revives.’ (Vincent van Gogh)

‘Love is... an active hope for what others can become with the help of our support.’ (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, n.39)

‘Love - the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n.1604)

‘If you give your heart to no one, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable and unredeemable.’ (C. S. Lewis)

‘Self-giving affection is the only authentically human way to live.’ (Andrew M. Greeley)

‘Love is the one means that ensures true happiness both in this world and in the next. Love is the light that guides in darkness, the living link that unites God with humanity, that assures the progress of every illuminated soul.’ (From Abdu’l-Bahá in *The Divine Art of Living: Selections from Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, compiled by Mabel Hyde Paine, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1960, p.108)

‘Not by the Vedas or grim ascetic practice, not by the giving of alms or sacrifice can I be seen in such a form as you saw Me. But by worship of love addressed to Me alone can I be known and seen in such a form as I really am: so can my lovers enter into Me. Do works for Me, make Me your highest goal, be loyal in love to Me, cast off all other attachments, have no hatred for any being at all: for all who do so shall come to Me.’ (*Bhagavad-Gita*, 11.53-55)

‘With regard to love, there is no means of getting it, unless we give it.’ (Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer*, DLT, London, 1975, p.14)

‘There is but one thing which can bring about unity inside us, as also in our lives... and action, and that is love.’ (René Voillaume, *Seeds of the Desert: the legacy of Charles de Foucauld*, Anthony Clarke Books, 1973, p.108)

‘The first step in personhood then is to allow ourselves to be loved.’ (John Main, *Inner Christ*, DLT, London, 1994, p.49)

‘Love makes everything lovely; hate concentrates itself on the one thing hated.’ (*George MacDonald: an anthology, 365 readings*, selected and edited by C. S. Lewis, Harper, San Francisco, 2001, no.263)

‘Love, in its own nature, demands the perfecting of the beloved; the mere “kindness” which tolerates anything except suffering in its object is, in that respect, at the opposite pole from Love.’ (C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Fontana, London, 1957, p.34)

‘God does not love Himself as Himself but as Goodness; and if there were anything better than God, He would love that and not Himself.’ (*Theologica Germanica*, 32)

‘Love constantly rejoices because the more it grows the more generously it gives itself away. Consequently, while those who desire evil are impoverished by their getting, lovers are enriched by their giving. The takers are troubled even as they seek revenge for injuries done to them; lovers are at peace as they delight in giving to others the love that has been given to them. The takers avoid the works of mercy, while lovers do them cheerfully.’ (Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Sermon 5.6*; CCL 91A)

‘Love is the one thing God asks for; without this he cannot give the kingdom. Give love, then, and receive the kingdom: love, and it is yours.’ (Saint Anselm of Canterbury, Letter 112, *Opera Omnia*, 3.246)

‘Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams.’ (Father Zossima in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)

‘Don't try to reach God with your understanding; that is impossible. Reach him in love; that is possible.’ (Carlo Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*)

‘The longest way to God, the indirect, lies through the intellect. The shortest way lies through the heart.’ (Angelus Silesius, *The Enlightened Heart*)

‘In a very true sense we cannot decide to love God, any more than we can decide to breathe or to be alive.... We must not try to love God; we must

become the kind of people who will discover that we do love God, and then accept it and let it come to its full flowering.’ (Simon Tugwell O.P., *Prayer*, Veritas Publications, Dublin, 1974, Volume 1, p.104)

‘The thing that most separates us from God is self-dislike.’ (Seán Ó Conaill, *Scattering the Proud*, The Columba Press, Dublin, 1999, p.38)

‘Happy is the man who loves you, my God, and his friend in you, and his enemy because of you.’ (Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, 4.9)

‘Jesus’ insight into the indiscriminate love of God provides the ultimate key to practically every word the Gospels record.’ (Donald Senior C.P., *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1992, p.88)

‘the true nature of charity: not a sterile fear of doing wrong but a vigorous determination that all of us together shall break open the doors of life.’ (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, translated from the French by Gerald Vann OP, Fontana, London, 1970, p.34)

‘When the evening of life comes, you will be examined on love.’ (Saint John of Cross, *The Sayings of Light and Love*, no. 60)

‘The ultimate reason for everything is love.’ (Saint John of Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 38.5.620)

‘Where there is no love, put in love, and you will draw out love...’ (Saint John of the Cross, *Letter 26*, 6 July 1591, on p.760)

‘In love, every getting is a form of giving; this other attitude is a sort of lust, where every giving is only a form of, or a means to, getting.’ (Gerald Vann, *The Divine Pity: a study in the social implications of the Beatitudes*, Collins, Fontana, London, 1971, p.72)

‘Someone asked me, “What is love?” God answered, “You will know when you lose yourself in Me.”’ (Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Masnavi II*, Prologue)
‘Whether love is from earth or heaven, it leads to God.’ (Rumi, *Masnavi I*.110-111)

‘God is not only love, God is friendship.’ (Aelred of Rievaulx)

‘Life is love, and love is sacrifice.’ (Blessed Antoni Gaudí, architect of the *Sagrada Familia* cathedral in Barcelona)

For Jesus, the love of neighbour was always practical and down-to-earth. It was about treating the other as we would like them to treat us, forgiving enemies, giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned, etc.

The love of God is not reducible to love of neighbour even though the two are inseparable. The

love of God expresses itself in, for example, keeping the Ten Commandments, but, at its core, it is about making a personal commitment to God, trying, as best one can, to give one's heart to God, and letting God be primary in every aspect of life.

Can love be commanded, as is implied here? No, if by love we mean an emotion. Emotions cannot be evoked by an act of will. Yes, if we mean making a choice, a decision, a commitment. We have free will and we can make such a choice. In any circumstance, we always retain the freedom to determine our attitudes. At any time or place, we can choose to put God first.

Lent

Week 3, Saturday

Luke 18.9-14 The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector

9. He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

10. 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

12. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

13. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

14. I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

V.9: In it, Jesus has a specific audience in mind: 'some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.' There's a strange irony about this at present. Church-goers, in my experience, are not like the Pharisee: they are ordinary people, struggling, aware of their limitations; they know they are sinners. But it is not uncommon to find non-church-goers who do the judging that Jesus here finds fault with. They say of church-goers, often seemingly for no other reason than that they are church-goers, that they are Pharisees, hypocrites, judging everyone, showing off their religion, etc. While condemning others for being judgmental, they do not notice that they are the ones doing the judging!

Vv.11-12: There are alternative translations of this verse. JB has it that: 'The Pharisees stood there and said this prayer to himself...' There is an irony in this. He said the prayer *to himself*. Prayer is supposed to be addressed *to God*. His words express the latter, but he sounds self-absorbed, perhaps was really only talking to himself, reciting his litany of self-approval. He had ticked the boxes of what the

devout were supposed to do, he felt he had made the grade, so he thanked God for it. He might as well have said, 'I've done what I am supposed to do, and therefore I'm right in the sight of God.' He saw salvation as an achievement which he had brought about by persevering effort. He was a successful Pelagian. (Pelagianism, so named after a {Celtic?} monk called Pelagius, held that grace was not necessary for salvation; it was a kind of bonus for those who had already made the grade by pulling themselves up by their boot-straps.)

But the Pharisee went further than that: he was aggressively busy sorting out others' conscience for them. He had their measure, and knew what sort of things they were up to. He was apologizing to God on their behalf because they were not as good as he. He did not ask for forgiveness for himself because he felt he was not in need of it. ('But, Father, I don't commit any sins; I never go out!')

V.13: The tax collector, aware of his sinfulness, is a picture of genuine humility: 'standing far off, [he] would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"' Blessed indeed are those who know their need of God. (See Matthew 5.3) He was a sinner, he knew it, and he admitted it openly before God. His was a simple, beautiful, perfect prayer; it said all that needed to be said. His "speech" was short - seven words, as against thirty-four for the Pharisee.

The essence of the parable's message is that the mercy of God is all that matters, and it is always there for the repentant. An Irish bishop, Donal Murray, wrote on this,

The Pharisee was an expert on the law of God but he had seriously misunderstood it. The tax collector had broken the law, but he understood that its essence was to be found in the mercy of God. (*Where the Heart is: How the Gospel transforms our Lives*, Veritas, Dublin, 2014, pp.137-8)

V.14: In what may have been an addition to the original parable, Jesus commends the humility of the tax collector, and goes on to make one of those statements of his which turn logic upside down, but which are powerfully true.

Lent

Week 4, Monday, alternative reading

John 9.1-41 Jesus gives sight to a man born blind

1. As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.
2. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'
3. Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'

4. I must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.
5. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'
6. When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes,
7. saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.' Then he went and washed and came back able to see.
8. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?'
9. Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.'
10. But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?'
11. He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.'
12. They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'
13. They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.
14. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.
15. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.'

16. Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided.

17. So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’

18. The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight

19. and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’

20. His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind;

21. but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’

22. His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

23. Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’

24. So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, ‘Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.’

25. He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’

26. They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’

27. He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?'

28. Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.'

29. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.'

30. The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.'

31. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.'

32. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.'

33. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.'

34. They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

35. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'

36. He answered, 'And who is he, Lord? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.'

37. Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.'

38. He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshiped him.

39. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.'

40. Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’

41. Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see,” your sin remains.’

Like much else in John, this story is unique to him; the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke) do not have it. It also reveals his way of communicating truths of faith. He does so through dialogue rather than a lecture-style teaching method. This gives energy and interest to his narratives.

V.1 is an introductory phrase that sets the scene.

V.2: It is his disciples, not scribes or Pharisees, that put the question to Jesus. We can take it that they were in good faith.

Their question expressed a common view, one fairly widespread even today, despite all that Jesus said: it is that pain is punishment. Who was to blame for the man’s condition? That is what they want to know.

V.3: Jesus tells them plainly that no one was to blame for it, neither the man himself nor his parents; ‘he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’

Vv.4-5: Throughout John's Gospel, light and night are symbolic of the power of good and evil. For example, 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' (1.5) Jesus says to Nicodemus, 'The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.' (3.19) He said of himself, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' (8.12) Other examples are in 11.10: 'Those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them,' and, 'Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness you do not know where you are going.' (12.35) When Judas leaves the Last Supper to complete the betrayal of Jesus, John says, 'Night had fallen.' (13.30)

Jesus, with his disciples - 'we' - must do the work of God who sent them while they can, because the hour of evil is approaching.

Vv.6-7: Jesus makes a mud paste with his spittle, spreads it on the man's eyes and then sends him to wash in the pool of Siloam. In some cultures, spittle was held to have medicinal properties. There may be a pun in the use of the name Siloam, 'which means Sent.' Jesus was the one sent (by God). What Jesus was doing constituted 'work,' and he did it on the Sabbath. That meant trouble. Clearly, Jesus was not looking for trouble: for him the man's well-being was the priority, and if that incurred the anger of the

scrupulous, then it had to be faced. He was not going to leave the man in his difficulty in order to accommodate the finicky strictures of the narrow-minded.

Vv.8-9: The first reaction is, naturally, one of surprise. Is this really the blind man who used to sit begging? Opinions are divided: yes, he is and no, he's not but someone who looks like him. Conflicting views are a sure sign of genuine eye-witness accounts. Where everyone is in agreement, almost certainly there has been a rehearsal. He tells them he is the same man.

Vv.10-12: They ask him for an explanation and he gives it, just as it was.

Vv.13-17: Enter the Pharisees - and trouble. They probably were not habitual fault-finders, however much they sounded like it, but rather people who could (or would) not see beyond their own understanding: either our way or no way.

Jesus had healed the man on the Sabbath. It sounds almost insane, but that was a problem for them. There are people who specialize in creating difficulties, who conjure up problems out of nothing. If they arrived in heaven, they would find something wrong with it. They are not happy unless they are unhappy. They nurse real or imagined grievances with such devotion you would think they were trying to qualify for a carer's allowance!

They argue the matter back and forth before turning to (and later *on*) the healed man. He says that Jesus is a prophet.

V.18: Here John speaks of ‘the Jews.’ It is difficult not to see this term as having an edge to it; it is more than merely descriptive. It is used not less than sixty-three times in John’s Gospel. If that was written after 70 AD, it may be that the author wanted to distance the nascent Christian community from the Jewish one, in view of the revolt by Jews against Roman rule culminating in the re-capture of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70. To the Romans, Christians may have seemed like a sect within Judaism, while John, wanting to keep on the right side of Rome, says, in effect, ‘We’re not the people who revolted against you.’ Hence ‘the Jews.’

If the facts don’t fit the ideological prejudice, then deny them – that was the response; they try to make out that the man had never been blind in the first place.

Vv.19-23: This episode bears sad and sorry testimony to the corrupting power of fear. The man’s parents are questioned; they reply, in what sound like prepared statements, by stating the facts, but they duck responsibility by saying of their son, ‘Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’ Why do they behave so shamefully, voicing not a breath of support for him? V.22 gives the answer: fear; it can make cowards of us all. (Full excommunication

of Christians from the synagogue did not come till about the year 90; this may have been a lesser form.)

Vv.24-34: The phrase 'Give glory to God' was a formula for putting people under oath, and requiring them to make reparation for an alleged insult to God.

If the parents were timid, the son is not. He takes on his critics and beats them. They must have been hopping mad when he asked them, 'Do you also want to become his disciples?' (v.27) When they find they cannot get the better of him, they insult him, "'You were entirely born in sins, and are you trying to teach us?'" And they drove him out.' (v.34) Jerusalem has spoken; the matter is closed.

The Pharisees, supposedly experts in the Torah, must have read with blind eyes the words of Isaiah on the coming of the Messiah: -

'On that day [the day of the Lord]... out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see' (29.18);

'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened' (35.5);

'I am the Lord... I have given you as a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind' (42.6-7).

Vv.35-38: Jesus presumably had come to hear of this row and recognized a need to meet the man. Abandoned by his parents, and rejected by the

synagogue, he must have felt alone. Jesus tells him who he is. The man, who had first spoken of Jesus as a prophet (v.17), then recognizes him as Son of Man (v.35), and now as Lord and professes faith in him. (v.38)

Vv.39-42: Jesus recognizes that he is a catalyst for division – ‘I came into this world for judgment’ (v.39): the sighted deny the evidence of their eyes; the blind recognize the truth about him. The Pharisees, to whom Jesus’ words apply, are so obtuse and/or wilfully dense, that they are incapable of seeing what is staring them in the face: ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ (v.40) Having earlier (v.3) rejected a link between sin and physical blindness, Jesus here emphatically asserts a link between sin and spiritual blindness. He tells the Pharisees that if they were physically blind, they would be blameless, but they are in sin because, while denying a truth which is evident before their eyes, they claim to see, to know and to teach the truth. It is a challenging and unsettling conclusion that has wider application than to the Pharisees of two thousand years ago. The Gospels were written for all people in every age.

What is the wider message? Like the other Gospel writers, John’s primary interest in recounting events such as works of power lies in what they say about Jesus. The primary message of this story is in Jesus saying, ‘I am the light of the world.’ (v.5) He enlightens people’s darkness, but only those of goodwill receive him. Those who are full of

themselves and their systems have no room for him, so they live in darkness. The humble, like the blind man, who are willing to accept evidence for what it is, enjoy the full revelation of the truth. This opens the door to all humanity.

Lent

Week 4, Monday

John 4.43-54 Jesus cures a court official's son

43. When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee

44. (for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in the prophet's own country).

45. When he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival; for they too had gone to the festival.

46. Then he came again to Cana in Galilee where he had changed the water into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum.

47. When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.

48. Then Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.'

49. The official said to him, 'Sir, come down before my little boy dies.'

50. Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.

51. As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive.

52. So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, 'Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him.'

53. The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' So he himself believed, along with his whole household.

54. Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.

There are similar passages in Matthew 8.5-13 and Luke 7.1-10. But there are substantial differences, too. With Matthew and Luke: -

- the healing takes place in Capernaum, not in Cana;
- it is that of a servant, not of a little boy;
- it is in response to a request from a centurion, not a royal court official;
- in Luke, the request is relayed by Jewish elders, while in Matthew and John it is made directly by the father;
- the snub, if that is what it was, in v.48, has relevance in a Jewish context, but would hardly apply to a centurion who would almost certainly have been a Gentile;
- while the dialogue in Matthew and Luke are similar to one other, they are quite different from that in John.

John's story is more likely than not to refer to a different occasion from Matthew's or Luke's.

Vv.43-45: Jesus returns to Galilee and is welcomed there. This was in contrast to the cool, or hostile, reception he had had in Judea. Galilee 'of the nations,' (Isaiah 8.23 {9.1}), that is, of the Gentiles, is more receptive than his own people. This theme, of Jesus' rejection by his own, runs through the Gospels.

V.46: The reference is to John 2.1-11.

V.47: It is easy to understand the father's desperation. At a time when doctors were such that one would do well to keep away from them, what else could he do but ask for help from someone who had a reputation as a healer?

V.48 sounds like a snub, as if Jesus were saying, 'You're another one of those who wants to put me to the test by looking for a sign.' The man was just asking honestly for help; he had no hidden agenda. But the two 'yous' in the verse are in the plural, so the remark may have been directed to onlookers rather than to him.

V.49: A sign of the man's sincerity is that he does not allow himself to be deflected by what Jesus had said; instead he reiterated his request. Like the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 7.24-30 and Matthew 15.21-28, who was snubbed even more forcefully, he

wants one thing – his little boy’s recovery – and will not allow anything, snub or otherwise, to deflect him. His feelings may have been hurt, but his son’s survival was his priority.

V.50: Did Jesus regret what he had just said? By his ready agreement to help, was he, in effect, offering an apology?

What matters is that ‘the man believed.’ To believe is to trust. That is the essential, the *sine qua non*. He takes Jesus at his word and does as he told him. When people do as Jesus says, good things happen.

There is a change of tone, from ‘official’ in v.49 to ‘man’ here and ‘father’ in v.53.

V.51: On the way home, he meets messengers who tell him that his child is well. One can imagine his relief and gratitude.

Vv.52-53: He asks when it happened and they say it was at the same hour that Jesus had told him his child would be well. That was at one in the afternoon, the hottest time of the day, the time when it was least likely that a fever would abate by itself.

The official and his household believe. That was common: when the head of the household came to faith, the rest would follow. An example is the household of Cornelius the Roman centurion in Acts 10.34-48.

V.54: The story is rounded off with a reference to Jesus' ministry in Galilee, as in v.46.

The father was one of those of whom Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.' (John 20.29) He begged, he believed, he obeyed, and he believed again. Most of all, he loved.

The story is one of many parables in action where the focus is on who Jesus is. This points to his being 'the resurrection and the life.' (John 11.25)

Lent

Week 4, Tuesday

John 5.1-3; 5-16 Jesus heals on the Sabbath

1. After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
2. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes.
3. In these lay many invalids - blind, lame, and paralyzed
- (4. waiting for the stirring of the water;)
5. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.
6. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'

7. The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’

8. Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’

9. At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a Sabbath.

10. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, ‘It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.’

11. But he answered them, ‘The man who made me well said to me, "Take up your mat and walk."'

12. They asked him, ‘Who is the man who said to you, "Take it up and walk"?’

13. Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there.

14. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.’

15. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

16. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath.

V.1 is a fairly standard introductory phrase in John’s Gospel. It presents Jesus as going to Jerusalem, heading towards the climax.

Vv.2-4: People sufferings from illnesses gathered at the pool, ‘waiting for the stirring of the water.’ It seems there was a popular belief, likely born of desperation, that, from time to time, an angel would stir the water in the pool, and this would bring healing to the first person to get into the water after it. (See v.7) Verse 4 is omitted from some manuscripts; its language is untypical of John. The phenomenon it describes may have had an entirely natural hydrological explanation.

V.5: Numerologists might offer an elaborate explanation for the number thirty-eight, but it is more likely just a factual measurement.

V.6: Jesus asks him a simple, some might say superfluous, question: ‘Do you want to be made well?’ Jesus needed to know; he worked *with* people rather than *for* them.

V.7: The man doesn’t answer his question. Maybe he doesn’t know what he wants; maybe he had not asked himself the question. Or was it a case of what has been called ‘the yokel blend of drowsiness and cunning’ that never gives a straight answer to a question for fear of giving away information, especially to a stranger?

There are people who do not want to be made well. They enjoy ill-health; from it they derive an identity; and if they have an unusual illness it makes them feel unique and they enjoy being centre-stage as they

recount in painful detail every pill, powder and procedure they have received. If someone could wave a magic wand and take away their illnesses, they would receive no thanks for it because they would have taken away from the patient the focus around which their life was centred and left them feeling naked, empty and ordinary. Some succumb to self-pity and refuse to be helped except on their own terms. They don't want to face the challenge of re-building their lives and facing the responsibilities that good health brings, such as going out and earning a living. There are people – the clinging vine personality, for example - who won't look for a remedy as long as they can find an excuse, or someone to blame, or a "pious" reason such as – 'I'm offering my life as a victim to suffering.'

Fortunately, the very great majority of people do want to get well. They want to have life and have it to the full. (See John 10.10) But it is significant that the man does not answer the question Jesus asked him. He did not say, 'Yes, I want to be made well.' Instead he tells his tale of woe. It has the sound of, 'Poor me; no one ever does anything for me.' There is more than a touch of self-pity about it; he seems to relish the role of victim, to wallow in it. As long as he indulges that frame of mind, he will not recover.

It is also true to say that there is more than one way of being paralyzed. A person may be paralyzed by fear, by being frozen, hardened or catatonic in selfishness, by resistance to conversion or change,

by the dead hand of routine, by mental stagnation, by emotional frigidity or rigidity, by a sense of guilt that cripples, by lack of imagination, by anything that impedes a person from living life to the full. May Jesus free us from those things!

V.8: There is something blunt, even sharp, about Jesus saying to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ (The language here is almost identical to that used in the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2.11.) It is like saying, ‘No more nonsense! Get up and get going!’ Maybe that was what the man needed, someone who would rip away the mask he had been hiding behind and confront him with the challenge of living. I have known cases of people with long-term illnesses (real or imagined), sometimes indulged by a doting relative, having the wits scared out of them by a strong personality who bluntly told them there was nothing wrong with them, to get up and do a day’s work – and they did it, because they were too scared not to!

V.9: The man did it, just like that. He got up and walked. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. (Matthew 12.8) He does not dismiss its significance but relativizes it in view of the greater good of the person. The Pharisees present might have said he was an à la carte Jew, with a pick-and-mix attitude towards the objective moral order. Tut-tut!

‘Now that day was a Sabbath.’ (This was the case also in the cure of the man born blind in John 9.14.)

One is tempted to ask, ‘Who cares?’ But to Jews this was a big issue. Fidelity to the Sabbath and its observances was a touchstone of Judaism; it was tangible, measurable, visible and unavoidable.

This had been inculcated in them by a tradition expressed forcefully in Jeremiah: -

Thus says the Lord: ‘As you love your lives, take care not to carry burdens on the Sabbath day, to bring them in through the gates of Jerusalem.

Bring no burden from your homes on the Sabbath. Do no work whatever, but keep holy the Sabbath, as I commanded your fathers, though they did not listen or give ear, but stiffened their necks so as not to hear or take correction.

If you obey me wholeheartedly, says the Lord, and carry no burden through the gates of this city on the Sabbath, keeping the Sabbath holy and abstaining from all work on it, then, through the gates of this city, kings who sit upon the throne of David will continue to enter, riding in their chariots or upon their horses, along with their princes, and the men of Judah, and the citizens of Jerusalem. This city will remain inhabited forever.

To it people will come from the cities of Judah and the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin and from the foothills, from the hill country and the Negeb, to bring

holocausts and sacrifices, cereal offerings and incense and thank offerings to the house of the Lord.

But if you do not obey me and keep holy the Sabbath, if you carry burdens and come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath, I will set unquenchable fire to its gates, which will consume the palaces of Jerusalem. (17.21-27)

It was perhaps with that text in mind that 'he [Jesus] would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple' (Mark 11.16) on the day when he overthrew the tables of the money-changers. Jeremiah's word was the word of the Lord. One could not simply set it aside without calling all of God's word into question.

Jesus was a Jew, born into and formed by Jewish tradition. He could not set it aside without violating the commandment to 'Honour your father and your mother.' That applies to our tradition and religious heritage as well as to our birth parents. But here in this passage from John, he orders a man to carry his mat through the Temple, and on a Sabbath. For him, the person had priority; human well-being came first. He had no patience with enclosed, self-referencing systems of thought where there are cut-and-dried answers to every question according to a prescribed formula, and people must be squeezed into their designated pigeon-hole.

Vv.10-12: The temple inquisitors, ever watchful, have heard about the matter and have arrived and begin their investigation. There is an issue to be examined and have judgment passed upon it and on those responsible. It is summarized in the phrase, ‘it is not lawful for you to carry your mat on the Sabbath’ spoken with outraged shock and portentous importance. This is the crisis, the challenge of the hour, the slippery slope, the awful horror, the appalling vista that unfolds itself before the defenders of truth. They may have seen themselves as heroic souls standing between the simple faithful and the wrathful arm of God stretched out in anger to strike those who would defile his Sabbath by that heinous crime – carrying one’s mat on the Sabbath, and in Jerusalem, too! – and the only excuse the wretched man has to offer is that this is the first time he has walked in thirty-eight years! They are determined to rise to the challenge – see v.16.

Their view of Sabbath observance exemplifies an understanding of religion where particular issue(s) – the Sabbath for Jews, abortion, contraception, ordination of women and homosexuality for Catholics – are made into the ultimate bench-mark of orthodoxy. They become the litmus test, acquiring a priority above that of the basics, such as the law of love or the primacy of the person. They enable lines to be drawn between those who are in and those who are out, between the chosen and the frozen. They become purity codes and merit systems rolled into

one and their appeal is to the ego. Pharisees of all religions and ages love them.

How ironic, yet sad, when one remembers that the Sabbath, in its origin, was a most welcome measure of human liberation! The Hebrew verb *shabbát* means to rest or cease. The command of God was to keep it holy. (Exodus 20.8) It was to be a day of prayer and of rest, a family day, a break from the usual burdens of life. How valuable it is for society to have such a day that is recognized and accepted by all! And in a world where slavery was almost universal, it ensured that slaves would have at least one day of rest in a week, an equalizing measure as well as one that gave them a break from work. The Christian church took up this idea from Judaism and extended it, so that, in the Middle Ages, in addition to Sunday rest, there were many ‘holy days,’ local, national, and universal, amounting to about eight weeks a year, which were also days of rest. (Hutton Webster, *Early European History*, D. C. Heath, London, 1924, p.435) These ‘holy days’ now have their secular form in the word derived from them – holidays.

By the time of Jesus, the gift of *shabbát* had become a guilt trip, tied up in a multitude of extravagant and burdensome minutiae. Catholics made a similar mistake: the sacrament of confession, of forgiveness, which could – and, at its best, did – bring reconciliation and peace of soul, became the tribunal of penance with the priest in the role of

presiding judge, and, for some people, a torment of scrupulosity – Was my contrition imperfect or perfect? What about remission of the temporal punishment due to my sins? Was this or that grave matter? Did I have clear knowledge? Did I give full consent? Did I confess all my mortal sins according to their number and kind? The Council of Trent anathematized anyone who might say that it was not necessary by divine law to confess each and all mortal sins, including secret ones and those of desire... as also the circumstances that change the species of a sin. (J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the doctrinal Statements of the Catholic Church*, Collins, London, 1983, n.1648)

How much simpler, easier and better than all of the above spiritual and moral gymnastics is Saint Paul saying, ‘Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink, or of observing festivals, new moons, *or Sabbaths.*’ (Colossians 2.16; my italics) And, better still, ‘by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God’ (Ephesians 2.8) or ‘The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.’ (John 1.17)

V.13: The man cannot answer their questions because he does not know. For the moment, the investigation stalls, but only for the moment. They will not let it rest.

V.14: As in John 9.35, Jesus goes after the man he has healed to follow up on the matter. When they meet, he implies that there is a link between the man's condition and sin: 'Do not sin any more or something worse may happen to you.' Elsewhere, as in John 9.1-3, for example, in the story of the man born blind, Jesus takes a different view: -

As he [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.' (John 9.1-3)

(There is a fuller comment on this question under Matthew 21.18-22)

There is no reason to think of the two positions adopted by Jesus - here and in John 9.1-3 - as contradictory. They are different situations with different people, who may have lived very different lives. Some illnesses may be the by-product of sin; for example, cirrhosis of the liver may be the result of prolonged bouts of excessive drinking. Habitual lying may lead a person to lose sight of the difference between truth and falsehood, between fact and fantasy, and tip them over the edge into mental illness. Jesus is saying to him, in effect, 'You've had a reprieve; learn from it; don't go back and start the process all over again.'

V.15: With thoughtless stupidity, the man repays Jesus for his generosity by drawing trouble down on him. He could have saved him much hassle by the simple means of keeping his mouth shut. Instead he prattles. Did it make him feel important for a fleeting moment? Who knows? May God forgive him, the fool.

V.16: The witch-hunt is on. In their zeal, the defenders of orthodoxy seem about to forget that the one who does the work of God must use the methods of God. (See v.18)

Lent

Week 4, Wednesday

John 5.17-30 The authority of Jesus the Son of God

17. But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working.’

18. For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

19. Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.’

20. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished.
21. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes.
22. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son,
23. so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Anyone who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him.
24. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.
25. Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.
26. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself;
27. and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.
28. Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice
29. and will come out - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.
30. I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.'

Vv.17-18: begins as an answer by Jesus to the criticism made of him in the preceding passage. The ‘them’ whom he addresses are likely to be from among the priests, scribes and Pharisees; they were his most frequent critics.

‘My Father is still working, and I also am still working.’ The Sabbath had its theological origin in the idea that God “rested” on the seventh day of creation. (Genesis 2.3) Jewish tradition held that God then finished the work of creation; from there on, his activity was in governing or sustaining what he had created. In particular, his work of giving life, healing and judging continues at all times, including the Sabbath. On that basis, Jesus says he is justified in doing the same.

This arouses great opposition because implicit in it are three claims which Jesus makes: - first, to be lord of the Sabbath; second, to call God his Father; and third, that he has the same power as the Father to give life, to heal and to judge. They understand that to be equivalent to making a claim to equality with God. They were right; it did.

Jesus did not use the language of equality, perhaps because that might suggest rivalry between him and his Father. Instead, he speaks of his unity, as the pre-existing Word, with God, as in: -

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.
What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all peoples. (John 1.1-4)

V.19: Unity is again his theme here, and in saying later, ‘The Father and I are one.’ (John 10.30) As man, however, he goes so far as to say, ‘The Father is greater than I.’ (John 14.28) Throughout John’s Gospel there is a constant referral by Jesus to his Father; it pervades this Gospel. It is Jesus’ constant reference point, the magnetic pole of his compass, so to speak. ‘The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands.’ (John 3.35)

Vv.20-21: The bond that binds Father and Son together is not mere equality, which is often understood to mean sameness, a sterile, legalistic or even statistical idea. It is love, mutual and total. Jesus the Son participates fully in his Father’s work, and will do greater works than those seen so far. The greatest is to give life to the dead – hence the impact of the raising to life of the dead Lazarus (John 11.1-45), and the raising to life of the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7.7-17). They will be followed by the raising of Jesus himself to life.

V.22: The role of judge is that of vindicating the good and condemning the evil. The Psalmist looks forward to judgment, seeing it as the time when he will be vindicated against his enemies, confident that God sees him as righteous. No such guarantees or expectations are voiced here.

In the Gospel, judgment seems to have two meanings, analogous to what we mean by verdict and sentence. God's verdict is true and just. God's sentence is merciful: -

I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge. (John 12.47-48)

In John, the role of Jesus as judge is difficult. There are different passages on the theme: -

- 'The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son' (5.22);
- 'The Father... has given him [Jesus] authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man' (5.26-27);
- 'As I [Jesus] hear, I judge; and my judgment is just...' (5.30);
- 'I [Jesus] judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I

- alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me.’ (8.15-16);
- ‘he [God the Father] is the judge’ (8.50);
 - ‘I [Jesus] came into this world for judgment’ (9.39);
 - ‘I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save it.... On the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge’ (12.47-48);

What is one to make of these paradoxical twists and turns? Life is larger than logic; context matters. A limited, provisional statement made in a specific context may not be enlarged into a generalized statement of universal application without the risk of falsification. But, even if it is unclear who is the judge, it is clear that there is a judgment.

V.23: The unity between Father and Son is such that honour paid to them is indivisible; to honour one is to honour the other. There is no either-or competitiveness.

Vv.24-25 each begins with the phrase, ‘Very truly, I tell you...’ This is generally taken to introduce a statement considered to be an accurate quotation from Jesus (the *ipsissima verba*, the very words).

V.24: To hear the word of Jesus and to believe in him means to give him one’s heart, soul, mind and body. It is more than simple intellectual assent, and still more than a mere verbal profession of faith.

V.25: 'The dead' here probably refers to those who are spiritually dead in sin rather than those 'who are in their graves.' (See v.28) They hear his voice now, he is among them. To 'hear' means to obey, as in the Latin, *audire*, to hear, and *obaudire*, to obey; it involves the heart as well as the ears.

Vv.26-30: These verses essentially are a repeat of vv.19-25.

Vv.26-27: The giving of life and of judgment, the special prerogatives of God, are given by the Father to the Son.

Vv.28-29: This refers to the dead 'who are in their graves.' It may be a reference to what was called in medieval times, 'the harrowing of hell,' Jesus' going to Hades, the abode of the dead, after his own death, as expressed in the *Apostles' Creed*: 'he descended into hell,' to liberate from there the souls of the just who pre-deceased him. It could also perhaps, in an extended sense, refer to the last judgment of all at the end of time.

V.30: In content, if not in wording, this repeats verse 19. 'I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me' is a summary of Jesus' relationship with God his Father.

What is the purpose of these extended debates about an intra-Jewish issue like Sabbath observance? It cannot be the issue itself *per se*. (See Colossians 2.16, for example.) From the viewpoint of Christians, including the Gospel writers, it does not merit such attention. There is an underlying issue, though, which is of supreme importance, and that is who Jesus is. He either was God-made-man or he was not; you cannot split the difference. He cannot be “sort of” God. Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote that Jesus is either of supreme importance or of no importance. That is right; there is no half-way house on the matter. The issue behind the issues (of Sabbath observance, fasting, etc.) is that Jesus is the Son of God who is united with God with Father, shares in all his powers and prerogatives, and is the embodiment of God on earth. He is the human face of God. He is God’s answer to the human question, ‘What’s God like?’

Lent

Week 4, Thursday

John 5.31-47 Witnesses to Jesus

31. If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true.
32. There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true.
33. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth.

34. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved.
35. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.
36. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me.
37. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form,
38. and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.
39. You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.
40. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.
41. I do not accept glory from human beings.
42. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you.
43. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him.
44. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?
45. Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope.
46. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.

47. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?

What follows in this passage may have been an answer by Jesus to a question posed, at least implicitly, but more likely explicitly, along the lines of, ‘No one can be a witness in his own case, so what witnesses can you call to support the truth of what you say?’

Vv.31-32: Jesus acknowledges that his own testimony about himself cannot be sufficient. (Though he appears to say differently later in John: ‘Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going...’ (8.13-14) He offers witnesses to support him. First, he cites John the Baptist. Jesus honours John as a man of truth, one who testified to who he was. John had said of Jesus, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’ (John 1.29) The Aramaic word *talya*, means both lamb and servant, so John could equally have meant ‘servant of God.’

Vv.33-34: The ‘You’ in v.33 contrasts with the ‘I’ in v.34; both are emphatic. Jesus contrasts Jewish attitudes and his own, as he does frequently in Matthew with the juxtaposition of ‘You have heard that it was said... But I say to you...’ (e.g. in Matthew 5.21-48)

V.35: John was ‘a burning and shining lamp,’ though ‘he himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.’ (John 1.8) John’s role was to prepare the way for Jesus, who said of himself, ‘I am the light of the world.’ (John 9.5)

V.36: Jesus goes on to say that he does not need human testimony, such as John’s, because the deeds of power he performs testify that he is from God. They are the second witness he cites. Implicitly, he says to people, ‘Look at what I’m doing, and recognize that these works show that I am from God.’

V.37a: His Father is his third witness: ‘The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished.’ (John 5.20) Jesus was focussed, even fixated, on God as his Father. For him, the Father was everything.

Vv.37b-47: This passage is an outburst of frustration on the part of Jesus. He is exasperated by his hearers’ refusal to accept him. It does not seem to matter what he does, they find some reason for refusing to draw the conclusion that he is from God. He says, in effect, that when they open their scriptures they close their minds. He is offering them life and yet they do not come to him for it. The passage, written after the resurrection and Pentecost, shows the fuller understanding of who Jesus was that those events gave.

Vv.41-42: Maybe they are looking for praise from people, wanting to be seen as ‘a safe pairs of hands,’ paragons of loyalty, not rocking the boat, or, as the Americans put it, ‘covering their ass.’ There are, and probably always will be, religious careerists anxious to guard their reputation, promote their careers, and climb up the greasy promotional pole, no matter what the price is in integrity.

This happens when religion becomes ideology; facts that do not fit the ideology are denied, suppressed, or ignored, and those who draw attention to them as true are treated likewise – all in the name of fidelity to revelation! It has happened many times since Jesus had these disputes with the Jews of Jerusalem. The message of vv.39-47 is for more than one particular time or place in history.

Vv.43-44: There were, in fact, others who came claiming to be the Messiah, men such as Theudas whose movement was suppressed by the Romans in 44 AD. Earlier people included Judas the Galilean who was killed along with his followers about 4 B.C. His sons, James and Simon, leaders of messianic movements, likewise revolted and were crucified. There were probably others also, whose names and movements have been lost to history.

Jesus attributes this to people following leaders with ambitions that do not come from God.

Vv.45-47: Moses and the scriptures (see v.39 also) are the fourth witness that Jesus calls. He says that Moses is the one who pointed the way to him. (Matthew, in his Gospel, goes to great lengths to show Jesus as the new Moses.) Elsewhere they boasted that ‘we are disciples of Moses.’ (John 9.28) In effect, he is saying, ‘If [you] do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will [you] be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’ (Luke 16.30-31). He spoke similarly elsewhere in John: -

I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge. (John 12.47-48)

Jesus has called four witnesses – John the Baptist, his own deeds of power, God his Father, and Moses. But it is always possible for people wilfully to refuse the truth. No one can be forced to accept it. But, if they knowingly reject it, their wilfulness will bring down condemnation on them. John’s Gospel has been called the Gospel of the rejection.

In reading John, it may be best to go from chapter 5 to 7, leaving 6 till later. There is a natural flow between the two. Some authors suggest reading chapters 4, 6, 5 and 7 in that order. Others, though, say that, from a theological perspective, chapter 5

must precede 6, because 6 would make no sense unless Jesus had first, in chapter 5, established his claim to be the Son of God.

Lent

Week 4, Friday

John 7.1-2, 10, 25-30 Jesus goes up to Jerusalem

1. After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him.
2. Now the Jewish festival of Tabernacles was near.

10. But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but in secret.

25. Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, 'Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill?'

26. And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah?

27. Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.'

28. Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, 'You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him.'

29. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.'

30. Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.

V.1: This is one of many references to Jews wanting to kill Jesus; others are in John 5.18; 7.1, 13, 19, 25, 30, 32, 44; 8.37, 40, 59 and 11.54. It is strange that something so significant receives such little coverage in the Synoptics.

V.2: The Festival of Tabernacles (also called Booths or Tents) celebrated the Exodus of the Hebrew peoples from Egypt; during it, Jews live in tents to commemorate their doing so during the Exodus. It was a joyful festival lasting eight days and had links with an earlier autumn harvest festival.

V.10: Jesus went to Jerusalem for the festival, not in the company of his brothers, but secretly. John says, 'Not even his brothers believed in him.' (v.7) In v.3, they tell him to leave Galilee, saying that he would become better known that way. They seem anxious not to have him with them but to keep him at arm's length. He told them he was not going to the festival (v.7), but appeared to change his mind and go there after they had gone (v.10). Perhaps a reason for his secrecy was that he wished to make his appearance in Jerusalem on his own terms. A sudden appearance there might have evoked the memory of Malachi saying, 'the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple' (3.1), and work to his advantage.

A large part of John's Gospel is set in Jerusalem in and around the Temple. This is strange: Jesus was not a Jewish priest. He could not have been one even if he had wanted to, because membership of the priesthood was by family descent. He was of the tribe of David, not of Levi; he was not a Cohen. And the priests were among his principal critics, maintaining the long-standing tradition of tension between prophet and priest, the desert and the temple, the charismatic amateur outsider and the managerial professional insider. Jesus must have felt like an alien there. In his life and teaching, Jesus was much closer to the prophet than to the priest or king. The comment has been made that there are many Catholic churches around the world dedicated to Christ the King, but few, if any, to Jesus the Prophet. Strange... and maybe telling.

Vv.25-26: Jesus' presence became known in Jerusalem and caused controversy: how could he, a wanted man, walk around openly, unless the Temple authorities had changed their minds and come to accept him as Messiah?

V.27: People say they know where Jesus comes from. What was it that they "knew"? Did they know he had been born in Bethlehem (in Judea)? He was spoken of widely as Jesus of Nazareth (in Galilee). Did they know that he had moved, more recently, to Capernaum?

Malachi had written, ‘the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.’ (3.1) And Daniel, ‘As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.’ (7.13) There is an element of surprise and mystery in both texts about the coming of the Messiah.

Yet Micah had written,

You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of
Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to rule my people Israel.
(Micah 5.1, quoted in Matthew 2.6)

That was understood by the people in messianic terms: ‘Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?’ (John 7.42) So, unless Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem had been secret – and the Gospel gives no indication of this, though John omits entirely the birth and childhood of Jesus – why should the people be unaware of it? If they were unaware, why would Jesus not have let them know? It would have helped to confirm that he was the Messiah. Did he say nothing because, in real terms, he came from God and *that* was the origin he wished to emphasize?

Vv.28-29: Jesus says people know where he is from. He links his coming to God and says his mission is from him.

In this passage, as in several others in John, Jesus seems provocative, one might even say unnecessarily so:

‘You do not have his word abiding in you’ (5.38);

‘I know that you do not have the love of God in you’ (5.42);

‘None of you keeps the law [of Moses] (7.19);

‘You do not know him’ [God] 7.28;

‘You do not know him [God]’ (8.55)

‘a liar like you’ (8.55);

V.30: All the Gospels emphasize that Jesus was the master of his destiny. No one forces his hand or imposes their timetable on him. ‘My time has not yet come.’ (John 2.4; 7.6, 8; 8.20)

Throughout this passage, the theme of Jesus’ rejection by his people continues as well as the foreboding sense that his time is drawing to a close and his enemies are closing in on him.

Lent

Week 4, Saturday

John 7.40-52 Jesus a sign of contradiction

40. When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.'
41. Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?'
42. Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?'
43. So there was a division in the crowd because of him.
44. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.
45. Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, 'Why did you not arrest him?'
46. The police answered, 'Never has anyone spoken like this!'
47. Then the Pharisees replied, 'Surely you have not been deceived too, have you?'
48. Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?'
49. But this crowd, which does not know the law - they are accursed.'
50. Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked,
51. 'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?'
52. They replied, 'Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.'

Vv.40-41a: Opinions are divided about Jesus, with some in his favour. Are ‘the prophet’ and ‘the Messiah’ two people, or two ways of talking about one and the same figure? The questions earlier put to John the Baptist suggest that they are two distinct figures: -

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’

He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’

And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ (John 1.19-21)

It seems there was a tradition about the coming of a new Moses who would be a prophet distinct from Elijah or the Messiah. Perhaps that was who they had in mind.

V.41b: They think of Jesus as having come from Galilee ‘of the nations’ (Isaiah 8.23 {9.1}), a partly Gentile region, and, unlike Judea, regarded as not fully *kosher*. Judean Jews saw themselves as the *crème de la crème* of Judaism, unlike their dodgy, compromised Galilean cousins. As for the Samaritans in between the two regions, well, the less said about that lot the better.

V.42: Jesus ‘was descended from the house and family of David’ (Luke 2.4). He was called Son of

David in Matthew 12.23; 15.22; 20.30-31; 21.9, 15; Mark 10.47-48; Luke 3.31 (in his genealogy) and 18.38-39. Oddly, the only one who questions it is Jesus himself: he seems to play to the gallery and make fun of the idea in Mark 12.35-37.

If Jesus had said he was from Bethlehem, would it have made a difference? If so, why did he not say it? Was it because, as some scripture scholars suggest, Jesus was not from Bethlehem but was born in Nazareth and the story of his Bethlehem birth was created by Matthew in order to provide a “fulfilment” of Micah 5.1?

You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of
Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to rule my people Israel.
(Micah 5.1, quoted in Matthew 2.6)

Vv.43-44: Not for the first time, Jesus becomes a catalyst for division. A few examples out of many will illustrate: -

There was considerable complaining about him among the crowds. While some were saying, ‘He is a good man,’ others were saying, ‘No, he is deceiving the crowd’ (John 7.12); Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner

perform such signs?’ And they were divided (John 9.16);

Again, the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, ‘He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him? Others were saying, ‘These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’ (John 10.21-22)

Jesus knew he would divide people; it was inescapable. He said: -

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!

I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son

and son against father,

mother against daughter

and daughter against mother,

mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law

and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

(Luke 12.49-53)

He did not set out to create division, but when someone who makes a big impact on the public and elicits a substantial following makes highly

important claims about himself and his mission, diversity of responses may be expected. Some wanted to arrest him, presumably to silence him and suppress his movement.

Vv.45-46: The division extends to temple personnel: security guards sent to arrest him come back his advocates.

Vv.47-49: The Pharisees fall back on authority, as if to say, 'Never mind the merits of the case; we know the inside story, we are the authorities, and we should be followed.'

Their arrogant dismissal of public opinion - 'this crowd, which does not know the law, they are accursed' - evokes memories of their saying to the man born blind to whom Jesus gave the gift of sight, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' (John 9.34)

The "experts" have unanimously got it wrong, while loftily dismissing public opinion as merely the product of ignorance. That is familiar in church and society. Alcuin's saying, written in a letter to Charlemagne about A.D.800, '*Vox populi, vox Dei*' (the voice of the people is the voice of God), would not have gained a hearing among them.

Vv.50-51: Nicodemus, he of the late night discussion with Jesus in John, chapter 3, speaks up – but not too strongly; clearly, he is afraid. He does

not speak in Jesus' defence, but limits himself to saying he should have a hearing. It is noticeable that no one answers his question, though it was important and at the heart of the matter. Instead, they indulge in an *ad hominem* attack on him.

V.52: For the Pharisees, the case is closed before it has opened. Their minds were locked into the local, into their limited understanding, imprisoned by narrow loyalties. They were unable or unwilling to look beyond their mental framework; if Jesus did not fit into it, then there was no room for him in their inn.

Nathaniel, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, had expressed the general view of Nazareth, and, implicitly, of Galilee, too, 'Nazareth? Can anything good come from that place?' (John 1.46, JB)

Lent

Week 5, Monday, alternative reading

John 11.1-45 The death and resurrection of Lazarus

1. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.
2. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.
3. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.'

4. But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.'
5. Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,
6. after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.
7. Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.'
8. The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?'
9. Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world.
10. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.'
11. After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.'
12. The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.'
13. Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.
14. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead.
15. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.'
16. Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

17. When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.
18. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away,
19. and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.
20. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.
21. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.
22. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.'
23. Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'
24. Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'
25. Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,
26. and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'
27. She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'
28. When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.'
29. And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.
30. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.
31. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out.

They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

32. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

33. When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

34. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.'

35. Jesus began to weep.

36. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'

37. But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

38. Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

39. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.'

40. Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'

41. So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me.'

42. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.'

43. When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'

44. The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

It is not difficult to see resonance between this passage and the healing of the man born blind in John, chapter 9. More importantly, it is a partial foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus himself.

V.1: This is not the Lazarus of Luke 16.19-31. (The name is an alternative form of the name Eleazar.) An unusual feature of this introductory passage is that Bethany is described as the village 'of Mary and her sister Martha.' Normally, both then and now, a village or house would be designated in reference to the man in the story. For Mary and Martha to be named has suggested to some that perhaps Lazarus may have been physically or mentally incapacitated from childhood, and therefore unable to assume the responsibilities of manhood.

V.2: This reference to Mary anointing the Lord looks to John 12.1-8, not to the woman 'who was a sinner' in Luke 7.36-50. Confusion between the two has led to the mistaken identification of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute, with unfortunate consequences for women of many centuries.

Vv.3-6: ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill:’ it was an affectionate and happy way of describing Lazarus.

As with the man born blind, Jesus sees this situation as one which he will direct differently from people’s expectations and which will give glory to God. (See John 9.3)

Jesus stays where he is, though probably well aware that Lazarus’ two sisters would have expected him to come immediately. He has a higher purpose, greater than anyone could have imagined, which he will bring to fulfilment. It requires a delay.

Vv.7-8: Jesus decides to go to Bethany in Judea in the face of objections from his disciples who point out that, not long before, an attempt had been made to stone him there in the grounds of the Temple. (See John 8.59)

Vv.9-10: He deals with their objections by saying, in effect, that time is limited and must be used to the full, because the hour of darkness is approaching when the opportunity will be gone. He is also making the point that he is master of his own destiny and will choose the time of his death.

Vv.11-15: He knew that Lazarus was dead and, in elliptical fashion, tells the disciples so. He is happy for their sake because the death will give him the opportunity of strengthening their faith.

V.16: Thomas, the twin (Greek, didymos), seeing the danger of going back to a place so near Jerusalem, bravely offers to die with Jesus. Did the other apostles come also? We don't know. In v.8 they sounded reluctant when they asked Jesus, 'are you going there again?' 'You' – not 'we.' No one says anything, and Jesus has to repeat his request 'let us go.' (vv.7, 15) In v.11, Jesus makes it clear that he is going anyway. The thought of his death (and resurrection) is never far from the focus of the story which is not just about Lazarus' death but about his, too.

V.17-19: The family of three may have been well known, in Jerusalem as well as in Bethany. It sounds like there was a big attendance at the funeral. While burial took place on the day of death, the period of mourning lasted a week.

V.20: Martha went out to meet Jesus while Mary stayed at home. That fits their personalities as described in Luke 10.38-42, where Martha is the active person, doing all the work, while Mary is quiet, almost withdrawn.

Vv.21-24: It is impossible to miss the implicit reproach in Martha's words, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' But she goes on to affirm her faith in God's readiness to hear Jesus' prayer. He tells her that her brother will rise again. She replies with a statement of faith in the resurrection as Jews of the time (except Sadducees)

understood it; it would come at the end of time. She probably did not dare to hope for anything sooner.

Vv.25-26: Jesus' response, like his saying 'I am the light of the world' (John 9.5, repeated in 8.12), is laying down a foundational principle about himself. He says, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

This is a breath-taking statement which, like others of his, opens up three, and probably only three, possibilities: -

- Jesus was deluded, out of touch with reality;
- Jesus was the most shameless conman who ever lived;
- Jesus was who he said he was – the Son of God.

Madman, conman or God-man: it's one of the three. Look at the evidence and see which fits.

Jesus' 'I am' sayings, found in John's Gospel, could not possibly be made by any simply human teacher, prophet or religious leader. They go much too far for any human claim: -

I am the bread of life.	6.35, 48
I am the light of the world.	8.12; 9.5
I am the gate for the sheep.	10.7, 9

I am the good shepherd.	10.11, 14
I am the resurrection and the life.	11.25
I am the way, the truth and the life.	14.6
I am the real vine.	15.1, 5

They are in harmony with God's 'I am' in: 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3.14), with, 'I tell you, before Abraham ever was, I am' (John 8.59), with, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end,' (Revelation 1.8; 21.6) and with 'I am the first and the last, the only God; I am the Lord, the Creator of all things; I am the high and holy God, who lives for ever; I am merciful; I am everywhere in heaven and on earth; I am the Lord.' (From Exodus 3; Isaiah 44, 57; Jeremiah 3; Malachi 3) His hearers understood what the phrase implied: immediately after saying, 'before Abraham ever was, I am' (8.59), 'they [the Jews] picked up stones to throw at him.' (8.60) Stoning was the punishment for blasphemy, for claiming to be God.

V.27: Martha now makes what may be the greatest profession of faith found in the Gospels. It was a giant leap of faith, all the more impressive for having been made at a time of personal grief and loss.

Vv.28-32: Now it is Mary's turn. Unlike Martha, she does not go out to meet Jesus but waits to be called. She goes to meet him and speaks just as Martha had: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother

would not have died.’ (See v.21 above) Maybe the sisters had said this to each other.

Vv.33-37: Now is a moment when we see Jesus emotionally alive: ‘Jesus began to weep.’ (The JB has, ‘Jesus wept,’ making it the shortest verse in the Bible.) This theme is continued in v.38, which speaks of Jesus being, ‘again greatly disturbed.’ Some bystanders remark on his love for Lazarus.

Others, however, indulge in carping negativity, asking why, if he could open the eyes of a man born blind, Jesus could not have prevented Lazarus’ death. It is not impossible that these critics might have been among those who refused to accept that the man had been blind to begin with. (See John 9.18) Cynicism takes little account of logic, reason or facts. Despair’s twin, it is a destructive mood that devours good.

V.38: Mention of a stone sealing the tomb anticipates John 20.1: ‘Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.’

Vv.39-40: In the face of misgivings expressed by the ever practical Martha, Jesus calls again for faith: ‘if you believe, you will see the glory of God.’ This reiterates what he had said in v.4 and also in 9.3.

Vv.41-42: Jesus thanks his Father, saying, ‘I thank you for having heard me,’ although, as yet, nothing

had happened. That is what Jesus had taught, 'I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.' (Mark 11.24) This expresses a relationship of total trust between Jesus and his Father. He says he voices his prayer openly so that the bystanders may come to believe that he was sent by God.

Vv.43-44: Jesus 'cried out with a loud voice,' perhaps because of the strength of his emotion, or maybe so that the bystanders could hear and not later doubt. 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.' (Hebrews 5.7) Lazarus emerges as he had entered, wrapped for burial. Jesus says, 'Unbind him and let him go.' This recalls Moses saying to Pharaoh, 'Let my people go.' (Exodus 5.1) But this liberation, from actual physical death, is the greater. At his resurrection, Jesus, without human intervention, emerges unbound, leaving behind the burial cloths. (John 20.5-7) While Lazarus will die again, Jesus, after his resurrection, lives forever.

This raising to life of the dead Lazarus is more than an act of compassion to an individual or his family. Even more is it a work of power done to bring glory to God, and to show who Jesus is: 'the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.' (John 1.14) A little

earlier, some people had complained to Jesus, ‘you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.’ (John 10.33) The raising of Lazarus may be seen as his reply. He had said, ‘the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice.’ (John 5.28) What had been done for Lazarus was a sign of hope for all humanity.

Lent

Week 5, Monday

John 8.1-11 The woman caught in adultery

1. Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.
2. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.
3. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them,
4. they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.
5. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’
6. They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.
7. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’

8. And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

9. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

10. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?'

11. She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

JB says, 'The author of this passage, 7.53-8.11, is not John... its style is that of the Synoptics and the author was possibly Luke.... Nevertheless, the passage was accepted in the canon and there are no grounds for regarding it as unhistorical.' (Note u. to 7.53) Luke has a passage which is similar to the introduction in 8.1-2: 'He [Jesus] would go out and spend the night at the Mount of Olives, as it was called. And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the Temple.' (21.37b-38)

On the same question, NCCHS states, 'This beautiful story, though canonical and inspired, is interpolated here...; its irony has the Johannine bite, but its vocabulary resembles Luke's.' (810a)

V.2: It was early in the morning; light was breaking, the darkness fading. This is John's familiar way of associating Jesus with light, and evil with

darkness: 'I am the light of the world.' (8.12 and 9.5)

The Temple and its precincts are the place where much of Jesus' story as told by John takes place.

'All the people...' We are not talking statistics here, but it means that Jesus had a large following. That alone would have created anxiety among the Establishment.

Jesus was a teacher. We don't know what he had intended teaching that day, but his principal lesson was to be one no one had anticipated.

Vv.3-4: The situation described is clearly a trap, one in which the woman is used as bait. The contempt with which she is treated is blatant. They call her 'This woman' - had she no name? By speaking of her as they did they were saying, 'She's a nobody.' The scribes and Pharisees were in high dudgeon, self-righteousness in full swing. They make her stand in full view, enduring a public humiliation; they exult in exhibiting their power; they had been given an ideal opportunity, since she had been caught publicly and in the Temple grounds; and they thought it all had God's sanction; you couldn't ask for better than that.

And yet Jewish law disallowed a prosecution by people motivated by malice. Were the scribes and Pharisees in the clear in that regard?

She was caught ‘in the very act committing adultery.’ Did she do it by herself? Where was the man? There was a double standard: the prevailing attitude was that if a man committed adultery, it was excusable; if a woman committed it, it was inexcusable. But Leviticus had taught, ‘The man who commits adultery with his neighbour’s wife will be put to death, he and the woman.’ (20.10)

(An analogous double standard today is when people speak of a man ‘who strays,’ ignoring the reality that for every man who strays there is a woman who strays with him; it takes two to tango.)

Vv.5-6a: The scribes and Pharisees often posed questions with pretended innocence, with the aim of scoring points, not getting at the truth; they were into debate, not dialogue. They bring out the big guns, throwing Moses at Jesus. They want to put him in a situation where he will have to choose, to say, either ‘Forget about Moses,’ or, ‘Yes, go ahead and stone her.’ If the first, then he is rejecting the law of God as revealed through Moses; if the second, they can represent him as being without compassion. There was an added bonus for them: the Roman garrison was next door to the Temple in the Antonia fortress, and it would quickly become aware of an execution. It is not impossible that the Romans were even watching what was happening as it unfolded. They did not allow the death penalty to be imposed other than by themselves, and Roman law did not consider

adultery a capital offence. So, if Jesus authorized a stoning, they would likely arrest and execute him. Mission accomplished!

If Jesus set aside the law of Moses, they could quote his own words back to him: -

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.

For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5.17-19)

Was the law, the Torah or teaching, the law of God or merely of Moses? One could argue that the Pharisees were right.

If he takes the second option, he will surely lose some, perhaps many, of his following, especially among women. They feel confident that, either way, they have trapped him, because Moses had commanded that women such as she be stoned: -

They shall bring the girl [who has been found not to have been a virgin] to the entrance of her

father's house and there her townsmen shall stone her to death, because she committed a crime against Israel by her unchasteness in her father's house. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst.

If a man is discovered having relations with a woman who is married to another, both the man and the woman with whom he has had relations shall die. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst.

If within the city a man comes upon a maiden who is betrothed, and has relations with her, you shall bring them both out to the gate of the city and there stone them to death: the girl because she did not cry out for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbour's wife. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst. (Deuteronomy 22.21-24)

A Jewish woman was her father's property until she married and her husband's thereafter. Adultery was violation of property rights. A man could not commit adultery against his wife.

Was the penalty of stoning ever applied? Jews today say that, at least in the time of Jesus, and probably for a long time before that, it was not. Had it ever been applied? Perhaps not.

V.6b: This is the only place in the Gospels where Jesus writes – and we don't know what he wrote. Speculation is mostly tabloid-think. (Jesus left no

writings; neither did Socrates, the Buddha or Muhammad.) Perhaps he just doodled to disconcert his questioners, a way of saying, 'I'm not playing your game.' He dealt with their question on his terms, not on theirs.

There is significance in the phrase 'with his finger.' Was it a hint of 'The finger of God' in Exodus 8.19 and 31.18? Or perhaps an allusion to the Ten Commandments which God wrote for Moses in Deuteronomy 5.22? Was it an indirect way of saying, 'Keep the Ten Commandments, one of which prohibits adultery; the rest is your own construction'?

(Perhaps Jesus is still writing with his finger, the power of God creating new facts on the ground, bringing into being new events and realities at the grassroots. May we have eyes open to read them, and a heart open to their significance.)

What was he doing? Maybe he was drawing attention away from the woman, to give her a breathing space from the hostile, accusing stares, revelling in their power over her. Or maybe it was a subtle way of putting himself at a lower level than the woman, in contrast to her accusers, who, both literally and figuratively, looked down on her. Their way, the way of blame and condemnation is not the way to bring the best out of people; it usually drives them back into themselves defensively.

V.7: They persisted with their questioning, walking themselves deeper into the trap they had prepared for him. Jesus avoids the horns of the dilemma they posed by throwing a challenge to them. It must have come as an utter surprise and shock! They had been on the attack, their focus on a vulnerable woman, but Jesus the indirect target of their attack. He threw it back at them, quickly turning their cocksureness to embarrassment. How they must have wished they had never opened their mouths!

V.8: He resumed writing, now perhaps making it easy for the accusers to move away, not wishing to box them into a corner, but giving them the chance of making their exit, even if it was with their tails between their legs. He had come to save Pharisees, too, not to demonize them. He was compassionate to the woman, and also to the Pharisees. Jesus asked questions to get them to think. The story is not an angel-and-demons story, the good woman and the bad Pharisees. He condemned no one, not even them. He was trying to wake them up, to see what they were doing, to look beyond the narrow confines of their certitudes which they identified with truth. They had a theology, and they identified it with God's will. They had started with God as their ruler and ended with rules as their God. They had a theology that made God redundant; they had taken the mystery out of God, replacing him with rules.

V.9: They went away, though perhaps ‘slunk away’ might have been a more accurate description. And they started with the eldest, those who had lived longest and therefore, likely, had the most sins. There was some basic honesty among them; they didn’t deny they were sinners. Or maybe the elders were smart enough to see defeat coming and got out of the way; older and more experienced, they were shrewd enough to anticipate imminent defeat.

No one was left but only the woman and Jesus, misery and mercy, she standing, he still at ground level.

V.10: He straightened up – JB has ‘looked up’ – and addressed her by the title of ‘woman,’ the normal form of address by a man to a woman who was a stranger. He surely smiled as he asked, ‘Has no one condemned you?’

V.11: It must have been with immense relief that she replied, ‘No one, sir.’ This was the first time in the episode that she is given a voice. His reply, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again,’ combined mercy and truth. He does not condemn, but neither does he ignore the reality that she had sinned. He doesn’t fudge that issue; he faces it and goes beyond it. He didn’t have the bogus “mercy” of trying to pretend that sin was not sin. But he went beyond the sin to look at the sinner with mercy, and see what she could become with the help of human support, as if he was saying,

'I see what you are, but I care more about what you could be, with the help of human support.'

The late Russian Orthodox archbishop, Anthony Bloom, wrote about a man who spoke to him about his judgmental attitudes. Bloom told him this parable and then asked, 'What would you have done in that situation?' The man answered, 'I never committed adultery, so I'd have thrown the first stone.' Bloom said to him, 'I can do nothing for you.' That kind of devil is driven out only by prayer and fasting.

Beyond the obvious point about forgiveness, the story is also about Jesus challenging religious authority. It contrasts his power to forgive with the religious establishment's control of minds exercised through guilt and fear. The latter exemplified what the South African anti-apartheid activist, Steve Biko, once said, 'The most powerful weapon in the hand of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.'

Gail R. O'Day has a similar perspective on the story: -

The story has a Christological core beyond the obvious moral point. It is about Jesus' challenge to religious authority by placing the power to forgive and to offer freedom in contrast to the religious establishment's control of the mind. In doing so, he opens up the possibility of new freedom. (*New Interpreter's Bible*, IX, p.630.)

Lent

Week 5, Tuesday

John 8.21-30 Jesus foretells his death

21. Again he said to them, 'I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.'

22. Then the Jews said, 'Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, "Where I am going, you cannot come"?''

23. He said to them, 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.'

24. I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.'

25. They said to him, 'Who are you?' Jesus said to them, 'Why do I speak to you at all?'

26. I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.'

27. They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father.

28. So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.'

29. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.'

30. As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

V.21: Jesus often used an elliptical way of speaking. He gave hints, some used puns and allegorical language. The people of his time, it seems, often found him difficult to understand. Even with the benefit of hindsight, we also find it difficult.

V.22: A problem with the use of such language is that it is open to many interpretations, and, therefore, to misinterpretation. Clearly, that is what happened on this occasion. He was speaking of his coming death and they thought he was speaking of suicide.

Vv.23-24: There is a tone of weariness and frustration in Jesus' voice here. He seems to say, 'We are on two different levels. Unless you learn to trust in me, you will not rise above your sins.' It was like the frustration he expressed in Luke: -

To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?

They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;

we wailed, and you did not weep.'

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon';

the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a

friend of tax collectors and sinners!' (Luke 7.31-34)

There are people who will neither push nor pull; if asked to go left, they go right; if asked to go up, they go down; if asked to go forward, they go back. Jesus' hearers often asked him for signs to show who he was; when given them, they quarrelled, objected and denied. When he explained their meaning, they refused to see it. He must, at times, have asked himself what he could do to get through to them. But he failed. The cliché, however over-used, remains true: there are none so blind as those who will not see.

Knowingly to reject the truth is to sin against the Holy Spirit: -

Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matthew 12.31-32)

Some texts conclude the verse with 'I am' instead of 'I am he.' This allusion to the great 'I am' of Exodus implies, on the part of Jesus, a claim to be the One who revealed himself to Moses: -

Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’

God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’ (3.13-14)

V.25: They ask him again, ‘Who are you?’ His reply seems to say, ‘What’s the point of talking to you? I’ve answered this question before, yet you refuse to accept what I say.’

Jesus could not have begun his mission by saying, ‘I am God-made-man, the Son of God on earth.’ Not only could people not have accepted such a statement, they would have regarded it as blasphemous and stoned him to death on the spot. To begin with, they likely saw him as an itinerant preacher, a wandering rabbi, of whom, it seems, there were many at the time. Gradually, they began to move beyond that: the testimony of John the Baptist, Jesus’ teaching and his works of power led people to begin to ask whether he might not be the Messiah, the chosen messenger of God. Not many, it seems, came to accept him as such, but some did. A very few began to think beyond that, especially after his raising to life of Lazarus. But the great majority remained at the level of their own limited vision, unable to think outside the box, afraid to risk using their imagination, thinking like a person who sees everything as brown because he is wearing brown-tinted lenses.

V.26: The condemnation comes, not from Jesus, who was sent, not to condemn but to save, but from God, who will raise Jesus from the dead, as if to say to them, 'This is the man you rejected; I have vindicated him.'

What can Jesus do except speak the truth, as he has learned it from God? 'The truth imposes itself on the mind only by reason of its truth,' said Saint Thomas Aquinas. It cannot impose itself.

V.27: This verse, taken in conjunction with v.30, makes for difficult reading. How can they both be true? They could both be true, if taken as referring to different hearers - some believe, some don't. Does that explain it?

V.28: It is unlikely that they understood what he meant by 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man.' (See also John 12.32) When they had done so in crucifying him, did they then understand? It doesn't look like it, nor even, in most cases, after his resurrection or Pentecost either. The rejection of Jesus by his people remains a great mystery. As in v.24, the 'I am he' may be read as, 'I am,' with similar significance.

The second part of the verse is an illustration of the way in Jesus referred everything to God his Father. How different is his, 'I do nothing on my own,' from, 'I do my own thing!'

V.29: This is so like what Jesus said elsewhere, ‘I am not alone because the Father is with me.’ (John 16.32)

‘I always do what is pleasing to him.’ There are many similar sayings in the Gospels, especially in John, and they are a summary of Jesus’ life and mission.

V.30: This saying seems so out-of-joint with the preceding that it is difficult to avoid asking whether it may not have been misplaced by an editor.

Lent

Week 5, Wednesday

John 8.31-42 Jesus and Abraham

31. Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples;

32. and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’

33. They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?’

34. Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

35. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever.

36. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

37. I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word.

38. I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you do what you have heard from your father.'

39. They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did,

40. but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.

41. You are indeed doing what your father does.' They said to him, "We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself."

42. Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me.'

V.31: Why the 'had' believed in him? Did they no longer? In view of v.33, perhaps not.

For Jesus and for Jews, truth is not a philosophical abstraction, as for Greeks, and perhaps also for Romans. (See Pontius Pilate in John 18.38) It is a commitment to a covenant with God, passionate and personal. It means being able to trust someone, to love with all one's heart. It goes wider and deeper than the intellectual assent of the Greeks. And so,

Jesus could say of himself, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life.’ (John 14.6)

Inlaid in the floor of the foyer of CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, USA, is the agency’s motto bearing the words, ‘The truth shall make you free.’ It does, too: the truth unburdens a person from deceit, lies, uncertainty, suspicion and mistrust. It brings a person into the world of what-you-see-is-what-you-get, things and people as they are, without pretence, sham or posturing, and that is a relief to all.

V.33: With their unerring instinct for misunderstanding his hearers take it up wrongly, thinking that he is calling them slaves, and they react angrily.

Vv.34-36: This enslavement to sin is easy to see where addictions are concerned. The addict is not a free agent, but is controlled by the addiction. However, all sin dehumanizes; it diminishes the image of God in us, making us less than we were made and meant to be.

The spiritual tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church, distinguishes three stages, or attitudes, towards God: that of the slave, the servant and the son. The Russian Orthodox lay theologian, Alexei Khomiakov wrote, ‘For the slave, the will of God is a curse; for the servant, it is a law; and for the son it is freedom.’ The slave, who asks – ‘Why do I have to do this or that? Why can’t I do what I like? Why

do I have to take orders from someone else? – never feels at home, but is always a stranger in the land. In a real sense, he feels an alien. His notion of freedom is freedom *from*, not freedom *for*. For the servant, the will of God is to be done according to law and as required under pain of punishment or loss; a minimalist approach underlies it. The servants fulfil basic requirements, but no more. For the son, or daughter, freedom is both freedom *from* and freedom *for*, especially freedom from selfishness, in order to be free for the service of others and the Other. Jesus spoke about this elsewhere: -

You are my friends if you do what I command you.

I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (John 15.14-15)

The Son – Jesus – is one who has no civil war raging inside himself, he is integrated and whole, an enabler not a master, ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 1.15), and the person who lives in union with him shares in his life like a branch of the vine. (John 15.1-8) In Jesus, the path of self-surrender is also the path of union with God. In losing himself, he “makes space” for God, and God fills it with himself.

Vv.37-42: His hearers make much of their descent from Abraham. (See v.39 also.) For Jesus, physical descent counts for nothing. He had said, 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (Mark 3.35), and to the woman at Jacob's well in Samaria, 'the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.' (John 4.21, 23) His hearers' minds were locked into the local, unable to see beyond it, like his townspeople in the synagogue in Nazareth who were enraged by his recalling how it was a widow of Zarephath in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian leper, both Gentiles, to whom the prophet Elisha was sent. (Luke 4.26-27)

Jesus claims to have been in the Father's presence, itself a remarkable claim, sure to raise questions.

He contrasts this with his hearers who do what they have heard from their father. They take this as referring to Abraham, but Jesus seems to refer to Satan, saying they are trying to kill him (vv.37, 40) because he has told them the truth as he heard it from God, whereas Abraham, whom they boast of calling their father, did whatever God asked of him, even to being willing to sacrifice his son. (Genesis 22.1-19) They are like the tenants who wish to become proprietors, to take over the vineyard and make it their own. (Matthew 21.33-46) But, for Jesus, 'Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.' (1 John 5.1)

Clearly, there was no meeting of minds here. Jesus makes claims about himself which they cannot accept - 'I came from God' – while they take their stand on descent from Abraham.

This discussion might seem like another wearisome intra-Jewish squabble, like wrangling over the minutiae of Sabbath observance, but, at its heart, it deals with a basic question which is the foundation to everything else: is Jesus who he claims to be, or not?

John's many references to Jews planning or trying to kill Jesus sometimes seem premature or even paranoid. But Jesus must have been aware of what had happened to his predecessors in the prophetic line – they had been killed. He could have diluted the universalist implications of his message to make it less challenging to them, but that would have been to betray his mission. Underlying their hostility to him was perhaps the fear that, if all people were invited to a new covenant with God, what would that make of Jews' unique relationship? What identity would they then have, since so much of it was defined *against* the Gentiles? If the Gentiles were invited to the messianic banquet, so to speak, along with Jews, then what was special about being Jewish? They might well have felt that someone who challenged their identity so radically had to be got rid of as a threat to the unity and even the survival of the nation. As Caiaphas said later, 'it is better... to

have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' (John 11.50)

There is a substantial echo of all this in 1 John: -

Everyone who commits sin commits lawlessness, for sin is lawlessness.

You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.

No one who remains in him sins; no one who sins has seen him or known him.

Children, let no one deceive you. The person who acts in righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous.

Whoever sins belongs to the devil, because the devil has sinned from the beginning. Indeed, the Son of God was revealed to destroy the works of the devil.

No one who is begotten by God commits sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot sin because he is begotten by God.

In this way, the children of God and the children of the devil are made plain; no one who fails to act in righteousness belongs to God, nor anyone who does not love his brother. (3.4-10)

The passages in John 8.12-59 have a jerkiness about them, suggesting that they have been taken from different places and times and then joined together almost hurriedly without editorial work to ensure continuity of thought or unity of theme.

Lent

Week 5, Thursday

John 8.51-59 Another 'I am.'

51. Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.

52. The Jews said to him, 'Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, "Whoever keeps my word will never taste death."'

53. Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?'

54. Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, "He is our God,"

55. though you do not know him. But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word.

56. Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.'

57. Then the Jews said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?'

58. Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.'

59. So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Throughout this passage, and in keeping with others, especially in John, Jesus makes the ultimate claim for himself – to be one with God.

V.51: Whoever perseveres in fidelity to Jesus will have eternal life. That, by itself, was a significant claim to make.

Vv.52-53: His critics think he is crazy, or possessed. A little earlier (v.48), they had accused him of being a Samaritan. Abraham was a most faithful follower of God, yet he died, and the prophets likewise. So what is Jesus saying? He did not mean that his followers would not die. They would, but would have eternal life to follow.

Their question, ‘Are you greater than Abraham?’ is like the question of the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well: ‘Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?’ (John 4.12) A seemingly obvious, “sensible” answer blocks a larger, greater one.

Vv.54-55: Jesus is clearly calling God his Father. He does not glorify himself; his Father does it: ‘The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me’ (John 5.36); ‘I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.’ (John 7.29)

V.56: Abraham, in spirit at least, would have welcomed Jesus. He would have been glad to see Jesus’ day. Here Jesus applies to himself a term of

divine significance. The 'Day of the Lord' was seen as the day on which Yahweh would manifest himself in glory, a day of judgment and of victory. (The hymn *Dies irae, dies illa* of Jacopone da Todi embraces these ideas.) Other scholars, however, see Jesus' day as being the day of his incarnation. Both-and, not either-or, is perhaps best.

This difficult passage illustrates some of the difference between the Western mind and the Semitic. The Western mind is formed by logic, reason and argument, and looks for proof. The Semitic mind is content to make allusions, to place ideas or images in apposition, and leave it to the reader to make the leap of imagination.

V.57: His critics object that Abraham is long dead, hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, so how could he claim to know anything about him?

V.58: Jesus then makes the very significant statement, 'Before Abraham was, I am.' 'I am' was a key phrase, full of divine resonance: -

- 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3.14);
- 'I am the Lord your God... you shall have no other gods before me' (Deuteronomy 5.6-7);
- 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.' (Leviticus 19.18)

John picks it up again and again: - 6.35; 8.12; 10.7, 11; 11.25; 14.6; 15.1; Revelation 1.8; 21.6. Jesus' hearers did not miss the point he was making.

V.59: Picking up stones to throw at him shows they understood the claim he was making. They regarded it as blasphemous – stoning was the punishment for blasphemy: 'One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer.' (Leviticus 24.16) In other words, they understood what he had said as a claim to divinity, which indeed it was. Were they capable of asking the question, 'Could it be true? What if God *has* come on earth among us?' It seems not.

Jesus evaded them when they attempted to kill him; he was master of his destiny: -

I lay down my life in order to take it up again.
No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it up again. (John 10.17-18)

Lent

Week 5, Friday

John 10.31-42 Jesus is again accused of blasphemy

31. The Jews took up stones again to stone him.

32. Jesus replied, 'I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?'
33. The Jews answered, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.'
34. Jesus answered, 'Is it not written in the law, "I said, you are gods"?'
35. If those to whom the word of God came were called "gods" - and the scripture cannot be annulled -
36. can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, "I am God's Son"?'
37. If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me.
38. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.'
39. Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands.
40. He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there.
41. Many came to him, and they were saying, 'John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.'
42. And many believed in him there.

This episode has clear echoes of John 8.51-59. Jesus makes, or defends, his claim to be the Son of God. His hearers, regarding this as blasphemy, decide to stone him, but he evades them. Are we hearing the same story told twice? Perhaps, or perhaps not. It is not improbable that there might have been more than one incident of such questioning, considering the importance of the issue.

V.32: Jesus challenges them as to why they want to stone him, pointing in his defence to the good works he has done.

V.33: Their reply is clear; there is no ambiguity about it: 'you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.' Jesus' many allusions and statements, both direct and indirect, about who he is and what his mission is have not been misunderstood. They have got the message: he is making a claim to be God's Son, fully in union with him. See also John 5.18: '[Jesus] was... calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.' While, later, they said, 'We have a law, and according to that law, he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.' (John 19.7)

Vv.34-36: Jesus employs an argument that sounds strange to our ears. It is like the one he used in Mark 12.35-37 in regard to the question about David's son. It seems a far-fetched interpretation of a text, where the phrase 'you are gods' was originally addressed to judges because their role in passing

verdict and sentence was like that of God as judge. What Jesus says could be taken to mean that everyone to whom the word of God has come is a son of God. Since it came to many, it would then follow that he, Jesus, was not in a unique position. That cannot be what he meant; it goes against the meaning of the whole passage. His further argument, in v.36, is a logical fallacy because it presupposes what it sets out to prove: that he was ‘the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world’ was precisely the point at issue. It was what they were challenging. If they had accepted that, there would have been no problem.

Vv.37-38: As elsewhere, Jesus points to the works he has done as evidence of who he is. If he is not doing the Father’s work, they have no reason to believe in him. But if he is, why can they not follow the evidence to its conclusion?

Jesus states things simply and clearly, ‘The Father is in me and I am in the Father.’ There are almost identical statements in John 14.11 and 17.21.

V.39: There is an attempt to arrest him, but it comes to nothing.

Vv.40-42: Across the Jordan, in Gentile territory, Jesus finds safety, a hearing and a following. It is a significant move from Israel to the Gentiles, from the insiders to the outsiders.

Lent

Week 5, Saturday

John 11.45-57 The plot to kill Jesus

45. Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

46. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done.

47. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs.

48. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our temple and our nation.'

49. But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all!

50. You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.'

51. He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation,

52. and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.

53. So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

54. Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples.

55. Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves.

56. They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, ‘What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?’

57. Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

V.45: The raising to life of Lazarus was so powerful an event that it won many to Jesus, probably including some of his previous critics. You can’t argue with a fact. It is there, standing in front of you, so to speak, and cannot be talked away.

Vv.46-48: Yet, even then, there were some who saw it as a crisis. It is astonishing, and very sad, that something which should have been a cause for unmitigated celebration, for praise and gratitude, becomes instead a reason for an anxious huddle: ‘What are we to do? This man is performing many signs.’ Raising a dead man to life was a problem? For those who had been fed, healed, given back their sight, speech or hearing, having their mobility or sanity restored, raised from death – they and their families and friends – it was no problem but a joy beyond all expectation.

The forces of institutional power thought otherwise. Institutions are self-protective. Whatever their stated mission, their priority is always self-protection, even if that means undermining the purpose for which they were founded, and ends and means are exchanged.

Political considerations take priority. In this informal gathering of members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, they argue that, if Jesus attracts a large following, this will upset the balance of power between the ruling Romans and the priestly class located in the Temple. And since it is the priestly class of the Sanhedrin which is discussing the question, they are not going to have that happen. (The irony of the situation is that their “success” in dealing with Jesus, that is, by having him killed, indirectly led to the Jewish uprising that began in 66 AD and culminated in 70 in the destruction of the Temple, Jerusalem and Israel as the home of the Jews.)

Were they right? Perhaps yes and no. Jesus was not a revolutionary as the Romans would have understood it. He had constantly and emphatically rejected the idea of becoming king. He preached peace, not violence. He had refused to espouse the non-payment of taxes. He spoke of forgiving one’s enemies, and had even healed a Roman centurion’s servant. There was nothing there for a Roman procurator to worry about. Indeed, they might even

welcome Jesus' movement as an opportunity to undermine the priests, whom they disliked.

But, for the Jewish leaders there was reason to be anxious. If Jesus' teaching were adopted, and spread to the Gentile world, that could not but dilute the uniqueness of Judaism. With all nations invited to become members of God's holy people, where would that leave the covenant between God and Jews? A change on that scale they were not prepared to consider, much less welcome. From their perspective, Jesus was a threat.

Vv.49-50: Caiaphas speaks words of expediency. Right or wrong, just or unjust, it is better to sacrifice one man for the sake of the institution. He worded it cleverly, 'it is better for you...' No! It was better for him and for the high priests who would become redundant if Jesus continued to increase his following. Caiaphas has done the political calculations and concluded that Jesus must be got rid of. Later on, the Sanhedrin shows a similar, if less aggressive, frame of mind when dealing with the preaching of Peter and John. (Acts 4.16-17)

Luke says that, 'The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people.' (22.2) JB states that, 'They mistrusted the people.' The people were moving to Jesus and the chief priests despised them for this. Caiaphas' remark, 'You know nothing at all!' is like the Pharisees' snap at the man born

blind, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’(John 9.34), and their earlier remark, ‘This crowd, which does not know the law - they are accursed.’ (John 7.49) It is the voice of arrogant authority, sure that it has the definitive answers and has no need of the voice of public opinion.

Vv.51-52: John sees a different significance in Caiaphas’ words. He sees him as, unwittingly, speaking the truth, in that it was necessary for Jesus to die for the salvation of humanity. John the Baptist had spoken of him as ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world’ (John 1.29), an acclamation re-echoed by the Samaritans in John 4.42. John likely had also in mind the ‘other sheep that do not belong to this fold’ (10.16), the vast family of non-Jewish peoples, or the words of Jesus when he said, ‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ (John 12.32)

V.53: No longer mere critics, these men are now his enemies, intent on his death. It is just a matter of finding a way of bringing it about.

V.54: As he had done after the attempts to stone him, Jesus left and went to a place of safety.

Vv.55-56: These verses convey a heightened sense of expectancy, a sense that matters are converging, and the climax is drawing close.

V.57: The groundwork is being laid for Jesus' capture and death.

Holy Week, Monday

John 12.1-11 Mary anoints Jesus

1. Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.
2. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.
3. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.
4. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,
5. 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'
6. (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)
7. Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.'
8. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'
9. When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

10. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well,
11. since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 26.6-13 and Mark 14.3-9. The story has sometimes been confused with Luke 7.36-50, and that story, in turn, confused with that of another Mary - Magdalene.

Vv.1-2 are an introduction and set the scene, taking us back to the visit by Jesus to the house of Mary and Martha in Luke 10.38-42, and to the raising of the dead Lazarus to life in John 11. Significantly, in view of Luke, the text reads, 'Martha served.'

John sprinkles his Gospel text with references to the Passover which has associations with the old covenant: 2.13, 23; 6.4; 11.55; 12.1; 13.1; 18.28, 39; 19.14, 42. They are a context that matters as the new covenant is being brought into being.

V.3: Mary, in a wonderful gesture of hospitality, and perhaps of gratitude for the raising to life of her brother, anoints the feet of Jesus with a very expensive perfume – perhaps as much as a labourer's wages for a year - see v.5 - filling the whole house with its aroma. Her action throws caution and calculation to the winds, is simply and

uninhibitedly generous. Those who love know how to recognize a unique occasion, when to simply celebrate with enthusiasm, to have a party and forget about the cost. The use of perfume on the head was not uncommon as an act of hospitality towards a guest, but to extend it to the feet was exceptional.

Vv.4-6: For John, Judas is unambiguously bad. Here, he is described not only as a thief, but as throwing cold water on a generous action; in 6.70-71 he is described as a devil and the betrayer of Jesus; he is linked with the devil again in 13.2, 21-30; and, in 18.2-5, he carries out his act of betrayal. In spirit, he is at the opposite pole to Mary.

V.7: Jesus comes to Mary's defence. He sees another meaning in her action. It was customary, where people could afford it, to anoint with perfume the bodies of the dead. (Had Mary first bought it for Lazarus?) Mary's action anticipates this in Jesus' case. Did she intuit in some way that the day of Jesus' burial might not be far off? Love sometimes knows through channels outside of the rational.

V.8 is perhaps one of the most misused verses in the Gospel. Jesus' point is that his time is coming to a close, and it is good that they make the most of it together. When he is gone, there will still be poor people to be helped. Mark has him say, 'you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish.' (Mark 14.7)

The verse has been presented in fatalistic terms, as if there was nothing that could be done about poverty, as if it were a natural condition, as much a part of life as the law of gravity, and so, why make an issue of it? That is indifference and opting out masquerading as the wisdom of experience. The reality is that poverty is the consequence of human decisions, and its remedy is in different decisions and following through on them, using the talents God has already given us. There isn't anything inevitable or inescapable about it.

Vv.9-11: The chief priests alone are named as the plotters here, and the perversity of their malice is underlined: they decide to kill Lazarus, too, because he is a living witness to Jesus and what he represents.

Holy Week, Tuesday

John 13.21-33, 36-38 Jesus' coming betrayal

21. After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.'

22. The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking.

23. One of his disciples - the one whom Jesus loved - was reclining next to him;

24. Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.

25. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?'
26. Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot son of Simon.
27. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.'
28. Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him.
29. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the festival'; or, that he should give something to the poor.
30. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.
31. When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.
32. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.
33. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come."'
36. Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered, 'Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward.'
37. Peter said to him, 'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.'

38. Jesus answered, ‘Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.’

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 26.21-25; Mark 14.18-19 and Luke 22.21-23.

Vv.21-22: Jesus was troubled in spirit – as in 11.33 at the death of Lazarus, and in 12.27 - at the thought of his coming death, perhaps not so much the fact as the manner of it. How much did he know? Quite a lot, it seems, to go by the prophecies he had made. Or did the Gospel writers fill out the details of those later with the benefit of hindsight? We don’t know. He knew that his enemies wanted him not simply dead but discredited, disgraced. So they were likely to make it as dramatic and forceful a public statement as they could arrange. That would give anyone reason to be troubled and to feel dread.

How did he know about the betrayal? He showed great insight into human nature: ‘Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people.’ (John 2.25) He could not have failed to read the signals which must have been there in Judas’ behaviour. Could Judas have looked him straight in the eye from the moment he began thinking of betrayal? Hardly. Besides, Jesus could read the signals among his enemies: at the beginning, they were curious; then they moved towards a carping, fault-finding criticism, then to

cynical sneering, then to attempts to trick or trap him, and finally to open hostility with attempts at arrest or stoning. It would make sense for them to seek someone of his group to undermine him from within. For someone as perceptive as Jesus, it would not have been hard to pinpoint the likely traitor.

The effect of his statement on his group was shocking. The obvious question came to everyone's mind: who?

Vv.23-25: The disciple referred to here is believed to have been John himself, the author of the Gospel. Four times in it he refers to 'the disciple Jesus loved.' (13.23; 20.2; 21.7, 20) Peter wants to know, but was probably afraid to ask; he had stuck his neck out just a short while before and been told off severely. (John 13.8b) So he puts "the young fellow" up to it to do the asking. There appears to have been a bond between Peter and John, and they had been together on several key occasions: -

- at the raising to life of the daughter of Jairus, (Mark 5.37);
- at the transfiguration (Mark 9.2);
- questioning Jesus about when the end would come (Mark 13.3);
- in the garden at Gethsemane (Mark 14.33).

So John asks the question.

Vv.26-27: Jesus chose his own way of answering it.

‘Satan entered into him’ likely means Judas realized that his secret was blown, so he felt there was no turning back and he might as well see it through. Did it occur to him to turn to Jesus, even at that stage, confess, and ask for forgiveness? When Jesus delivered to Peter the savage rebuke, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me’ (Matthew 16.23), Peter had not turned against Jesus but had emerged from it a better man. Judas did not follow him.

Why did Judas betray Jesus? Was it just the money, the thirty pieces of silver? (Matthew 26.15) John suggests that it was, with his calling Judas a thief. (12.6) Was it, as some have suggested, anger at Jesus for not using his miraculous powers against the Romans, driving them out and restoring the kingdom of Israel? Was it simple perversity, where evil spits on good, hates it, tramples on it and seeks to do it down at every opportunity? We don’t know. John says simply, ‘The devil had already put it into [his] heart...’ (13.2)

Jesus tells Judas to get it over with. At all times, he is in charge of his fate.

Vv.28-29: These verses seem strangely out of place. The high tension which must have been present just a moment before when Jesus said that

one of them would betray him, tension surely heightened by John's question as to who it was, evaporates, and switches in the disciples' minds to arranging shopping and a donation to the poor. Can it really have happened like that?

V.30: John uses the loaded phrase, 'And it was night,' meaning the time of evil. Judas leaves Jesus, the light of the world (John 8.12), and goes out into the darkness.

This is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. (John 3.19-20)

How Satan must have gloated as he saw Jesus rejected and betrayed by one of his chosen: 'Everything going according to plan!'

Vv.31-33: Jesus sees these events in a different light. For him, they are part of God's plan, and he is bringing it to fulfilment. Judas may think he is setting the pace, but, in reality, the death of Jesus was freely fore-ordained and accepted by Jesus. (See John 10.17-18)

The time has grown very short and it will soon become the moment of parting between Jesus and his disciples.

Vv.36-37: Peter - impulsive, loving Jesus with all his heart, but unaware of his limitations – makes a rash, but generous, promise.

V.38: Jesus slaps him down; he was hard on Peter. It recalls to mind a situation in the life of Saint Teresa of Ávila where it is recorded that, after a very difficult journey on foot through storms and floods to Burgos, to make her last foundation, she said to God, ‘Lord, we almost drowned! Why did you let it happen? We are only doing what you asked us to do!’ The Lord answered her, ‘Teresa, this is how I treat my friends.’ To which she retorted, ‘Well, then, it’s no wonder you have so few.’ (Eugene McCaffrey OCD, *Let Nothing Trouble You: Teresa, the woman, the guide and the storyteller*, The Columba Press, Dublin, 2015, pp.71-72) Even with God, women always want to have the last word!

Holy Week, Spy Wednesday

Matthew 26.14-25 The betrayal and the Passover

14. Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests

15. and said, ‘What will you give me if I betray him to you?’ They paid him thirty pieces of silver.

16. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

17. On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Where do you want

us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?’

18. He said, ‘Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, “The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.”’

19. So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

20. When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve disciples,

21. and while they were eating, he said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.’

22. And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, ‘Surely not I, Lord?’

23. He answered, ‘The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.’

24. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.’

25. Judas, who betrayed him, said, ‘Surely not I, Rabbi?’ He replied, ‘You have said so.’

There are passages parallel to vv.14-16 in Mark 14.10-11 and Luke 22.3-6, and to vv.17-25 in Mark 14.12-21 and Luke 22.7-13.

Vv.14-16: Twelve is a significant number: there were twelve tribes of Israel and twelve baskets full of fragments left over after a multiplication of loaves and fishes. (Luke 9.17) The Book of Revelation offers a veritable feast of twelves; describing the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, it states: -

It had a massive, high wall, with twelve gates where twelve angels were stationed and on which names were inscribed, (the names) of the twelve tribes of the Israelites.

The wall of the city had twelve courses of stones as its foundation, on which were inscribed the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (21.12, 14)

The twelve gates were twelve pearls. (21.21)

Through the city there flowed the 'river of the water of life' and 'on either side of the river grew the tree of life that produces fruit twelve times a year, once each month.' (22.1-2)

Earlier, there is an apocalyptic vision: 'A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.' (12.1) Clearly, the number twelve mattered to the biblical writers; it was a symbol of abundance and completeness.

Judas is described as being one of 'the twelve.' This term is more than a head count; it has a technical meaning. It is used thirty-one times in the four Gospels, eight in Matthew, ten in Mark, nine in Luke and four in John. The twelve – in some translations, the Twelve - are seen as a group, called by Jesus, who become his disciples, accompany him on his journeys and are witnesses to his resurrection. Through the gift of the Spirit, they are entrusted with the task of continuing his mission when he is gone.

(After Judas' death, the group of apostles is described, not as eleven, but as 'the eleven.' Each of the Synoptics uses the term: Matthew 28.16; Mark 16.14; Luke 24.9, 33)

The chief priests must have been as delighted as surprised by this highly fortuitous turn of events. Matters seem to fall into their lap. One of Jesus' own chosen ones solves for them the problem of how to arrest him. Judas makes them an offer they are delighted to accept. They want Jesus; he wants money; a deal is struck. The price, thirty pieces of silver, is the official compensation for a slave killed by accident, e.g., gored by an ox (Exodus 21.32; see also Zechariah 11.13). Judas not only sold Jesus; he sold him cheap. All that remains is to arrange the practicalities of the arrest.

Vv.17-19: In the meantime, the Passover is drawing near and preparations have to be made for it. (The precise dating of these events is very complex and probably beyond definitive resolution.) The disciples ask Jesus, and he gives them instructions. He had previously said, 'My time (or hour) has not yet come.' (John 2.4; 7.6) Here he says, 'My time is near.' His response is mysterious. Mark and Luke have Jesus give an equally enigmatic, though different, response, about meeting a man carrying a jar of water. (Mark 14.13-14; Luke 22.10) These three passages are mirrored in the similarly enigmatic episode about finding a colt for Jesus to ride on as he enters Jerusalem. (Matthew

21.1-6; Mark 11.2-6 and Luke 19.30-34) They are strange, and it is difficult to see their purpose, unless they are intended to show that Jesus was fully in command of the situation. The concern of Matthew and the other Gospel writers seems to be to show that Jesus knew beforehand what would happen and freely accepted it, and thus fulfilled the prophecies of the past.

Vv.20-23: What should have been a joyful occasion, the celebration of the Passover, becomes instead one of betrayal. Jesus lances the boil and brings the matter out into the open. The response is one of deep shock, the disciples in turn asking him if it is they.

Jesus says that it is the one who dips his hand into the bowl with him. Mark says the same (14.20), while John (13.26) has Jesus give a piece of dipped bread to Judas; Luke omits any reference to this.

Significantly, Matthew has the other disciples call Jesus 'Lord' (v.22), while Judas (v.25) calls him 'Rabbi,' a title used in Matthew only by Jesus' enemies.

Vv.24-25: Jesus sees all this as the fulfilment of what has been written about him. John (13.18) sees these events in the light of the psalm, 'Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me.' (41.9) The sense of betrayal runs deep and strong: -

If an enemy had reviled me, that I could bear; if my foe had viewed me with contempt, from that I could hide.

But it was you, my other self, my comrade and friend,

you, whose company I enjoyed... (Psalm 55.13-15)

Jesus speaks terrible words about the one who betrays him: 'it would have been better for that one not to have been born.' Judas asks if it is he, and Jesus confirms it. John calls Judas, 'the one who chose to be lost' (JB), 'the one destined to be lost' (NRSV), also translated as 'the son of perdition.' (17.12)

At this stage it is worth contrasting Judas and Peter. They both betrayed Jesus. In Peter's case, he denied three times that he even knew Jesus, cursing and swearing to reinforce it. Then, when the cock crowed, he remembered what Jesus had said to him. (Matthew 26.69-74; 26.34-35) 'And he went out and wept bitterly' (26.75); he was deeply sorry and ashamed of himself. But he turned to Jesus and was forgiven. (John 21.15-19) He emerged from the experience a better, stronger man.

Judas planned Jesus' betrayal and carried it out, even keeping up the appearance of still being a loyal disciple by participating in the Last Supper with Jesus and the others of the Twelve. He sold Jesus for

the price of a slave. He, too, regretted his action and threw the money back into the Temple. But instead of looking for forgiveness, which he would surely have received, he went and hanged himself. (Matthew 27.3-5; Acts 1.16-18)

They both betrayed Jesus and were sorry for having done it. But, from there on, they went separate ways; they differed in how they responded to it. Peter's response was to turn to Jesus, while Judas' was to turn away. One found salvation, the other death.

Holy Thursday

Chrism Mass

Luke 4.16-21 Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth

16. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,

17. and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

19. to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

20. And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

21. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

There are passages similar to this in Matthew 13.54-58 and in Mark 6.1-6.

Vv.16-19: Jesus was brought up in Nazareth, but moved to Capernaum, perhaps after his baptism. The Gospels give no solid information about a time or reason for this. The two towns are not more than 30 km. apart, with Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee (also known as Lake Tiberias or Lake Gennesareth), and Nazareth to its south west. Jesus went to the synagogue, 'as was his custom.' It was a matter of custom, not of obligation binding under pain of sin; that was good.

From Isaiah 61.1-2, he read what might be called the mission statement of a servant of God. It is about freeing people from what weighed them down: poverty, captivity, blindness and oppression. The interpretation of these need not be limited to the literal; they are works associated with the Messiah. 'Being saved' means being delivered from whatever diminishes a person's humanity, especially sin.

Jesus was literate. Probably a higher proportion of Jewish men was literate than of most of the

surrounding peoples. With the Torah occupying such a central position in Jewish life, this is not surprising.

Vv.20-21: Having read the text in Hebrew, Jesus probably gave an Aramaic version of it, as classical Hebrew was no longer understood by the great majority of the people, who spoke Aramaic as their day-to-day vernacular. (Aramaic is still spoken today in parts of Syria, such as Maalula.) Then he sat down and the eyes of the people looked on him expectantly.

His statement, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,' does not necessarily imply a claim to be the Messiah, but implies that he makes the mission statement his own; he puts himself in the Messianic tradition. The Hebrew word *Mashiach* (English, Messiah) is translated into Greek as *Christos*, a title meaning anointed. The word carried varying connotations for Jews. It included the idea of a future kingdom of Israel which would be God's kingdom; this became especially prominent with the establishment of the monarchy. Among post-exilic writers, the future Messiah was seen as a returning King David. But Zechariah scales down this grandiosity with a different image: -

Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy,
O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall
come to you; a just saviour is he, meek, and
riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.

[See Matthew 21.1-6; Mark 11.2-6 and Luke 19.30-34]

He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. (9.9-10)

The ambiguity around the meaning of the term with its heavy political overtones explains Jesus' reticence in claiming the title for himself and his insistence on silence from those he healed.

Later, when he was asked by the disciples of John the Baptist, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (Luke 7.20), his answer drew on Isaiah: -

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offence at me. (Luke 7.22-23, drawing on Isaiah 35.5-6; 26.19 and 61.1-2)

These are the signs that the Kingdom of God is present.

Holy Thursday

Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper

John 13.1-15 Jesus washes his disciples' feet

1. Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.
2. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper
3. Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,
4. got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.
5. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.
6. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?'
7. Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.'
8. Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.'
9. Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!'
10. Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.'
11. For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

12. After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you?'
13. You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am.
14. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.
15. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'

This story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples is unique to John. Unique also is the fact that, unlike the Synoptics, in his account of the Last Supper, John omits the institution of the Eucharist. (However, he gives extensive Eucharistic teaching in chapter 6 of his Gospel.)

Some scholars see the story as a fusion, or a confusion, of two distinct elements, a moral message about service, and a sacramental message about baptism. Some see them as complementary.

V.1: John keeps the Passover in mind constantly: 2.13, 23; 6.4; 11.55; 12.1; 13.1; 18.28, 39; 19.14, 42. It was the occasion on which Jews celebrated their deliverance from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land by passing over the water of the Red Sea. The celebration changed in form over the years, and had different meanings. It is described in Exodus 12.1-13.10. It consisted of a meal, in which a yearling lamb was eaten, with none of its bones to be broken. (Exodus 12.46) Originally, the blood of

the lamb was smeared over the doorposts of people's houses so that they would be delivered from destruction by the angel of the Lord. (Exodus 12.21-24)

Jesus, the Lamb of God (John 1.29, 36), none of whose bones was broken on the cross (John 19.32-33), and who is about to shed his blood to deliver his people from the slavery of sin, is calm and self-possessed. He is in control of events. His hour has come. The reference point for all his thought and activity is God his Father; that is a pervasive feature of John's Gospel. His love for his disciples, those who remained with him, was total.

V.2: Judas has gone to do his deed of betrayal. He does so freely, of his own choice; there is no compulsion on him. Yet Jesus knew it beforehand, did not seek to prevent it, but made it part of his plan for humanity.

Vv.3-5: Jesus, acting with the knowledge that he was from God and returning to him, was perfectly at peace with himself. He knelt down on the floor in front of his disciples and began to wash their feet. In his time, when guests arrived at a house, it was customary to do this. Roads were dusty, and people wore sandals; their feet would be dirty, and perhaps tired. A wash would be refreshing as well as cleaning. This was a job assigned to the household slave; the householder did not do it. That's what slaves were for, and, in the case of foot washing,

Gentile slaves at that; Jewish slaves were exempt. But here Jesus gives himself the role of a slave. His action would have greatly surprised and probably embarrassed his disciples.

Vv.6-10a: Peter, loving, big-hearted and impulsive as ever, blurts out his objection. (He is always anxious to “correct” Jesus’ “mistakes.”) He cannot bring himself to accept that Jesus whom he loves and reveres with all his heart can bring himself to undertake such a humiliating task, one of the most menial. He can’t accept it, won’t have it; it is just too embarrassing. Maybe also Peter, the strong, self-contained, self-reliant man, had not learned to *receive*. Giving was not a problem to him; he was generous. But maybe he felt he didn’t need the service of others; he could look after himself, thank you.

If Jesus had chosen an assertive role, and decided to put all his critics in their place and show them who was boss, Peter would have been there, cheering for all he was worth. But for Jesus to kneel on the floor, and take Peter’s dirty feet in his hands and wash them - this was against all his expectations. If what Jesus had in mind had been a new rite of purification, a ritual washing – Judaism had plenty of them – Peter might not have minded. But this was the real thing. And it had particular force, coming as it did almost at the end, the last parable-in-action he was to show them. Washing the feet, doing the work of a slave, was a new

understanding of authority as the power to serve, not to dominate, a particularly important message for Peter to whom he gave the leading role among the disciples.

Jesus explains to Peter that, while he does not understand it now, he will later (when the Spirit comes), and so he should accept it. Even that has no effect on Peter. It is still too much for him, and he refuses. One of those who did understand was Paul, who wrote,

In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus: his state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as people are; and, being as all people are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. (Philippians 2.5-8)

Jesus lays it on the line for Peter: either you let me do this or you will have nothing more to do with me. Peter, humbled, immediately backtracks and asks Jesus to wash not just his feet but all over. Whatever happens, he wants to be with Jesus.

Vv.10b-11: Jesus knew what was happening. He knew that one of his disciples was a traitor, an unclean one.

Vv.12-15: Jesus, the teacher, asks them if they have understood what he has done. He spells it out

as simply and clearly as he can. If he, their Lord and Teacher, has washed their feet, they also should do the same. He has given them an example so that they will follow it and do likewise. It was revolutionary for a master to wash the feet of his disciples. This was turning the established order upside down, and he did so with the intention that they do the same, at the cost of self-sacrifice. He had said: -

‘I have come among you as one who serves; the greatest among you shall be your servant (Luke 22.26);

‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all’ (Mark 9.35);

‘The Son of Man has come, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’ (Mark 10.45)

Service of people is a pre-requisite to worship of God. Clearly, Jesus sees it as part of the Eucharist, not an optional extra.

Easter Week

Alleluia

Throughout Eastertide, there are lots of alleluias. The word is Hebrew – Halleluyah – which is an exclamation of praise, meaning Praise Yahweh! [the Lord]

Acts of Apostles

The first reading at Mass on the Sundays and weekdays of Easter are from the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts are in the New Testament after the Gospels. In Holy Week, we remembered the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Eastertide, we follow on logically and chronologically from there, tracing the steps of the early Christian community after the resurrection of Jesus.

The Acts have been called the fifth Gospel, or, sometimes, the Gospel of the Holy Spirit, because there are many references to the Spirit in it, about forty-six. They were written, probably before the year 70, by Luke, the same man who wrote the third Gospel, and they were probably originally one book. He wrote in them the history of the early Christian communities in Jerusalem and Antioch, the conversion and missionary journeys of Paul, as well as narratives about individuals such as Stephen, Philip and Peter.

Probably the biggest issue for the early Christian community was that of the admission of Gentiles to it. All were agreed that they could be admitted. The difference was about the basis of their admission: should they be required, as Jews were, to observe the law of Moses, or was faith in Jesus by itself a sufficient basis? After much debate, they agreed that faith in Jesus, by itself, without any commitment to observe the law of Moses, was a sufficient basis for admission to the community. To have insisted on

observance of the law of Moses would have been to miss entirely the point of what Jesus was about. He came to free people from its burden and to show them that *he* was the way: 'The law indeed came through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.' (John 1.17)

If observance of the law of Moses had been required, along with faith in Jesus, it is likely that the Christian community would have become no more than a sect within Judaism, probably long forgotten or extinct by now. To declare that faith in Jesus by itself was a sufficient basis for the admission of Gentiles opened the way to Christianity becoming a universal religion, one for all peoples, and that is, in fact, what happened. The decision was momentous.

Luke was from Antioch in Syria, a medical doctor, and of pagan origin. Perhaps because of this background, he had a universalist outlook. He looked beyond the borders of Judaism, and attributed the remarkable growth, in numbers and geographical spread, of the community to its empowerment by the Holy Spirit. Acts makes not less than forty-six references to the Spirit. Luke is frank about the difficulties, setbacks, and even occasional divisions among the first Christians, but he presents a picture of great life and growth through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Easter Monday

Matthew 28.8-15 The resurrection of Jesus

8. So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

9. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.

10. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

11. While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened.

12. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers,

13. telling them, 'You must say, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep."'

14. If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.'

15. So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 16.1-8, Luke 24.1-12 and John 20.1-10.

V.8: From the context (v.1), 'they' refers to Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary.' Mark speaks of this latter as 'the mother of James' (16.1), while Luke speaks of 'the women who had come with him

from Galilee' (23.55), and John has just one person there, Mary Magdalene.

'Fear and joy' – an unusual combination, but then the circumstances were so unusual that an unusual response might be expected. They have seen the empty tomb and the angel has given them God's message. (vv.5-7)

They did as the angel had told them and ran to bring the Good News that Jesus had indeed risen and that he would meet them in Galilee. Why Galilee? Was it because it had a significant Gentile population and symbolized the new reality that, since the Jewish people had rejected Jesus, the mission of Jesus' disciples would now be towards the Gentiles? It had also been more welcoming, or at least less hostile, than Judea.

V.9: Jesus meets and greets them. They 'worshipped him;' this has not been said before of Jesus. Clearly, the disciples understand that the Jesus whom they thought they knew was, in reality, more than they had imagined.

V.10: As is very often the case in the Bible, the first words from God are, 'Do not be afraid.' It is reassuring, to say the least, that this is what God so often says through Jesus, or an angel, or other messengers.

The Good News is meant to be spread; it is for others.

Vv.11-15: The women were not the only ones spreading the news. So were the guards appointed to ensure the security of Jesus' tomb. They must have been worried about how they would account for what had happened and for its consequences for them.

The resurrection of Jesus was not good news for everyone: for the Temple authorities, it was the worst outcome they could (n)ever have imagined, and their response is to try and cover it up. They fall back on bribery, telling the guards to lay the "blame" for the disappearance of Jesus' body at the door of his disciples. Saint Augustine makes hay with this, saying of the priests and elders, 'They call sleeping witnesses.' Money was used to bring about the death of Jesus, and now money is used again to try to ensure silence about his resurrection. The priests give assurance that they can work things out with Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator. The institution safeguards itself. And when Jesus rose from death, they again co-operated in order to protect their perceived self-interest – all 'for the good of the cause.'

Why was Jesus killed?

Christ died for the sins of all mankind. (See John 1.29; 3.16; 6.33, 51; Romans 5.18; 1 Timothy 2.5-6; 4.10; 1 John 2.2. That is the post-Resurrection understanding of the Christian community, its interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' death, its answer to the above question. Without diminishing that, it may be helpful to examine at the question from a pre-Resurrection perspective by looking at the various power-groups that existed in Israel.

The Romans

Rome's priority was control; its imperial rule in Israel was not to be challenged. Its local representative, Pontius Pilate, would not want to be regarded as 'soft on Judaism,' or be hauled before a Senate committee to answer questions about why he 'lost' Israel. There could only be one outcome to that. When the crowd said to him, 'If you release this man [Jesus] you are no friend of the emperor' (John 19.12), he must have felt he had no option but to placate them, so he took the line of least resistance and ordered the execution of Jesus.

The Sadducees and Herodians

They were at the peak of the pyramid of political, social and economic power. They had made their compromises with the Roman order and had a heavy investment in the *status quo*. They were doing well out of it, and wanted things to stay the way they were. When Jesus said, 'Many are first who will be last, and the last shall be first' (Mark 10.21), that was not good news to them. Similarly, 'Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.' (Matthew 20.26-27) No, thank you; let the servants stay downstairs where they belong; people like us remain on top. And Jesus actually had the cheek to call Herod the tetrarch a jackal! (Luke 13.32) And he said, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' (Mark 10.23) and 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' (Matthew 19.24)

If that carpenter-turned-preacher from Nazareth – what good can come from that place? – thinks he’s going to turn the social order upside down, he’ll have to be taught a lesson.

When a charismatic figure with popular support rocks the boat, Establishment figures will try to use him, buy him off, co-opt him, silence him or - failing those - kill him. They probably tried those with Jesus, but failed, so they wanted him stopped. Those at the summit of power are ready to be as ruthless as is expedient in dealing with threats to their position. Jesus was such a threat.

The Pharisees

The Pharisees, for the most part, were sincere believers, anxious to do what was right, to please God by faithful observance of the Torah. They had 365 prohibitions (one for every day of the year), and 248 precepts (one for every bone in the body), making 613 in all. To remember those was difficult enough; to live by them impossible, but the Pharisees were determined to give it their best. Their system seems gradually to have insinuated itself into their thinking to such an extent - as systems have a way of doing - that it became an end instead of a means. There was a shift from God as their ruler to rules as their God. You could say that their system, if adhered to, made God redundant.

Jesus was an à la carte Jew. He subverted the Pharisees’ system: he re-interpreted it, set it in new

contexts, extended it, ignored it or rejected it as he thought best. That was a challenge the Pharisees could not accept. Upset the system of an enthusiastic systematiser, and you'll soon know what anger is! (Think of how some liturgists can fight over a rubric!) And Jesus mixed with people who violated the law every day without even knowing it. Surely he couldn't imagine that, 'God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'? (Acts 10.34-35) What would that do to the integrity of doctrine, and to the uniqueness of the Jewish people? Where did that leave the covenant? Where will it all end? There would be nothing left if he wasn't stopped.

The priestly class

The priestly class must have felt challenged by Jesus, such as by the universalism of his mission and his assault on hierarchy.

Universalism

Jewish tradition at its best had a universalist character: random examples might include concern for the widow, the orphan and the stranger in the land (Deuteronomy 10.17-19); 'the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing' (Sirach 18.13); 'the Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.' (Psalm 145.9) See also Isaiah 2.2-3; 25.6-7 and the book of Jonah, etc.

The covenant which God made with the people of Israel was foundational to their identity. (Exodus

19.3-8; Deuteronomy 20.1-17, etc.) The Jews were, and still are, God's chosen people, 'for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.' (Romans 11.29) Beginning as a motley group of ex-slaves from different ethnic groups, the Hebrews (in Old Egyptian *hapiru* meant a slave) became a people through the experience of the exodus and the giving of the covenant: 'I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.' (Leviticus 26.12)

If they were chosen, this suggested to them that other peoples were not chosen; the world could be divided into the chosen – and the frozen! That mentality had insinuated itself into Jewish thinking in Jesus' time. An illustration is that the wall dividing the court of the Gentiles from the court of the Israelites in the temple in Jerusalem bore a notice in several languages to the effect that any Gentile who entered the court of the Israelites did so at the risk of his life. (See Ephesians 2.14) Judaism, in the time of Jesus, was exclusive rather than inclusive, local rather than universalist; it had a Jew-and-Gentile, them-and-us mindset.

It was into that tradition that Jesus was born and brought up. He said of his own mission, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' (Matthew 15.24) And his commission to his disciples was similar, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but

go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ (Matthew 10.5) But he gradually went beyond that.

‘Jesus increased in wisdom.’ (Luke 2.52) He moved from ‘Whoever is not with me is against me’ (Matthew 12.30) to ‘Whoever is not against us is for us.’ (Mark 9.40) He went beyond the borders of Israel: ‘he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.’ (Mark 7.31) Tyre and Sidon are in today’s Lebanon, while the Decapolis was a group of ten culturally Greek towns outside the Promised Land, east of the River Jordan.

A common theme of the Gospels is that the “outsiders” get Jesus’ message, while the “insiders” do not. Jesus ‘came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.’ (John 1.11) But he praised the faith of the Roman centurion (Matthew 8.5-11), held up the good Samaritan as an example (Luke 10.25-37), praised the Samaritan leper in contrast to the other nine (Luke 17.11-19), and climbed a steep learning curve in his encounter with the Canaanite woman. (Matthew 15.21-28) His attempt to broaden the sectarian and exclusivist mentality of his kinsfolk in Nazareth to one which was universalist and inclusive made them so angry they wanted to kill him. (Luke 4.16-30)

The priests must have seen the implications of Jesus’ mission. If God’s saving action in Jesus was really for all, where did that leave the uniqueness of

the Jewish people? If their identity was compromised by being extended to all, what would bind them together, keep them a distinct people?

The reaction of the priests was similar to that of the people of Nazareth: -

If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation. But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the scattered children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death. (John 11.48-53)

Challenge the identity of a group, especially a group under pressure, as Jews were in the time of Jesus from Roman and Greek influences, mount that challenge from within, and you will experience a strong reaction. What might happen to a sash-wearing Orangeman carrying an Irish tricolour on Sandy Row on 12 July? Jesus had taken his challenge to the priestly system right into the Temple, their stronghold. (E.g., John 2.13-22, etc.) Correctly from their perspective, the priests saw

Jesus and his mission as a threat to the unity, coherence, and even meaning of Judaism. (This, despite the chief priests' own implicit denial of the covenant when they said to Pilate, 'We have no king but the emperor.' John 19.15) Where would that leave the priests, the Temple and the sacrifices? – quite simply, redundant.

Hierarchy

You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23. 8-12, JB).

It's no wonder that religious and political authorities wanted him out of the way: he was an anti-hierarchical figure, a leveller. Consider that most hierarchical of institutions, the military, and imagine how top brass might react to a private advocating the abolition of rank and insignia.

Jesus was closer to the prophet than to any other Old Testament figure. There was long-standing friction between the sanctuary and the desert, the priest and the prophet, the latter nearly always

laymen. Jesus was not a priest in the Jewish tradition, and his relations with the priestly class were hostile.

Why was Jesus killed?

Jesus was not killed by atheists or agnostics, but by a coalition of mutual convenience between religious and political leaders. In different ways, and for different reasons, they saw him as a threat to their power. He had refused to play the political game vis-à-vis the power groups of his time. They had their areas of self-interest, and were determined to protect them. Each group wanted to get rid of him, so they collaborated to bring about his death. They collaborated similarly to suppress news of his resurrection. (See Matthew 28.11-15)

The best-laid plans of mice and men...

The Gospel writers see the above as having been foreseen by God and taken into account. God did not cause it to happen, but foresaw it and allowed it. When humanity had done its worst by killing the Son of God, God did his best, by raising him to life again. The Christian story is one of God bringing victory out of human sin and death.

Easter Tuesday

John 20.11-18

Jesus appears to Mary

Magdalene

11. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;

12. and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

13. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’

14. When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

15. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’

16. Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher).

17. Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."’

18. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 28.1-8, Mark 16.1-8 and Luke 24.1-11.

Mary Magdalene (v.18) is distinguished from other women in the Gospel named Mary by adding Magdalene to her name. This may mean that she was from Magdala, a town thought to have been on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, or to be linked in some way to the Aramaic word *magdala*, meaning a tower.

Mary Magdalene is mentioned once in the Gospel before the crucifixion,

The twelve were with him [Jesus], as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits

and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out... and many others, who provided for them out of their own resources. (Luke 8.1-3; Mark 16.9)

Mary comes to the fore, uniquely among the disciples, at the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Mark 15.40, Matthew 27.56 and John 19.25 mention her as a witness to the crucifixion, along with other women. Luke does not name witnesses, but mentions 'women who had followed him from Galilee' standing at a distance. (23.49)

In listing witnesses who saw where Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, Mark 15.47 and Matthew 27.61 both name only two people: Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary,' who, in Mark, is 'the mother of James.' Luke 23.55 describes the witnesses as the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee. John 19.39-42 mentions no other witness to the burial of Jesus except for Nicodemus. John 20.1 names Mary Magdalene in describing who discovered the tomb to be empty. Mark 16.1 says she was accompanied by Salome and Mary the mother of James, while Matthew 28.1 omits Salome. Luke 24.10 says the group who reported to the disciples the finding of the empty tomb consisted of 'Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them.'

In Matthew, Mark and John, Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the resurrection. John 20.16 and

Mark 16.9 both say simply that Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance was to Mary Magdalene alone. Mary's role is unusual because, at the time, women were not considered to be credible witnesses. In Matthew 28.9, Mary Magdalene is with the other women returning from the empty tomb when they all see the first appearance of Jesus. In Luke 24.1-7, the resurrection is announced to the women at the tomb by 'two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning' who suddenly appeared next to them.

The Gospels of Mark and Luke record that the rest of the disciples did not believe Mary's report of what she had seen. Neither Mary Magdalene nor the other women are mentioned in Paul's list of appearances in 1 Corinthians 15.1. Instead, he writes that Jesus 'appeared to Peter, and then to the twelve.' After her disbelieved first report of a resurrection vision, Mary disappears from the New Testament. She is not mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, and her fate remains undocumented. But from the tenth century onwards, she became known as 'the apostle to the apostles.' (The word *apostle* means 'someone sent.')

There has been a long-standing tradition that Mary Magdalene was a reformed prostitute. (Think of Magdalen homes, etc.) This may have had its origin in a homily on Luke 7.36-50, given by Pope Saint Gregory the Great on 14 September 591. In it, he said,

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected, according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? ... It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the ointment to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. (*Homily 33*)

But there is no basis in the Gospels for linking Mary of Magdala with the un-named woman of Luke 7.36-50 who anointed Jesus, nor with Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who anointed him in Bethany, nor that this latter Mary was a sinner. (John 12.1-3, 7) In Orthodox tradition, Mary Magdalene is often depicted on icons carrying a jar of ointment, because she brought ointment to anoint the body of Jesus in the tomb.

Pace Dan Brown and other writers of fiction, there is no evidence that Mary's relationship with Jesus was anything other than that of disciple and teacher.

Vv.11-12: Mary is first a witness to the empty tomb. A moment later, she will become a witness to the risen Christ.

Why *two* angels? Is there a possible link to Jesus sending out the disciples 'in pairs'? (Luke 10.1)

V.13: The angels' question is similar in tone to the many-times repeated injunction, 'Fear not.' If Jesus is risen, that is the joy of all joys; it is the foundation of the hope of all believers that they who have

shared in Jesus' life through faith on earth will also share in his risen, glorious life. Saint Paul said, 'if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.' (1 Corinthians 15.14, 19)

It seems Mary assumed that some people – 'they'- had taken away the body of Jesus for some purpose of their own, whatever that might have been.

V.14: This is a common feature of post-Resurrection appearances: Jesus shows himself to his disciples, and only to them, and they fail to recognize him. Clearly, while there was essential continuity between Jesus before and after - there was only one Jesus, not two - there was also discontinuity. The resurrection was not resuscitation, as if Jesus simply took up where he left off, as if his death had been no more than an interruption. Instead the resurrection was a qualitatively new beginning: the risen Christ is different, and so is his disciples' relationship with him.

V.15: Jesus repeats the angels' question, adding, 'Who are you looking for?' In effect, he is asking her why she looked for the living among the dead. She did so because her faith was not yet fully alive to who Jesus really was.

Mary may have been distraught, and who could blame her if she was? The man she loved had been

cruelly and unjustly killed, then buried, and now his body had disappeared from its tomb. Who would not be disturbed and search for meaning even through a question that did not make much sense?

Mary did not recognize Jesus, thinking him to be a gardener. There is a sense, perhaps, in which she thought he was *only* a gardener. She failed to see him in an ordinary person, as if to say, ‘How could Jesus be present in anyone so run-of-the-mill?’ It takes faith to see Jesus in the mundane human beings around us, such as gardeners, carpenters and fishermen. She missed the hint planted in her error: the garden of Gethsemane and the garden of Jesus’ burial and resurrection were God’s response to Adam’s sin in the garden of *paradise*. (The word *paradise* originally meant *garden*.)

V.16: Jesus spoke her name, and then her fear and confusion drop away. Where there is a greeting, there is a meeting. This evokes memories of God speaking through Isaiah, ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine.’ (43.1)

Mary recognizes him, calling him ‘Rabbouni,’ an Aramaic (popular Hebrew) word meaning ‘my master.’ Scholars say that it is a more solemn mode of address than simply ‘Rabbi,’ was sometimes applied to God, and is similar in connotation to Thomas’ ‘My Lord and my God!’ (v.28)

V.17: Mary must have clung to him in joyful welcome of his restored presence. Matthew says, 'took hold of his feet.' (28.9) But he is not staying; he has entered on the last phase of his pilgrimage on earth. And she is commissioned to go and tell the disciples: she is 'the apostle to the apostles.' Was Jesus implying, 'Do not cling to an image of me'? Or was it more, 'Do not try to hold onto the past. Do not try to fence me in, to contain me, to define me, to limit me'? Indeed, we cannot with truth proclaim the risen Christ if we cling to a past that is dead.

Jesus directs her attention to where it all leads: to God, 'my Father and your Father.' His last words in this episode, were, as always, about God his Father, the one to whom his thoughts turned, especially in key moments of his life and work. His resurrection and ascension are essentially one act, whatever their timing. They represent the completion of Jesus' mission until he comes again.

V.18: Mary did as the Lord told her. Her message was as simple as it was comprehensive, 'I have seen the Lord.' What more did she - or anyone - need to say? For John, she is the first witness to the resurrection. For someone to be recognized as an apostle, the basic requirement was that they should be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. Mary Magdalen was, and the first among them.

Easter Wednesday

Luke 24.13-35 On the road to Emmaus

13. Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,

14. and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

15. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,

16. but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

17. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad.

18. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’

19. He asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,

20. and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

21. But we had hoped that he was the one to set Israel free. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

22. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,

23. and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.

24. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’
25. Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!
26. Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’
27. Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.
28. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.
29. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them.
30. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.
31. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.
32. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’
33. That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.
34. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’
35. Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

There is a reference to this episode in Mark 16.12-13.

V.13: John L. McKenzie says that the location of Emmaus is uncertain. In fact, it may not be anywhere at all, and the name, together with the ‘seven miles from Jerusalem’ may be a way of saying ‘anywhere at all.’ But others maintain that it was a town destroyed by the Roman general Varus in 4 AD. Its location seems to be of little significance to the story, however.

Vv.15-16: Common features of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus are that they were to his disciples only, not to the general body of the public; and also, that disciples had difficulty in recognizing him. The post-resurrection Christ is the same person yet qualitatively different from Jesus of Nazareth. They recognize him in ‘the breaking of the bread,’ a common name among the early Christians for the Eucharist. V.30 clearly suggests a Eucharistic connection; the phrasing is familiar in that context.

Vv.17b-21: The disciples’ sense of disappointment is palpable; their hopes and expectations had been disappointed. They were unable to imagine the bigger picture. (That is true of ourselves, too, in our inability to imagine a different model of church.)

In the post-resurrection period, Jesus revealed himself only to his disciples, not to everyone. And

they always needed a reminder, a wake-up call, for them to recognize him. In John 20.15, Mary Magdalen thought Jesus was the gardener, even though she must have known him well. (You'd almost say, 'Trust the disciples to get it wrong; they usually did!')

Jesus' risen body was different from that before his death. There was continuity; he was not a different Jesus. But there must have been some difference for the disciples, one after the other, to fail to recognize him. He seemed to be able to go through walls or doors (John 20.19), yet engage in ordinary activities like cooking and eating food. (John 21.9, 12-13; Luke 24.41-43)

Today, the two disciples do not recognize him. (v.16) They speak of their disappointed hopes, their dreams that had come to nothing. Their expectations of him had been political: 'our hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free.' (v.21) That wasn't what he was about. They had been looking for the gifts of God more than the God of gifts.

The human is the medium of the divine. When we recognize and respect the humanity of the other, we recognize Christ among us.

V.18: It is highly ironic that one of them says to Jesus, 'You must be the only person staying in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last few days.' Jesus

was, in fact, the only person in Jerusalem who *did* know what had been happening!

Vv.22-24: They talked about what the women had said, but disregarded it. You could imagine the men saying, 'Women get excited about nothing; take no notice of them.' But they begin to have second thoughts when the women's story is confirmed by some of their male friends.

V.25: Jesus takes them to task for resisting faith. We resist it, too, one reason being that, to a tired and cynical world, it seems too good to be true. Perhaps this is the main reason why people today reject the Christian faith. When we are in that frame of mind, we become afraid to trust, and that is our loss.

V.26: He explains that his suffering, death and resurrection were necessary, fore-ordained by God and part of his eternal plan for humanity.

V.27: It would have been wonderful to have been there when Jesus, 'starting with Moses and going through all the prophets [and the Psalms, in v.44]... explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself.' He re-interpreted the events in the light of the scriptures. The word of God gives new meaning to the ordinary and familiar. The two men were aware of the events, but their interpretation of them was stunted. When they heard the same events interpreted through the scriptures they saw them differently.

V.29: The disciples take the initiative of inviting Jesus to stay with them. They ask him to join them in a meal. It wasn't a fast food take-away, a guzzle-and-go meal that misses out on companionship. ('Companion' in Latin is one who has had bread with you; Latin *cum*, with, and *panis*, bread.) Meals matter, especially in Luke.

Vv.30-34: During it, he says and does something familiar, echoed in each Mass just before the Consecration: 'he took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them.' (v.30) Those words are straight from the narratives in Matthew, Mark and Luke about the institution of the Eucharist. They are used in the consecration of the bread at Mass. The occasion becomes Eucharistic, and 'they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.' (v.35) That phrase, 'the breaking of the bread' is used by Luke as a name for the Eucharist. (e.g., Acts 2.42, etc.) (That is why the priest breaks the consecrated bread, the Host, at Mass.) And he vanished from their sight. Then they said that they had known all along who it was. In their hearts they had, but they were afraid to dare to hope. (v.32)

V.35: At the end there is a missionary dimension. He vanished from them, leaving them to go back to the others and tell them. That is what the church, the community of faith, is meant to be - people with a living memory of meeting Jesus sharing it with

others. ‘The best evidence of the resurrection is not a rolled back stone but a carried away community.’ (Clarence Jordan) When the disciples recognize who it was, they return to Jerusalem to tell the others and say, ‘Yes, it is true, The Lord has risen.’ (vv.33-34)

Easter Thursday

Luke 24.35-48 Jesus appears to his disciples

35. Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

36. While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’

37. They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

38. He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?’

39. Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’

40. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

41. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’

42. They gave him a piece of broiled fish,

43. and he took it and ate in their presence.

44. Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that

everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’

45. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

46. and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day

47. and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

48. You are witnesses of these things.’

Vv.36-37: The body of the risen Jesus is different from ours. He seems to have appeared suddenly among them. ‘In a state of alarm and fright, they thought they were seeing a ghost.’

V.38: He calms their fears and chides them for their doubts. The opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear. Doubt is a necessary corrective to faith, so that it does not become credulity or gullibility, which are, in fact, a parody of faith. But fear is of help to no one. The German-American Lutheran theologian, Paul Tillich, wrote, ‘Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith; it’s an element of faith.’ (*The Dynamics of Faith*, Harper & Row, New York, 1957, p.20)

Vv.39-43: Jesus seems to want to emphasize his bodiliness, his physicality, the reality of his bodily presence. He says, ‘Look at my hands and feet... touch me and see for yourselves...and he showed

then his hands and his feet.’ (vv. 39, 41) To emphasize it further, he asks them for food, and, ‘they offered him a piece of grilled fish, which he took and ate before their eyes.’ (v.43)

The Christian faith regards the material, the physical, the bodily as the means by which we are connected to the spiritual. It does not see material and spiritual as opposites but as complementary. For example, nearly all the sacraments have a basis in the material: water in baptism, bread and wine in the Eucharist, the human body in marriage, oil in baptism, confirmation, the sacrament of the sick, and ordination. In the Christian tradition, matter matters.

Several centuries before Jesus, the philosophy of Manicheism developed which set the material and the spiritual in opposition to each other. It has recurred at intervals throughout history and caused lots of trouble, for example, by burdening people with guilt about seeming opposites that were meant to be complementary:

- God man
- divine human
- head heart
- nature grace
- sacred secular
- natural supernatural
- emotional rational
- intellect will
- theory practice

- thought action
- immanent transcendent
- religion science
- heaven earth
- temporal eternal
- male female
- functional relational
- space time

Everything is in God, and these things find unity in him.

Vv.44-46: Jesus reminds them of what he had earlier said to them, presumably his three-fold prediction of his passion, death and resurrection, given in the Synoptics. As earlier in v.27 he explains to them the scriptures about himself, in this case adding the Psalms as a source along with Moses and the prophets. The focus is on the idea that his death and resurrection were fore-ordained by God.

Vv.47-48: ‘Repentance and forgiveness of sins’ are to be proclaimed; that is indeed Good News. It is reminiscent of the words that Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, spoke to him about his mission: -

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in
the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke
1.76-79)

If people could believe that their sins are forgiven,
much healing would follow.

At the end, as in vv.33-35, there is another
missionary dimension. 'You are witnesses of these
things.'

Easter Friday

John 21.1-14 Jesus appears to seven disciples

1. After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.
2. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.
3. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.
4. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

5. Jesus said to them, ‘Children, you have no fish, have you?’ They answered him, ‘No.’
6. He said to them, ‘Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.
7. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.
8. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.
9. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.
10. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’
11. So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.
12. Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord.
13. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.
14. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

V.2: the sons of Zebedee were James and John, the writer of the Gospel, who usually refers to himself

obliquely as ‘the disciple Jesus loved.’ (See also v.7.)

There is a similarity with the post-resurrection appearances in John 20.11-18 and Luke 24.13-35 and 35-48. They are to disciples only, not to the general public, and the disciples at first don’t recognize Jesus. There’s hesitation – is it really he, or not? And then it begins to dawn on them.

V.4: ‘Just after daybreak’ is John’s way of saying that there is grace and hope, in contrast to ‘And it was night’ in 13.30, at the betrayal by Judas. See also John 3.19-21.

V.5: Unsuccessful fishermen don’t like being queried about their non-existent catch. Their answer sounds gruff: ‘No.’

V.6: Jesus suggests to them what to do. The fact that they followed it suggests they may have known it was he.

‘There were so many fish’ – this abundance is an echo of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, or the living water at Jacob’s well in Samaria (John 4.14). It is Jesus’ way of doing things.

V.7: Then John – ‘the disciple Jesus loved’ - realizes who it is. He says, ‘It is the Lord.’ Love sees.

When people do as Jesus says, good things happen - from having caught nothing (v.5) to catching in abundance (v.11.)

V.8 'they were only about a hundred yards from land' suggests an eye-witness detail.

Vv.9-10: Like yesterday, food is eaten. Jesus invites them to a meal; he has bread, fish and a fire ready. John mentions that it is a charcoal fire. Is this to suggest Peter's rehabilitation after he had denied Jesus three times while warming himself at a charcoal fire? (John 18.19) Jesus is the cook, the servant. At this point they recognize him – 'they knew quite well it was the Lord - (v.12); they bring the fish and they share the meal together. Perhaps, when they saw what Jesus had prepared, it evoked a memory of loaves and fishes. The occasion is like a harvest, a joyful sharing in abundance, an image of heaven.

V.11: the number of fish caught – 153 – equals $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12+13+14+15+16+17$. Seventeen is made up of ten and seven, both of them significant biblical numbers. Is there any significance in this? Is it an elaborate and complex way of suggesting superabundance, the message being that God can bring superabundance out of human failing, when people obey his Son? Or is that just a numerological flight of fancy?

According to Saint Jerome, Greek zoology held at the time that there were 153 different kinds of fish. So the number may be a symbol of all peoples being called to the kingdom of God, where Peter has the role of a fisher of men. (Matthew 4.19) The parable of the net in Matthew 13.47-48 is a symbol of the end of time.

V.12: ‘None of the disciples was bold enough to ask, “Who are you?”’ There are other instances of this, as in Mark 9.32: ‘they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.’ Did they fear a telling off like the one they got in the boat when they misunderstood what he said about yeast and bread? (Mark 8.14-21) Was Jesus someone who did not suffer fools gladly?

The above is more than a story of a barbecue. It’s full of evocative symbols and images – loaves and fishes, a net catching everyone, Peter as the fisher of men. It suggests celebration, harvest, banquet. It is a happy re-union, a shared celebration of hope.

Easter Saturday

Mark 16.9-15 Jesus appears and gives a commission

9. Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons.

10. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping.
11. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.
12. After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country.
13. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.
14. Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.
15. And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.’

There is a passage parallel to this in John 20.11-18.

Mary of Magdala came to be known in the early church as ‘the apostle to the apostles,’ because she was sent by Jesus to bring the news of his resurrection to the apostles.

V.11: ‘They would not believe’ - pointed out three times (vv.11, 13, 14) - is strange. Had the disciples not been told three times by Jesus that he would rise from the dead? (Mark 8.31-32a; 9.30-32; 10.32-34) Had they not seen Jesus raise to life the daughter of Jairus? (Mark 5.21-24, 35-43) Had they not seen him raise Lazarus? Had the three most privileged among them, Peter, James and John, not questioned among

themselves what “rising from the dead” could mean? (See Mark 9.9-10) Had Jesus not ‘explained everything in private to his disciples’? (Mark 4.34) Why then the disbelief? Perhaps it is a matter of which disciples are in question; some were present at some events, others not.

V.12: ‘he appeared in another form’ is a reminder that Jesus was resurrected, not resuscitated; his rising from death was not a matter of taking up where he left off, as if his passion and death were no more than an interruption. After dying and rising, Jesus Christ the Lord is qualitatively different from what he was before.

Vv.12-13: like vv.11 and 14, it expresses the disbelief of the disciples (or apostles). Reluctant witnesses are more reliable than enthusiasts; when they are convinced, their evidence is more persuasive. The ‘two of them’ are almost certainly the disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus. (Luke 24.13-35)

V.14: The twelve has become the eleven, since the departure of Judas. The meeting place, as often before, is a meal, a major element in Jewish life.

‘He upbraided them’: the word used here is a powerful one, the same as that for the abuse heaped on Jesus on the cross by the two bandits, where it is translated as ‘taunted.’

V.15: The note of universalism is evident here, even where it comes from the pen of someone other than Mark. Maybe it is a direct quotation from Jesus. The Gospel - the good news - is for 'all the world... the whole creation.' This command should have undermined racism, based as it is on the premise that all people have one origin and one destiny, namely, to be children of God. Peter seems to have got the message right: 'Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."' (Acts 10.34-35) But Christians were slow to learn and apply it.

The Good News is for 'the whole creation,' not just for people. What a pity that the Judeo-Christian tradition has been so far behind many others in its attitude to non-human life! Our history is largely that of seeing nature simply as there to be exploited by us at will, and we have done that, often destructively. The phrase of Genesis (1.26) 'let them [humans] have dominion over....' has been cited as a licence to heedless exploitation. And God said to Noah and his sons,

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be

food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. (Genesis 9.1-3)

A visitor to a Hindu or Buddhist country cannot but notice the different attitude to animal and insect life; it is treated with respect, and it responds with an abundance of diversity and numbers, and a notable absence of fear. We have often acted as if our faith gave us a license to plunder nature at will. I remember visiting a Buddhist monastery in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and walking under the trees in the garden. There were hundreds of birds in them, all twittering away. As I walked underneath, having to duck now and then under low-hanging branches, the birds took no notice at all; they felt no fear in the presence of a human. Similarly, walking through a densely populated slum area with lots of dogs, they ignored me, a stranger; they were unaggressive. And I saw fish gathering in the late afternoon near a bridge because Buddhist monks were in the habit of feeding them at that time each day, and they had grown accustomed to it.

For much of our history, Christians have been bad news for creation. From the colonial era of the past to the economic neo-colonialism of today, it was, and is, the Western world, coming from a Judeo-Christian tradition, that is the great exploiter of the world's resources. Where is the good news for creation in that? Is it enough to talk of stewardship, especially as we have been such rapacious "stewards"? Perhaps we need to move beyond the

notion of stewardship and acknowledge that humans are part of nature, not its masters and lords, above and beyond it in a kind of control centre. We need nature; it does not need us. If humans were to disappear from the face of the earth, nature might breathe a sigh of relief at a welcome end to the suffering we have inflicted on it so mindlessly. Largely, we continue to do so, despite nature's repeated distress signals being sounded with increasing frequency in recent decades.

The American Franciscan friar, Richard Rohr, offers his perspective: -

Most of us were raised inside an old cosmology: there was the individual; there was God, who was somewhere "out there." Then there was the earth and all that went with it, the animals, plants, soil, air, fire and water.

We saw salvation as something that applied just to our species. This was anthropocentric, a kind of narcissism, to think that God was interested only in us. We were the centre of everything. The task became how to get the individual, isolated self to be connected to God.

The Great Chain of Being, the earth, was left out of the equation. It, frankly, was of no interest. In fact, it was a bother. The idea that nature was a bother spread to everything material, physical,

emotional, sexual - all of this was the inferior self. It was not integrated into the pattern of salvation.

Nature, science, and parts of Scripture validate the shape of a new cosmology, which is really the old cosmology. We're recognizing from many of the scientific disciplines that the entire nature of the biological and physical universe is completely interpenetrating and relational, one big ecosystem.

God is not "out there," but God is in all, and through all, and guiding all. That's surely the ultimate therapy: when you know not only that everything belongs, but that you belong to everything.

The Bible ends with the promise of the 'new heavens *and a new earth*,' (Revelation 21.1) This earth is clearly seen *as participating* in this mystery called redemption, liberation, salvation. It's not just about the human beings. The whole creation 'is groaning in one great act of giving birth.' (Romans 8.18-25) The whole thing is being reborn, recovered and realigned.

The ark in the Noah story became the image of salvation. Notice that God doesn't have Noah take only his wife and children into the ark. He also has him take two of every animal. What is that saying? Apparently that animals matter! They also needed to be saved and liberated, and therefore were a part of the divine ecology, a part of the divine

plan. But many animals on this earth have been nothing but beasts of burden for our use, misuse, and hunting pleasure.

God said to Noah and to his sons, ‘I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that was with you - the birds, the livestock, the wild animals - all those that came out of the ark, every living creature on earth. I establish my eternal covenant *with the earth*. I am making between me and you *and every living creature* a covenant for all generations to come. And the sign of it will be this: I have set my rainbow in the clouds. This will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth itself.’ (Genesis 9.8-17)

God is not “out there,” but is in all, and through all, and guiding all. That’s surely the ultimate therapy: when you know not only that everything belongs, but that you belong to everything. (End of edited quote from Richard Rohr)

Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote, ‘Revelation comes to us in two volumes: scripture and nature.’

Week 2 of Easter

Monday

John 3.1-8 Nicodemus visits Jesus

1. Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.
2. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'
3. Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.'
4. Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'
5. Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.'
6. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
7. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.'
8. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

This was different from most other situations involving Jesus and Jewish leaders: -

- it was one-on-one, with no crowds;
- Nicodemus wanted to understand Jesus; he had no tricks or traps;
- he was a good listener, and therefore a learner;

- he was humble, accepting Jesus' implied rebuke in v.10.

Nicodemus represented some of the best in the Judaism of his time. He was a teacher, a member of the Sanhedrin; he was sincere, he genuinely wanted to know the truth about Jesus. (He was the same man who, later on, spoke up for Jesus, saying that he should be given a fair trial. (John 7.50-52) And he provided the spices for Jesus' burial. (John 19.39) He probably became a disciple, though that is not expressly stated anywhere.)

V.1: He came to Jesus by night – significant in John. This was not the night of sin or evil, as with Judas (13.30), but the night of ignorance, of not seeing things as they were, a time of limited vision, or perhaps also a time of fear for Nicodemus.

V.2: What Nicodemus wanted to know was where Jesus fitted into the Jewish scheme of things. He acknowledged that no one could do the things that Jesus had done unless God were with him, but who exactly was he? – that was his question.

V.3: Jesus speaks about the need for someone to be born anew. He is saying that there isn't a gradual evolution from Judaism to him, to belief in God made man. He represented an unprecedented, fundamental, definitive and radical inbreaking by God to the human situation. Something completely new and unheard of has happened in him: God has

become man. To accept that, a person, perhaps especially a Jew, had to make a leap of faith; it did not just follow on from the preceding. A Jewish rabbi of our own time, Abraham Heschel, said of Jesus that he was either of ultimate significance or he was of no significance. That was right; there is no middle way. Jesus either is divine or he isn't; you can't be "sort of" divine.

V.4: That is too big a leap for Nicodemus to make, at least for the present, and he becomes sarcastic: 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'

V.5: This verse was for long regarded as the *locus classicus* for the teaching that baptism by water was necessary for salvation. It led to the development of the doctrine of limbo. It seemed to close the door to heaven against the unbaptized, but that, in turn, clashed with the salvific will of God evidenced throughout the New Testament, especially in Jesus himself. In the New Testament, the *locus classicus* for the salvific will of God is 'God our Saviour... desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.' (1 Timothy 2.3-4) Theologians tried to find a way out by conjuring up limbo as a half-way house, a place or state of rest between hell and heaven, a kind of no man's land for those of goodwill who died without baptism, such as stillborn children. For this reason, the latter were not allowed to be buried in consecrated ground. This

brought consolation to some, torment to others. One woman, the mother of four stillborn children, as she looked out at the field where they were buried, plaintively asked a priest, ‘Father, do you think there is any chance that my babies might ever get into heaven?’

Limbo was consigned to oblivion by Pope Benedict XVI, an example of a teaching changing as a result, not so much of theological development, as of grassroots pressure from people simply finding it unbelievable and unacceptable. Continuing to teach it was undermining the credibility of the church. It was an example of a yes becoming a no, that is to say, it involved a *change* and not merely a *development* of doctrine. (If an acorn becomes an oak, that’s a development; if an oak becomes a table, that’s a change.)

V.6: ‘What is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is spirit.’ This is not about body and spirit being in opposition to each other, as in Manicheism or Platonism. “Flesh” means the whole person, with their past and present, against God, without God, or indifferent to God; it means human corruptibility. “Spirit” means the person with and under God.

V.7: Jesus repeats what he said in v.3.

V.8: ‘Wind’ may also mean Spirit. The wind blows freely; it is invisible, but nonetheless real and powerful. A strong wind may drive a ship or a wind

turbine - or knock a tree. Human beings can cooperate with it as a partner, but in reality have little control over it. Jesus sees this as an image of the working of the Holy Spirit. God gives grace freely, to whomsoever he wills. The evidence of God's grace shows up in the most unexpected places. God gave us church, sacraments and Bible, but is not limited to or bound by them. God is always sovereign. Our role is to respect that.

Week 2 of Easter

Tuesday

John 3.7-15 More time with Nicodemus

7. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.

8. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

9. Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'

10. Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?'

11. Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.

12. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?'

13. No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

14. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

15. that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'

V.8: Jesus gives Nicodemus a mini-parable to help him. We cannot see the wind but we can hear it; we do not know where it comes from or where it is going. We cannot control it. But it is strong. Wind and Spirit are the same word in Greek and Hebrew - *pneuma* and *ruah*. God can intervene whenever, wherever and in whatever manner God wishes, not needing our permission.

Another way of looking at that is to say that all truth is God's truth, however it is mediated, whether it comes through religion, philosophy, traditional wisdom, the lyrics of a pop song, out of the mouth of an infant, or anywhere else. If it is true, it is true, and is of God.

V.9: It is impossible not to like Nicodemus; he is an honest man who is not inhibited in revealing his lack of knowledge.

V.10: Jesus is surprised that Nicodemus does not understand what he (Jesus) is saying. Perhaps Nicodemus, like so many of his tradition, was unable to see the wood for the trees; he may have become lost in the minutiae of the Torah so that its larger

purpose slipped from sight. It can happen to anyone. But his great merit was that he continued to search and to ask questions. Maybe he had prayed with the anonymous person who wrote: -

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truths,
from the laziness that is content with half-truth,
from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
O God of truth, deliver us.

How much better that is than the rock-like assurance of the closed mind that confuses certainty with truth!

V.11: Jesus switches to the plural. Who is the ‘we’ in ‘we speak’? It is introduced by the emphatic phrase, ‘Very truly, I tell you,’ and the verb used for ‘speak’ is one usually reserved for prophetic utterances. Jesus was the author of his teaching; unlike Nicodemus and everyone since, he was not retailing second-hand goods. He was the truth, he knew it and he testified to it.

V.12: What were the earthly things Jesus had told people about, in contrast to heavenly things? His “heavenly” teaching was down-to-earth. There is only one kingdom of heaven and it doesn’t have two storeys. Jesus himself is the bridge between heaven and earth; they come together in him. Beyond that seems like guesswork.

V.13: Jesus “came down” from heaven and he “went up” again in his ascension. He is clearly speaking of himself, the Son of Man.

Vv.14-15: Jesus refers here to the book of Numbers: -

From Mount Hor they set out on the Red Sea road, to by-pass the land of Edom. But with their patience worn out by the journey, the people complained against God and Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!’ In punishment the Lord sent among the people saraph serpents, which bit the people so that many of them died.

Then the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned in complaining against the Lord and you. Pray the Lord to take the serpents from us.’

So Moses prayed for the people, and the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a saraph and mount it on a pole, and if anyone who has been bitten looks at it, he will recover.’

Moses accordingly made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole, and whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, he recovered. (21.4-9)

The American Franciscan, Richard Rohr, has a comment which may help to throw light on this difficult passage: -

Consider the crucifix as a *homeopathic* image, like those medicines that give you just enough of the disease so you can develop resistance and be healed of the disease. *The cross dramatically reveals the problem of ignorant killing, to inoculate us against doing the same thing.* It is God's vaccination plan!

Or is Jesus saying that it is only with his crucifixion (and presumably resurrection) that people will come to believe in him? The language is highly metaphorical and difficult for people of a different culture and milieu.

Week 2 of Easter

Wednesday

John 3.16-21 God's love for the world shown in Jesus

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

16. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

17. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

18. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

19. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

20. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

21. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

Vv.16-17: God saw that the world he created and loved was in a mess. He did not stand back from it in condemnation but wanted to save it. “Saving,” or salvation, means deliverance from everything that diminishes a person’s humanity, especially sin and death.

Eternal life, or eternity, is about being in or with God. It’s not about time, or immortality. God stands outside of time, which is his creation. Humans think in terms of past, present and future; we cannot conceive of life outside those categories. But they do not apply to God, who lives in what might be called an eternal present.

God got involved in the most radical way possible, by becoming a human being himself. He did that in Jesus, his Son, who is true God and true man. Jesus came to show us what it is to be human; he is the human face of God.

V.18: Believing in Jesus means more than giving intellectual assent to what he taught. Mostly, it means trusting him and committing oneself to him in a personal relationship.

Those who refuse to believe in him (the JB translation of v.18) are different from those who are simply unable to believe. To refuse is to say no, to turn away, to reject, to close the door against God. The real atheist, though, may be not so much the person who says, 'I don't believe in God', or 'God means nothing to me,' because there likely are people for whom the idea of God has been poisoned, by, for instance, having cruelty inflicted on them in the name of God, or injustice done to them and being told that, 'This is God's will for you.' There are people who have experienced religion being the occasion, the excuse or the cause of division, anger, hatred, and even violence, and their feeling is, 'I don't want any of that; religion does no one any good.' That's understandable. A woman once said to me, 'I believe in God but not in religion.' She spoke for many. The real atheist is the one who says, 'Truth, justice, beauty, mercy, compassion, forgiveness – they mean nothing to me.'

In the Gospel, Jesus never forces himself on anyone. As Peter Kreeft put it, 'God is a lover, not a rapist.' (*Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensées Edited, Outlined and Explained*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1993, p.198) God the Father is not a godfather, making us offers we can't refuse.

Humanity is neither self-sufficient, self-explanatory, nor self-perfectible, but to turn away from God in rejection is to imply that it is so.

Vv.19-20: 'People loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.' Sometimes this is so. People are sometimes perverse and affirm as true what they know to be untrue or vice versa, sometimes choose evil rather than good, sometimes treat beauty, goodness, justice and truth with contempt and trample on them. Sad, but true. And actions have consequences.

V.21: Where is God? Wherever there is a human heart open to receive him.

Week 2 of Easter

Thursday

John 3.31-36 The One who comes from heaven

John the Baptist said to his disciples:

31. The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all.

32. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony.

33. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true.

34. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.

35. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands.

36. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

Jesus in this passage, as in many others, clearly puts himself on a par with God. (How do Jehovah's Witnesses miss this?)

Vv.32-33: Throughout his Gospel, John puts a lot of emphasis on testimony. He is strong on bearing witness, and on his testimony being true. He gives lots of eye-witness details to reinforce this, such as the arrangement of the cloths in the tomb that had wrapped Jesus, 20.6-7, and, in 6.10, in saying that 'there was a great deal of grass in the place.' Here he uses the words testifies, testimony, certifies, true. He wants to emphasize that what he is saying is the truth.

Vv.34-36: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.' To believe means more than to give intellectual assent, more than merely to say, 'I agree with Jesus.' It is more like trusting. The Latin word *credo*, I believe, comes from *cor*, the heart, and *reddo*, I give back. *Cor plus reddo* becomes *credo*. To believe means to give one's heart. Those who give their heart to Jesus have eternal life.

To give one's heart means also being open to receive, since giving and receiving are reciprocal and inseparable. To live in that kind of relationship means being able to accept with the heart that God loves me 'without measure' (v.34), despite all the reasons for not doing so. It means that I need not live in shame because of my sins, or in fear because of the many crises evident in the world, but live secure in the knowledge that God is greater than all, is in control, and that human destiny is in his hands. The Father who gives (v.35) and the Son who receives (v.36) show the way; it is the way of love.

Week 2 of Easter

Friday

John 6.1-15 Jesus feeds five thousand

1. After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias.
2. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.
3. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.
4. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.
5. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?'
6. He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

7. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.'

8. One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him,

9. 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?'

10. Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all.

11. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

12. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.'

13. So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

14. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

15. When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

There are parallel passages in Matthew 14.13-21, Mark 6.32-44 and Luke 9.10-17.

Matthew, Mark and Luke each give an account of the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus at the Last Supper. John doesn't. Instead he gives something they omit – the washing by Jesus of his disciples' feet. (13.1-15)

John has plenty to say about the Eucharist here in chapter 6. Underlying what Jesus is saying is his effort to bring people to see who he was. He never simply stood up and said, 'I'm God.' If he had, people could not have accepted it; it would have been too much. For them, God was a transcendent figure, far above humanity and the world. Had Jesus done so, they would probably have stoned him to death for blasphemy.

So Jesus led them slowly, stage by stage, until, after the Resurrection and Pentecost, and because of them, they came to see for themselves that God had come among them in him.

In the early days of his ministry, they called him *rabbi* (teacher), *master*, and later on, *messiah*. (Only rarely did they call him *Jesus*.) The latter was not a divine title. *Messiah*, *Christ* in Greek, was the anointed one, chosen especially by God to be his unique messenger to his people, but not God. The title of *Lord* was not used of Jesus until after he had risen from death; it was a divine title.

V.1: 'After this' is a generalized introduction of a type John uses widely. (E.g., see 5.1)

‘The other side’ means the East bank of the Jordan, which had a higher concentration of Gentiles than the West. Perhaps it is a hint of the breakout of the Christian faith to the wider world community.

V.2: The crowd ‘kept following’ him. These were loyal supporters, drawn by his works of power. We may assume that they were well disposed.

V.3: Mountains are associated with significant theophanies – Sinai (Horeb), Carmel, Hermon, Tabor, the hill of the Transfiguration and the hill of Calvary. In Matthew 5.1, where Jesus begins to teach the Beatitudes, we read that, ‘When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them, saying...’ (The present-day Church of the Beatitudes is on level ground near the lake, nowhere near a hill.) There is broad similarity between the two, with a hint that something portentous is about to happen.

V.4: The reference to the Passover and the wording of v.11 have Eucharistic associations. This is significant as an introduction to what follows in chapter 6. The story is intended to give authority to what Jesus is going to teach.

Vv.5-6: Jesus tests Philip who came from the nearby town of Bethsaida. He also shows concern for the practicalities of feeding a large crowd of people. In him, there was no separation of material

and spiritual into separate categories; the person was one. He didn't say, 'I'm here to save souls; let others look after bodies.'

Vv.7-9: The local man is at a loss to know what to do. What the people bring is clearly insufficient, but it was what they had. Barley loaves are coarse and hard; they were the bread of the poor. The rich ate wheaten bread.

V.10: As elsewhere (e.g., 20.7), John gives eye-witness details: 'there was a great deal of grass in the place.' The Passover would be in April when the Spring rains would have watered the ground. He has an eye for numbers, too - of loaves, fish and people.

Vv.11-13: It is impossible to miss the Eucharistic association, as later on in 21.13: 'Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.' These follow Luke's institution narrative, 'Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."' (22.19)

Jesus gives in abundance, 'as much as they wanted.' What the people had brought was insufficient, but Jesus makes it more than sufficient. The leftovers – twelve baskets - exceed the original supply. (At the Eucharistic table we come as recipients; the liturgy is more about what God does for us than what we do for God.)

Jesus lived in a land where food was precious, not to be wasted. The leftovers were gathered up, ‘so that nothing may be lost.’ (v.12) It evokes Gandhi’s saying that, ‘There is enough in this world for everyone’s need, but not enough for everyone’s greed.’

V.14: The people recognize the significance of what has happened. It is more than a free picnic; it is an emphatic way of saying that Jesus is someone from God.

V.15: But then they get it wrong, interpreting the event in the light of their preoccupation for the independence of their country from its oppressive Roman rulers. This was no part of Jesus’ agenda, so he is having none of it. His food is ‘to do the will of him who sent me’ (John 4.34), no more and no less.

Week 2 of Easter

Saturday

John 6.16-21 Jesus walks on water

16. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea,

17. got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

18. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.

19. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified.

20. But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.'

21. Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 14.22-33 and Mark 6.45-52.

This story has the kind of eye-witness detail that likely came from John's experience, along with his brother James, as sons of Zebedee the fisherman. It suggests local knowledge.

Vv.16-17: Their boat-journey is from East to West, back to Capernaum on the north-western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was evening, and dark, and they were alone. To experienced fishermen, that would not have been a problem.

V.18: The Sea of Galilee is one which commonly experiences stormy weather, which can blow up quickly and die down again just as quickly. The prevailing wind is from the West, which would make their eastward journey more difficult.

Scripture scholars say that, in the time of Jesus, the lake shore was more densely populated than it is today, with perhaps 100,000 people in nine cities along it. In contrast to today, fishing, including fish-

packing, fruit-growing and agriculture flourished. The lake is about 21 km. long and 13 km. wide at its greatest extent.

V.19: The distance covered is nothing remarkable, nothing that would have tired experienced rowers. They see Jesus walking towards them on the lake and were terrified by such an unprecedented sight. Some have suggested that they were mistaken, were actually near the shore and Jesus was merely walking in shallow water; this is to empty the story of meaning and make its inclusion pointless.

V.20: 'It is I' or, better, 'I am' evokes memories of God's 'I am who I am' in Exodus 3.14. Its inclusion is clearly not a coincidence but a deliberate evocation. It is accompanied (though not in all manuscripts) by an equally characteristic divine saying, 'Do not be afraid,' the most widely recurring single phrase in the Bible. Even a slow learner could not fail to pick it up.

V.21: There is a suggestion here that Jesus, to whom they had helpfully offered a lift, facilitates their speedy arrival at their destination.

The miracle stories of the Gospel are never told simply to arouse wonder or amazement; they have a didactic purpose. What is the point of this story? It would seem to be to point to Jesus' divinity. (Buddhists have a story about Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, walking on water and calming a stormy

sea, but they reject any claim to divinity for him.) Perhaps the purpose was to strengthen Jesus' authority in the minds of his hearers to prepare them for the difficult teaching which was to follow.

Week 3 of Easter

Monday

John 6.22-29 The people want to know what to do

22. The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone.

23. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.

24. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

25. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?'

26. Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.'

27. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.'

28. Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’

29. Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’

Vv.22-25 give an account of toings and froings across the lake. The people are puzzled as to how Jesus reached Capernaum. It seems to be of little importance, but are we missing something? What might it be?

The phrase ‘after the Lord had given thanks’ in v.23 is omitted from many manuscripts.

V.26: Jesus says to the people that they followed him for the free food. The high-minded might take offence at that, but people on an empty stomach see things differently. I remember a congregation in Africa laughing at it, because, I think, they felt it described them. They laughed in a similar way when told about the expression “rice Christians,” used of Chinese converts to Christianity. Jesus had no illusions about people; he understood what made them tick.

V.27: He tries to draw them from there to think about something more enduring which he offers them, he to whom God the Father has given his approval.

V.28: They ask him a good question which he answers in a way which perhaps they had not expected. As always, Jesus answers questions on his own terms.

V.29: The work of God, which they want to know about, is not to do this or that action or service, but to believe in him. This is consistent with everything else in the Gospel: believing in Jesus, committing oneself to him, is what God looks for in a person. Jesus, so to speak, looks after the divine end of things; our job is to become human.

Week 3 of Easter

Tuesday

John 6.30-35 The people ask for a sign

30. So they said to him, 'What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?'

31. Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."'

32. Then Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.'

33. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'

34. They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.'

35. Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

V.30: Jesus had made claims of being one with God. It was natural that people would ask for supporting evidence, for "signs." They were always looking for signs, even when they had just been given them. Jesus had already given them some, as in the loaves and fishes in vv.1-14, walking on water in vv.16-21, and more were to come, but they still kept asking for them. We often fail to see what is staring us in the face; the obvious is easily missed or ignored.

V.31: The people have memories of the manna, the free food they had in the desert, and they want more of it. Free food is a big draw for a people often living on the borderline of hunger. People at that time, as with many in the Third World today, are often not far from hunger. We have our own memories of the Great Famine, which, of course, was only one of several. (One in Munster in the 1740's killed 400,000 people.) In the Western Province of Zambia, on average, one maize harvest in three was a failure to a greater or lesser degree. Then people fall back on famine food, like cassava, which is tasteless and not very nourishing, millet or sorghum, wild berries or forest fruits. Food is never far from people's minds because its supply is unreliable. We shouldn't look down on the Jewish

people in this story for hoping for more loaves and fishes: it is easier to be high-minded on a full stomach than on an empty one.

Jesus had said to them a little earlier, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.’ (v.26) He wants them to look beyond that: ‘Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.’ (v.27)

Vv.32-33: Jesus once again – see v.27 – tries to draw them away from ordinary food to what he calls the bread of life for the world.

V.34: But they are not easily deflected. They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’ They are like the woman at Jacob’s well in John 4.15 who says, ‘Give me some of that water, so that I never get thirsty and never have to come back here again to draw water.’ Jesus recognizes that food will always be a priority, but he wants it not to be the major one.

V.35: Jesus brings them back to look at himself, to think of who he is and what he represents. He wants to let them know that God loves them and forgives their sins. He wants to give them dignity, a sense of direction, purpose and meaning in life. That is worth more than a hand-out of free food. As Seán Lemass, the late Taoiseach (prime minister) once said, ‘Eaten bread is quickly forgotten.’ Populist politicians

down through the centuries have offered people the equivalent of loaves and fishes; Roman emperors offered people bread and circuses to keep them quiet, and modern leaders offer them welfare and telly for the same purpose. Jesus was far from being a populist who gives people what they want in order to have their support. After feeding the people with loaves and fishes in John 6.1-15, people wanted to make him king, but he would have none of it: 'he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.' (v.15) If he were to accede to their request for more such signs, it could only feed their expectation of his being a political Messiah. He did not want that. What he wants is for them to give themselves to him so that he can give himself to them; it is a relationship of the heart.

Week 3 of Easter

Wednesday

John 6.35-40 Jesus drives no one away

35. Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

36. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.

37. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away;

38. for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

39. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

40. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.’

V.35: This passage begins with a highly significant phrase: ‘I am,’ (*Ego eimi* in Greek). It was the supreme title of the One God in the Hebrew Bible. In Exodus,

‘Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’

God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I am has sent me to you.”

God also said to Moses, ‘Thus shall you say to the Israelites, “The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ ‘This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.’ (3.13-15)

The saints have commented on this usage: -

‘The name “He who Is” is the most appropriate of all the divine names.’ (Saint John of Damascus, *On the orthodox Faith*, 1.9)

‘As only in God is essence one with existence, “He who Is” is the appropriate name of God.’” (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, I, ques.13, art. 11.)

John repeatedly uses this phrase/title, always in contexts of special significance, pointing to Jesus as Messiah, Son of God, or God in human form: -

I am the bread of life.	6.35
I am the light of the world.	8.12; 9.5
I am he.	4.26, 6.20, 8.24, 28; 13.19, 18.6
I am the gate for the sheep.	10.7, 9
I am the good shepherd.	10.11, 14
I am the resurrection and the life.	11.25
I am the way, the truth and the life.	14.6
I am the true vine.	15.1
I am a king.	18.37
(I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Revelation 1.8; 21.6)	

In John 8.57-59, there was a controversy about Abraham: 'Then the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.' It was clear that they understood the significance of his use of the phrase 'I am.'

Jesus' language is suggestive of a banquet, which, in the Bible, is a common image of heaven, of being with God. (e.g. Isaiah 25.6; Matthew 22.2-14; 26.29; Luke 14.15; Revelation 3.20; 19.9) But some do not

believe. However, those who do come will not be turned away.

V.36 is difficult. What does 'I have said to you that you have seen me' mean? If they had seen him, they didn't need to be told. Does 'see' have another meaning? Does it mean that they "saw" – i.e., knew - who he was, but refused to accept him? If that were the case, then they would really be guilty of great sin.

Vv.37-40: Jesus is doing what his Father asked him to do. He does not wish anyone to be lost; he does not drive people away. 'There is not, there never has been, and there never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer.' (Council of Quiercy, 853 AD)

God wishes all people to be saved, and the only ones who will not be are those who wilfully refuse it. Jesus is the way to God (that isn't a principle of exclusion): 'whoever sees the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I shall raise them up on the last day.' (v.40)

Perhaps it means that, unless we deliberately say no, God takes that as a yes. Such is the generosity of God. The prodigal son's motivation in coming home was that there was good food there - not a great motive, nor the worst either - but God accepts it nonetheless.

There are people – good people – who have the words ‘should,’ ‘must,’ ‘ought,’ ‘have to,’ knocking around inside their souls, inflicting spiritual self-harm. Sometimes they see life as a moral obstacle course, and, unless you clear the hurdles, you’re out. They hollow themselves out from the inside with guilt, and the fear that follows it. This is a long way from Jesus who said, ‘I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.’ (John 10.10)

Those people have forgotten, or may have never learned in the first place, that the Christian faith is much more about what God does for us than about what we do, or should do, for God. Jesus says, ‘anyone who comes to me I will never drive away’ (v.37), and ‘this is the will of him who sent me [God], that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.’ (vv.39-40) It would be a great step forward for such people if they would stop worrying, stop battering themselves, and instead go, grow, enjoy – and give thanks. That would greatly please God.

Week 3 of Easter

Thursday

John 6.44-51 Jesus offers us unity with God

44. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.
45. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.
46. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.
47. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.
48. I am the bread of life.
49. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.
50. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.
51. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

Essentially, it is the same message as in the rest of the chapter: the one who believes in Jesus will have eternal life. Jesus is implicitly making a claim for himself: to be one with God.

The theme of unity between Jesus and God and between Jesus and his disciples runs throughout John’s Gospel, including this passage. Clearly, unity between people and God is not something which we can create. But what we can do is be open to the gift of unity which God offers us.

Vv.48-50: The initiative is with God. Through Jesus, God offers us a way to him. He is the way, the mediator, the bridge that links God and humanity, because he is God and human. He invites us to that unity by an act of faith, that is, by trusting in him.

We are invited to a holy union with Jesus (Latin *cum*, with). He asks us to take and eat, with faith and reverence, that is, with mindfulness, aware of what we are doing. Holy Communion is *the* sacrament of mutual self-giving. It is entering into a relationship; it creates an event; it is a meeting more than a thing, a verb more than a noun. To reduce it to swallowing a Host which then simply “works” is to make it into a magical “holy pill.”

The references to bread probably evoked for the people memories of manna in the desert (v.31), and the miracle of the loaves and fishes in John 6.1-15.

V.51: The offer Jesus makes is for the future as well as the present. It offers the promise of eternal life to those who receive it with faith.

Week 3 of Easter

Friday

John 6.52-59 Objections are raised

52. The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’

53. So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.
54. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;
55. for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.
56. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.
57. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.
58. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.’
59. He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

V.52: Clearly, Jesus’ audience took what he had said literally. He didn’t correct them, or say that he meant it in a different way. In fact, he reiterated it even more emphatically.

V.53: Scripture scholars say that when a teaching is introduced by a phrase such as, ‘Very truly, I tell you...’ we may be confident that it is a genuine saying of Jesus, as close to word for word as is possible.

The title “Son of Man” was Jesus’ preferred self-designation. It meant a man, but it also had a divine resonance to it. An example of this is in Daniel 7.13-14: -

I gazed into the visions of the night. And I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven, one like a son of man. He came to the one of great age and was led into his presence. On him was conferred sovereignty, glory and kingship, and people of all tribes, nations and languages became his servants.

Vv.54-55: This needs to be taken in conjunction with the Eucharistic institution narratives found in the other Gospels. See Matthew 26.26-28: -

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you;

for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’

Similar accounts are to be found in Mark 14.22-25 and Luke 22.19-20.

V.56: The word Jesus uses for ‘eat’ suggests munching, taking your time over it. Jesus is inviting

people to enter into his life, and to allow him to enter into theirs, as fully as possible. In the Eucharist, we become what we receive. With ordinary food, it is transformed into our flesh; with the Eucharist, we are transformed into it.

Vv.57-58: To receive the Eucharist with faith and reverence is to receive the life of Christ, and, with it, the promise of eternal life, of union with God the Father. A Communion received in faith draws us closer into the life of God, into a holy union with Him. ‘The one who eats this bread will live forever.’

‘The sacrifice of the cross [is]... a memorial of his [Christ’s] death and resurrection, a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.’ (Vatican II, Constitution on the Liturgy, n.47, quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas)

V.59: Matthew states, ‘Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. (4.12-13) In 9.1, Matthew describes it as ‘his own town.’ Was there any particular significance in Jesus giving the teaching there? It was the centre of his Galilean ministry.

Week 3 of Easter

Saturday

John 6.60-69 The Words of eternal life

60. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'

61. But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you?'

62. Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?'

63. It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

64. But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.

65. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

66. Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

67. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?'

68. Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.'

69. We have come to believe and know that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

V.60: Many of his disciples were unable to accept his teaching. Did they understand it in a cannibalistic sense? If so, why did Jesus not explain a teaching

which is not easy to understand, even today? I have heard it said by a person living in India that this teaching is a major obstacle to Hindus becoming Christians, because they understand the Eucharist as cannibalism.

Vv.61-62: Jesus seems to point ahead to his ascension, as if to say, ‘When you see that, then you will understand who I am.’

He goes on to say that it is the Spirit which enables a person to accept the teaching. It is about Jesus’ self-giving to us. We re-enact it at Mass, when we do as Jesus, at the Last Supper, told us. He took the bread, and said, ‘This is my body,’ and the wine, saying, ‘This is my blood.’

Extraordinary generosity evokes suspicion among the despairing and the cynical. It evokes gratitude from those who are themselves generous.

V.63: This is not spirit-flesh opposition in a dualistic sense. ‘Spirit’ refers to the Holy Spirit; ‘flesh’ roughly means the unredeemed world, the world that refuses to acknowledge God. Jesus sees them as clearly in mutual opposition.

V.64: Jesus understood people. He knew that some would oppose him, and he had the perceptiveness to be able to see who would go further than opposing him and betray him. Verses 70-71, omitted from this reading, spell out who the betrayer was.

V.65: Faith is a gift from God, and not everyone is given it.

Vv.66-69: The episode was a turning-point. Many no longer walked with him, so he asked the twelve if they, too, wanted to go. Peter gave the answer that faith gives.

Vv. 70-71 are omitted from *The Lectionary*, probably as being unsuited to this Eucharistic context. They are: -

Jesus answered them, 'Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.'

He was speaking of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

Week 4 of Easter

Monday

John 10.1-10 Jesus is the gate

1. 'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.
2. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

3. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.
4. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.
5. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.'
6. Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.
7. So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.
8. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.
9. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.
10. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

In giving this teaching, Jesus would have been well aware of the use of the image of God as shepherd of his people in the writings of the prophets, and of the condemnation of the false shepherds. For instance, he would have known the passages from Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture, says the Lord.

Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, against the shepherds who shepherd my people: You have scattered my sheep and driven them away. You have not cared for them, but I will take care to punish your evil deeds.

I myself will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands to which I have driven them and bring them back to their meadow; there they shall increase and multiply. (Jeremiah 23.1-3)

Ezekiel also spoke strongly: -

The word of Yahweh was addressed to me as follows: -

'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them, "Shepherds, the Lord Yahweh says this: Disaster is in store for the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Are not shepherds meant to feed a flock?

Yet you have fed on milk, you have dressed yourselves in wool, you have sacrificed the fattest sheep, but failed to feed the flock.

You have failed to make weak sheep strong, or to care for the sick ones, or bandage the injured ones. You have failed to bring back strays or look for the lost. On the contrary, you have ruled them cruelly and harshly.

For lack of a shepherd they have been scattered, to become the prey of all the wild animals; they have been scattered.

My flock is astray on every mountain and on every high hill; my flock has been scattered all

over the world; no one bothers about them and no one looks for them.

Very well, shepherds, hear the word of Yahweh: As I live, I swear it - declares the Lord Yahweh - since my flock has been pillaged and for lack of a shepherd is now the prey of every wild animal, since my shepherds have ceased to bother about my flock, since my shepherds feed themselves rather than my flock,

very well, shepherds, hear the word of Yahweh: The Lord Yahweh says this: Look, I am against the shepherds. I shall take my flock out of their charge and henceforth not allow them to feed my flock. And the shepherds will stop feeding themselves, because I shall rescue my sheep from their mouths to stop them from being food for them

‘For the Lord Yahweh says this: Look, I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it.

As a shepherd looks after his flock when he is with his scattered sheep, so shall I look after my sheep. I shall rescue them from wherever they have been scattered on the day of clouds and darkness.

I shall bring them back from the peoples where they are; I shall gather them back from the countries and bring them back to their own land. I shall pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the inhabited parts of the country.

I shall feed them in good pasturage; the highest mountains of Israel will be their grazing ground.

There they will rest in good grazing grounds; they will browse in rich pastures on the mountains of Israel.

I myself shall pasture my sheep, I myself shall give them rest - declares the Lord Yahweh.

I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the injured and make the sick strong. I shall watch over the fat and healthy. I shall be a true shepherd to them.

As for you, my sheep, the Lord Yahweh says this: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and he-goats.

Not content to drink the clearest of the water, you foul the rest with your feet.

And my sheep must graze on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have fouled.

Very well, the Lord Yahweh says this: I myself shall judge between the fat sheep and the thin sheep.

Since you have jostled with flank and shoulder and butted all the ailing sheep with your horns, until you have scattered them outside,

I shall come and save my sheep and stop them from being victimised. I shall judge between sheep and sheep.

I shall settle them round my hill; I shall send rain at the proper time; it will be a rain of blessings.

I shall raise up one shepherd, my servant David, and put him in charge of them to pasture them; he will pasture them and be their shepherd.

I, Yahweh, shall be their God, and my servant David will be ruler among them. I, Yahweh, have spoken.

I shall make a covenant of peace with them; I shall rid the country of wild animals. They will be able to live secure in the desert and go to sleep in the woods.

The trees of the countryside will yield their fruit and the soil will yield its produce; they will be secure on their soil. And they will know that I am Yahweh when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the clutches of their slave-masters.

No more will they be a prey to the nations, no more will the wild animals of the country devour them. They will live secure, with no one to frighten them.

I shall make splendid vegetation grow for them; no more will they suffer from famine in the country; no more will they have to bear the insults of other nations.

So they will know that I, their God, am with them and that they, the House of Israel, are my people - declares the Lord Yahweh.

And you, my sheep, are the flock of my human pasture, and I am your God - declares the Lord Yahweh. (34.1-31)

These passages form part of the background to 10.1-18. In Ezekiel, the Lord dispossesses the false shepherds, takes the charge of the flock from them, and puts it in the care of David, his servant.

The story is a parable (v.6) which Jesus presents for the Pharisees to hear and learn from. It may be considered as a follow-on from chapter 9 where the Pharisees were physically sighted but spiritually blind, and yet still saw themselves as leaders of the people.

V.1: ‘Very truly,’ in addition to being an expression of emphasis, also has the sense of continuing from the previous passage.

The gatekeeper, on duty at the gate, would prevent thieves from entering through it, so they have only the alternative of climbing over the wall. Thieves clearly have their own interest in mind, not that of the sheep. At night, the shepherd was expected to sleep across the entrance to keep the sheep from wandering out, or a wolf or thief from coming in.

V.2: By contrast, the shepherd knows the sheep and is known by them, so he may come and go freely through the gate without frightening them.

V.3: He calls the sheep by name. Seemingly, that was the case among shepherds in Jesus’ time. They needed to, as the enclosure sheltering the sheep at night was used by several shepherds, and each one had to know his own. Since the story is a parable, a further meaning is intended beyond the practicalities of Palestinian shepherding. The story clearly suggests that Jesus regards every individual as important. This is enhanced by the parable of the lost

sheep in Luke 15.1-7, where the shepherd is prepared to take the risk of leaving ninety-nine sheep untended in order to go and look for the one that was lost. The flock is never – to quote the New Zealand term – a “mob.” ‘In the eyes of God... all the billions that have lived, and now live, do not make a mob. God sees each one as an individual.’ (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard*, edited by Peter Rhode, Citadel Press, New York, 1960, s.127.) Isaiah comes to mind, where God says, ‘Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name and you are mine.’ (Isaiah 43.1)

Vv.4-5: The shepherds led the sheep; they did not drive them. Unlike shepherds of the present day, they did not have sheep-dogs; there was no snapping at heels to frighten them into moving. The shepherd’s crook was not to beat them with; it was, in effect, an extended arm, enabling the shepherd to rescue sheep from holes, or ledges in ravines, where they could not otherwise be reached.

The sheep would be familiar with the shepherd’s voice and follow him, not a stranger.

V.6: John explains that ‘they’ did not understand what he was saying to them. The ‘they’ must include the Pharisees; could it also refer to the priests? Probably.

V.7: Jesus explains that he is the gate in the parable. (In vv.11-18, he is the shepherd.) And he repeats this in v.9. He is the means whereby the sheep, i.e. the people, find safety.

V.8: ‘All who came before me...’ On the face of it, this could include the patriarchs and the prophets. But this cannot be what Jesus meant: he never denounced them – quite the contrary.

V.9: Jesus is the means of salvation, not the Pharisees, priests, ritual observance, or the Torah. If the Torah could save, there was no need for Christ.

V.10: The others are thieves, killers and destroyers. That chilling message has perennial application. If a teaching or a practice does not give life, if it stifles, kills or destroys, it cannot be from Jesus. That is a challenge to the church of today as it was to Jesus’ hearers – and they did not get the message. Do we? Are we a hindrance or a help to the sheep? In recent times, there have been instances where the “sheep” taught the shepherds, rather than vice versa, and the shepherds did not learn. This applies especially on issues where compassion or respect for people was called for, and, furthermore, to matters relating to human sexuality and relationships.

‘I came that they might have life, and have it to the full.’ This is surely one of the most wonderful

phrases in the Gospel. Along with John 8.32, 'The truth shall make you free,' it is my favourite.

Week 4 of Easter

Monday, alternative reading

John 10.11-18 Jesus is the good shepherd

11. 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

12. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away - and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

13. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

14. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,

15. just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

16. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

17. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.

18. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

Vv.11-12: By calling himself a shepherd, Jesus puts himself in a messianic role. See Ezekiel 34 above.

In Jewish tradition, the shepherd was not a hired hand; he was committed to the flock; they were his. If a wolf attacked them, he was expected to return home either with an ear of a dead wolf, or with scars on his body to show that he had fought to protect the sheep.

The word *good* (Greek, *kalos*) here means not just kind but noble, splendid.

V.13: In 1981, Pope John Paul II visited Argentina. In an address to the bishops of that country, he spoke to them of the hired hand who abandons the sheep in time of trouble. He did not spell it out, nor did he need to. It was well known that the Argentinian bishops, faced by a military dictatorship carrying out what was called “the dirty war” against its opponents, “disappearing” large numbers of people, and routinely using torture in the Navy mechanics training school, for example, had, for the most part, turned a blind eye and deaf ear to it all, ignoring pleas for help, and even, in a few cases, giving explicit approval to the junta’s actions. The pope said that the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. It was a stinging rebuke, all the more so for being under-stated.

Vv.14-15: In biblical usage, to know is to experience. Examples are to be found in John: -

‘This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you.’ (14.17)

‘On that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you.’ (14.20)

‘This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’ (17.3)

Jesus knows his “sheep,” and they know him. Jesus and the Father know each other. This mode of expression is common in John’s Gospel: it constantly speaks of an interaction and relationship of mutuality between the Father, the Son and the disciples. The bond that links them is one that goes beyond convenience or functionality. It is about a self-giving, sacrificial love.

V.16: Who are the ‘other sheep’? Are they the priests, Pharisees, Sadducees and other opponents whom Jesus was always hoping and trying to bring to faith in him? Are they the Gentiles, the outsiders who knew nothing of Judaism, whose ways were foreign to it, and who were, by almost any standard, lost sheep – in some cases, believing in a multiplicity of gods, worshipping idols made with their own hands, or misled by foolish ideas such as astrology? The hope Jesus has is to bring the human family into unity around one God.

Vv.17-18: The only human sacrifice in the Bible was the self-sacrifice of Jesus. He laid down his life of his own free will, and he took it up again. The Gospels speak of Jesus raising himself up after death, and also of being raised up his Father; in real terms, it amounts to the same thing. Jesus said, ‘The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands.’ (John 3.5)

Jesus was self-possessed in all circumstances. No one imposed anything on him. In John, for example:

Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come. (7.30)

Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. (7.44)

He spoke these words while teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come. (8.20)

Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands. (10.39)

It is difficult to understand to what the ‘command’ refers.

The use of the word *sheep* in vv.1-18 represents a problem. I used to feel embarrassed using it in sermons. From my (limited) experience of working with them, I know that sheep are notoriously stupid.

They are at the back of the slow learners' class. If there was a flock in a large field with one small bog-hole in it, they would find it and fall - no, *jump* - into it, one after the other, and have to be pulled out. Humanity could not be that stupid, I thought. Yet, in these verses, Jesus casts them in the role of his followers. Is he implying that they are as stupid as sheep? Through the experience of life I came to see that as an interpretation not to be lightly discounted.

When I was in New Zealand, there was a sea-quake off the coast about 1975 which created a tidal wave. No one knew in which direction it was going to move, but scientists warned that if it came ashore it would be a wall of water about five metres high and moving at a speed of about 650 kilometres an hour. It would sweep all before it, and no building could withstand its force. They advised people by radio to head quickly for high ground. But what did they do? They went down to the sea-coast to watch the wave coming. Police drove along beaches asking people to go to high ground for safety, but instead they went in even greater numbers, taking cameras with them so as to take pictures of the incoming wave. Fortunately, the wave ran parallel to the coast and did not come ashore, so no lives were lost. *Those sheep jumping into the bog-hole begin to seem less stupid.*

I think of what happened in the Netherlands when a fire began in a warehouse storing fireworks. What did people do? They went to watch the fire; the

warehouse blew up, killing fourteen people and burning four hundred houses. *Woolly thinking!*

In the Eighties, the Ethiopian government berated the Western world for not coming quickly enough with food aid to help its people suffering from famine. But the same government was spending \$1 million a day on a war with its neighbour, Eritrea. And what was the war about? It was about personal animosity between the president of Eritrea and the prime minister of Ethiopia, who hated each other; that was the issue. *Mutton heads!*

I recall the antics of government soldiers fighting in a civil war in Sierra Leone. They looked like armed thugs. They danced in the streets, firing streams of machine-gun bullets in the air to celebrate a local victory. They said they could have done more but for lack of ammunition. *Whoever said sheep were stupid?*

We've heard of wars to end all war. In April 1855, only two months after an earthquake had badly damaged most houses in Wellington, New Zealand, the citizens subscribed £63 to the British Government because 'the present Russian war [in the Crimea] in which our soldiers are engaged is one in which they are serving the ultimate peace of the whole world.' (Arthur Carman, *Tawa Flat and the Old Porirua Road*, Wellington, p.52) Between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the year 2000, there have been over two hundred wars in the world, according to the Swedish International Peace

Research Institute. Where is the learning process there? *And we think of sheep as slow learners.*

It would be easy to multiply examples: just watch the news any day. Most human problems are self-inflicted, pure DIY jobs, often the product of poor communication or a failure (or refusal) to learn from experience. I owe the Lord an apology for raising an eyebrow at his simile. And, while I am at it, I apologize to the sheep, too.

Week 4 of Easter

Tuesday

John 10.22-30 Jesus is rejected by the Jews

22. At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter,

23. and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon.

24. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’

25. Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me;

26. but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.

27. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

28. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

29. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.

30. The Father and I are one.'

V.22: The festival of the dedication took place in December. It commemorated the re-dedication of the temple in Jerusalem by Judas Maccabaeus after it had been violated by the Greeks under Antiochus Epiphanes.

The phrase, 'It was winter,' is probably more psychological than meteorological in intent, just like John stating in 13.30, 'And it was night,' when Judas slips out of the supper room to begin his betrayal. It is probably meant to suggest the wintry coldness of the hearts of his hearers.

V.23: A noticeable feature of John's Gospel is how, in contrast to the Synoptics, so much of it takes place in or around the temple. In one way, this is strange, in view of the fact that, not only was Jesus not a Jewish priest, but he experienced hostility from those who were. It may intend to suggest that the temple and all it represented was being given a last chance. If the heart of Judaism did not accept its Messiah, what likelihood was there that other areas would? This was a supreme time of testing for Judaism, and much would depend on the outcome.

V.24: Are you the Messiah? They ask a direct question. If he answered ‘No,’ that would be the end of him; if he answered ‘Yes,’ they would probably inform the Romans who would likely arrest and kill him.

V.25: Jesus replies that he has already told them through the works of power that he carries out in his Father’s name. Elsewhere – e.g. in John 5.31-47 - he referred to God the Father, John the Baptist and the scriptures as further witnesses for him.

Their question was about whether Jesus was Messiah. His reply is affirmative, but goes further with a greater claim, implicit in his calling God his Father, and, more emphatically still in v.30: ‘The Father and I are one.’

V.26: He knew that they did not believe in him. What more did they want? What would they have accepted?

Vv.27-29: The Gospel is not a success story. Human freewill, and, with it, human perversity is a not uncommon fact of life. Human wilfulness, which is sometimes evident in a stubborn child, is embarrassingly present too in adults of all ages. Those who accept Jesus, who trust in him and commit themselves to him, have the way to God opened up to them. They are in the hands of Jesus, in the hands, too, of the Father, and the gift of eternal life is theirs.

V.30: This verse says it all. It means more than just a common course of action or unity of purpose; it means a claim to being one with God, that is, to being himself God. His hearers understood that this was what he was saying, because, in v.31, they 'took up stones again to stone him.' Stoning was the punishment for blasphemy.

Week 4 of Easter

Wednesday

John 12.44-50 Summary of Jesus' teaching

44. Then Jesus cried aloud: 'Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me.

45. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me.

46. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.

47. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

48. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge,

49. for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak.

50. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me.'

Vv.44-45: Jesus and the Father are one. To accept Jesus is to accept the Father: -

‘The Father and I are one.’ (John 10.30)

‘The Father is in me and I am in the Father.’
(John 10.38)

‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me.’
(John 14.10)

‘You, Father, are in me, and I am in you.’ (John
17.21)

V.46: Jesus came on earth to lead humanity from darkness to light. He is ‘the light of the world.’ (John 8.12; 9.5)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. (John 3.16-19)

Vv.47-48: Jesus does not judge because he came as a saviour, but his word will be the judge of anyone who rejects it. 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' (John 8.31-32) 'Whoever keeps my word will never see death.' (John 8.51)

Vv.49-50: In this, as in all else, Jesus has done as his Father told him. The Father's will for humanity is eternal life, and this is the message Jesus has received from him. 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me.' (John 4.34) 'I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.' (John 6.38) 'I do only the things that please him.' (John 8.29)

We do not know the time, place, or audience for this statement by Jesus. In it he summarized his teaching. It is a proclamation of his unity with the Father, of his mission to lead humanity into light, and how he judges no one, because that is not his mission, but the word itself will be the judge of those who reject it. By doing so, they reject God, because it is he who has given Jesus the word to speak, and he has spoken only that.

Week 4 of Easter
Thursday

John 13.16-20 Servants and masters

16. 'Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.

17. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

18. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, "The one who ate bread with me has lifted his heel against me."

19. I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he.

20. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'

V.16: This seems like a statement of the obvious. (It is repeated in John 15.20.) In the context, however, is it a hint that Judas thought he knew better than Jesus what he should say and do? One theory which has become popular in recent years is that Judas wanted Jesus to use his powers to overthrow the Romans and restore the kingdom of Israel, and was bitterly, even angrily, disappointed that he did not do so. Was he a servant who thought he was greater than his master? Maybe.

Some scholars point out that the text reads better if this verse is omitted. Clearly, vv. 15, 17 read better without it: -

‘For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (v.15)
If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.’ (v.17)

They suggest that v.16 is an editorial addition. (E.g., NCCHS, 813e)

V.17: Jesus gives a blessing to those who simply follow him, without trying to second-guess him, “correct” him, or nudge him in the direction they want, in the belief that it is a better one.

V.18: This is clearly a hint about Judas and the betrayal he planned. The internal quote is from Psalm 41.9, ‘Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.’ (NRSV) Jesus must have known what was going on in Judas’ heart. When he was in Jerusalem for the Passover, John says of him that, ‘Jesus... himself knew what was in everyone.’ (2.24-25)

V.19: He is letting the disciples know this in advance, so that, when the betrayal comes, they will understand that he had known of it in advance and did not try to forestall it because it was going to be used to further what God had in mind for humanity, and he freely gave himself to that.

Some texts, instead of, ‘you may believe that I am he’ have ‘you may believe that I am.’ The use of the divine ‘I am’ is deliberate and significant. See

comment on John 6.35 above; it is found elsewhere in John, too: -

‘you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.’ 8.24;

‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man then you will realize that I am he.’ 8.28;

‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’ 8.58;

‘Jesus replied, “I am he.”’ 18.5;

‘Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he.”’ 18.8

V.20: ‘Very truly, I tell you...’ This phrase also is deliberate and significant. It is intended to emphasize what follows. As elsewhere, it shows the inseparable link between the Father, the Son and the Son’s disciples. There are passages very similar to it in Matthew 10.40, Mark 9.37 and Luke 9.48. The repetition underlines its importance. NCCHS 813f suggests that, like v.16, it may be an editorial addition.

Week 4 of Easter

Friday

John 14.1-6 Jesus is the way, the truth and the life

1. ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

2. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?
3. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.
4. And you know the way to the place where I am going.'
5. Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'
6. Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

In chapters 14-16, Jesus speaks intimately to his chosen ones. There are no angry confrontations or trick questions. He is able to speak to them freely from his heart, taking them into his confidence, revealing his innermost thoughts and building them up for what is to come. In chapter 17 we have an intimate discourse between Jesus and his Father.

In 14.1-6, as is commonly the case throughout John's Gospel, there is reference, implicit or explicit, to the theme of unity – unity between Father and Son, and unity also between Jesus and his disciples. We do not, indeed cannot, bring it about; we have no power to do so. It is simply God's gift. Our role is to accept Jesus in trust, and to follow him; he does the rest.

V.1: It is almost like Jesus saying, ‘Keep it simple; don’t complicate matters.’ Most of our problems are DIY jobs. We worry excessively. Yesterday was the tomorrow I was worried about the day before, and yet it came and went with little trouble. The present is the only time we can really do anything about, the only time we really live in. To ‘believe’ means to trust.

If this verse followed in time on the preceding, the disciples had reason to be troubled because they would have heard Jesus foretell his betrayal by one of his own, and Jesus’ saying that Peter would deny him three times. (13.38)

Vv.2-3: The first sentence is often taken to mean that there is room in heaven for the multitude of individual personalities to be found in the human race. I hope it is so. In creating us, God did not go in for cloning; nor did he run us off on a photocopier. One of the wonderful features of humanity is that we are *not* all the same; on the contrary, we are all different. Thank you, God, for that.

The second sentence is linked to the first by the, ‘If it were not so...’ If there were no reward in heaven, he would have told them. But there is, and he will be there waiting for them when they come. It is likely that Jesus said this to encourage his disciples for the difficult days that lay ahead for them.

In v.3, Jesus promises to go and prepare a place and then come again for them. Is this a reference to his second coming at the end of time, the Parousia? Perhaps, but more likely to his welcoming them individually at the moment of their death. It is this hope which sustains the community of faith.

Vv.4-5: This is phrased as a statement, but has the tone of a question. It sounds more like, 'Do you know...?' Thomas does not, so he asks.

V.6: Jesus proclaims another foundational 'I am' statement. To claim to be 'the way, the truth and the life' is so sweeping that no one could make it except a conman, a megalomaniac, or one of whom it was true. The latter fits.

Jesus is the way to the Father: -

'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.' (John 1.18)

'Whoever sees me see him who sent me.' (John 12.45)

'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.' (John 14.9)

'I am the gate for the sheep.' (John 10.7, 9)

Jesus is the truth. He said: -

'The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to

worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’

The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’

Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’ (John 4.23-26)

Jesus is the life: -

‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.’ (John 3.16)

‘This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’ (John 17.3)

What response can we make except to say, ‘Come, Lord Jesus?’ (Revelation 22.20)

The final phrase, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’ (v.6b) sounds like a principle of exclusion. Taken alone, it would be hard to avoid that conclusion. However, there are many statements in the Bible that take a wider view, for example, ‘This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2.3-4), and, ‘Those who hope in you shall not be disappointed, but only those who wantonly break faith.’ (Psalm 25.3) Taken together, they point to the

conclusion that only those are excluded who knowingly reject the truth, and their exclusion is the result of their own free decision. In effect, they exclude themselves. God always respects human freedom. ‘God created us without us, but did not will to save us without us.’ (Saint Augustine, Sermon 169.11.13; PL 38.923)

Week 4 of Easter

Saturday

John 14.7-14 Philip’s request

7. ‘If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’

8. Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’

9. Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?’

10. Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

11. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

12. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

13. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

14. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

V.7: The unity between Jesus and his Father is repeated here, as in many other places in John. It is basic to his Gospel.

'From now on...' looks to the future; 'you do know him' looks to the present; 'and have seen him' looks to the past. It is a strange sequence, and hard to understand. Does it mean, 'He is standing in front of you, always was, and always will be'?

V.8: Philip asks for clarification. His request is honest; he has no hidden agenda. Saint Paul wrote later, 'God... has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' (2 Corinthians 4.6) But Philip did not see that yet.

Vv.9-10: Philip had been with Jesus at significant moments. It was he who had brought Nathaniel to Jesus, saying to Nathaniel, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' (John 1.45)

And Jesus tested Philip: -

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?'

He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' (John 6.5-7)

And Philip, possibly of Greek origin - his name is Greek - introduced Greeks to Jesus: -

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'

Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. (John 12.20-22)

Philip had been close to Jesus, and yet he had missed a basic point, namely, that 'The Father and I are one.' (John 10.30) Or could it be that John the evangelist put the request into Philip's mouth for the benefit of the reader? The words and the works of Jesus are done in him by the Father.

Jesus reiterates the point, 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me.'

V.11: In case Philip – or the reader - missed it, Jesus says it yet again: 'I am in the Father and the

Father is in me,' and adds, in effect, 'If you don't believe me, then at least believe the works that I do.' Follow the evidence, Philip.

Vv.12-14: Jesus speaks about his going from them. Here and later, he presents it as necessary so that God's work can move on to the next stage, the coming of the Spirit.

In v.12, Jesus makes a huge promise, and repeats it in different wording in vv.13 and 14, and later in 15.7: 'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.' John comes back to this later: -

this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything in accordance with his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. (1 John 4.14-15)

There is an odd logic in that last sentence.

In the two thousand year history of the community of the disciples of Jesus, it is hard to see this borne out. Who among us has done works to equal those of Jesus, much less greater ones? And how many times have Christians asked Jesus for this or that in his name and been met with silence? Innumerable, it would seem. 'No' seems to be a more frequent answer than 'Yes,' so much so that many Christians

have quietly, despairingly, given up on prayer of petition. The “blank cheque” of these verses seems to have so many terms and conditions attached that people do not find it credible.

What are we to make of this? To deny the reality of human experience is not honest. I recall once being asked by a taxi driver, ‘Are you good at praying for things?’ By this, I think he meant, ‘If you pray for things, do you get them?’ I answered, ‘I don’t know whether I’m good at praying or not, but I do it anyway, because Jesus told us to.’ I do not know whether that satisfied him, but I could not say any more. Beyond that, I am agnostic.

Week 5 of Easter

Monday

John 14.21-26 Jesus points to the Holy Spirit

21. ‘They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

22. Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, ‘Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?’

23. Jesus answered him, ‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.’

24. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

25. I have said these things to you while I am still with you.

26. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.'

V.21: Love between Father, Son and disciples are inter-related and inseparable. Keeping God's commandments is evidence that the disciples' love is a commitment more than an emotion. It is about decision and choice more than feeling. The Christian faith is not reducible to morals - though there have been times when we came close to doing that - but observing good morals is evidence of the genuineness of a person's faith. 'All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit he has given us.' (1 John 3.24)

V.22: The question is strange. What does he mean by, 'that you *will* reveal yourself...'? Had Jesus not already done so? And it seems unrelated to the context, unless we are to understand that Judas anticipated, at this stage, before the Passion, that 'God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were

chosen by God as witnesses... ’ (Acts 10.40-41)
That seems most unlikely.

Who was this ‘Judas (not Iscariot)’? A Jude, one of the Twelve, is regarded by some scholars as the author of the Letter of Jude. Others, however, say the contrary because the letter was written as late as 80 or 90 AD, and because, in v.17, the author writes in a way which suggests that he was not an apostle: ‘you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles...’ Another Jude, traditionally held to be a brother of James, was described as the brother of the Lord (Mark 6.3). He is generally understood to be the same person as Thaddaeus of Matthew 10.3, perhaps to distinguish him from this Jude.

Vv.23-24: The word, or message, Jesus has is one that he has received from the Father; this is something he said many times. And the word is inseparable from the Word. Peter Kreeft has put it well, ‘The Word of God is not a “message”; it is a Person. Let us not sell our birthright for a pot of message.’ (*Ecumenical Jihad: Ecumenism and the Culture War*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1996, p.39)

Vv.25-26: Jesus is looking ahead and pointing his disciples in that direction. He is looking past his death and resurrection to the time when he will no longer be with them. Then the Holy Spirit - ‘the spirit of truth’ (John 14.17; 15.26; 16.13) - sent by the Father in his name, will be with them, teaching

and reminding them ‘everything’ about Jesus, including: -

- that he was the fulfilment of the scriptures (John 2.22; 5.39; 12.15-16);
- testifying on his behalf (John 15.26);
- showing how wrong the world was in rejecting him (John 16.8-11);
- that Jesus, like the Spirit, is the truth (John 14.6; 1 John 5.6)

Perhaps especially the Spirit will enable the disciples to understand for the first time who Jesus really was:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16.13-14)

In John, the words of Jesus ‘are spirit and they are life.’ (6.63) The Spirit is the Lord, the giver of life, who energizes believers: -

As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.’

Now he [Jesus] said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7.38-39)

One of the signs of the presence of the Spirit is when there is forgiveness. (John 20.22)

The Holy Spirit is here spoken of as the Advocate, or Helper. This title was also applied to Jesus, 'If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.' (1 John 2.1) The Spirit is sent by Jesus, 'When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father...' (John 15.26; 16.7) He is also described as sent by the Father in Jesus' name. (v.26)

There is an over-lapping of roles between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is nothing to be surprised at: what is said of one may be said of any of the three. And, 'Role... is the original sense of the word *persona*.' (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Inter Insigniores*, 15 October 1976, n.5)

Jesus has first to go before the Spirit can come, 'I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.' (John 16.7)

Week 5 of Easter

Tuesday

John 14.27-31 The gift of peace

27. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

28. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.

29. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

30. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me;

31. but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

This passage brings together several recurring themes of John’s Gospel: -

- Jesus’ union with God his Father and his total acceptance of everything the Father wills;
- “The world” does not understand or accept God;
- Disciples should not be afraid;
- Jesus must go before the Spirit can come;
- Jesus has complete control over his destiny.

V.27: ‘Peace’ – in Hebrew *shalom*, in Arabic *salaam*; the Semitic origin is common to both – was, and is, the traditional Jewish greeting. Jesus uses it

in the form, 'Peace be with you' in John 20.19, 21 and 26, and, in a different setting, in Luke 24.36. In sending out his apostles, he had told them, 'As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.' (Matthew 10.12-13) The expression 'Go in peace' was used in farewells, as in Luke 7.50; 8.48 and Mark 5.34. (It is probably coincidental but each of those is addressed by Jesus to a woman.)

The Hebrew word has a fuller meaning than the English. It suggests completeness, righteousness, being in communion with God and the community, as a result of God's gift.

The peace that Jesus gives and the peace "the world" gives – "the world" understood as that part of humanity that ignores or rejects God - are not the same. The peace offered by the world is often about prosperity, having enough money and the things it can bring, and being untroubled by anything that calls on us to reach beyond our comfort zone or that of our self-interest. It is about a world centred on the self – self-sufficient, self-satisfied and self-explanatory. If God is not the centre of our life, then something else will be, and a likely substitute is the ego. The peace that Jesus offers comes from believing that, no matter what we do, God loves us. 'Jesus' insight into the indiscriminate love of God provides the ultimate key to practically every word the Gospels record.' (Donald Senior C.P., *Jesus: A*

Gospel Portrait, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1992, p.88)

‘Do not be afraid,’ a repeat of John 14.1, is the single most common phrase in the Bible. Richard Rohr, the American Franciscan, states that it occurs 365 times in the Bible, once for every day in the year. Even a slow learner should be able to get the message after so much repetition, but, living as we do in a world – at least in the West - characterized by a culture of suspicion, mistrust and even cynicism, we mostly find it too good to believe and suspend acceptance of it.

Why should we not be afraid when there is so much to be afraid of? – global warming and its consequences, pollution of air and drinking water, the possibility of nuclear annihilation whether by terror or error, the breakdown of marriage and family life, uncontrolled migration, multiple health scares that the media love to batter us with, the growth of religious fundamentalism accompanied by the cruellest atrocities, etc. – the list is as long as one might wish to make it. The dangers are real.

God is not saying, ‘Close your eyes, sing a happy song and pretend the problems are not there.’ He is saying that, in good times or in bad, alive or dead, we are in his hands, and that is a good place to be. Trust, and let go. Do what you can do and don’t worry about what you can’t.

V.28: Jesus had already said more than once that it was necessary for him to go to the Father so that the Spirit would come. The Spirit would reveal all truth to the disciples and that was something for them to look forward to with expectation. When Jesus did ascend to his Father, the disciples 'returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.' (Luke 24.53)

The verse ends with a remarkable statement, short, simple and emphatic: 'The Father is greater than I.' Jesus was not a Greek, distinguishing between his two natures or thinking in terms of the Hypostatic Union. Perhaps he spoke in the spirit that Paul expressed in Philippians: -

Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.
Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance,
he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.
Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (2.5-11)

Jesus' many 'I am' or 'I am he' statements lay claim to equality and union with God, most emphatically perhaps in John 10.30, 'The Father and I are one.' He pre-existed with God, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.' (John 1.1-3) And he prayed for his re-union with God, 'Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.' (John 17.5) The claim he made was understood for what it was: -

Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working.'

For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. (John 5.17-18)

V.29: Jesus is telling the disciples all this so that, when his time to leave comes, they will understand what is happening and not be confused or despondent.

V.30: The time of Satan is drawing close: Jesus' passion is at hand, the hour when Satan seemed to

triumph and Jesus seemed helpless and abandoned by God. But Satan ‘has no power over me.’

V.31a: This repeats Jesus’ frequent profession of his obedience, love and loyalty to God his Father, as, for example: -

‘Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.’ (John 5.19)

‘I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.’ (John 5.30)

‘I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me.’ (John 6.38)

‘I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me.’ (John 12.49-50)

‘If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.’ (John 15.10)

V.31b: This is probably a closing phrase rather than a direction to go anywhere in particular. Or perhaps it means, ‘I know my death is coming and I’m ready for it.’

Week 5 of Easter

Wednesday

John 15.1-8 The vine and the branches

1. I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.
2. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.
3. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.
4. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.
5. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because, apart from me, you can do nothing.
6. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.
7. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.
8. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

The synoptic Gospels use the vine as an image of the kingdom of God, for example, in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard in Matthew 20.1-16, and the parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew

21.33-46 = Mark 12.1-12 = Luke 20.9-19. The fruit of the vine is the Eucharistic sacrament of the New Covenant: 'I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.' (Matthew 26.29 = Mark 14.25 = Luke 22.18)

This image has its origins in the Old Testament: -

- in Jeremiah 2.21 the vine is a symbol of Israel;
- in Isaiah 5.1-7, God says 'I planted you, a choice vine...'
- in Isaiah 27.2-5, Yahweh is the keeper of the vineyard: 'every moment I water it for fear its leaves should fall; night and day I watch over it.'
- in Hosea 10.1, 'Israel was a luxuriant vine, yielding plenty of fruit.'
- in Psalm 80.8-18, 'You brought a vine out of Egypt...'

The overall theme of John 15.1-8 seems to be unity: unity between Jesus the vine, his Father the vine-grower (v.1), and the disciples who are the branches (v.5). The fruit of the vine (v.2) seems to be a life lived like Jesus.

V.1: The unity suggested by the allegory is organic, not administrative or organizational; it is a living relationship. Is it over-loading it to suggest

that the Holy Spirit is the sap that gives the branches life and makes them fruitful?

A vine in winter is dried up and shrivelled-looking. It is difficult to imagine how something so desiccated could ever produce bunches of luscious, juicy grapes. Watching a vine change as the seasons go by is like watching a process of resurrection.

The passage has a eucharistic character, in view of its use of the vine image, its focus on unity, and even its choice of vocabulary, such as the word ‘abide’ in vv.4, 5 and 6 as in John 6.56: ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.’

V.2: Clearly the genuineness of discipleship is measured by the deeds the disciple does. Communion is the characteristic Jesus especially points to here, that is, to be ‘in me,’ a phrase taken up and used many times by Saint Paul.

V.3: The *pruning* of v.2 and the *cleansing* of v.3 come from the same Greek root; they are essentially the same process.

Vv.4-6: Unity with Jesus is what gives life to the Christian; without this, a disciple is nothing. The phrase, ‘apart from me you can do nothing’ needs to be read along with: -

- ‘nothing will be impossible with God’ (Luke 1.37)
- ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible’ (Mark 10.27)
- and, ‘Strive for the greater gifts’ (1 Corinthians 12.31) or ‘Be ambitious for the higher gifts’ in JB, the greatest of which is charity.

Saint Augustine put the choice for the disciple starkly: *Aut vitis aut ignis* – Either the vine or the fire.

V.7 is a problem. It is a huge promise, sweeping in scope, but does not seem to be borne out by experience. (See above under John 14.7-14) When held up to the light of human experience, including that of faith-filled believers who pray with all their hearts, it sounds like a parent saying to a child, ‘Ask for whatever you want and I will give it to you – as long as what you ask for is what I want to give.’

V.8: As with everything that Jesus said and did in John, the extract begins and ends with the Father.

Week 5 of Easter

Thursday

John 15.9-11 Unity between Father, Son and disciples

9. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

10. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

11. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

The focus here, as above in vv.1-8, seems to be on unity. God creates it, between himself and Jesus, between him and us, among us and within us. God the Father's love for Jesus is the model of his love for us.

V.9: Unity is conditional on remaining in Jesus, and his words remaining in us, 'keeping my commandments.' It evokes memories of, 'By their fruits you shall know them...' (Matthew 7.20)

V.10: Keeping the commandments is not the heart of the matter – the Pharisees thought it was – but it is evidence that the relationship is genuine and committed, not simply an emotional flush.

V.11: The joy spoken of is the joy of knowing that you are loved. Pope Paul VI, in his Apostolic Exhortation on Christian Joy of 9 May 1975 (ACTS, Melbourne), wrote: -

Christian joy is the spiritual sharing in the unfathomable joy, both divine and human,

which is in the heart of Jesus Christ glorified.
(II, p.10)

If Jesus radiates such peace, such assurance, such happiness, such availability, it is by reason of the inexpressible love by which we know that he is loved by his Father.... This certitude is inseparable from the consciousness of Jesus.... For Jesus it is not a question of a passing awareness. It is the reverberation in his human consciousness of the love that he has always known as God in the bosom of the Father. (III, p.14)

Joy cannot be dissociated from sharing. In God himself, all is joy because all is giving.
(Conclusion, p.34)

Week 5 of Easter

Friday

John 15.12-17 Love one another as I have loved you

12. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

13. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

14. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

15. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made

known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

16. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

17. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Vv.12-13: Can love be commanded? Clearly, the emotion of love cannot be. But if we look at it at the more fundamental level of a choice or decision, it can be. A person cannot decide to feel the emotion of love, but a person may decide to do loving things or behave in a loving way. ‘To love is to will the good of another,’ said Saint Thomas Aquinas. (Summa Theologiae, I, II, ques.26, art. 4 corp. art.) To *will* means to wish effectively, that is, to choose to do what is for the good of the other. That is a freedom which everyone has. We can decide, or not, to do what is for the good of the other.

Neither here nor elsewhere does Jesus ask us to like one another. Liking is about compatibility of personality. We like some people, we do not like others, and that is neither here nor there. What Jesus asks for here is both wider and deeper than liking: wider, because it reaches out to all humanity, excluding no one; deeper, because it includes those we don’t like. Love enables a person to say, ‘I don’t like X. He irritates me, etc. etc. etc. Despite that, I

will respect him as a human being, act justly towards him, deal with him truthfully, forgive him if he has wronged me, and help him in any way I can.’ That is love. It is the kind of love that Jesus showed, love that was self-sacrificing, even to death on the cross, not only for his friends but for his enemies. That can be commanded, because every person has free will and can choose to do it. A good place to start is by engaging in kind actions, treating others as we would like them to treat us. ‘Always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets.’ (Matthew 7.12)

V.14: As the philosopher said, ‘Dammit! Do it!’ Spare us the promises, the talk and the gushy emotionalism. Just do it. Following Jesus is not simply a matter of faith, such as accepting Jesus as my personal saviour. It means doing what he commands us: ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.’ (Matthew 7.21) Ask people today what they think: is it what a person says or what a person does, that counts most? They will say that it is what a person does that counts. Talk is cheap; action costs.

V.15: (See Sermon 10, Relationships with God: slave, servant, son.) The Russian Orthodox lay theologian, Alexei Khomiakov summarized it well, ‘For the slave, the will of God is a curse; for the servant, it is a law; and for the son it is freedom.’

Where the motive of the slave is fear, and the servant is self-interest, that of the adult son (or friend) is respect, loyalty, generosity, self-giving. We are sons (daughters) of God through faith and baptism.

Being an adult son (or friend) means growing up, being responsible, making choices and taking decisions and being accountable for them - the prodigal son took the wrong decisions, but he remained a son all the same. 'I tell you solemnly, everyone who commits sin is a slave. Now the slave's place in the house is not assured, but the son's place is assured.' (John 8.34-35)

Being an adult son or daughter means having the courage to speak openly, the loyalty to look beyond one's self to the needs of the other, being ready to walk the extra mile, to give without counting the cost.

The son (or daughter) is not *bound* by rules, not because (s)he ignores or disobeys them, but because (s)he goes beyond them. (S)he doesn't say, 'I make my own rules' (the attitude of the adolescent), but 'I make the rules my own' (the attitude of an adult). (S)he assimilates and interiorizes their meaning and purpose, so that, while being faithful to their spirit, (s)he is able to be flexible with the letter... responsibly.

The adult son or daughter is able to think of freedom not only as freedom *from* but also, and more importantly, *for*, e.g. freedom *from* selfishness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency, self-indulgence or a childish refusal to grow up and take responsibility for ourselves to freedom *for* service to others. Maturity means being willing to put the other person first: the twin poles of our life, self or others. This is a call to maturity, 'that maturity which is the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.' (Ephesians 4.13)

Unless like the pagan mystery cults around them, with Jesus and his disciples, there was no inner circle of initiates who had specialized knowledge reserved to a few, leaving the rest on the outside of the circle feeling excluded: 'I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.'

V.16: Unlike the situation prevailing in Jesus' time, where students chose their teacher, it was Jesus who took the initiative in choosing his disciples. For people who say, 'I have chosen Jesus as my personal saviour,' his words here are something to ponder; the initiative is always with God. Commonly enough, man's search for God is, to quote C. S. Lewis' phrase, like the mouse's search for the cat. (*Surprised by Joy: the shape of my early life*, Fontana, London, 1959, pp.181-2) Sometimes we hope fervently that the hound of heaven will not catch up; we prefer God at a distance, safely

removed from us by putting him on a pedestal. Jesus brought that notion down to earth.

This applies to prayer also: ‘We begin to pray, believing that it is our own initiative that compels us to do so. Instead, we learn that it is always God’s initiative within us...’ (Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, edited by Vittorio Messori, translated by Jenny and Martha McPhee, Jonathan Cape, London, 1994, p.17)

V.16: Jesus concludes with a promise as sweeping as he has made elsewhere: ‘the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.’ See also: -

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. (John 14.12-14)

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15.7)

There are many believers who are hurt, and whose faith is deeply challenged, by the seeming unfulfilment of these promises.

V.17: John has funny logic. An example is: -

this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything in accordance with his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. (1 John 4.14-15)

This verse is another example. It represents a different way of thinking, perhaps between the Western mind and that of people brought up in a different tradition.

Whatever the full meaning may be, one part seems clear – Jesus wants us to love one another. What should we say to that? – ‘Lord, it is not complicated enough for me’? That is how we seem to think, much of the time. We have come to assume that, unless something is complicated, it can’t be much good or have much depth in it, so we make simple things complicated. But one of the great blessings of the Christian faith is that one does not have to be an intellectual to follow it. Love is what is required, and the most uninformed, unlettered, ignorant person can do that - and it is sufficient. ‘Love – and do what you like,’ said Saint Augustine. (‘Dilige – et fac quod vis,’ *Tract on the first letter of Saint John*, Tract 7, Chapter 10, paragraph 8, Migne, III, p.2033.)

Week 5 of Easter

Saturday

John 15.18-21 The world will hate you

18. If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.

19. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world - therefore the world hates you.

20. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also.

21. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

The word “world” is used in two different senses in scripture. In one sense, for example, ‘God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son to redeem and save it.’ (John 3.16) ‘I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.’ (John 12.47)

In the other sense, as in the text above, the “world” is also a place at enmity with God, or indifferent, or inward-looking, or self-absorbed, e.g., ‘the world did not know him.’ (John 1.9) The world ‘hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil.’ (John 7.7) The world rejects the Spirit: ‘the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.’ (John 14.17) In John 15.18, Jesus says, ‘If the world hates you, be

aware that it hated me before it hated you.’ In John 16.33, he says, ‘In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!’ In John 17.9, he says, surprisingly, ‘I pray for them; I am not praying for the world.’ The disciples ‘do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.’ (John 17.14, 16)

There is persecution of Christians in the world today, not only in fundamentalist Islamic countries, but also in some secular societies, and in some formerly Christian ones. Indeed, there were more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than in any other.

The former Soviet Union was the most repressive of all regimes in its attitude towards the Christian faith. ‘Historians estimate that 35 million Soviet and East European citizens died at Communist hands - including half of the 260,000 priests and 250 of the 300 bishops belonging to Russia's Orthodox Moscow Patriarchate alone.’ (Jonathan Luxmore, "The Quiet Saints of the Gulag", *The Tablet*, 27 May 2000, p.708) Not all of those were Christians, and those who were did not all die because of hatred of the faith; sometimes the reasons were simply political. ‘At least 33,000 churches and 500 monasteries were destroyed.’ (*The Tablet*, 12 January 2002, p.27)

Mexico, although it has a large Catholic majority, persecuted the church in the nineteen twenties and

thirties under President Calles. (Graham Greene touched on this in his novel, *The Power and the Glory*.) Mexican legislation laid down that every State of the Federation should determine the number of priests authorized to exercise the ministry, in public or private. In the State of Michoacan, one priest was assigned for every 33,000 of the faithful, in the State of Chiapas one for every 60,000, while in Vera Cruz only one priest was permitted for every 100,000 inhabitants.

A much more severe persecution took place in Spain during the civil war from 1936 to 1939. In that war, 13 bishops, 4184 diocesan priests, 2365 male religious and 283 nuns died for the faith. This figure was quoted by Pope John Paul II during a ceremony in Rome during which he declared 233 of them Blessed. (See *The Tablet*, 17 March 2001, p. 389)

In World War II, about 2,000 Catholic priests died in Dachau concentration camp near Munich in the south of Germany. And Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister for Propaganda, said in 1941, when it looked as if Germany would win the war, that, when it was over, one major task which remained for Germany was the destruction of the Catholic Church.

In Albania, 'Five bishops, one hundred and sixty priests, one hundred and thirty nuns, and many lay people died for their faith' in the Communist period. (From Michael Walsh, *John Paul II: a biography*,

HarperCollins, London, 1994, p.266) In 1967, for example, a priest was executed for baptizing a child.

Between 1994 and 1998, 499 Catholic priests, religious brothers and sisters were murdered in various countries around the world. (*Mondo e Missione*, quoted in *The Far East*, May/June 1999)

(The organization, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, publishes regular reports on the persecution - with varying degrees of severity - of Christians in 2005 in as many as seventeen countries, among them Sudan, Egypt, China, Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Lao, Indonesia, East Timor, Bhutan, Guatemala. For more information, read Robert Royal, *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century: a comprehensive world history*, Crossroad Publishing Company, USA, 2000.)

That is to be expected. If there were no persecution of Christians anywhere, it would probably mean that we were not being faithful to Christ and had accommodated ourselves to prevailing standards and attitudes.

There are always hard choices to be made: between good and evil, between light and darkness. It is good that we have enemies in high places.

The dividing line between good and evil is not off out there somewhere; it runs through every human heart. The struggle is in ourselves to begin with. We

should not assume that we are above all that, as if the struggle is only for others. Human beings have an astonishing capacity for self-deception, and we may feel that all is well with us, when we have simply settled for easy or lazy compromises, and are cruising along in cloud-cuckoo land, unaware of what's going on within ourselves.

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truths,
from the laziness that is content with half-truth,
from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
O God of truth, deliver us. (Anonymous)

In this passage, Jesus explicitly links the fate of Christians with his own: as for Christ, so also for the Christian.

Week 6 of Easter

Monday

John 15.26-16.4 Persecution will come

26. When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.

27. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

1. I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling.

2. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God.

3. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me.

4. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

Vv.26-27: Jesus will send the Spirit to strengthen the apostles so that they will be able to testify about

him. This indeed was to be the case. The apostles, so demoralized and frightened at the time of the passion, become courageous witnesses to Jesus after Pentecost. They continued to be so in many countries until their death. These uneducated men, often muddled and missing the point of what Jesus taught, had the courage to go before the highest religious authorities and speak in the name of Jesus: ‘The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of Jesus with great power.’ (Acts 4.33) This was to be the key feature of an apostle, that they were eye-witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

16.1-4: But Jesus forewarns them of hard times to come. He wants them to know what is coming so that it will not take them by surprise when it happens. (vv.1, 4) They would be put out of the synagogue (v.2) – though there were degrees of excommunication before the final break between Christians and the synagogue came only several decades later. One of those who was most enthusiastic in doing this was Saul, the later Paul: -

I myself once thought that I had to do many things against the name of Jesus the Nazarene, and I did so in Jerusalem. I imprisoned many of the holy ones with the authorization I received from the chief priests, and when they were to be put to death I cast my vote against them. Many times, in synagogue after synagogue, I punished them in an attempt to force them to blaspheme; I was so enraged against them that I

pursued them even to foreign cities. (Acts 26.9-11)

But that was not the whole picture – indeed, far from it.

It was not until about the year 100 that the Jewish and Christian communities began to go separate ways. Before that, the early Christian community spread in the east of the Roman Empire under the protection of laws enacted for Jews. The empire, for political reasons, took an open attitude to local religious beliefs, but the Jewish faith was different from others. The God of the Jews was not a national God; he made universal claims and would not co-exist along with the many other gods of the empire. For its part, the empire, faced by the refusal of Jews to compromise on this point, made special provision for them in its laws. This did not threaten the empire's unity because Jews were few in number. To the Roman authorities, Christians were difficult to distinguish from Jews. In the early years of the Christian community, it was the "Jewishness" of Christians which saved them from the wrath of the empire that was later to hit them with force. It was only later that the differences between Jew and Christian became more apparent. After the destruction of the temple, Christians were anxious that the empire should see them as different from Jews. In effect, they were saying to the Romans, 'We're Christians; we're not those Jews who gave you so much trouble by revolting against you in

Palestine between 66 and 70.’ In Luke’s Gospel - Luke was a Gentile – there is a clear effort to portray the Romans in a good light, while in John, probably written later, “the Jews” becomes almost a derogatory term.

What is the reason for all this? V.3 explains that, ‘they [the Jews] will do this because they have not known the Father or me.’

Week 6 of Easter

Tuesday

John 16.5-11 Jesus triumphs over the world

5. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’

6. But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.

7. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

8. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment:

9. about sin, because they do not believe in me;

10. about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer;

11. about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

V.5: The disciples had in fact asked twice already:

Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, where are you going?’ (John 13.36)

Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ (John 14.5)

V.6: The disciples felt sad at the thought of Jesus leaving them. Strong bonds of affection had grown between them during their time together and they could not but feel a sense of loss at the thought of his being with them no more. But, ‘Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.’ (John 13.2) He had earlier said something which might have added to their confusion: ‘You heard me say to you, “I am going away, and I am coming to you.” If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.’ (John 14.28) What did he mean by ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you’? Is he saying that the Spirit is he under another form?

V.7: Jesus said that unless he returned to the Father, the Spirit could not come. It is difficult to understand this, unless it is Jesus who sends the Spirit: ‘if I go, I will send him to you,’ though, in 14.26, it is the Father who sends the Spirit, ‘the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name...’ In John 7.39, the coming of the Spirit seems to require that Jesus first be glorified: ‘he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him

were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given because Jesus was not yet glorified.’ The Spirit had descended on Jesus himself at his baptism (Matthew 3.16; Mark 1.10; Luke 3.22 and John 1.33) – indeed, everything he did was ‘in the Spirit’- but the disciples had still to await the Spirit.

Vv.8-11: The Spirit will enable the disciples to understand what had been closed to them before, especially about who Jesus really was.

Here ‘the world’ means that part of it that is at enmity with God. It is as if Jesus sees much of the world as ruled by Satan: ‘the rule of this world is coming. He has no power over me...’ (John 14.30), and ‘Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.’ (John 12.31) Jesus sees the world as caught in a struggle between himself and Satan, between good and evil: ‘All who do evil hate the light and do not come into the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.’ (John 3.20) Similarly, the world cannot receive ‘the Spirit of truth... because it neither sees him nor knows him.’ (John 14.17) In the capture, trial, torture and execution of Jesus, Satan seemed to triumph. But, in the resurrection, all that is overthrown, and Jesus emerges as victor.

The world has already condemned Jesus: -

‘We know that this man [Jesus] is a sinner.’
(John 9.24);

‘If this man [Jesus] were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.’ (John 18.30);

‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.’ (John 19.7)

However, the sin is not with Jesus, but with the world: -

‘Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?’ (John 8.46)

‘Those who believe in him [Jesus] are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’ (John 3.18-21)

‘Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.’ (John 3.36)

‘I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.’ (John 8.24)

‘Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ (John 12.31-32)

‘If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also.

If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.

It was to fulfil the word that is written in their law, "They hated me without a cause." (John 15.22-25)

Jesus presents this as being like a trial between him and the world. The resurrection is his vindication, the evidence that he was what he claimed to be, the Son of God: ‘What if you were to see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?’ (John 6.62) After his resurrection, he has to make a break and return to the Father, ‘Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.”’ (John 20.17) A conclusion is in John 16.33: ‘I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!’

Week 6 of Easter

Wednesday

John 16.12-15 The Spirit of truth will give all truth

12. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

13. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

14. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

15. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

A common thread running through the Easter readings from John's Gospel is that of unity between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the binding force between them is love. There is constant interaction between them.

The three persons of the Trinity are equal but distinct. In them, equality is not sameness or identity. (A point that was lost sight of in the 2015 debate on the referendum on same sex marriages is that equality is not sameness.) Wouldn't life be dull if we were all the same? Perhaps the most obvious fact about human beings is that we are *not* all the same; not even identical twins are identical. By analogy, the Trinity is meant to offer a pattern for human relationships, where persons are equal but

distinct, and live in harmony without losing their individuality. It offers a view of relationships without one-upmanship, status-seeking or the pursuit of ego – that is how human relationships are meant to be. It is about unity in diversity, about distinctiveness not leading to division, about equality achieved through mutual self-giving, not through standardization.

V.12: The apostles had shown themselves to be pretty uncomprehending, even after the resurrection. For example, even then they had asked, ‘Will you now restore the kingdom to Israel?’ (Acts 1.6)

Vv.13-15: Father, Son and Spirit all give the one revelation of truth. The Father gives the revelation to Jesus, who communicates it to the world. It is brought to completion by the Holy Spirit, who will give the disciples understanding so that they will know the full truth about who Jesus was. This brings glory to the Father and the Son. The revelation is the Father’s work, and everything Jesus has is from him:

- ‘The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands.’ (John 3.35)
- ‘The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son.’ (John 5.22)
- ‘Just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.’ (John 5.26)

- ‘Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God...’ (John 13.3)
- ‘since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.’ (John 17.2)

A little later, Jesus said to his Father, ‘I glorified you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.’ (John 17.4)

A general feature of these readings is that they look forward to Pentecost, to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Week 6 of Easter

Thursday

John 16.16-20 Jesus will go and will return

16. Jesus said, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.’

17. Then some of his disciples said to one another, ‘What does he mean by saying to us, "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me"; and "Because I am going to the Father"?’

18. They said, ‘What does he mean by this ‘a little while’? ‘We do not know what he is talking about.’

19. Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, ‘Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me”?’

20. Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.’

The phrase ‘a little while’ occurs seven times in this short passage. There must be a point to its reiteration.

V.16: It seems that Jesus here was referring to his upcoming death and resurrection. For a little while the disciples would no longer see him, because he would be in the tomb. Then they would see him again after his resurrection, but only for a little while. Some scholars say that the resurrection and ascension took place on the same day. Even if the interlude between one and the other was forty days, as the liturgy suggests, that could still be reckoned a little while.

Vv.17-18: The disciples did not know to what he was referring and discussed it among themselves, but were perhaps afraid to ask him. That was not uncommonly the case. In Mark 2.6-12, Jesus asks aloud the silent question of his hearers and deals with it. In Mark 8.14-21, he seems annoyed by his disciples’ question and, in reply, fires a volley at

them that must have left them reeling. In Mark 9.32, ‘they did not understand what he said and were afraid to ask him.’ (See also Luke 9.45)

Jesus had already said very much the same thing at other times, though John’s chronology cannot be taken as definitive. In John 7.33, Jesus says, ‘I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me,’ and, in 14.19, ‘In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me...’ Was he simply helping to prepare the disciples for the coming loss they would experience and which they had failed to understand despite his speaking of it many times?

Vv.19-20: Jesus anticipates their unspoken question and answers it. The world will rejoice at Jesus’ death while they will be in sorrow. But when he rises from death, the roles will be reversed.

Week 6 of Easter

Friday

John 16.20-23a The disciples’ sorrow will turn to joy

20. Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.

21. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the pain because of the joy of having brought a child into the world.

22. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

23a. On that day you will ask me no more questions.

From their position in John's Gospel, chapters 14-17 would seem to have their place some time in or around the Last Supper. But, from their content, they would seem, at least partly, to come from a time after the resurrection; they make more sense in that setting. The passage in vv.16-23, however, seems to relate to a time before his Passion.

Vv.20-22: Jesus appears to say that the powers of evil will rejoice at his death, seeing it as their victory over him, believing that they had finally seen him off in defeat. But of course his resurrection changed all that.

At the time of Jesus' passion, the apostles had two powerful and seemingly contradictory experiences. The first was of Jesus as a man chosen by God in a way unique in human history; they had heard his teaching and seen his many signs and wonders, such as raising the dead. They had seen him in communion with God his Father, of whom he had said, 'I am not alone for the Father is with me.' (John 16.32) The second experience was one of seeing Jesus humiliated, beaten, scourged, and killed like a criminal, with God doing nothing to stop it, but abandoning him into the hands of his enemies.

Jesus had said, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matthew 27.46)

They saw Jesus as a man chosen and sent by God, but also, seemingly, abandoned and rejected by God. How could both be true? They must have felt confusion and bewilderment, a collapse of morale. Maybe they even wondered if they were going insane, if the whole thing were not a delusion. To see them as cowards who ran away when the going got tough is surely unfair. They did not know what to make of the situation, they could not understand it and that left them baffled, not knowing what to do or how to make sense of anything. Small wonder that they were unable to take a stand!

V.21: But the despair which they felt at Jesus’ capture, ill-treatment, condemnation, and death was turned into joy at his resurrection. Jesus uses the analogy of a woman who suffers pain in childbirth but who forgets the pain when her child is born. Her pain is turned to joy. The disciples’ pain at Jesus’ passion and death becomes overwhelming joy at seeing him among them again, whole and entire. This entire passage, vv.16-23, is characterized by a note of joy.

It is noticeable too that, in all this, Jesus is thinking, not of himself, but of the disciples.

V.23: Jesus seems to be saying that it will be a relief to him when the disciples stop asking

questions! (See above under John 16.16-20.) Or does it mean that everything will be so clear that they will not need to ask questions? In John 21.12, they were invited by Jesus to breakfast, but ‘none of them dared to ask him “Who are you?”’ Interestingly, when they did later ask him questions, they were met with a rebuff: ‘When Peter saw him [John], he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!”’ (John 21.21-22) And, in Acts 1.6-7, when they again asked a question, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?’ they were also rebuffed, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority...’

It is difficult to understand what this is about. Question-and-answer is a well-recognized learning process. But, of course, it must be acknowledged that many of the questions put to Jesus in the Gospels were intended to trick or trap him. They were intended, not to elicit the truth, but to score debating points. A person would grow tired of that very quickly. The disciples, however, questioned him in good faith. Was Jesus, in effect, saying to them, ‘Don’t try to understand with your heads. Just live the experience when it comes’?

Week 6 of Easter
Saturday

John 16.23b-28 Jesus came from God and returns to him

23b. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.

24. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

25. I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father.

26. On that day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf;

27. for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

28. I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father.

V.23b: This phrase is introduced by ‘very truly,’ an expression indicating something coming from Jesus himself as a priority. It is used twenty-five times in John’s Gospel, in each case introducing a formal pronouncement of special significance.

Here it introduces a generous and sweeping promise on the part of Jesus, one reinforced in the following verse, ‘Ask and you will receive...’ In the light of human experience, it is difficult not to question this. Is it verified by the experience of life?

Unanswered prayer raises difficulties, and thinkers like C. S. Lewis and Anthony Bloom, among others, have given careful thought to it. In the case of the former, if I remember rightly, he acknowledged simply that he did not know the answer to the conundrum.

V.24: By implying that the disciples are now able to ask in his name – see v.26 also – Jesus is putting himself on a par with God the Father. This is part of a pattern throughout the Gospels, but especially in John's. It is true also of Jesus' teaching and miracles: what is most important in them is what they say about him.

V.25: Jesus says that, from here on, he will speak plainly and not in figures of speech. A little later, in vv.29-30, the disciples say,

Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God.

Mark says that Jesus did not speak to the disciples except in parables, but explained everything to them in private. (See 4.34) Yet they – and we! – continue to have difficulty understanding what he was saying.

V.26: 'On that day' probably refers to the same time as 'the hour' in v.25. When is it? Is it the time

of his resurrection, or is this passage already set in a post-resurrection period? Is it a reference to Pentecost? It is not easy to know what is meant by it.

V.27: These difficult questions are relieved by the simple phrase ‘the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.’ It comes down to love, and that is a relief. Anyone can love, even those who do not understand.

V.28 is mercifully understandable.

Week 7 of Easter

Monday

John 16.29-33 The disciples say they understand

29. His disciples said, ‘Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech!’

30. Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God.’

31. Jesus answered them, ‘Do you now believe?’

32. The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me.

33. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!’

Vv.29-30: Aristotle said that the wise are those who know that they do not know. There is something improbable about the disciples now, suddenly, out of the blue, claiming to understand all the things they had previously not understood. In v.18 they had said, 'We do not know what he is talking about.'

What has changed? They say they now believe Jesus came from God because he knows all things and does not need to have anyone question him. That is not easy to understand. What has brought about this change on their part? Was it seeing the miracles of the loaves and fishes and walking on the water? Had they not seen other miracles before?

V.31: Jesus sounds skeptical about their new frame of mind.

V.32: He tells them that they will soon be scattered, abandoning him. Zechariah had written, 'Strike the shepherd that the sheep may be dispersed...' (13.7) And the Psalmist likewise, 'I looked in vain for compassion, for consolers; not one could I find.' (68.21b) But, even though the disciples will abandon him, the Father will not. Jesus had also said, 'the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone...' (John 8.29) (In the JB translation, John 8.16 is almost identical to 16.32.)

V.33: Jesus wants them to trust in him completely and thereby find peace. The world will persecute

them – most of them, according to tradition, died martyrs’ deaths – but he calls them to courage, saying, ‘I have conquered the world.’ The world, here but not everywhere in the Gospels, understood as a place of hostility to God, does not know Jesus: ‘He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.’ (John 1.10) This passage echoes his earlier statement, ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.’ (John 14.27) Jesus sees his mission as a struggle between his spirit and that of the world, under its own ruler: ‘Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out’ (John 12.31), and, ‘the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me.’ (John 14.30)

This passage, like others in chapters 14-17, is ambiguous regarding its location in time. One phrase, v.32, suggest it comes from before the Passion; another, v.33b, from afterwards. The Gospel was written many years, perhaps even decades, after the events it describes, so considerations of before and after are fluid. Memory is not so precise.

Week 7 of Easter

Tuesday

John 17.1-11a Jesus rejoices in his union with God

1. After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you,
2. since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.
3. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.
4. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.
5. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.
6. I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.
7. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;
8. for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.
9. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.
10. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.
- 11a. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.’

Where was this great prayer spoken? When? – before or after the Resurrection? Who was present at the time? Did Jesus say it or sing it? We don't know. But it is addressed to God the Father, as Jesus characteristically did in his prayers.

The dominant characteristic of this passage is one of a quiet, joyous celebration of unity between Son and Father. Mutuality runs all through it. A secondary one is that of his care for those who believe in him.

V.1: 'up to heaven' is an accommodation to the understanding or imagery of the time. God isn't "up" any more than down, or left or right or in or out. God exists outside of considerations of space and time; he is their creator. Humans cannot think outside of such dimensions, but to God they are of no consequence.

All things are in God, and couldn't not be if they were to be at all.

'The hour has come.' This seems to suggest that the moment of his Passion is at hand. But, in v.4, he speaks as if he has finished the work the Father gave him to do; he could hardly have said that before the Passion.

V.2: Jesus' care is for those given to him, the faithful ones to whom he will give the gift of eternal life. 'Eternal life' means essentially life in union

with God, more than life without end. The Greek word *aionios* implies this.

V.3: Eternal life is to know God and Jesus. To ‘know’ means to experience, not simply to have knowledge of or information about; it is experiential more than conceptual, as in the following: -

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. (John 10.14-15)

On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. (John 14.20)

Vv.4-5: There is mutual glorification between Son and Father. That may sound inward-looking or even incestuous, but it can be said that if God knew of anything more worthy of glorification than himself he would give it all his glory. The essence of “glory” is to recognize divinity.

There is here a clear implication of Jesus’ pre-existence with the Father before the Incarnation. It is another way of saying, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ (John 1.1)

V.6a: The ‘name’ of God (Hebrew *Hashem*) is synonymous with the reality of God. Jews often use the word Hashem, or, in English, the Name, instead

of the word God (which, out of reverence, they commonly spell G-d.) Similarly, ‘hallowed by your name’ means ‘may you be held holy.’

This fuller meaning of ‘the name’ is found also in:

‘Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ (John 12.28)

‘I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’ (John 17.26)

V.6b-8: Jesus rejoices in the fidelity of his chosen ones. They have accepted him as the One sent by God, and he has passed on God’s word to them (see v.16.30 above).

V.9: Jesus prays on their behalf, not on behalf of ‘the world.’ The world is a place of hostility to God – see note under 16.33 above. But the term also has another meaning: -

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3.16-17)

V.10: There is no competitiveness between Father and Son. Mutual self-giving love is the heart of their relationship.

V.11: Jesus is leaving the world, but his thoughts are with his disciples who are in it, and they are thoughts of great affection. Jesus and the community of faith he called into being are inseparable.

The full passage, up to v.26, is a prayer, and one with many allusions to the Our Father. With its lyrical beauty, it may have enjoyed liturgical use in the early Christian community.

Week 7 of Easter

Wednesday

John 17.11b-19 Jesus prays for his disciples

11b. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

12. While I was with them, I protected in your name those whom you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.

13. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

14. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

15. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.
16. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.
17. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.
18. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.
19. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

This passage continues the great prayer of Jesus to God his Father, here focussing on his disciples and his love for them. Unity between Jesus and God the Father, a recurring theme throughout John's Gospel, is clearly evident here.

V.11b: The unity of faithful disciples and Jesus reflects the unity that exists between Father and Son.

Vv.12-13: Reflecting that his time on earth is drawing to a close, Jesus commends the disciples to his Father's care, just as he had cared for them while he was with them. Jesus expresses no anxiety but rather joy that the unity between his Father and himself also exists between himself and his disciples.

V.14: Jesus has given the disciples not *his* word, but the Father's. It is noticeable, especially in John, how the Father is Jesus' constant reference point.

Nowhere is he asserting himself against the Father; quite the contrary: -

‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me.’
(John 4.34)

‘I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.’
(John 6.38)

‘I do only the things that please him.’ (John 8.29)

‘The Father and I are one.’ (John 10.30)

‘The world has hated them...’ is a strong phrase. There are other similar examples of the word *hate* being used to express what may not, in reality, be such a dramatic contrast. For example: -

‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.’ (Luke 14.26)

‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.’ (Matthew 6.24)

Vv.15-16: The disciples’ place is in the world, so Jesus does not ask God to remove them from it to a safe haven, but, instead, to protect them from evil. (The similarity to the final phrase of the Our Father is evident.) There is a poster which proclaims that, ‘Ships are safe in a harbour, but that’s not what ships

are for.’ Similarly, the disciples are to engage with the world, to enter into it, challenge it and take it by storm, not to take refuge in, for example, a spirituality of disengagement – ‘It will be all the same in the next life...’ ‘The only thing that matters is to get to heaven,’ etc. Christianity is a religion of incarnation, and Christian spirituality must always reflect this. A cop-out is a cop-out, whether or not it cloaks itself in “piety.”

V.17: ‘Sanctify them in the truth.’ It is truly a terrible thing to say, but there are times when the church’s leadership does not seem to be too concerned about the truth. It seems more interested in protecting the status quo, or vested ecclesiastical interests, or a pretended or bogus continuity in doctrine where, in reality, there has been change, an act of discontinuity necessitated by a better or wider understanding of a situation. When a most senior church official can say – and it has been said – ‘Sometimes the church finds it necessary, in the interests of *communio* (or prudence), to set aside the demands of natural justice,’ that is an act of infidelity to truth. It is particularly wrong when this statement is defended by other church officials in deference to the higher authority of the one who made it or to the demands of practicality. (See John 11.49-50)

There is a similar ambiguity – stronger words could be used – in the canonization of some whose manner of life was, in ways, far from Christian. The

first requirement for holiness is to live the Christian life in a manner which is an example to the faithful. How could anyone consider as saints those who urged the killing of heretics, witches, Jews or homosexuals? They are not few in number and they have places of honour in the calendar of the saints. Yet the act of canonization is considered by the church's leadership to involve the exercise of papal infallibility. And what of the statement by a pope in an encyclical letter that Saint Cyril of Alexandria lived 'a spotless life' when it is clear that he used mob violence against his rivals in the church hierarchy, perhaps murder against the woman philosopher Hypatia, and instigated a pogrom against Jews in which several thousand were killed?

Where is the truth in those canonizations, in our time and in earlier generations, which are motivated by considerations of politics, either civil or ecclesiastical? It is not difficult to find such instances; they discredit the process of canonization and undermine the credibility of those responsible for it.

A much milder, even comical, form of ecclesiastical infidelity to truth is when a preacher, on the occasion of a funeral, praises the deceased for precisely those qualities which everyone who knew her/him knows s/he did *not* exhibit.

V.18: The disciples are to go into the world. If the traditions about the apostles are to be believed, they did just that.

V.19: ‘I sanctify – “consecrate” in JB – myself... in truth’ For John, truth was not a philosophical abstraction, not an ‘*adequatio rei et intellectus*,’ ‘conformity between the intellect and reality.’ (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.16.1) For Greeks, truth was to be sought by being detached, impersonal and dispassionate. For John, truth was the reality of God as revealed in Jesus. He has Jesus say, ‘I am the... truth.’ (14.6) Only God is and knows the truth. Anything human is, at best, an approximation. In John, truth is personal – indeed, a person; it was a present reality – Jesus; and it is something to be passionate about. It is offered to humanity through Jesus, and it saves: ‘The truth will make you free.’ (John 8.32)

Week 7 of Easter

Thursday

John 17.20-26 May they all be one

20. I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,

21. that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

22. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,

23. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

24. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

25. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me.

26. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

What is God's will? We can say with certainty that an undivided humanity is part of it: 'May they all be one.' It runs throughout this passage.

Vv.20-21: Jesus is looking beyond his disciples to those who will come to believe through them. He prays for unity among them as a witness in a divided world. His concern is for unity, not uniformity; he is not against diversity or difference but against division.

How far are Christians from this unity! Indeed, one of the major obstacles which religions put in the way of unbelievers, at least some of whom are open to belief or would like to believe, is that religion seems divisive. Sometimes it is exploited for political

purposes and gets a level of blame which it does not deserve. But, in other cases, it is simply divisive on its own account. As a sample from recent times, one can think of Northern Ireland 1968-1998, the Balkans in the early Nineties, Sunni and Shia Muslims today in many parts of the world, and, perennially, Christians in Jerusalem. The world would find religious belief more persuasive if it was seen as unitive rather than divisive. In Sri Lanka in the Seventies, Christians exercised a successful mediating role between Tamils and Sinhalese, and won credit for doing so. (Unfortunately, it did not last.)

Vv.22-23: For Jesus, unity is clearly indivisible: it is meant to be between all – the Father, the Son and the disciples, and the door is open to those who are not yet disciples.

Vv.24-26: Jesus looks to the future, thinking of those yet to come. He looks forward to a time when all will be one. The entire passage may be summed up in one word: love.

Week 7 of Easter

Friday

John 21.21.15-19 Jesus and Peter

15. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you

know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’

16. A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’

17. He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’

18. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’

19. (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

V.15: We do not often think of Jesus as a cook, but that is what he is here. When the disciples came ashore from their fishing trip, ‘they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.”’ (vv.9-10) And then he served it: ‘Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.’ (v.13) Then, when the breakfast was over, he questions Simon Peter.

Vv.16-17: Jesus asks, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ What does the question mean? Does it mean, ‘Do you love me more than you love these?’ or does it mean, ‘Do you love me more than these others do?’ As the translation stands, it could be either, (though the JB prefers the latter), but the former seems the more likely: Simon knows how much he loves Jesus and how much he loves his fellow disciples; he could not know how much the disciples love Jesus.

In our culture a man would be embarrassed to be asked such a question by another man, unless they were gay, and there is no hint in the Gospels that either Jesus or Simon Peter were. But that embarrassment is probably evidence of a limitation in our culture rather than in theirs. Western males are a pretty repressed bunch when it comes to disclosure of emotion – except anger, which is the permitted male emotion. Other cultures are less inhibited and displays of affection between males pass unnoticed.

John is nothing if not a careful writer, and, like the other Gospel writers, has no hesitation in editing material to suit his purpose. Like them, he is not writing a history or a biography, but a Gospel. It is clear that he is here creating a scene with an agenda. There are hints leading up to it. In v.9, there was mention of bread (loaves) and fishes. There is also a charcoal fire, which evokes memories of John 18.18:

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Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

This was just prior to his betrayal of Jesus.

John has an eye for details, and a purpose in including them. Then, in v.13, the Eucharistic association of loaves and fishes is extended, with Jesus doing as he did in the Eucharistic institution narratives: ‘Jesus took the bread and gave it to them.’ (See Matthew 26.26; Mark 14.22; Luke 22.19) John is suggesting links, dropping hints, creating resonances; he is not arguing a point or pressing an argument. He wants to draw readers into the process so that they see it for themselves. (There probably is some significance in the number 153 in v.11 also, but I don’t see it.)

The three-fold question put by Jesus to Peter about his love for him is often seen as, so to speak, giving Peter the opportunity of retracting his earlier threefold denial of Jesus. (See John 18.15-18 and 25-27) I find it hard to believe that Jesus did this, and think it may have been an editorial piece by John. As the text stands, Jesus appears to rub Peter’s nose in it, reminding him, to what must have been his great embarrassment and humiliation, of his failings. More than once, Jesus was hard on Peter, but I cannot see

him doing something like this; it seems unworthy of him. It could only have been said by someone who enjoyed rubbing it in – after all, who likes to be reminded, even once, of their shortcomings? But three times? There is something cruel about it, and that was not the way of Jesus. He could be tough, but his toughness was loving, not hurtful or humiliating.

Peter was hurt by it (v.17), and that was not surprising. To be asked once, ‘Do you love me?’ could be hurtful if it suggested that the questioner doubted it. To be asked three times, despite an effusively positive answer each time, could not have been anything other than hurtful.

On each occasion, Jesus responded to Peter by saying, ‘Feed my lambs (v.15), or sheep (vv.16, 17).’ There is probably no difference between these two. What did Jesus mean? Was it, ‘Look after the others’? Probably.

Vv.18-19: Jesus appears to foretell Peter’s death by execution.

Verse 19 concludes with, ‘Follow me,’ and it is repeated in v.22b. This also may have reminded Peter of an earlier dialogue with Jesus: -

Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, where are you going?’ Jesus answered, ‘Where I am going,

you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward.’

Peter said to him, ‘Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.’

Jesus answered, ‘Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.’
(John 13.36-38)

If the ‘Follow me’ was a challenge to Peter to purge himself of his earlier failures, by saying to him, as it were, ‘Earlier on you talked about following me but did not do it; now is the time to actually do it,’ that would seem, as in the questions about love, to pour salt in Peter’s wounds, to be a somewhat nasty, almost underhand or even gleeful, way of giving him a dig under the belt. There is a hint of the bully about it. You feel like saying, ‘Leave off! Can’t you see he’s sorry! You don’t need to keep humiliating him about it!’ No; this was not the way of Jesus; it shows another hand. It has to be John’s; no other evangelist has it.

So, what point was John making? His Gospel was written perhaps some time between 70 and 100 AD, that is to say, four to seven decades after the events it describes. The *Jerusalem Bible* says, ‘the gospel as we have it may well have been edited and published later [than John’s death], probably by John’s disciples.’ (Introduction to Saint John, p.144) It was written for an existing, active Christian community with a regular liturgical life. It was far from blowing

the trumpet for any Petrine primacy. Indeed, its depiction of Peter being frequently rebuked or snubbed by Jesus – there was still one more to come, in v.22 – could make sense if there were signs of incipient self-aggrandizement by Peter’s successors, in so far as these latter may be determined at such an early stage.

Week 7 of Easter

Saturday

John 21.20-25 Jesus and the beloved disciple

20. Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, ‘Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?’

21. When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about him?’

22. Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!’

23. So the rumour spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?’

24. This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.

25. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them was written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Vv.20-22: Reading these verses, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Jesus did not like people asking him questions. This is surprising as rabbinic tradition encouraged it.

The disciples (and others) often seemed afraid to ask him a question. In Mark 2.6-12, Jesus asks aloud the silent question of his hearers and deals with it. In Mark 8.14-21, he seems thoroughly annoyed by his disciples' question. and, in reply, fires a volley at them that must have left them reeling. In Mark 9.32, 'they did not understand what he said and were afraid to ask him.' After another encounter, a friendly one in which Jesus commends his questioner, Mark says, surprisingly, that, 'After that, no one dared to question him any more.' (12.34)

In John 14.8-9, Philip irritates Jesus by a foolish question. In John 16.16-19, the disciples discuss a question among themselves, but did not ask him about it; it was he who took the initiative in asking the question for them. (v.19) Here, Peter, not for the first time, was rebuked sharply by Jesus. Was it that Jesus didn't suffer fools gladly?

Acts 1.6-7 reports a question put by the disciples at the time of Jesus' ascension which suggests that, even then, they did not understand his mission: 'Lord, has the time come? Are you going to restore

the kingdom to Israel?’ And he replied, ‘It is not for you to know...’ Is there a sense of anticipated relief in Jesus saying in John 16.23, ‘When that day comes [the day of his return] you will not ask me any more questions.’

The American Franciscan, Richard Rohr, points out that, ‘He [Jesus] directly answers only three of the 183 questions that are asked of him in the four Gospels!’ (*Adam’s Return: the Five Promises of Male Initiation*, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 2004, p.112)

However, with respect to the above, it must be borne in mind that many, perhaps even most, of the questions put to Jesus were disingenuous; they were a trap, intended not to elicit the truth but to score debating points. They represented the politicization of issues rather than a desire to examine them on their merits. It was as if the questioners were saying to themselves, ‘Let’s try this out on him and see if we can catch him out,’ or ‘Let’s float this idea and see how it runs.’ It is no wonder that Jesus had little patience with such attitudes.

Vv.24-25: these are one of two endings to John’s Gospel. The other is in 20.30-31: -

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

In each ending, the writer, who is possibly another disciple, or a group of them, or maybe even the remembered Twelve – “we” in v.24 - testifies that John is telling the truth.

He adds that he cannot write all that Jesus said and did, because ‘if every one of them was written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.’ (v.25) This may be a note by an editor.

The purpose of the book is explained: ‘these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.’ (v.31) That is the conclusion to which John’s Gospel leads.

“Messiah” was not a divine title, but “Son of God,” as used in the New Testament, was a means by which the early Christian community expressed its faith in the absolutely unique character of Jesus. (John L. McKenzie) For John, the Son pre-existed with the Father before all time, and the one who believes in him ‘will have life in his name.’ (v.31) You could say that John ends where he began, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ (1.1)

Week 7, Monday

Mark 9.14-29 Jesus heals a boy who was possessed

14. When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them.

15. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him.

16. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?'

17. Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak;

18. and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.'

19. He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.'

20. And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.

21. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood.

22. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.'

23. Jesus said to him, 'If you are able! - All things can be done for the one who believes.'
24. Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'
25. When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!'
26. After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.'
27. But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.
28. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?'
29. He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 17.14-21 and Luke 9.37-43a.

As he has previously done, Mark finds or creates links between Jesus and Moses: see 1.12-13; 6.30-44; 9.2-8. Here he builds into the narrative similarities between Jesus and Moses in Exodus 34.29-31. Both descended from a mountain: 'As they were coming down the mountain,' and, 'Moses came down from Mount Sinai.' Some physical change had taken place in them which evoked surprise from people: 'When the whole crowd saw

him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him,' and, 'the skin of his [Moses'] face shone because he had been talking with God.' Both find unease between their followers and the people: 'When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them,' and 'the Israelites... were afraid to come near him.' Both experience difficulty with the people: 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I put up with you?' and Moses had to call them to come to him because they were afraid.

In contrast to earlier healings (see Mark 7.33 and 8.23), this one takes place in public. The description in vv.18, 20, 21, 22, 26 of the boy's illness, with the exception of his going rigid (v.18), is a description of *grand mal* epilepsy. (See notes to Mark 1.21-28 above.)

When the boy's father says, in v.22, 'if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us', he speaks for any parent who has seen the suffering of a child, tried for help everywhere, failed to find it, and, in desperation, seizes with great intensity on the last chance. Jesus, in reply, takes up the man's opening phrase, 'If you are able!' Was he offended? The wording sounds sarcastic. Was he saying, 'Do you doubt that I can do this?'

Nonetheless he says, 'All things can be done for the one who believes.' The father's reply was

magnificent, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ It was honest, not saying more than he could truthfully say. He had some faith; without it, he would not have come to Jesus in the first place. But he wasn’t sure, and who could blame him? Having being disappointed by Jesus’ disciples (v.18), how could he be sure of Jesus himself? So the father did what he could, and asked for help with what he couldn’t. In doing so, he speaks for all humanity. Everyone lives in the half-way house between doubt and certainty: the most thorough-going sceptic has some faith, the strongest believer some doubt.

The story is partly about the role of faith and prayer in healing. It also shows again Jesus’ power over evil in any form. Furthermore, it points out that the disciples, without Jesus, can do nothing. More significantly, however, placed as it is shortly after Jesus’ foretelling his death and resurrection, it makes the point that one who can ‘lift up’ this seemingly dead boy (vv.26-27) can also lift himself up from the dead. This usage of the term ‘lift up’ is found in Mark 5.41; 8.31; 9.9-10; 10.34; 14.28 and 16.6. The passage answers the disciples’ question in 9.10.

What are we to make of Mark’s exorcism stories? In Genesis 1-3, the writer tells the story of creation, using the language, images, and ideas of the cosmology of his time - which is not our time. The heart of the creation stories is not *how* God created, but rather *that* God created, and *why*. Similarly, in the exorcism stories, Mark uses the language,

images, and ideas of the pre-scientific medical understanding of his time. The heart of these stories is that Jesus freed people from whatever it was in their mind, body, or soul that impeded them from reaching their full humanity. The stories of bodily healing, or of feeding the hungry, are essentially the same. “Salvation”, or “saving” people, is freeing them from anything that diminishes their humanity. And Jesus is the role model of what humanity is. So, for Mark, exorcism, healing, feeding the hungry, and saving are not separate activities, but rather different dimensions of one activity. Common to all of them is that salvation - whatever form it takes in a given instance, and it could be a cup of water given to the thirsty - is a gift, that is to say, something given. There is recognition in the stories of human need - the Gospels are a declaration of dependence - and of God who intervenes in human affairs to help, to “save”, doing so by means of Jesus, the human face of God. And Jesus is the role model for humanity.

Week 7, Tuesday

Mark 9.30-37 Jesus again foretells his passion

30. They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it;

31. for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’

32. But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

There are parallel passages in Matthew 17.22-23 and Luke 9.43b-45.

Vv.30-32: Jesus continues on his way, a way that leads to Jerusalem, to his suffering, death and resurrection. Why did he not want anyone to know it? It does not here seem to be the concern for secrecy about his Messiah-ship that he so often showed before. Was it that he sensed his time was drawing to a close, his enemies were mustering their forces, and there was no point in giving them advance information about his movements? V.31 seems to suggest that.

For the second time, Jesus speaks of his coming death and resurrection. The first was in Mark 8.31-32a, and the third in 10.32-34. A characteristic of the three texts is that each is followed by an incident in which Jesus' followers are shown in a bad light, while someone outside their circle is shown favourably; there is mention in each, also, of the need of renunciation. If these are three separate events, they show either remarkable coincidence or conscious reconstruction.

The wording here is more emphatic than in 8.31-32a: instead of saying simply that he, or perhaps his mission, is rejected, he is here said to be 'betrayed;' and the word 'kill' is repeated.

As elsewhere, the disciples do not understand. Sometimes bad news is too big to take in. Many people, recalling the 911 attacks in the USA in 2001, say that, for a while, they could not take it in; they tried to make sense of the news by every explanation but the true one. Yet there seems to be more than that here, especially if this really was a second prediction, and not merely a second account of one event. Some scholars suggest that the repetition was a teaching device of Mark's to underline the importance of the message.

Others suggest that the episode(s) is a reconstruction by the early church after the event. If there is here a prophecy truly made beforehand, that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to explain the disciples' reaction to Jesus' arrest and death, and their astonishment at his resurrection. How could people be surprised at something they had already been told about solemnly three times? 'It is now generally agreed that the Passion Prophecies... which predict the individual resurrection of Jesus, have been written up in the light of the Easter Event.' (Dermot A. Lane, *The Reality of Jesus: an essay in Christology*, Veritas, Dublin, 1975, p.168, n.6, of chapter 5)

Some authors split the difference, saying that Jesus did indeed foretell his death and resurrection, but only in general terms, and Mark, in the light of

events, recounts the story with details drawn from those events.

Why were the disciples afraid to ask Jesus about it? (v.32) Did they fear a telling off like the one they had got in the boat when they misunderstood what he said about yeast and bread? (Mark 8.14-21) One could argue that Jesus didn't suffer fools gladly, and might indeed have given them a blast, had they questioned him. Or was this verse added later, so as, in some way, to excuse the disciples' failure to understand?

Who is the greatest among us?

33. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?'

34. But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

35. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'

36. Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

37. 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

There are parallel passages in Matthew 18.1-5 and Luke 9.46-48.

Jesus does not want anyone to know that he is passing through Galilee. (v.30) Yet he goes to Capernaum, his adopted town, which is in Galilee, to 'the house,' presumably his own. That wasn't likely to ensure silence. What did Mark mean? Was it a slip?

Vv.33b-34: Here is a very normal, and human, discussion among the twelve: which of us is Number One? Who is entitled to feathers in his cap? In every institution, there is a struggle about who is in and who is out, who is up and who is down. The will to power is a basic drive among men and women. But, when challenged to bring this out into the open and acknowledge it, the twelve are embarrassed into silence. No one wants to admit the squabble to Jesus, probably because they know that such concern has no place in his priorities.

For Jesus, authority is the power to serve, not to dominate; it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The twelve, it seems, wanted to have it for the sake of having it, just to revel in it. They had still not understood what God's kingdom is about: it is to be people-serving not power-serving, other-serving not self-serving. Institutions are to exist for people, not *vice versa*. What Jesus did and taught gave a dignity to service, challenging the idea that to be a servant is demeaning or belittling. But the service has to be real, not a mere title, or a token gesture used as a cover for control.

Vv.36-37: these are difficult to understand in this context. Jesus is not holding up the child as an example of service, or of how to exercise authority, but making a different point, namely, that to welcome a disciple of his – in Mark 9.42 he calls his disciples ‘little ones’ - is to welcome him. There are parallels to this elsewhere in the Gospel: ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.’ (Luke 10.16) And, much more emphatically, ‘Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.’ (John 13.20) Jesus associates the disciples with himself, and he with them, even when they are muddled.

Week 7, Wednesday

Mark 9.38-40 Acting in the name of Jesus

38. John said to him, ‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’

39. But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.’

40. Whoever is not against us is for us.’

There is a passage similar to this in Matthew 10.40-42 and a parallel passage in Luke 9.49-50.

As Mark tells it, Jesus had scarcely finished associating himself with his disciples (in v.37b) than they misunderstand him. Perhaps they had begun to see the following of Jesus as a gathering into a club separating insiders from outsiders – in other words, new Pharisees. The other exorcist was ‘not following us;’ he wasn’t doing what they told him; he didn’t let them control him, so they tried to stop him. It is as if they want to take possession of Jesus, to claim copyright and registered trade mark over him; no one should do anything in his name without their permission, because he is theirs, and they are his. He has just said it.

The disciples repeat the mistake made by their ancestors: -

The Lord then came down in the cloud and spoke to him. Taking some of the spirit that was on Moses, he bestowed it on the seventy elders; and as the spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied.

Now two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, were not in the gathering but had been left in the camp. They too had been on the list, but had not gone out to the tent; yet the spirit came to rest on them also, and they prophesied in the camp.

So, when a young man quickly told Moses, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp,’

Joshua, son of Nun, who from his youth had been Moses' aide, said, 'Moses, my lord, stop them.'

But Moses answered him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!' (Numbers 22.24-29)

Correcting his disciples, Jesus says, 'Whoever is not against us is for us.' He also said, 'Whoever is not with me is against me' (Matthew 12.30), and the same again in Mark 11.23. The two sayings are complementary, not contradictory. Jesus looks to wider horizons than those of his disciples. He welcomes the power of God wherever it is present. His work is inclusion, integrating outcasts into community, not exclusion. For him identity is created and maintained, not by laying down lines of demarcation dividing insiders from outsiders, not by drawing lines in the sand that are not to be crossed, but by doing, or not doing, the work of God. 'No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.' (1 Corinthians 12.3)

The ways recounted by Mark, in which Jesus was misunderstood by his disciples, have been repeated in, and by, the Christian community in every generation since. How often has the Christian religion been the occasion, the excuse, and the cause of division among people, even to the extent of war!

Week 7, Thursday

Mark 9.41-50 Temptations to sin

41. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

42. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

43. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

45. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.

47. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,

48. where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

49. For everyone will be salted with fire.

50. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you restore its saltiness? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 18.6-9 and in Luke 17.1-2.

V.41 is almost certainly an addition by the early Christian community. It does not seem to fit into its place here, with either the preceding or the following passages. It reiterates the message of v.37 and would be better placed following it. It uses the phrase ‘Christ’, which is apostolic; the Gospels normally use ‘the Christ.’ The two are combined in Matthew 10.42: ‘whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly, I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’

V.42: A “stumbling block” is a scandal (Greek, *skandalon*), not the tabloid “SHOCK HORROR” type, but something that causes a person to fall, an obstacle, like a stone on a path - in this instance an obstacle to faith. It is conduct or teaching that misleads a person, preventing them from coming to the truth. As elsewhere, e.g., Matthew 10.42; 18.6, 10, 14; Luke 17.2, the phrase ‘little ones’ does not mean children, but disciples, especially perhaps those who are weak in faith. Jesus uses a powerful and graphic image: better to have a millstone hung around your neck and to be thrown into the sea than to become an obstacle to someone’s faith. Jesus was not into religion as therapy, or wish-fulfilment, or the creation of comfort zones. He presents dramatic choices in either-or language. He underlines the fact that actions have consequences. Perhaps the person for whom Jesus has least respect is the one who tries to have the best of all worlds, sitting on the fence, taking the line of least resistance, and going with the flow.

Vv.43-47: Perhaps this is what has been called “Semitic exaggeration.” It is something that Irish people – a nation of exaggerators – can relate to. Origen, the most important biblical scholar and theologian of the early Greek church, who lived in the third century, is said to have castrated himself in response to these verses, in order to preserve his chastity. But that does not stop the imagination.

The word used for hell is *Gehenna*, the name of a ravine south of Jerusalem used as a rubbish dump, where fires burned constantly. For some seven centuries, it was a symbol of punishment: ‘they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.’ (Isaiah 66.24)

What is hell? One view presents heaven and hell as carrot and stick on a cosmic scale: ‘Be good boys and girls, and you’ll go to heaven; be bad boys and girls, and you’ll go to hell.’ That belittles people. It also belittles the Christian faith by making compliance, rather than a relationship with God, its goal. It uses terror tactics - cheap, unworthy, demeaning, an abuse of religion. It also belittles the messenger by using fear to control people.

Is hell the Christian *gulag*? Whereas Stalin’s was cold rather than hot – that’s one difference, though not the most important – not even his malice could

find a way of tormenting someone after death. But hell is everlasting – ‘the fire is never quenched’ (v.48); there is no reprieve, no possibility of escape. Is that what Jesus meant?

Another view has been well expressed by the Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis,

In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell, is itself a question, “What are you asking God to do?” To wipe out their past sins, and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not [i. e. refuse] to be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does. (*The Problem of Pain*, Fontana, London, 1957, p.116)

These verses are about priorities, decisions and commitment. For Mark, renunciation is an inseparable element of the teaching of Jesus. What counts is self-denial not self-gratification, self-giving not self-seeking.

Vv.44 and 46 are missing. They are identical to v.48, and are not found in the best manuscripts.

Vv.49-50: Salt is used to season food; it brings out the best in it, adding flavour. It preserves it from corruption. It was used as an antiseptic in the

treatment of wounds. It was seen as having a purifying effect, and offerings of food in the Temple were to be sprinkled with it. (Leviticus 2.13) It was a means of exchange: people were paid in salt, often a precious commodity. (The word *salary* comes from the Latin, *sal*, salt; a good worker was “worth his salt.”) Greeks spoke of conversation “salted” with wit. (See Colossians 4.6) A “salted” horse was one which had contracted and survived a range of equine diseases. Jesus seems to call on his followers to bring out the best in people and situations, to add flavour to life, to help prevent corruption, be healers, and facilitate exchange. They will then be ‘the salt of the earth.’ (Matthew 5.13) But that calls for renunciation of self. V.50b seems to say that this is how Jesus’ disciples should be in themselves and in relation to others. (Or see below.) Salt that has lost its taste, however, ‘is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.’ (Matthew 5.14)

Vv.38-50 is probably a series of sayings gathered together from different times, places, and contexts. They may have formed the basis for *catechesis* (religious instruction of the faithful) among the early Christians.

V.50b: The concluding phrase, ‘be at peace with one another,’ may be a wrap-up phrase referring back to the dispute among the twelve which began the series. (Mark 9.33-34)

Week 7, Friday

Mark 10.1-12 Jesus teaches about divorce

1. He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.
2. Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’
3. He answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’
4. They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.’
5. But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.
6. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’
7. ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,
8. and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh.’
9. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.
10. Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.
11. He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her;
12. and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 19.1-9.

V.1: The geographical information given here is confusing. It suggests that Judea is beyond the Jordan; but, in fact, it is on the 'homeward', that is, Western bank of the river.

The narrative exemplifies and underlines the authority of Jesus as a teacher: 'as was his custom, he again taught them.' (v.1)

The teaching follows a pattern standard in rabbinic circles: question (v.2); counter-question (v.3); a rejoinder which silences the original questioner (v.5); sometimes a further question (none here); private reflection with a select group (vv.10-12). The house (v.10) is a dramatic convenience by Mark for this latter purpose, as in 7.17, 9.28 and 33.

Vv.3-4: The reference is to Deuteronomy: -

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it into her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who marries her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not

permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession. (24.1-4)

The “bill of divorce” was a simple note, stating, ‘I divorce you.’ In return for a fee, a scribe would write one for the illiterate.

Vv.3, 5: It is strange that Jesus is quoted as saying, ‘What did Moses *command* you?’ Moses had not commanded anything in Deuteronomy 24.1-4; he had, at most, *allowed* something, though the text may be read simply as a description of what happens, not as permission, much less a command, to do it. Jesus explains that this allowance was made by Moses ‘because of your hardness of heart.’ (24.4)

Vv.6-8: Jesus goes on to quote Genesis as the original source where it is taught: ‘God made them male and female’ (1.27), and, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.’ (2.24) He is calling for a return to authentic sources. The legitimacy of divorce was accepted by all Jews in the time of Jesus; the only issue of debate was the ground for it. In the surrounding cultures of Rome, Greece, Egypt and Persia, divorce was freely available to a man and widely practised. Jesus prohibits it entirely, a huge innovation against the background of his time, and a striking move towards equality between women and men. In Jewish

tradition, a man could divorce his wife; she could not divorce him; Jesus puts them both on the same footing. He sets aside Deuteronomy 24.1-4 in order to return to the original teaching. For a Jewish teacher to set aside what Moses had said was an enormous departure from rabbinic tradition, and assumed a claim to a higher authority.

V.9 is important for understanding how Jesus saw his mission: in effect, he says, 'This is what God says on the matter, even if Moses says otherwise.' What he teaches is 'a wholly new idea not found in the Old Testament or rabbinical literature.' (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*, New Testament, p.44, just before 61)

Vv.10-12 reinforce the strength and originality of the teaching. V.11 introduces a new concept of adultery as an offence against a woman; in Jewish tradition, adultery was an offence only against a man: a woman who committed adultery violated her husband's property rights. V.12 takes Roman law into account; under it, a woman could sue her husband; in Jewish law, this was impossible. The verse suggests a context with which Jesus would have been unfamiliar. It is probably Mark, rather than Jesus, who speaks in it.

Although Jesus cites Genesis as the basis of his teaching, what he said was closer to provisions found in Leviticus: -

The priests... 'shall not marry... a woman who has been defiled; neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband. For they are holy to their God, and you shall treat them as holy, since they offer the food of your God; they shall be holy to you, for I, the Lord, I who sanctify you, am holy. When the daughter of a priest profanes herself through prostitution, she profanes her father; she shall be burned to death. (21.7-9)

This latter provision is believed by Jews never to have been carried out. The Torah (teaching, or "law") was seen by Jews primarily as an instrument of teaching rather than of regulation.

In Ezekiel, there is something similar; the priests 'shall not marry a widow, nor a divorced woman, but only a virgin...' (44.22) These two texts contain provisions regarding the marriages of Jewish priests in the new temple of the messianic era. Underlying the entire passage (10.1-12) is Jesus' claim to be the Messiah, and to having ushered in the final phase of human history. In him, the new temple has already been established. (Jesus 'was speaking of the temple of his body.' John 2.21) Is Mark 10.1-12 to be interpreted principally as a statement of who Jesus is, namely, the Messiah who ushers in a new age? That is Mark's preoccupation throughout his Gospel. Is Jesus talking about how things *should be* in a messianic age which begins with his coming? It is hard to find much basis for that in the text.

What confirms the radical nature of Jesus' departure from established practice is that it is repeated several times elsewhere in the New Testament: -

But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5.32);

I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery. (Matthew 19.9);

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery. (Luke 16.18)

... a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. (Romans 7.2-3)

To the married I give this commandment – not I but the Lord - that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to

her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. (1 Corinthians 7.10-11)

This teaching on divorce and remarriage is surely one of the hardest of the Gospel. Is there anything closer to hell on earth than being trapped in a bad marriage? If, as the years roll by, a couple grow apart instead of closer, must they stay together, or, if they separate, remain single until one dies? Monogamous, faithful marriage for life is the ideal; what of those couples who fall short? What room does the radical exclusion of divorce-and-remarriage leave for human error or frailty? Jesus, who was compassionate and understanding of human failings – the Gospels are full of it - seems here to leave no room for human weakness.

But divorce begets divorce. Every divorce diminishes all marriage. The words ‘till death does us part’ may become an empty formula, even a mockery, a joke in bad taste that people snigger at. The simultaneous polygamy of some Third World countries is paralleled by the serial polygamy of the First World. There is the reality of selfishness, where the ego demands to be satisfied, and is prepared to sacrifice others to achieve its will. There is, for example, male selfishness, which sees women as mere prick fodder, which fucks around, fucks up, and, finally, fucks off, leaving behind a trail of broken trust, distorted relationships, and damaged children who, in their turn, will find it difficult to enter into marriage as a permanent bond - and may treat all this as a merry frolic, a mere ‘affair.’ (There

are parallels to this among females.) There is laziness, the simple unwillingness to make an effort, for example, to work at communicating. There is the reality of lust, which refuses to take no for an answer. Not every desire can, or should, be gratified, even if that sounds outrageous to a world which believes they should be, as of right. Evil may be “nice” as well as nasty, banal as well as brutal. And there is stupidity, the failure to learn from mistakes.

I recall meeting a man who wanted me to conduct his forthcoming wedding ceremony. I asked him to give me the background. He began, ‘Well, first, there was Mary. She was no good, so I divorced her. Then there was Ann - even worse, a bad mistake.’ And so on he went, counting the women off on his fingers, first on one hand, and then moving to the other as the list lengthened. He came to Number Eight. ‘This one is going to be right. I’m going to make sure that this works.’ ‘What’s her name?’ I asked. He replied, ‘I don’t know, I haven’t picked her yet.’ I did not conduct any wedding ceremony.

When I was a missionary in Zambia, a woman called to the mission one day in great distress, asking for help, and crying almost hysterically. After calming a little, she told me her story. She had been “sent away” by her husband, that is, divorced. This meant she would no longer see her children, since he had decided to keep them. She had no possessions other than the clothes she was wearing. She would have no choice but to return to her own village,

where she would be regarded as a failure, because “she failed to please her husband.” Since it is almost impossible for a woman in many Third World countries to live as alone, the options open to her would be to find a man who would take her as his second or third wife. In that situation, she would most likely be a second-class partner in the marriage, and experience the resentment or even contempt of the other wives. She could live by prostitution or brewing - the two often went together - and she would find some sort of recognition among the men of the village because she was available for sex. (A confrère of mine told me of seeing a divorced woman being driven into a forest by a posse of her husband’s relatives, female as well as male, who laughed at and ridiculed her. They had taken even the clothes she was wearing, leaving her entirely naked.)

I read recently of an Irish farmer speaking at a family celebration of his fiftieth wedding anniversary. What he said went like this: -

I married her for love and she married me for money. We were both disappointed. It was hard going but there were children to be looked after and a farm to be run. There was no divorce in those days so we had no choice but to stick together and make the best of it. We found common ground in shared disappointment. We worked at it, and that’s why it lasted till today, and we have found love together.

What is remarkable is his acceptance – stoic, fatalistic or realistic? – of the imperfect. He did not fall prey to the perfectionism that feels it has a right to have everything just right, that anything less than that is unacceptable and therefore adequate grounds for breaking up the marriage and making a fresh start with a new partner in the hope that, this time, things will “work out.”

There is a powerful emotional force in Jesus’ teaching here. Did it come from personal or family experience? Had Joseph divorced Mary? Is that why Jesus moved to Capernaum from Nazareth? Had Jesus experienced the cruelty of divorce at first hand? Is that why he was so vehement against it? Or was it that Jesus himself was married but abandoned by his wife? Or was it even that he had married and divorced, and decided to live a single life thereafter? Was Jesus ever in love? He was ‘like us in all things except sin,’ (Hebrews 4.15) so would it not have been entirely fitting for one who was fully human, truly a man, to have had this latter experience? Indeed, would its absence not have diminished his humanity? We have no evidence from the Gospels on these questions but it is good to ask them.

Did Jesus marry? This question is addressed, drawing largely on material from James Wesley Stivers, is under the entry for Matthew 19.1-12.

Week 7, Saturday

Mark 10.13-16 Jesus blesses children

13. People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

14. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

15. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’

16. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 19.13-15 with an echo in 18.1-4, and Luke 18.15-17.

V.13: Why did the disciples speak sternly to those bringing little children to Jesus? Was it that they, the disciples, were tired and irritated by children who might be noisy, fidgety and restless? Maybe. Or maybe it is another example of the disciples’ failure to understand Jesus’ attitudes and priorities. Were they trying to endow him with a VIP status which needed to be protected from anything as unpretentious as a group of children, as if to say, ‘He’s above all that’?

V.14a: Jesus was indignant with the disciples, clearly saying to them that there is something

important at stake here. Perhaps the explanation is the simple and obvious one: that Jesus loved children and therefore welcomed them. Perhaps this incident was intended to complement Jesus' previous teaching on marriage.

Some commentators see the story as an indirect reference to a later liturgical rite of baptism. It is somewhat reminiscent of Jesus' own baptism: 'Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.'" (Matthew 3.13-15) In Acts, there are similar examples: - the Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip, 'What is to prevent me from being baptized?' (8.36); and, later, Peter asks, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' (Acts 10.47); and again Peter says, 'If, then, God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?' (Acts 11.17) The message seems to be: 'Let them come; they are welcome.' Mark may be re-telling the story from the perspective of a later controversy about infant baptism so as to suggest that Jesus favoured it. Or perhaps that is reading too much into a simple story meant to be taken as it appears.

V.15 is likely a genuine saying of Jesus recalled as he spoke it. In a different form, it reiterates v.14b. The introductory phrase, 'Truly I tell you' is emphatic, stressing its importance.

Jesus calls people to be child-like, not childish. There was nothing childish about Jesus himself, but he was child-like in the sense that he constantly referred all things to God whom he spoke of as his Father. What is it about little children that he upholds as an example for his disciples to follow? Is it that they are true to themselves, do not pose or posture, have no pretence? They do not hide behind masks, or try to project images. They do not have hidden agenda. Is it that they readily recognize their dependence and feel no embarrassment in asking for help? A little child is far removed from the image of a Messiah of power asserting dominance over the nations. Is Jesus saying that, to receive the kingdom of God, a person should be ready to forego the ways of power and control, and instead be unaffected, trusting, and ready to freely acknowledge dependence on God?

V.16: This conveys an image of Jesus as affectionate, warm, loving, at ease with himself as well as with children, one not afraid to let his gentle side be shown. There was no machismo in Jesus.

Week 8, Monday

Mark 10.17-27 The rich man

17. As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’

18. Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.’

19. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.””

20. He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’

21. Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’

22. When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’

24. And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!’

25. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’

26. They were greatly astounded and said to him ‘Then who can be saved?’

27. Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 19.16-26 and Luke 18.18-27.

V.17: ‘A man’, not ‘a young man’, as in Matthew (19.20, 22). In Luke (18.18), he is a ruler and therefore unlikely to be young.

The best may be the enemy of the good, and sometimes the good is lost for the sake of the best. Was the man a perfectionist? His question was based on an illusion – that eternal life is something you can gain by doing certain things. He seemed to think that if you did A, B, and C, then you would “inherit” eternal life. So, what were the necessary A, B, and C? – that was what he wanted to know. But, ‘it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.’ (Romans 9.16) Did he think eternal life was self-actualized? Was he looking for a self-determined life? If he was, he sought something which goes contrary to human experience and tradition. These demonstrate that we are interdependent; the independent self, the autonomous individual, is a myth. ‘Let it be done to me according to your word’ (Luke 1.38) is different, and better.

Did the man understand that what he sought required renunciation, that there is no grace without discipleship, none without the cross? Did he perhaps fail to see grace as the treasure hidden in the field

(Matthew 13.44), for the sake of which people go and sell what they own, and then follow Jesus? Did he fail to see grace as the pearl of great price (Matthew 13.45-46), to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods? This grace is costly, costing people their lives, yet giving life. (This paragraph is adapted from Dietrich Bonhöffer on cheap grace in *The Cost of Discipleship*.) Was he ultimately into self-seeking instead of self-surrender?

V.18: In Jewish tradition, ‘good’ was a title reserved for God. Here Jesus appears either to be unaware of his divinity or to set it aside. Yet how could Jesus possibly be divine, yet unaware of it? It is self-contradictory. Nor could he set his divinity aside in any real sense. God cannot stop being God.

V.19: Jesus brings his questioner down to earth by reminding him of what is expected of the follower of God. The man was enthusiastic, but perhaps had not counted the cost. Did Jesus have him in mind when he taught the parable about the man building a tower, or the king going to war? (Luke 14.28-33)

V.20: Can anyone truly say this? Few, if any. Maybe this man was such a one. His enthusiasm and simplicity suggest the innocence of one who has not sinned.

V.21: Jesus loved him, perhaps because he knew the man spoke the truth, so he made it as attractive to him as possible: while calling for renunciation of

possessions, he holds out a promise of ‘treasure’ in heaven. The renunciation of possessions is one step on a journey; it is meant to free a person from concern about possessions, knowing that they may possess people, rendering them unfree. That renunciation is a sign and a step towards the renunciation of self. The step after that is to follow Jesus.

V. 22: The lure of wealth was too strong for him. Is this the only case in the Gospel where someone directly refused Jesus?

V.23: Jesus seemed to consider wealth a greater impediment to entering the kingdom of God than just about anything else. That was contrary to the mood of the times which saw wealth as a sign of God’s blessing. What we spend our money on is a good sign of what our priorities are.

V.24: It is largely a repeat of v.23, though with a shift from the simple fact of having wealth to trusting in it. The disciples’ objection represented the prevailing view.

V.25: It may be that the word translated as camel (*camelos*) should be *camilos*, a rope. In either case, the point is the same. It is virtually impossible for someone attached to wealth, or, by implication, to security, or to self, to enter the kingdom of heaven; their attachment makes them unfree.

The passage reads better if vv.24 and 25 are switched.

V.26 re-states even more strongly the reaction of the disciples in v.24: they were ‘perplexed.’ Now they are ‘greatly astounded’, asking, ‘Then who can be saved?’ This raises a question: What is it “to be saved”? What is salvation? In Jesus’ understanding, it seems to mean deliverance from anything that diminishes a person’s humanity. Jesus himself is the exemplar of humanity at its fulness. Salvation is a gift, not an achievement, a point perhaps missed by Jesus’ questioner. The saving of humanity is the purpose of Jesus’ life: ‘the Son of Man came... to give his life as a ransom for many.’ (Mark 10.45) The greatest threat to salvation is sin. Yet who can avoid it? Jesus, in his own life, accepted the paradox that those who seek to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will save it. (See Mark 8.35) On the cross, he was mocked by those who said, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself.’ (Mark 15.31) But God saved him by raising him up.

V.27: A basic principle is stated here. It underlies everything Paul wrote but has earlier origins. It is in Sarah’s question in Genesis 18.14, ‘Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?’ And in Jeremiah, ‘I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me?’ (32.27)

Week 8, Tuesday

Mark 10.28-31 Peter's question

28. Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.'

29. Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel

30. who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age - houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions - and in the age to come eternal life.

31. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 19.27-20 and Luke 18.28-30.

V.28: Peter was honest, and he asked a very human question: 'What's in it for us?' He had given up his home and his job to undertake the life of a companion to a wandering preacher, unsure of food or lodgings from day to day, often facing public hostility and with an uncertain future before him. Maybe the thought had crossed his mind that if Jesus came to a bad end, then so might he, Peter, as his associate. No one is so high-minded as never to have asked the same question – at least silently. How many people would follow Christ if there was no promise of eternal life?

Vv.29-30: Jesus spells it out: renunciation for his sake, or for the Gospel (good news), will be generously rewarded by God. But there will be persecution. The phrase ‘and for the sake of the good news’ (v.29) is probably an addition by Mark.

Along with v.17, these are the only places in Matthew, Mark and Luke where the phrase ‘eternal life’ is used.

V.31: The entire passage is about renunciation, a recurring theme in Mark, and the same point is made in each of the three parts of the text.

God alone is the judge and can read the human heart in truth. God rewards people according to their deeds and these are often unknown. So, some who might seem to be clear “insiders” in the world of religion may lose out, while the “outsiders” who seemed not to be part of the picture at all, may come first. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector makes this point powerfully – see Luke 18.9-14.

Week 10, Wednesday

Mark 10.32-45 Jesus foretells his passion a third time, and the request of James and John

32. They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He

took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him,

33. saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles;

34. they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

35. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'

36. And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?'

37. And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'

38. But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?'

39. They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;

40. but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

41. When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

42. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they

recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

43. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,

44. and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

45. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

There are passages parallel to Jesus' prediction of his passion in Matthew 20.17-19 and Luke 18.31-33, and to the question of James and John in Matthew 20.20-28.

This is the third of Jesus' predictions in Mark of his suffering, death and resurrection, the others being in 8.31-32a, and 9.30-32. It is the longest, the most detailed, and the most specific. It follows closely the account of Jesus' passion in chapter 15. Matthew (16.21; 17.22-23; 20.17-19) and Luke (9.21-22; 9.43b-45; 18.31-34), along with Mark, have Jesus making this prediction three times, and drawing attention to it emphatically: 'Let these words sink into your ears...' (Luke 9.44) Mark says they were 'amazed' and 'afraid.' (v.32) Yet, though they heard these predictions, they seem neither to have foreseen his death nor awaited his resurrection.

How is this to be explained? Is it evidence of the human capacity for eliminating unwanted news, hearing what we want to hear, and ignoring, or even

“forgetting,” what we do not want to hear? There’s an Irish expression - ‘Bodhar Uí Laoghaire’ - for a person who acts in that way.

The details of the prediction are widely regarded as an editorial insertion, what scripture scholars call *vaticinium ex eventu* (a “prophecy” arising out of the event). “Predicting” what has already happened seems dishonest to us, but it appears to have been an accepted literary device of the time. It seems impossible to answer the question definitively, and a preoccupation with this issue could distract from other aspects of the matter.

Did Jesus have a fixation with suffering, or even a death wish? One could make a case for that, especially in the light of John’s Gospel. But he was nothing if not perceptive. He must have been aware, in the light of the history of previous prophets, that his criticisms of the religious establishment would not go unchallenged. Isaiah, for example, had written: -

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of
lambs, or of goats.
When you come to appear before me, who
asked this from your hand? Trample my courts
no more;

bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation - I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates;

they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you;

even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord:

though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow;

though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (1.11-18)

There are many passages in a similar vein in the prophet Amos, and in Jeremiah, which Jesus later quoted: -

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord:

-

Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the

word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place.

Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'

But if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt,

then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!' - only to go on doing all these abominations?

Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord. (7.1-11)

Isaiah and Jeremiah had both paid the price, Isaiah, it was said, dying a martyr's death, while Jeremiah was first exiled to Egypt, and then stoned to death.

There was a long tradition of friction between priest and prophet, the professional and the amateur, the insider and the outsider, the upholder of the *status quo* and its challenger, between those who say, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.... We are safe!', and those who see the heart of religion as being about relationships, especially human relationships based on justice and compassion. (In our time, this is often expressed in tension, or even conflict, between church and Kingdom.) Jesus, who was not a Jewish priest but stood in the prophetic tradition, preached a message like Isaiah's, and said to the Pharisees and lawyers, 'Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs.' (Luke 11.47-48; see also Matthew 23.29-31.)

Jesus must have been well aware of the realities of politics - religious and civil, must have known that anyone who rocked the boat as he did was not going to be allowed get away with it. He had disturbed interests, made enemies. The religious establishment had come to identify the symbol (itself) with the symbolized (God), to see itself as self-justifying, an end in itself, the necessary mediator between people

and God, not to be questioned or challenged. By legalistic observances and ritual prescriptions it had come to insulate people from authentic religious experience; it made religion a substitute for God. Essentially, it had lost sight of the first Commandment: 'I am the Lord your God... you shall have no other gods before me.' (Deuteronomy 5.6)

Jesus undermined that view of religion, and its leaders responded by deciding to destroy him, if necessary by killing him. That is what powerful people do when they are threatened. From their viewpoint, the destruction of Jesus' name by a false charge, and his removal from the scene, were requirements of practical politics.

A further way in which Jesus undermined the religion of his time and place was through his universalist perspective. Jews saw themselves as a people especially chosen by God and bound to him by covenant. This was what gave them their identity and unity. This often led to the conclusion that other people were not God's people. Jesus reached beyond this, visiting, teaching and healing people of other nations. By doing so, he was challenging his people's identity. If anyone anywhere could call God 'Our Father,' where there did that leave the uniqueness of the Jewish people? It dissolved it. It is no wonder they wanted to get rid of him. The moment you challenge people's identity, their sense of what makes them to be what they are, of what sets

them apart from others, you undermine their security - and you draw down trouble on your head.

Another group he likely upset were the Sadducees, who were the wealthy, the merchants, those who cultivated good relations with Herod and the Romans in the pursuit of business. How would they have felt when they heard Jesus say, ‘The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted?’ (Matthew 23.11-12) and ‘many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’ (Matthew 19.30) They would have wanted none of it. They were happy with things as they were, where the last stayed last and they stayed first.

Jesus had alienated the major power groups: priests, Lawyers and scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. He knew the reactions his teaching and actions would evoke. But the truth required that he do them, so he did them and was prepared to pay the price. A “practical” man would have seen what way the wind was blowing and trimmed his sails accordingly. Jesus was not such a man.

The request of James and John (Mark 10.35-45)

Vv.35-39a: James and John - with Peter the especially favoured among the disciples - come across as idiots, embarrassing in the childishness of their behaviour. What did they think of Jesus – someone there just to do their bidding? ‘We want

you to do for us whatever we ask of you’ – a child’s view of a fairy godmother. Neither were they shy about looking for the best for themselves: ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ When asked ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ whether, that is, they were prepared to be immersed in the suffering their destiny might entail, their self-confidence was as large as their self-ignorance. They replied, ‘We are able.’ No problem. Yet, what happened when they came to that test? ‘All of them deserted him and fled.’ (Mark 14.50) Were they really so childish, or has Mark “spun” the story for a teaching purpose, such as to underline the contrast between their attitudes and behaviour before and after Jesus’ resurrection?

Here as elsewhere, Jesus answered a question with a question. It was his way of getting people to think. He gave people questions to answer as well as answers to questions. (The four Gospels record some one hundred and twenty questions of his. See my *The Questions of Jesus*, Columba Press, Dublin, 2003)

Vv.39b-40: Jesus was his own master: he declined to have a role imposed on him. Although he had promised his followers thrones, ‘you who have followed me will... sit on twelve thrones...’ (Matthew 19.28), the allocation remains with God his Father, ‘to sit at my right hand or at my left is not

mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’ Similarly, in Luke 12.13-14, he refused to accept the role of arbitrator which someone sought to impose on him.

Here, Jesus acknowledges his subordination to the Father, as he does again in speaking about the day of judgment, ‘About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.’ (Mark 13.32) John puts it more strongly, ‘The Father is greater than I.’ (14.28) Theologians, perhaps more than scripture scholars, sometimes adopt an “amphibian” approach to this matter. In my African days, I remember people saying of themselves that they were like frogs. When there’s trouble on land, the frog hops into the water; when there’s trouble in the water, the frog hops out onto land. The amphibian is at home in both worlds. Sometimes theologians, when presented with a difficulty about the knowledge of Jesus, say, ‘That was his human knowledge,’ while, in another situation, they say, ‘That was his divine knowledge.’ That reminds me of the frog, but the Gospel writers don’t seem to share their difficulty. For John, especially, everything Jesus thought, said, and did, was in reference to God his Father, motivated by the desire to do his will.

V.41: The ten - the twelve accompanied Jesus on his journeys - began to be angry with James and John. Were they angry because *they* wanted to be in the top slots that the brothers had pre-emptively

sought? ‘Why should those fellows get them? What about me?’ – was that it?

V.42: Jesus saw this squabble as an opportunity to teach about power and authority. Power is might; authority is right. Authority has a moral basis, power not necessarily so. The late German moral theologian, the Redemptorist priest, Bernard Häring, when asked what lesson his country should learn from the experience of World War II, said it was that power - as exercised, in law and government, for instance - must have a moral basis; Germany should forego the tradition of unquestioning obedience to the leader, whether the Kaiser (the self-styled All-Highest), the Führer, or anyone else.

Not only in Germany, but also in other societies, traditions and cultures, those in positions of power are sometimes seen as entitled to unquestioning obedience and loyalty. Examples are: - ‘The king can do no wrong’; ‘Parliament is supreme’; ‘Roma locuta est, causa finita est’ (Rome has spoken, the matter is closed). Another is Saint Ignatius Loyola writing, ‘We should always be ready to accept this principle: I will believe that the white that I see is black, if the hierarchical Church so defines it.’ (Rules for Thinking with the Church, n.13, in *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, translated by Anthony Mottola, introduction by Robert W. Gleason SJ, Image Books, Doubleday, New York, 1964, p.141.) Or this from nineteenth-century Japan:

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Know ye, Our Subjects: ...guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth....

The Way here set forth is indeed bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. (From the Imperial Rescript on Education of 30 October 1890, from Ninian Smart and Richard D. Hecht, (eds.), *Sacred Texts of the World: A Universal Anthology*, Herder and Herder/Crossroad, New York, 2002, p.326)

That sounds uncomfortably close to the language and mentality of the Vatican.

Vv.42-45: Jesus goes on to contrast the view of authority as the power to dominate with his view of it as the power to serve. (This parallels his statement about the child, in Mark 9.36-37, after the second foretelling of his death and resurrection.) The goals authority serves must be moral, as also the manner in which it exercises power. Otherwise, it has no moral claim on a person's obedience. Does it respect and build up the person, or does it not? Is it exercised in dialogue or in dictation? The difference is large, and, for Jesus, significant. And those who claim to do the work of Jesus must use the methods of Jesus.

His use of the expression 'great ones', in v.42, is probably ironic, perhaps a reference to a title

bestowed on himself by a local potentate. Jesus points to himself and his future fate: ‘the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

V.45: The use of the phrase ‘for many’ does not imply that some are excluded; it was a Semitic expression equivalent to ‘for all.’ ‘There is not, there never has been, and there never will be a single person for whom Jesus Christ did not die.’ (Council of Quiercy, 853 AD, drawing on 2 Corinthians 5.15 and 1 John 2.2)

Jesus consciously and deliberately chooses the way of renunciation of self. V.42 is surely an echo of Isaiah: -

It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring and prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.
Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;

yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors'.
(53.10-12)

Jesus' death is to serve the atonement of humanity, its "at-one-ment" with God. But "ransom" is not a kind of debt-repayment offered to soothe an angry God who might otherwise lash out and strike people down. To see it in that way – and it has many times been presented as such – is a travesty of the picture Jesus paints of God.

Week 8, Thursday

Mark 10.46-52 Jesus heals a blind beggar

46. They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.

47. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'

48. Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'

49. Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.'

50. So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

51. Then Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’

52. Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well.’ Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 20.29-34 and Luke 18.35-43.

V46: A blind beggar, Bartimaeus – unusually we have his name - sits by the side of the road between Jericho and Jerusalem. He’s on the margins, having a hard life, at dust level and kicking level. Not everyone is sympathetic: you’re a nuisance, in the way; why don’t you go somewhere else? Not in my backyard. And not all of those who are sympathetic can help; they don’t have money to give away. Maybe some say, ‘Something should be done about this. Why doesn’t someone look after him?’ But they do nothing. Someone is someone else.

Bartimaeus has learned to listen. It’s a survival skill. He has also learned to wait - what else can he do? And he’s not ashamed to ask for help. That’s a survival skill, too. Listening, waiting, and asking from a heart that is alive - three characteristics of prayer.

Vv.47-48a: He hears a clamour of excitement; what’s it all about? A crowd coming, an air of

animation, a thrill of expectation. He asks what's happening, and is told that it's Jesus of Nazareth. Bartimaeus has heard about him, and the effect is electric. It's like a light coming on in his mind. Maybe he has a chance. Dare he hope? Is there a possibility that Jesus might see him, have compassion on him, do something for him, even heal him? The man who has learned how to wait knows when to wait no longer: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' The crowd are annoyed: trust this scruffy nuisance to spoil the occasion. A VIP has come to town, and the beggar messes up everything by screaming and yelling; he has no idea how to behave.

V.48b-50: Bartimaeus ignores them. He "sees", and seizes, the opportunity of a lifetime: 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood, and called him. The mood of the crowd changes: 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' Bartimaeus' cloak is in the way, awkward. He throws it off; nothing is going to stop him. He runs, a risky thing for a blind man to do, but he is beyond caution or calculation. Hope impels him.

V.51a: Jesus asks, 'What do you want me to do for you?' the same question he had put to James and John. (Mark 10.36) While their request for thrones of honour was pretentious and silly, Bartimaeus speaks out of real necessity. Once again, someone on the margins understands Jesus, while his disciples do not.

V.51b-52: Bartimaeus comes straight to the point; he has no need of a prepared speech. He knows what he wants: 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way, perhaps the way of discipleship.

In this account, there is no secrecy, no injunction to silence. It was the crowd that wanted silence; Jesus and Bartimaeus ignore them. Jericho is only twenty-five kilometres from Jerusalem, and Jesus is heading there. Mark (and Luke even more) often refers to Jesus being 'on the way,' i.e. on the way to Jerusalem. He sees Jerusalem as the significant centre, the place of destiny. Here the time for caution is gone. Jesus will soon be in Jerusalem. Bartimaeus began to shout, and then 'cried out even more loudly.' In Mark, this type of phrase is usually associated with the demons' acknowledgement of Jesus' divine mission.

Bartimaeus twice uses the messianic title, "Son of David", appropriate to the direction Jesus is taking towards the city of David; appropriate, too, to Isaiah's vision of the day of the Messiah: 'On that day... out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.' (29.18) Samuel has God say about his covenant with David, 'I will be a father to him, and he a son to me.... I will not take my steadfast love from him.... Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your

throne shall be established for ever.’ (2 Samuel 7. 14, 15, 16; 1 Chronicles 17.11-14; Psalm 89.19-37)

This is the first time in Mark’s Gospel that a messianic title is used by a person; previously it was only demons who used it. The Messiah was to be of the line of David; assigning the title to Jesus puts him, so to speak, in the line of succession. Jesus neither approves nor rejects it. But, in Mark 12.35-37, he clearly implies that it is inadequate.

Together with the good thief crucified beside Jesus (Luke 23.42), and the ten lepers (Luke 17.13), Bartimaeus is alone in calling Jesus by name, a measure, perhaps, of his desperation, his heartfelt and trusting sincerity in making known his need, in a word, a measure of his faith. Mark makes no mention of a healing gesture by Jesus, or of any reaction from the crowd; his focus is on Bartimaeus’ faith. That is sufficient: his faith has made him well.

The cure of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8.22-26), and this cure of Bartimaeus, are like brackets around a teaching section of Mark’s Gospel. They serve to emphasize Jesus’ authority: ‘he taught them as one having authority.’ (Mark 1.22, 27)

It has been suggested that something is missing from the text of v.46. As it stands, it reads strangely, ‘They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho...’

To 'see' Jesus means to believe in him.

Week 8, Friday

Mark 11.11-26 Jesus, the fig tree, the Temple

11. Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

12. On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.

13. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.

14. He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it.

15. Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves;

16. and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

17. He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?'

But you have made it a den of robbers.'

18. And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they

were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.

19. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

20. In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.

21. Then Peter remembered and said to him, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.’

22. Jesus answered them, ‘If you have faith in God

23. truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, “Be taken up and thrown into the sea,” and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.

24. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

25. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

26. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.’

There are passages analogous to vv.15-18 in Matthew 21.12-17, Luke 19.45-48, and John 2.13-22.

This is another example of Mark’s “sandwich” technique. As in 3.20-35, 5.21-43 and 6.16-29, it is designed to focus attention, to provide a setting, to create a link, and to heighten tension by keeping the

reader waiting for the concluding part of the story. In this instance, Jesus' cleansing of the temple comes between vv.12-14 and 20-26, and those two texts are linked in their character and purpose. But all the Gospel writers felt free to move incidents around to suit their purpose, so it does not necessarily follow that we have in chapter 11 a faithful eye-witness account. John, for instance, places Jesus' cleansing of the temple at the start of his ministry - 2.13-22 - not at the end.

Is this an invented story, as is clearly the case with the following parable of the barren fig tree in Luke 13.6-9?

Then Jesus told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"

He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Vv.11-13: Mark is writing theology, not history or biography. It seems likely that the story is a creation of his imagination, designed to "fulfil" earlier prophetic writings, and to make a point about Jesus.

In this parable in action, the tree represents Israel. Jeremiah has God lamenting Israel's blindness, saying, 'When I wanted to gather them... there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree...' (8.12, and Hosea 9.10) The fruitless tree is seen as symbolic of the fruitlessness of the temple and what it represented, a religion of law and observances which blinded people to the nature of God.

But 'it was not the season for figs;' the tree couldn't have produced anything. Is that saying that Israel's failure to recognize Jesus was predetermined by God? Peter says so in Acts: 'Jesus of Nazareth..., [who was] handed over to you [Jews] according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed...' (2.23) Mark implies this elsewhere in his Gospel. And yet, 'the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable' (Romans 11.29), so it does not mean that Jews are rejected, or are no longer God's chosen people. Is v.13 linked thematically to Mark 4.11-12: 'for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven'?

Is Mark saying that, while the tree looks healthy, since it was 'in leaf,' it was actually barren, and that this was analogous to the temple of the day, which seemed to flourish but was, in fact, fruitless? That interpretation is reinforced by the tearing in two of the temple veil from top to bottom. (Mark 15.38) In

short, the two texts would appear to say, “The temple is finished.” For Jesus, the “temple” that counted was the community of his disciples - people, not institutions or structures: ‘Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’ (Mark 3.35) John has Jesus say to the woman at Jacob’s well in Samaria,

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4.21, 23-24)

V.15: Mark has Jesus begin to drive out the traders. John has him drive them all out, and with greater violence. (2.15)

V.16 sounds like something a Pharisee, rather than Jesus, might have been concerned about. Was it that people were using the temple as a handy short-cut, a mere convenience for trade goods? Jeremiah has the message, ‘Thus says the Lord: “As you love your lives, take care not to carry burdens on the Sabbath day, to bring them in through the gates of Jerusalem.”’ (17.21)

V.17: The quotation is drawn from Isaiah 56.7: ‘foreigners... I will... make... joyful... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples,’ and Jeremiah 7.11: ‘Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers?’ It shows Mark’s characteristic interest in the ‘foreigners,’ the Gentiles. Other passages come to mind, ‘the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight - indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.’ (Malachi 3.1) Similarly, the prophecy in Zechariah, ‘there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day’ (14.21), the day when, according to Zechariah, the Messiah conquers his enemies. Mark, like Matthew and Luke, likes to create “fulfilments” of scriptural passages, the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke being especially powerful examples.

V.18: Mark feels bound to account for the desire of the chief priests and scribes to kill Jesus. He finds it here. Jesus had drawn a following away from them, and so they were afraid of him. In 3.6, he had the Pharisees conspiring with the Herodians how to destroy him because he healed people on the Sabbath.

The story of the temple cleansing, as it stands, has much about it that is improbable. The temple was a large group of buildings, situated in a larger area of ground, and the crowds at Passover were great. Jesus had previously shown no particular concern for

buildings of any kind; (Jews, unlike Christians, don't have "holy places," or blessings of objects.) Had it happened as described, the temple police would surely have intervened, but there is no mention of them; and, if they had not, the Romans in the adjoining Antonia fortress would. And Jesus' use of violence is sharply at variance with his actions in the rest of the Gospel.

Where the Gospel writers present a prophecy that has been "fulfilled" for an apologetic purpose, as in v.17, there are usually good grounds for doubting the historical character of its setting.

What seems more likely is that Jesus engaged in some kind of prophetic action in the messianic tradition, intended as a last effort on his final visit to the temple to challenge the complacent certitudes of his people's religious attitudes, as a sign of God's judgment on formalistic religion. He failed. 'Nothing so masks the face of God as [such] religion.' (Attributed to Martin Buber and also Reinhold Niebuhr)

The stories of the barren fig tree and the temple cleansing have a polemical character; they seem designed to underline the break between Jesus and Judaism. They may have been a response by the Gospel writers to the expulsion of the disciples of Jesus from the synagogue in later decades, and that suggests a late date of composition. It is likely that it is Mark's voice, not that of Jesus, we hear in these

texts. This is reinforced by the different ways in which the other Gospel writers treat the same stories. See Matthew 21.12-17 and Luke 19.45-48, while John, the last of the Gospels to be written, has the most violent account of Jesus' action: 2.13-22.

The temple, understood in the widest sense, had become corrupt. While there is some (ambiguous) evidence that the high priestly families of the day had cornered the market in religious goods such as sacrificial animals and in the money exchanges set up for Jews coming from abroad, the problem, for the Jesus of Mark, went deeper than that. Later generations of Christians understood Jesus as inaugurating a new kingdom, made up of Jews and Gentiles, in which all are priests: 'Jesus Christ.... made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.' (Revelation 1.5-6) They saw the temple of God's kingdom in a way very different from the temple that Jesus cleansed: -

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2.19-22)

God's people are the temple: 'Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood...' (1 Peter 2.5) The faith-community is a kingdom of priests that constitutes God's temple.

The stories of the fig tree and the temple cleansing may be a way of saying that all religions - the Jewish in this particular instance - since they are largely creations of the human mind, cannot but fail to communicate the reality of God, and that such failure is God's will. Could it, indeed, be otherwise? If they did more, would we not mistake the symbol for the symbolized, the messenger for the message, the icon for the reality? Maybe God wills it so, in order to make it clear that it is God alone, and no other, who saves, and has a claim on our allegiance.

Formal, institutionalized or - especially - established religion always runs the risk of turning inwards on itself. It easily becomes self-centred, self-justifying, self-preserving, self-promoting, an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. The risk is not always recognized; indeed, there are times when the development is welcomed. If the first disciples were slow learners, as Mark so constantly and emphatically underlines, what does that make of those who followed them? It could be said that Christians, in every sense but the literal, have been re-building the temple for the last two thousand years: religion as a system of power and control held in place by fear and guilt; law above love; the

institution above the person; a self-validating teaching authority elbowing aside scripture, tradition and human experience; the closed organization, the clerical caste system. Such religion is an institutional ego trip; it gives satisfaction to the group through the power of its rituals and symbols while exchanging authentic religious experience for a shallow imitation which voids or even negates communion with God. Such religion worships itself, relegating to the margins the commandment, 'I am the Lord your God... you shall have no other gods before me.' (Deuteronomy 5.6-7) It is what Jesus cursed in the fig tree, which 'withered away to its roots.' (v.20) The incidents of the fig tree and the temple cleansing are the only Gospel examples of Jesus using power punitively, something that is surely significant. Is Jesus saying – powerfully - that there is nothing more dead or more deadly than dead religion and that it has to die because it is an obstacle to a real relationship with God?

And, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, did Christians step into the shoes of the vanished Jewish priesthood, creating the kind of priestly caste which Jesus was at odds with throughout his ministry and which brought about his death?

Vv.22-26: These sayings have come from a different context from the preceding, and appear to have been inserted here as an appendix, as if Mark did not know what their original setting was, but did not want them to be forgotten.

Vv.22-23: Jesus answers a question, but we don't know what the question was, or who the questioners were. It would have helped if Mark had included that information. Jesus used hyperbole; he exaggerated. He says that, if people believe strongly enough, then what they believe will happen.

V.24: This repeats the point of vv.22-23 in different language, though it is perhaps stronger, since it says, 'believe that you have received it,' not 'believe that you will receive it.' That requires stronger faith still.

A question is inescapable: is this saying true? Is it borne out by the experience of life? What can one say in reply except: yes and no? But perhaps more no than yes. If it really were as simple and direct as vv.22-24 suggest, prayer of petition would not be the problem that it is for so many people. Many have quietly given up because it seems ineffective, and Jesus' promise of its effectiveness does not seem validated by experience.

And if we say to a person who has prayed for something and not received it, that this must have been because they doubted in their heart and their faith was weak, that is a great way of making them feel guilty, when they may have been quite guiltless, or it may even be a bully's way of silencing potential objections arising from disappointment or hurt.

‘More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of,’ said William Wordsworth, the poet. And Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote, ‘We do not pray in order to change a divine decree, but only to obtain what God has decided will be obtained through prayer,’ (*Summa Theologiae*, II, II, question 83, article 2) though that sounds a little too clever, like someone shooting off an arrow, watching its flight, drawing a circle around its point of impact, and then declaring, “Bull’s eye!” ‘If our prayers are granted at all they are granted from the foundation of the world.... Our prayers are heard... not only before we make them but before we are made ourselves.’ (C. S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, Fontana, London, 1964, pp.50-51)

It may be significant that perhaps the only prayer of petition in the Gospel to which God gave the answer no was the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, ‘Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.’ (14.36) God’s answer to Jesus was given by silence.

Treated as an intellectual proposition, vv.22-24 constitute an insoluble problem. Treated as an image, a hint, a suggestion, they harmonize with (some) faith-experience.

All of reality is inter-connected, and it seems impossible that any prayer should simply be in vain. God does not make fools of us, or laugh at us, or,

after the manner of Greek mythology, treat us as play-things. Perhaps we should simply pray, and leave everything in God's hands. God, who is reality, the foundation and source of Being, is more than able to take account of all. The story is told of a group of Jews in one of the Nazi death camps in World War II that, faced by the glaring contradiction between, on the one hand, the covenant between God and them and their status as God's chosen people, and, on the other, the fact that they were being murdered pitilessly, *en masse*, they "put God on trial" for crimes against humanity. They argued the case back and forth before finally finding him guilty. When that was done, they said their evening prayer.

Vv.25-26: (The *New Revised Standard Version* and the *Jerusalem Bible* omit verse 26.) These sound like tit for tat, operating within a framework of conditionality. But, in fact, giving and receiving are reciprocal. It may sound as if it defies the rules of logic, but there is a sense in which those who refuse to give are unable to receive, and those who refuse to forgive are unable to be forgiven. The saying is close to the 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us' of the Our Father, (the Lord's Prayer; see Matthew 6.12) and may be based on it, or drawn from a common source. It is close in spirit to the prayer attributed to Saint Francis that says, 'It is in giving that we receive... It is in pardoning that we are pardoned....'

Six controversies are found here, involving priests, scribes and elders, Pharisees and Herodians, and Sadducees – representative groups within the Jewish community. The controversies are about authority, 11.27-33; the parable of the wicked tenants, 12.1-12; taxation, 12.13-17; the resurrection, 12.18-27; the first commandment, 12.28-34; and David’s son, 12.35-37. Only in the last does Jesus take the initiative; in the others, he is responding to challenges from his critics. In them, Jesus faces (mostly) hostile questioning from his opponents, but turns the tables on them.

Week 8, Saturday

Mark 11.27-33 A question about Jesus’ authority

27. Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him

28. and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?’

29. Jesus said to them, ‘I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.

30. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.’

31. They argued with one another, ‘If we say, "From heaven," he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?"’

32. But shall we say, "Of human origin?" - they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet.

33. So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

This passage is reminiscent of Mark 3.22-30. The religious authorities are preparing for a showdown; they sense that a crisis is coming, when the people will choose between them and Jesus, and they want to secure their position.

Vv.28-30: Jesus refused to engage with the chief priests, the scribes and the elders on their terms, because they were not in good faith; their question was a trap. His question to them exposed their unwillingness to seek the truth, he rejects their proprietorial attitude to truth, and tells them to be off.

But how true to life was their attitude! Theirs was an "ecclesiastical" view: for them, the issue under debate is secondary, authority is primary; every issue is an issue of authority - their authority as they see it. They see and judge issues in terms of authority rather than on their merits. And their view of their authority is as far-reaching as public opinion will allow them: -

‘Bishops are the authentic teachers of faith and morals in their own diocese, and their authority includes the right to determine the boundaries of their jurisdiction,’ declared an Irish archbishop in 1951. (See Patrick Murray, *Oracles of God: the Roman Catholic Church and Irish Politics, 1922-37*, University College Dublin Press, Dublin, 2000, p.14)

Vv.31-33a: In response to Jesus’ question, the leaders looked at the situation, not in terms of what was true or false, but relative to its politics. For them, expediency and evasion trumped truth. When the tables are turned on them, their ‘We do not know’ was shabby and evasive, though they may have seen it as clever because of avoiding committing themselves. Ordinary Jews listening to these religious leaders must have felt a sense of betrayal at their slippery attitude towards an issue of truth. It undermined credibility.

In Poland, after forty years of communism, the people had so little faith in anything said by Communist party leaders that they used to say, ‘Nothing is true until it has been officially denied.’

Religious leaders of our own time sometimes act similarly. In discussing doctrinal issues, they sometimes recognize that their predecessors have painted them into a corner, and that there is no way out other than to admit that the church got it wrong. That is something they cannot bring themselves to

do - they see the very notion as unthinkable - so instead of facing the issue they fudge it, hoping that collective amnesia will quietly bury it. They end up with the worst of both worlds, their authority diminished and the issue muddled. That is what happens when issues of truth are politicized, and it goes on all the time.

V.33b: Jesus must have had a powerful personality. He challenged the chief priests of his people in the Temple, their own stronghold, beat them in argument, showed up the shallowness and indeed the shabbiness of their argument, and sends them packing. His authority was founded on his actions, and they spoke for themselves. In effect, he was saying, 'I do the works of God, so draw the appropriate conclusion. That is the basis of my authority.' Truth is its own authority; it doesn't need anyone's validation.

Week 9, Monday

Mark 12.1-12 The parable of the wicked tenants

1. Then he began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.
2. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard.

3. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed.
4. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted.
5. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed.
6. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son."
7. But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours."
8. So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.
9. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.
10. Have you not read this scripture: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
11. this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?
12. When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 21.33-46 and Luke 20.9-19.

Jesus uses an allegory to make a point, and it is best understood if read as following after the story of

the barren fig tree in Mark 11.12-14. The vineyard represents Israel; his hearers would have been familiar with Isaiah's song of the unfruitful vineyard: -

Let me sing for my beloved, my love-song concerning his vineyard:

my beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;

he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;

he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw

bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!
(5.1-7)

Vv.1-8: Though called a parable, this story is really an allegory. In it, the owner of the vineyard represents God; the vineyard represents Israel; the tenants represent its religious leadership, “them” (v.1) suggesting the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the previous episode; the slaves represent the prophets; the beloved son of v.6 (and of Mark 1.11 and 9.7), Jesus himself. God looks for a harvest from his vineyard, but the tenants refuse it. They reject the prophets, maltreating and even killing them. Then he sends his son and heir, thinking the tenants will respect him. But they kill him also, hoping to take his place, and throw him out of the vineyard, denying him even a decent burial. (Jesus was killed at Golgotha outside of Jerusalem - see Mark 15.22, 46 – an abandoned quarry, used as a rubbish dump.)

Vv.9-12: The owner decides to give the vineyard to ‘others,’ representing the Gentiles. Jesus is referring to the consequence of the people’s rejection of him: ‘the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.’ (Psalm 118.22-23) The religious leadership understood clearly the meaning of the story. For Mark, it represents the displacement of Jews by Gentiles in God’s plan. (But for Paul, there is no displacement, because ‘the gifts and the calling of God are

irrevocable’ Romans 11.29; ‘If we are faithless he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.’ 2 Timothy 2.13)

The allegory has permanent application. It is a warning against religion trying to make God redundant, trying to control and domesticate God, trying to create a system so complete that it will be self-sustaining, with religious leaders as its rulers. Pope Pius XI, speaking to soon-to-be-ordained seminarians in 1938, described the church as “a monster, all head and no members.” The church is always limited, contingent and sinful, always reformed and always in need of reform. Whenever it appears to come to a peak of achievement – as, for example, in thinking of itself as “a perfect society,” a common self-designation in post-Reformation theology – then it is nearest to a crash. And the vineyard may again be taken from it and given to others who will bear fruit. The kingdom is larger than the church.

Week 9, Tuesday

Mark 12.13-17 A question about paying tax

13. Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said.

14. And they came and said to him, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but

teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

15. Should we pay them, or should we not?' But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.'

16. And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.'

17. Jesus said to them, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were utterly amazed at him.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 22.15-22 and Luke 20.20-26.

Vv.13-14: Pharisees and Herodians are making common cause, as they did in Mark 3.6 with the healing of a man on the Sabbath. Normally they were poles apart, the Pharisees fervent nationalists, the Herodians in bed with the Romans. When these two groups get together in an alliance of convenience, integrity goes out the window and dirty doings are not far away.

Their question was a trap. If Jesus answered, 'No, don't pay the tax,' he would be delated to the local Roman authorities for sedition, and executed. If he said, 'Yes, do pay the tax,' they would stir up popular feeling against him, portraying him as a

collaborator with the occupying power. Taxation was a sensitive issue with many families levied between one-third and half of their income. Either way Jesus would be trapped. The dishonesty of their pretended innocence is heightened by the flattering – though true – introduction to their question.

Vv.15-16: A tax was levied on Palestine by the Roman Empire from 6 to 70 A.D., paid in coins bearing the emperor's image. Using them implicitly recognized his sovereignty. By asking them to bring him such a coin, Jesus is reminding them that they do, in fact, already pay the tax anyway.

V.17: Jesus' answer, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's,' is the punch-line, the climax of the story; everything leads up to it. It is an answer that is open to different interpretations. One is that, since, in the view prevailing in Mark's time, the end of the world and the second coming of Christ was imminent, the insignificance of Rome's power by contrast to that of God's would be revealed. It was like saying, 'Let the emperor have what's his; it's nothing in the sight of God.' Another interpretation is that Jesus was teaching that there need not necessarily be a conflict between loyalty to God and to the state. This was to be a matter of considerable importance to Christians during the later persecutions by the empire.

It can be argued that Jesus' reply was more clever than wise. As a retort, it was clever in that it silenced his critics who deserved to be shut up because of their dishonesty. But it implies that the things of Caesar and those of God occupy separate domains, that Caesar's domain is outside of God's, or, in present-day language that religion is a private matter that should "keep out of politics," that it is simply about "saving one's soul." In recent years, an Irish cabinet minister said with what sounded like self-approval that, 'When I enter the cabinet room, I leave my conscience outside the door.' If he did, he left his humanity alongside it. Religion is about all of life; it can never be a mere weekend hobby, inward-looking and self-centred. If it is, it does not deserve the name of religion. Politics, like all human affairs, stands under the judgment of God.

It is not without significance perhaps, that, just a little later, Mark has Jesus quoting the *Shema*, the daily prayer of Jews, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' (Mark 12.29-30) Loyalty to God always takes the first place. This was to be remembered especially in times of persecution, something Jesus also warns, 'Beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me.' (Mark 13.9) He himself was soon to do just that.

Jesus' way of replying to this question is part of a fairly standard pattern with him. First, he recognized that it was a trap. Then he replied to it on his own terms, not on those of his questioners. He goes on to give a teaching on a broader and deeper basis than that posed by the question. This teaching is an answer to their question, but goes further. And he commonly sends his interrogators away with a flea in their ear, having sprung their trap on themselves.

Week 9, Wednesday

Mark 12.18-27 A question about resurrection

18. Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, saying,

19. 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.

20. There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children;

21. and the second married the widow and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise;

22. none of the seven left children. Last of all, the woman herself died.

23. In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.'

24. Jesus said to them, 'Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?

25. For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

26. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"?

27. He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 22.23-33 and Luke 20.27-40.

V.19: the reference to what Moses wrote is from Deuteronomy 25.5-6: -

When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the first born whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out from Israel.

This far-fetched tale, in vv.19-23, obviously fabricated by the Sadducees for the purpose of reducing to absurdity the idea of resurrection, Jesus ignores; it did not deserve a serious response. Instead, he shifted the ground of the discussion by

pointing out that the Sadducees' idea of resurrection rested on a false premise, namely, that life after resurrection would be substantially the same as before. For Jesus, life after resurrection was qualitatively different from anything earthly; it was essentially life with God, who transcends human limitations. The Sadducees showed that they did not know 'the power of God.' (v.24) They saw God in human terms, as an extension of themselves.

For Paul on this see 1 Corinthians 15.35-57. A few extracts will illustrate: -

Someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.... Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.... Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?... But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15.35, 42, 50, 55 and 57)

It is an almost inescapable human tendency to make God in our own image and likeness - returning the compliment of Genesis 1.27! Whatever ideas, or images, we have of God inevitably break down, and the one who - mercifully - breaks them down is God, because they are all idols in one form or another. Idolatry is bringing God down to the level of the

creature as much as it is bringing a creature up to the level of God. ‘God is in some measure to a man as that man is to God.’ (C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, Fontana, London, 1976, p.23)

Doing this means that we see reality (including God) in terms of ourselves, as if we were its focus and source of meaning. That is only a step away from wanting to dominate it, including manipulating the idea of God to control others. History saw many examples of this, such as the early Hebrew view of Yahweh as a tribal war-god fighting for them against their enemies. (There is also a powerful prophetic counter-view to this in 1 Samuel 4.1b-11.) We thus become like Galileo’s critics who thought the sun revolved around the earth. This narcissistic outlook moves us from the other-centred world of the adult to the self-centred world of the child. We need a Copernican revolution of the soul to shift us out of self-centredness into God-centredness. ‘They measure God by themselves and not themselves by God,’ said the Christian mystic, John of the Cross. (*The Dark Night of the Soul*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, revised edition, ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, DC, 1991, Book 1, chapter 7, section 3, p.374) This is at the root of much of the atheism and agnosticism of recent centuries, where people – rightly - reject images of God which are simply projections of human fears, ambitions etc.

What brings about this misunderstanding is seeing ideas as defining capsules, images as real descriptions, symbols as the thing signified - for instance, thinking, when we speak of God as personal, that this means that God is personal as humans are - *persona* means role - a bigger and better version of ourselves, or thinking of God as Father in terms of human fatherhood, without acknowledging that this may have the (probably unforeseen) consequence of conjuring up an image of God in terms of male self-sufficiency on a cosmic scale, with a resultant belittling of the ordinary male, not to mention the female.

But it is impossible for humans to escape the limitations of humanity and its thought processes. What have we got except human ideas, images, language, parable and paradox? And all are equally limited. 'Never... let us think that while... images are a concession to our weakness, the abstractions are the literal truth. Both are equally concessions; each single misleading, and the two together mutually corrective.' (C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, Fontana, London, 1976, p.23) What can we do, except be aware of the way our thought processes work and acknowledge the limitations of the human mind? An appropriate response is humility, not skepticism, grateful wonder in silence - the silence, not of despair, but of reverence. It is good to say with Isaiah, 'Truly, you are a God who hides himself.' (45.15) Let God be God.

Week 9, Thursday

Mark 12.28-34 The first and the greatest commandment

28. One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?'

29. Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

30. you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

31. The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'

32. Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other;"

33. and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength," and "to love one's neighbour as oneself," - this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.'

34. When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 22.34-40 and Luke 10.25-28.

V.28: In contrast to previous episodes, a scribe comes forward, clearly acting in good faith, posing an honest - and important – question. Jesus treats him and his question with respect.

V.29: In reply, Jesus quotes the Shema (Hebrew: *Hear*), the daily prayer of Jews, from Deuteronomy 6.5.

V.30: This is the most fundamental of all the commandments.

Vv. 29-31: Jesus was asked about one commandment, but answered about two, because, for him, the two were inseparable. Love is indivisible. This conjunction of the two in one seems to have been unique to Jesus. It signals the freeing of the followers of Jesus from the multitude of laws and rules of Jewish tradition. It focuses on the basics, emphasizes priorities, and, by implication, relegates other regulations to history. And love is about invitation, not obligation.

Vv.32-33: The scribe's summary of the law in two commandments was not a novel idea at the time; Rabbi Hillel, leader of one of the two principal rabbinical schools in the decades before Jesus, had taught it.

V.34a: This is like Mark 10.21, where Jesus says to the rich man, in effect, ‘You’re almost there.’ As with him, one more step remains to the scribe, and that is to accept Jesus and follow him. Whoever accepts Jesus is “in” the kingdom of God.

V.34b: This is strange; it doesn’t appear to fit the context. Why would no one dare to ask him any question, when he had just (v.34a) commended the wisdom of the scribe who had asked one? Perhaps it refers to the hostile questioning of the four previous episodes, and signals a change in which it is Jesus who begins to ask them.

The teaching in this passage is surely one of the easiest of all in the Gospel to understand - and one of the most challenging to follow. And yet, perhaps, it requires more reflection. It raises the question: what is love?

Here is a selection of what writers from various traditions have said about it: -

‘Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.’ (1 John 4.7-8)

‘Perfect love casts out fear.’ (1 John 4.18)

‘To love is to will the good of another.’ (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. II. ques.26, art. 4 corp. art.)

‘If you love a thing for its beauty, you love none other than God, for he is the Beautiful Being. Thus, in all its aspects, the object of love is God alone.’ (Muid ad-Din al-Arabi, *The Meccan Revelations*, 2.326)

‘Love does the job of destroying the ego, not in a binge of self-hatred or contempt, but by leaving its limitations behind for the sake of the other. In gentleness it transcends the ego. But you cannot decide to love another in order to achieve this or to bring about its good effects for oneself.’ (Karen Armstrong, *A History of God. From Abraham to the Present: the 4000-year Quest for God*, Heinemann, London, 1993, pp.260-261)

‘Love is God's Holy of Holies.

Love alone is salvation.

Only in the Temple of Love do I worship God.

Love alone introduces God to us.

Where love is, there God is.’

(Toyohiko Kagawa, Japanese Christian trade unionist and pacifist, 1888-1960)

‘There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.’ (Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Albert & Charles Boni, USA, 1927, last words of the book.)

‘Do you know what makes the prison of loneliness and suspicion disappear? Every deep, genuine affection. Being friends, being brothers, loving, that is what opens the prison, by some magic force. Without these one stays dead. But wherever affection is revived, there life revives.’ (Vincent van Gogh)

‘Love is... an active hope for what others can become with the help of our support.’ (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, n.39)

‘Love - the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n.1604)

‘If you give your heart to no one, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable and unredeemable.’ (C. S. Lewis)

‘Self-giving affection is the only authentically human way to live.’ (Andrew M. Greeley)

‘Love is the one means that ensures true happiness both in this world and in the next. Love is the light that guides in darkness, the living link that unites God with humanity, that assures the progress of every illuminated soul.’ (From Abdu’l-Bahá in *The Divine Art of Living: Selections from Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, compiled by Mabel Hyde Paine, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1960, p.108)

‘Not by the Vedas or grim ascetic practice, not by the giving of alms or sacrifice can I be seen in such a form as you saw Me. But by worship of love addressed to Me alone can I be known and seen in such a form as I really am: so can my lovers enter into Me. Do works for Me, make Me your highest goal, be loyal in love to Me, cast off all other attachments, have no hatred for any being at all: for all who do so shall come to Me.’ (*Bhagavad-Gita*, 11.53-55)

‘With regard to love, there is no means of getting it, unless we give it.’ (Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer*, DLT, London, 1975, p.14)

‘There is but one thing which can bring about unity inside us, as also in our lives... and action, and that is love.’ (René Voillaume, *Seeds of the Desert: the legacy of Charles de Foucauld*, Anthony Clarke Books, 1973, p.108)

‘The first step in personhood then is to allow ourselves to be loved.’ (John Main, *Inner Christ*, DLT, London, 1994, p.49)

‘Love makes everything lovely; hate concentrates itself on the one thing hated.’ (*George MacDonald: an anthology, 365 readings*, selected and edited by C. S. Lewis, Harper, San Francisco, 2001, no.263)

‘Love, in its own nature, demands the perfecting of the beloved; the mere “kindness” which tolerates anything except suffering in its object is, in that respect, at the opposite pole from Love.’ (C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Fontana, London, 1957, p.34)

‘God does not love Himself as Himself but as Goodness; and if there were anything better than God, He would love that and not Himself.’ (*Theologica Germanica*, 32)

‘Love constantly rejoices because the more it grows the more generously it gives itself away. Consequently, while those who desire evil are impoverished by their getting, lovers are enriched by their giving. The takers are troubled even as they seek revenge for injuries done to them; lovers are at peace as they delight in giving to others the love that has been given to them. The takers avoid the works of mercy, while lovers do them cheerfully.’ (Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Sermon* 5.6; CCL 91A)

‘Love is the one thing God asks for; without this he cannot give the kingdom. Give love, then, and receive the kingdom: love, and it is yours.’ (Saint Anselm of Canterbury, Letter 112, *Opera Omnia*, 3.246)

‘Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams.’ (Father Zossima in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)

‘Don't try to reach God with your understanding; that is impossible. Reach him in love; that is possible.’ (Carlo Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*)

‘The longest way to God, the indirect, lies through the intellect. The shortest way lies through the heart.’ (Angelus Silesius, *The Enlightened Heart*)

‘In a very true sense we cannot decide to love God, any more than we can decide to breathe or to be alive.... We must not try to love God; we must become the kind of people who will discover that we do love God, and then accept it and let it come to its full flowering.’ (Simon Tugwell O.P., *Prayer*, Veritas Publications, Dublin, 1974, Volume 1, p.104)

‘The thing that most separates us from God is self-dislike.’ (Seán Ó Conaill, *Scattering the Proud*, The Columba Press, Dublin, 1999, p.38)

‘Happy is the man who loves you, my God, and his friend in you, and his enemy because of you.’ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, 4.9.

‘Jesus’ insight into the indiscriminate love of God provides the ultimate key to practically every word the Gospels record.’ (Donald Senior C.P., *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1992, p.88)

‘the true nature of charity: not a sterile fear of doing wrong but a vigorous determination that all of us together shall break open the doors of life.’ (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, translated from the French by Gerald Vann OP, Fontana, London, 1970, p.34)

‘When the evening of life comes, you will be examined in love.’ (Saint John of Cross, *The Sayings of Light and Love*, no. 60)

‘The ultimate reason for everything is love.’ (Saint John of Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 38.5.620)

‘Where there is no love, put in love, and you will draw out love...’ (Saint John of the Cross, *Letter 26*, 6 July 1591, on p.760)

‘In love, every getting is a form of giving; this other attitude is a sort of lust, where every giving is only a form of, or a means to, getting.’ (Gerald Vann, *The Divine Pity: a study in the social implications of the Beatitudes*, Collins, Fontana, London, 1971, p.72)

‘Someone asked me, “What is love?” God answered, “You will know when you lose yourself in Me.”’ (Rumi, *Masnavi II*, Prologue)

‘Whether love is from earth or heaven, it leads to God.’ (Rumi, *Masnavi I*.110-111)

‘God is not only love; God is friendship.’ (Aelred of Rievaulx)

‘Life is love, and love is sacrifice.’ (Blessed Antoni Gaudí, architect of the *Sagrada Familia* cathedral in Barcelona)

Week 9, Friday

Mark 12.35-37 A question about David’s son

35. While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, ‘How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?’

36. David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, "The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.’”

37. David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?’ And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 22.41-46 and Luke 20.45-47.

In contrast to the previous episodes, Jesus here takes the initiative with a question. Having seen off his critics, he now appears to be having some fun at their expense. He asks why scribes say that the Messiah is the son (or descendant) of David, when David himself, in Psalm 110.1 (which Jesus quotes in v.36), calls him Lord. Surely, Jesus’ argument runs, a man does not call his son Lord. So the scribes have got it wrong. Jesus seems to be playing to a

gallery and winning them to his side by a playful, if questionable, interpretation of scripture.

In any event, physical descent from David is not important, as Jesus had pointed out in Mark 3.31-35, and likewise in relation to Abraham in John 8.39-59, because the kingdom of God is not a continuation of the kingdom of David. By citing Psalm 110.1, where God (the Lord') directs the Messiah ('my Lord') to sit at his right hand, Jesus is perhaps pointing to the Messiah having a closer relationship to God than was generally supposed by his hearers. (See also notes under Mark 10.46-52.)

The six controversies, from Mark 11.27 to 12.37, though gathered together by Mark in one place, almost certainly came from different places, times and circumstances. Their significance appears to be that they point towards a definitive break between the disciples of Jesus and the Jewish community. From being, and seeing itself as, a group within Judaism, the community of the disciples of Jesus begins to develop into a distinct body standing apart from Judaism, and with its own identity. Had it not done so, it would very likely have passed into obscurity in history.

Week 9, Saturday

Mark 12.38-44 Jesus, the scribes and the poor widow

38. As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,
39. and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets!
40. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’

41. He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.
42. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.
43. Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.
44. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.

There are passages parallel to vv.38-40 in Matthew 23.1-7 and Luke 20.45-47, and to vv.41-44 in Luke 21.1-4.

Vv.38-39: Religions, in particular, seem to have a special liking for the ‘long robes’ that Jesus refers to. Whether those of the mullahs, hojatoleslams and ayatollahs of Shia Islam, or those of Buddhist monks, or the soutanes, habits, and *cappa magna* of Catholic church personnel, the evidence is striking.

Hierarchies of all kinds - royal houses, judiciaries, armies, as well as religious personnel – have a particular liking for distinctive forms of dress. Along with titles, these are adopted seemingly for the purpose of creating an alternative identity to that of the self, ranking, staking a claim to esteem, and setting wearers apart from the general public. The same might also have been said, at least in the past, of prisoners: they wore a distinctive dress, were identified by a number, and had their own hierarchical pecking order.

There is a strange psychology at work here, and Jesus challenges it, perhaps because of the often spurious authority attached to “the uniform.” He was probably well aware that the other side of the coin of hierarchy is infantilism and passivity, for example, in armies, where the rank and file soldier is not asked to take responsibility for his actions – ‘You’re not paid to think; you’re only paid to do as you’re told,’ and its inevitable corollary, ‘I was only carrying out orders.’

Matthew’s Gospel quotes Jesus as saying: -

You are not to be called rabbi, for you have only one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have only one father – the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have only one instructor – the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. (Matthew 23.8-11)

Is it not remarkable that the church so obviously, indeed so enthusiastically, does other than Jesus did?

To whom are religious institutions accountable? To God? Without being flippant, and with all respect, one can say that, for this purpose, God is safely out of the way. To the sacred scriptures, or the tradition? But who determines what is sacred scripture or merely human writing; who determines what is “in” the deposit of faith? Who interprets the scriptures and the tradition? The religious institution. It determines the limits of its authority, and becomes the judge in its own case. ‘Jesus made truth his authority and not authority his truth.’ (Éamonn Conway)

Religious institutions are among the most vigorous in resisting democratic accountability or moving from disabling to enabling hierarchy. How political institutions would love to have the kind of unaccountable authority religious institutions have! (The authority of the former works from without, of the latter from within.) The leadership of religious institutions is accountable only to itself. Such “accountability” inevitably becomes self-serving. If an institution claims the right to determine the limits of its own authority, then it in-builds untruth and abuse into its life; it cannot be otherwise. Power without accountability *inevitably* leads to abuse. An example is in the Gospel of John, where the High Priest, in answer to a question from the Roman

prefect, Pontius Pilate, as to why he had brought Jesus for trial, replied, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' (John 18.30) In other words, 'If we say something is so, then it is so - because it is we who say it.'

In general, too, the larger and more complex the hierarchy, the more self-protective it becomes, the less flexible, the less open to reform, often using the language of service to disguise the reality of control. *The* priority of any hierarchy is institutional self-preservation, not the promotion of the goals it professes to serve. The vertical, pyramid model of authority characteristic of many religious hierarchies is not people-serving; it is self-serving.

Hierarchies operate by fear, and fear is contagious and corrupting. Those who control by fear themselves become afraid. Afraid of what? That "we" will lose control, and "they" will get out of hand, or see the truth about the emperor's new clothes and walk away. Above all, they are afraid to trust people.

Hierarchies see themselves as indispensable, as being at the centre of things, and having a global view. They become an end in themselves, they make ends into means and means into ends. In this mode of thought, faith exists to maintain the institution rather than *vice versa*. The institutional swallows up

the charismatic and the prophetic, subsuming them to its interest; they are sacrificed to ecclesiolatry.

People can best deal with this, not by fighting it from without, which usually succeeds only in hardening attitudes - what we resist, persists - and in a gradual adoption of the others' priorities, values and methods - we become like those we hate. Nor need people beat their heads in futility off a wall of resistance, trying to reform the irreformable from within. They can walk away leaving the hierarchies talking to themselves, and create new models of authority and leadership. People can do what Jesus said, 'Do not resist an evildoer...' (Matthew 5.38) Those who belittle and disempower people, as many hierarchies do, are evildoers, if not in a personal sense, then in a collective. Jesus invited people to do otherwise, to create new patterns of relationships in which power-seeking is not a priority.

A strange effect of the hierarchical process is that its practitioners become, of all people, the most controlled by it. Internalizing its values, failing to see through the bluff, they are hoist on its own petard. Clericalism creates the myth of the spiritual superman, a heavy burden to carry. (The fact that some manage to maintain their humanity in it is an example of grace triumphing over adversity.) Instead of being a source of personal liberation for greater service, hierarchical structures stifle the Gospel and those who serve it. Such structures are, almost everywhere, male and patriarchal, itself a major

limitation. Celibate institutions in particular, already semi-emasculated, tenaciously uphold hierarchy out of the will to power. This may explain the resistance of clergy in some hierarchical religious structures to church councils. The will to power exists, and needs to find expression somehow. Diminish that power by having to share it, and clergy would feel fully emasculated, reduced to being puppets.

V.40: Jesus' condemnation evokes memories of Charles Dickens' 1853 novel, *Bleak House*, about lawyers – another closed and introverted hierarchy - devouring an estate in pointless litigation until the money is exhausted, at which point they arrive at a settlement. Lawyers operate a closed shop, self-centred, and self-perpetuating. They draft the laws, enact them into legislation, argue and interpret them in the courts, amend them - and earn a good living from them. The alternative is not to have no law, but to have a system which is open, transparent and accountable, responsive to public need. Otherwise, truth and justice become casualties, and the verdict goes to the person with the “best” lawyer, which, in practice, means the rich.

Hierarchies may be disabling or enabling: the former works through dictation, pretended dialogue with conclusions and decisions arrived at beforehand, communication from the top down, giving high priority to status, invoking an overarching external power as authority, (e.g. God, the nation, the ideology, the Party, the flag, etc.) They

are self-serving, self-centred, self-justifying, and ready to sacrifice truth and justice to institutional interests. ‘Sometimes the church finds it necessary, in the interests of *communio*, to set aside the requirements of natural justice,’ said a very senior Catholic cleric.

In contrast, Jesus presents God in the Trinity as relational by nature, without domination or subordination. He presents his teaching as a call to community. He looks to a community where the person is the priority, where authority is exercised in service without privilege and with accountability, decision-making is based on dialogue from the grass-roots up, power is exercised more in the service of relationships than in the performance of tasks, the common good is an over-riding concern, and there is openness to encountering God ‘outside the camp.’ (See Exodus 19.17; 33.7-11)

Notes on Mark 12.41-44

In a writer as careful as Mark, it is surely not a coincidence that this story of a widow follows immediately on a remark about widows. He dramatizes the contrast between the scribes who ‘devour widows’ houses’ (v.40), and the generosity of the widow who put into the temple treasury ‘everything she had, all she had to live on.’ (v.44) The coins in question were *lepta* – the Greek word *lepton* (sing.) means tiny – and two of them made up a *quadrans*, which amounted to one-hundredth of the

price of a meal. Her gift, insignificant in monetary terms, is seen by Jesus as an outstanding example of self-giving generosity; she gave out of her poverty, while the rich gave out of their abundance. She stands in contrast with the rich man of Mark 10.17-31; she let go of her security; he clung to his.

At a time when Mark has been stressing the failure of Israel to respond to God in Jesus, he also underlines the fidelity of one of the lesser ones in society, a widow. Her generosity “redeems” her people from failure, an action that foreshadows Jesus’ redeeming of his people through his self-giving in his death on the cross.

Week 10 Monday

Matthew 5.1-12 The Beatitudes

1. When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.
2. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
3. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
5. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
6. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
8. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
9. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
10. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
12. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 6.20-26.

These are known as the beatitudes, a word which means a blessing (Latin, *beatitudo*), because of their opening word. If the Ten Commandments are a summary of the moral teaching of the Old Testament, these are a summary of the New. They are different in character from them. The Ten Commandments are a list of sharply focused precepts, mostly framed in negative language: 'You shall not do this or that...'

Vv.1-2: Jesus taught from a mountain, as did Moses (e.g., in Exodus 19.20), his fore-runner in Matthew's presentation of him. And he teaches there

again before finally leaving his disciples. (Matthew 28.16)

But there are no mountains in the area where Jesus is said to have taught the beatitudes. Perhaps the location is mistaken, or it may be that the reference is a literary fiction created by Matthew to allude to Moses giving the Hebrews the Ten Commandments.

First: recognize your need of God. Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the poor,’ not ‘Blessed is poverty.’ Jesus is not romanticizing poverty; it is often degrading, unhealthy and dangerous. But the poor have often learned to trust in God. This is the only beatitude which is used in the present tense; the others all refer to the future. (v.3)

Second: make known your needs; you’re not self-sufficient. (v.4) (JB switches the order found in NRSV of the second and third beatitudes.)

Third: keep out of the power game. (v.5)

Fourth: care as much about justice as you would about finding food and drink when you are hungry and thirsty. (v.6)

Fifth: be merciful; you’ll need it yourself some day. (v.7)

Sixth: be single-minded; have pure intentions. (Among Jews the “heart” was seen as the seat of the intellect.) (v.8)

Seventh: make peace; ‘Do not let the sun go down on your anger.’ (Ephesians 4.26) (v.9)

Eighth: stand for what is right and take the punches that go with it. (v.10)

Vv.11-12 might be called a ninth beatitude – though they are always spoken of as eight. They sound like an extension, or even repetition, of the eighth, in v.10.

The sayings are about attitudes more than actions, so they are sometimes called “be-attitudes”; they are about being more than doing; are positive more than negative, a blessing more than a demand. In effect, they say, ‘If this is the kind of person you are, then you are blest.’

Nonetheless they call for effort. They are “ego-stripping,” not ego-tripping, a contemplative way of reading reality, to quote Richard Rohr.

But they are not set out as standards for us to attain; they are unattainable by us. They are about God’s action rather than ours. They are God’s project. Salvation is a gift, not an achievement, a grace, not an accomplishment. They are God’s work in us, if we surrender to God. God comes to us disguised as our life. God is wherever there is a human heart open to receive him.

Mary’s *Magnificat* (in Luke 1.46-55) has been described as a summary of the beatitudes. Mary was one in whom they found living expression.

Week 10, Tuesday

Matthew 5.13-16 Salt and light

13. You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

14. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

15. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

16. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 9.50 and Luke 14.34-35.

These two teachings (v.13; vv.14-16) are part of a collection of sayings of Jesus, probably from different times and places, gathered here by Matthew. They have come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5 to 7.) A possible illustration of this diversity of origin may be found in the apparent disharmony of Matthew 5.14-16 and 6.3-4.

V.13: Salt is good for seasoning food; just a little brings out the best in it. Salt is used in preserving food; pork or fish used to be preserved in brine.

You never take salt alone, but always with something else. Salt was used to disinfect wounds, hurtful but helpful.

Salt was used as a currency before money came along. A means of exchange, it was given to those said to be worth their salt. The Latin for salt is *sal*; ‘salary’ meant a monthly ration of salt.

Salt is ordinary, commonplace stuff; like 99.9% of life. It is precious; we need it in order to live.

If it becomes wet, it loses its saltiness and is worthless. It can’t be “re-salted.”

The verse reads like a challenge from Jesus to his disciples to go beyond rituals and observances and be the genuine article.

Vv.14-16: Jesus seems to say to his disciples that they should let their good works be seen. But, a little later, in Matthew 6.3-4, he says, ‘when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’ The two statements seem to contradict each other. But there is surely a time and a place for both. Like life, the Gospel has loose ends and untidy borders. It is not meant to be read forensically like a lawyer reading a legal text looking for a loophole. It’s best to treat these anomalies as complementary, not contradictory, not either-or but both-and.

V.14: Jesus said of himself, ‘I am the light of the world.’ (John 8.12) As for the master, so also for the disciple. And whatever is hidden in the dark, will be revealed: ‘nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light.’ (Luke 8.17)

Week 10, Wednesday

Matthew 5.17-19 The law and the prophets

17. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.

18. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

19. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

V.17: Jesus never renounced his Jewishness, and likely never had any thought of doing so. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew is anxious to show Jesus fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. If someone had asked Jesus, ‘Are you founding a new religion?’ it is probable that he would have answered by saying something like, ‘No. The work my Father

has given me is to bring Judaism to fulfilment.’ He might have referred to the Covenant, and said, in some manner, ‘God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice.’ (Romans 11.29) Jesus was a Jew by race, religion, culture, language and upbringing. (Jews sometimes say of Christians that we have turned him into a Gentile. That probably has much truth in it, and, if so, it is a loss to us. We cannot appreciate the humanity of a culturally naked Jesus.) Jews were, and still are, the chosen people of God, but not in an exclusive sense, because, since Jesus, all human beings are, at least potentially, the people of God. ‘There is not, there never has been, and there never will be a single person for whom Jesus Christ did not die.’ (The Council of Quiercy, 835 AD)

For Christians to understand Jesus, we need to understand his Jewishness and Judaism. When the early Christian writer, Marcion, who died excommunicate about 160, proposed that only the New Testament be recognized as foundational to Christianity, this was rejected by the Christian community of faith. And, much later, Pope Pius XI was to say of Christians, ‘Spiritually we are all Semites.’ The commandment of God, ‘Honour your father and your mother’ (Exodus 20.12), also applies to the traditions we have received from the past, including the Jewish matrix in which the Christian faith was formed.

V.18: This cannot be taken as literally true, though the introductory phrase, ‘Truly, I tell you...’ is usually understood to indicate an accurate citation from Jesus. ‘Letter’ (NRSV), ‘dot’ (JB), ‘jot’ (Douai) translate the Greek letter *iota*, (Hebrew *yod*), the smallest letter of the alphabet. ‘Stroke of a letter’ (NRSV), ‘one little stroke’ (JB), ‘one tittle’ (Douai) refer to the tiny marks – serifs - used in Hebrew to help with pronunciation or to decorate letters. It’s like talking in English about, ‘dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s.’ Jesus was not concerned with the minutiae of the Torah – far from it; he had shown that clearly in his many controversies with scribes and Pharisees. Is the saying in this verse from Jesus or from Matthew, or from Matthew’s source, common to him, Mark and Luke, the unknown one that scripture scholars call Q (from the German *Quelle*, a source)? Luke has a similar phrase in 16.17.

Jesus will indeed, in a broad and deeper sense, bring the Torah to fulfilment, not like a slave motivated by fear but like a son motivated by love. Being a son means growing up, being responsible, making choices and taking decisions and being accountable for them. The prodigal son took the wrong decisions, but he remained a son all the same. ‘I tell you solemnly, everyone who commits sin is a slave. Now the slave’s place in the house is not assured, but the son’s place is assured.’ (John 8.34-35)

This means having the courage to speak openly; the loyalty to look beyond one's self to the needs of the other, being ready to walk the extra mile, and to give without counting the cost.

The son is not *bound* by rules, not because he ignores or disobeys them, but because he goes beyond them. He doesn't say, 'I make my own rules' (the attitude of the adolescent) but 'I make the rules my own' (the attitude of an adult). He assimilates and interiorizes their meaning and purpose, so that while being faithful to their spirit he is able to be flexible with the letter... responsibly.

He is able to think of freedom not only as freedom *from* but also, and more importantly, freedom *for*, e.g. freedom *from* selfishness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency, self-indulgence or a childish refusal to grow up and take responsibility for ourselves to freedom *for* service to others.

There is a need for mental adjustment before we are able to grasp what Jesus was saying. The moment one begins to assert that law is not primary, as Jesus did, there are those who see this as the slippery slope to irresponsibility and anarchy. They cannot grasp that there is only one source of security for a Christian, and that is faith in Christ; he alone is the way, the truth, and the life. (John 14.6) Systems are no substitute; on the contrary, they may become an obstacle to union with God, especially if they are imposed in a way which lacks respect for human

freedom. We need order and discipline as ‘occasional crutches to our weakness,’ but not as dominant values. When they dominate, we have reduced religion to ‘a handy form of social organization.’ (John F. X. Harriott, *The Empire of the Heart*, Templegate & Gracewing, Springfield & Leominster, 1990, p.37)

V.19: ‘whoever does them and teaches them...’ In the end, we will be judged on what we have done, not on what we have taught, or said we have believed in. There is an element of the (Protestant) Reformed tradition which puts great store on getting the right statement of belief. If you can say you believe in Jesus as your personal Saviour, you’re home and dried; if not, you are on your way to perdition. But here Jesus gives the priority to *doing*, and then to teaching. (Matthew 25.31-46 also gives priority to doing.)

Here is one of many references to the kingdom of heaven. Sometimes the term used is the kingdom of God. Kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are different ways of saying the same thing. Both are common, in Matthew especially - kingdom of God seven times and kingdom of heaven thirty-nine times. Jewish reverence for God meant they often used substitutes, such as heaven (as in ‘What in heaven’s name?’), or The Name (*Hashem*) rather than the word God (which they often spell G-d in English). Some scripture scholars say that a better translation of the phrase would be the Rule or Reign

of God, which avoids problems associated with a political term like kingdom. One loose way of describing the Rule of God is to say that it is the world as God would like it to be, the world as it would be if God's will were done on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6.10)

Feminists point out that *kingdom* is a patriarchal term; they suggest the alternative word *kindom*.

Week 10, Thursday

Matthew 5.20-26 On anger

20. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

21. You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

22. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

23. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,

24. leave your gift there before the altar and go and first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

25. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.

26. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 12.57-59.

V.20: Jesus is calling his disciples to a higher standard. His critique of a legalistic approach to the Torah is not a cloak for an easy way out. His teaching goes further and deeper than mere observance of laws and rules; it reaches to the human heart and calls for conversion.

Vv.21-22: Jesus is here looking at attitudes, at the underlying frame of mind that leads to murder. Clearly, murder usually involves premeditation and follows when a person has not checked feelings of anger, hatred or bitterness towards another. Anger must have a large part in it. Jesus acknowledges different kinds or degrees of anger and lists them, 'if you are angry,' 'if you insult' and 'if you say, "You fool."' There is the anger that flares up in a sudden outburst but calms down again quickly; there is the anger that smoulders beneath the surface, growing more intense, like a volcano preparing to erupt. Of this latter, the Desert Fathers used to say that it is

better to meet the devil than not to meet him, which, in this context, means that it is better to face your anger, acknowledging and naming it than suppressing it, as that only tightens the screws of repression, making the explosion more violent when it comes.

Jesus is surely not talking of the righteous anger which has often served as a spur to working for justice and ending oppression. He himself showed this anger on occasion, as, for example, in Matthew 16.4; 17.17 and 23.1-36. And this may have been what Saint Augustine had in mind when he wrote, ‘Hope has two beautiful daughters – anger and courage.’

But there is another side to the matter of righteous anger. The sixteenth century Spanish writer, Luis de Granada, wrote, ‘An angry man thinks that in whatever he does... he always has justice on his side; indeed, he is often deceived so far as to imagine that the very heart of his anger is nothing but zeal for justice, and so vice hides itself under the colour of virtue.’ And experience confirms the truth of what was said by the eighteenth century English writer, William Law: ‘As anger produces angry words, so angry words increase anger.’ And there is still another dimension to it, ‘As long as we live in hatred of our neighbours we are hating our own selves, because hatred deprives us of divine charity. How stupidly blind not to see that with the sword of hatred of our neighbour we are killing ourselves!’ (Saint Catherine of Siena, Letter 78, from *The*

Letters of Saint Catherine of Siena, Suzanne Noffke OP, Vol.1, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 1988, pp.238-239.)

Vv.23-24: With Jesus, reconciliation with brother or sister is a precondition for worship. In the example Jesus gives, it is the other who has a grievance against us, not we against him. But we should take the first step, not wait for the other. It is not dissimilar to Mark 11.25, where Jesus says, 'When you stand in prayer, forgive whatever you have against anybody, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your failings, too,' or to the Old Testament teaching, 'Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven.' (Sirach 28.2) They are complementary.

Masters of self-deception that we humans are, we may feel that the above does not apply to us, thinking, 'I have no enemies.' Really? Is there no one the mention of whose name does not give us a jolt? Is there nothing at all in our lives that does not arouse in us feelings of anger, resentment, hurt, a desire for revenge, etc.? Unless we are living in cloud-cuckoo land, we must acknowledge that there are such people in our past or present. And it is to that situation that the teaching is directed.

We are not good at doing it. In the Church of Ireland Communion service they sometimes issue the invitation to Communion by saying, 'Let all who have forgiven their enemies come forward to

receive.’ That might shorten the queue dramatically! It is easy to imagine someone responding to this by saying, ‘But surely Jesus never meant that to be taken literally!’ Really? Much more of that way of thinking and the Gospel will be reduced to platitudes, saying nothing.

Suppose we asked ourselves the question, ‘If it were a crime to be a Christian, and I was brought before a court charged with being one, would there be enough evidence for a conviction?’

Vv.25-26: Jesus is here presented as offering practical advice: settle out of court if you can, rather than take the route of litigation. It is an inescapable reality that actions have consequences. In taking a case to court, we may expect to win but find that we lose. Going to court has only two certainties – a verdict and a bill.

However, NCHS states (717f) that vv.25-26 were probably inserted into the discourse by Matthew. The Gospel is good news rather than good advice; Jesus didn’t offer homely nostrums.

In Matthew 5.20-48, Jesus introduces a series of sayings with the words, ‘You have heard how it was said...’ and he quotes a saying, which is nearly always from the Bible. And then he goes on to offer his own comment, explanation or extension, by saying, ‘But I say this to you...’ This was a

revolution. No one else would have dared to say such a thing. It was no wonder that people would say of him that, 'Here is a teaching that is new – and with authority.' (Mark 1.27) Jesus taught with authority; he could do that because he was the author of the teaching. No one else, no teacher of his time, would have dared to teach by saying, 'You have heard how it was said, but I say to you...' Just a little while before he had said, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5.17-18)

But clearly Jesus felt a freedom to push the boundaries of teachings. While there was substantial continuity – he did not repudiate the Old Testament or any or his Jewish heritage - there were also significant extensions, and he was just about to make one.

Week 10, Friday

Matthew 5.27-32 On adultery and divorce

27. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

28. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

29. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of

your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

30. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

31. It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

32. But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

There are passages parallel to vv.31-32 in Mark 10.11-12 and Luke 16.18.

Vv.27-30 deal with adultery and vv.31-32 with divorce. It surely cannot be a coincidence that these topics are placed together. (Was it Jesus or Matthew who arranged them so? One may reply, 'Does it matter?' They are what we have and they are so revealed to us.) Their placing suggests strongly that adultery is seen as a major cause of divorce, and the experience of life would seem to bear this out.

Vv.27-30: As with the previous statement on anger and murder, Jesus here establishes a link between lust and adultery. Desire is father to the deed. Every infidelity, whether in marriage or anything else, usually begins with repeated, tolerated small infidelities.

Jesus adopts an uncompromising stance. Like greed, lust will never say, 'I have enough.' It will always look for more and may become addictive. But most, if not all, addictions begin with small, indulged acts of wrong-doing. An addiction to internet pornography, for example, may have begun with a glance at a site the viewer came across by accident, but, instead of being rejected it was indulged, and it led to the next one until a habit was formed, and then the habit became an addiction. What may have begun as a claimed right – 'I have a right to look at whatever I want' - then becomes 'I'm helpless, I can't stop, I'm not responsible and so what follows is not my fault.'

Jesus recognizes the demon of lust and knows it can't be bargained with. Drastic measures are necessary and it needs to be cut out without compromise before it gets a grip on a person's soul. This might mean, for example, breaking off a relationship with another.

Charlotte Bronte, writing in *Jane Eyre*, has Jane say: -

I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane and not mad – as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in

mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth – so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane – quite insane; with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs. Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by; there I plant my foot. (This was when Jane was infatuated by Rochester who wanted to marry her as well as his wife.)

Vv.31-32: The teaching on divorce is unusual in at least two respects: -

- The first is that it went against the grain of what was accepted as normal in the time of Jesus, both in his own Jewish culture and in that of the surrounding cultures of Greece, Rome, Persia and Egypt. In all of them divorce was accepted and widely practised, as it is today in most countries.
- The second is that it is clearly taught in Matthew (here and in 19.9), in Mark (10.12), Luke (16.18) and Paul (1 Corinthians 7.10-11). Few teachings receive this level of priority.

Jesus presents a one-size-fits-all teaching which makes no concessions to human weakness. This is unusual in him. We may be sure that he was as well

aware as anyone of the diversity of human situations, of the pain of unhappy marriages, of cruelty and abuse in some marriages, etc. Yet he appears to make no accommodation to any of that. It is as if he sees divorce and re-marriage as something which has to be met head on, without compromise, that any accommodation to it will inevitably lead to the undermining of commitment to permanent marriage and to the erosion of family life. His concern was to lift standards, not to dive to the bottom to accommodate the lowest common denominator.

It does clearly appear to be the case that divorce, initially introduced for only a few emotionally charged and seemingly very deserving cases, gradually has its grounds widened until now all that is required is mutual agreement after a short period of separation. Jesus must have seen that arguments based on the needs of the children cut both ways, that divorce may indeed be traumatizing for them, but so may living in a family where there is anger, hatred and violence.

Historically, for a long time, divorce with re-marriage was prohibited in Christian countries. On balance, that probably gave greater stability to family life, and helped ensure that young people entering into marriage thought more seriously about it, in the knowledge that there would be no way out. 'You make your bed and you lie in it' was a common saying. Where divorce is easy, as it is now,

it is difficult for young people to have the same level of commitment to making their marriage work. Recourse to the divorce court, while it is not the first response to a serious row, may not be far behind.

It is worth quoting at some length from a contemporary writer, Melanie Phillips: -

Marriage, the M-word,... [is] the love that dare not speak its name.

So many people, particularly within the intellectual classes and especially the media, are into serial dysfunctional relationships and have a vested interest in suggesting that this is a normal and desirable way to live.

Until very recently the malign effects generally inflicted by divorce upon children were denied. Indeed, it was said that it was better for children if their unhappy parents parted.

Fatherhood is acknowledged as important - but its obligations can apparently be discharged perfectly well at a distance from the family. At the same time, fathers must turn themselves into hands-on carers. Male bread-winning, it is said, is absolutely inimical to adequate fatherhood because it takes the man away from his children; bread-winning by mothers, on the other hand, is absolutely essential to enable women to gain independence from men.

The autonomous individual... now reigns supreme.

The breakdown of the traditional family is the single greatest issue of our time, and the most difficult.

Those who argue with most fury against the traditional family almost always do so... from private positions of great pain, guilt and anguish.

In general most children do worse, relatively speaking, if they come from fragmented or reconstituted families, and tend to repeat the pattern in their own inability as adults to form permanent relationships. Many adults also get hurt by marriage breakdown. Life after betrayal or desertion is no picnic.

Stable family life is the bedrock of securely attached individuals and the resulting co-operative social order.

There is a rising tide of juvenile distress and disorder throughout the Western world which cannot be accounted for by poverty or unemployment. It is more likely to be due to a collapse of social bonds, with family breakdown at its heart.

The collapse means the erosion of those networks of trust, responsibility and commitment that make up civic society. The child whose parents are split asunder by adultery has its assumptions about trust, fidelity and commitment destroyed.

Commitment... means undertaking to restrict one's freedom of action in a greater cause. But to the absolute individualist, any such restriction is by definition oppressive.

Cohabitation..., we are told, is just as good as marriage in that parents who cohabit can be just as committed to caring for their children. But most cohabitations break down or mutate into marriage.... Only... some four percent of children not being brought up by their own married parents live in stable cohabiting households.

Links between acts and their consequences should be restored so that personal behaviour is seen to matter again.

Marriage represents the intersection between public and private morality.

Family relationships now centre round private sexual acts which have become divorced from their consequences.

Marriage is being dismantled by the doctrine of equivalence, which demotes it from the foundation stone of a civilized society to just another lifestyle choice, to be discarded along with those who rely on its support.

People who imagine they have pursued their own inalienable right to personal happiness by throwing marriage away get enraged by the reminder that there are adverse consequences for others.

(Melanie Phillips, "Keep using the M-word," *The Tablet*, 14 February 1998, pp.197-198)

V.32: What are we to make of the phrase, 'except on the ground of unchastity'? There are different interpretations: -

- One is that unchastity (Greek: *porneia*) refers to actions within a forbidden degree of relationship, such as those between a brother and sister. Such a “marriage” would be no marriage at all, would be invalid to begin with. If it took place, it would be dissoluble without violating the prohibition on divorce and re-marriage, since it was never a real marriage to begin with.
- Another view is that the verse is saying that, if a man divorces his wife he causes her to commit adultery, since, in that culture, she could not live as a single woman; but, if she had already committed unchastity anyway, then he would not be forcing her to do it.

Whatever interpretation may be given to the phrase, it is impossible to see it as conceding divorce on the grounds of adultery, without ignoring the context in which it is set.

‘This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honour, not with lustful passion...’ (1 Thessalonians 4.3-4) ‘Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.’ (Hebrews 13.4) Fidelity in marriage makes for good relationships, good health in mind and body, and good conscience.

Week 10, Saturday

Matthew 5.33-37 On telling the truth

33. Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.'

34. But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,

35. or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

36. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

37. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Vv.33-35: The passage is about perjury. The phrases used – 'by heaven,' 'by the throne of God,' 'by Jerusalem' - were considered to be ways of swearing 'by God' without actually using God's name, which was forbidden.

V.36: This may have been a colloquial expression at the time.

V.37: The *Jerusalem Bible* gives a more understandable translation: 'All you need say is "Yes" if you mean yes, "No" if you mean no.' James has that same formula: 'let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No" be no.' (5.12) The doubled Yes or No were understood as oath-formulae in the time after

Jesus. But the meaning is the same in either case:
Say what you mean and mean what you say.

When Saint Paul felt himself to be under suspicion of disingenuousness, he defended himself in similar language: -

For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with the simplicity and sincerity of God, (and) not by human wisdom but by the grace of God.

For we write you nothing but what you can read and understand, and I hope that you will understand completely,

as you have come to understand us partially, that we are your boast as you also are ours, on the day of (our) Lord Jesus.

With this confidence I formerly intended to come to you so that you might receive a double favour,

namely, to go by way of you to Macedonia, and then to come to you again on my return from Macedonia, and have you send me on my way to Judea.

So when I intended this, did I act lightly? Or do I make my plans according to human considerations, so that with me it is 'yes, yes' and 'no, no'?

As God is faithful, our word to you is not 'yes' and 'no.' (2 Corinthians 1.12-18)

The issue in the text is truthfulness. Jesus accompanies the teaching with a heavy punch: ‘anything more than this comes from the evil one.’ He says an emphatic no to spin, cute hooring, running with the hare while hunting with the hounds, plausible deniability, elasticating the truth, telling people what you think they want to hear, etc. He is also saying an emphatic No to simple lying, and especially to perjury. The context of the passage seems to be that of swearing oaths.

Just tell the truth, because ‘The truth shall make you free.’ (John 8.32) (That phrase is inlaid on the floor of the foyer of the CIA headquarters at Langley, Virginia.) Life is simpler for ourselves if we do. Truthfulness creates trust; that is a better and easier way to live than with lies, deceit and ambiguity.

Truthfulness brings freedom, as for example, in not having to remember which lies we told to which person. ‘It’s impossible to cheat reality [truth]; reality will always take its revenge.’ (Jean Sullivan) Truthfulness is the foundation of credibility; if we are truthful we will be trusted; and, if not, we won’t. Sam Maginess of the Ulster Unionist Party paid a great compliment to Séamus Mallon of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, saying at a tense time in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement, ‘I never heard him tell a lie.’ ‘In a time of testing, one word of truth outweighs a whole world of lies.’ (Alexander Solzhenitsyn)

The prophet Muhammad said, ‘The best *jihad* is to speak the word of truth before a tyrant’ (An-Nawawi notes). Saint Vassily the (so-called) Holy Fool (after whom Saint Basil’s cathedral in Red Square is named) was the only person that Tsar Ivan the Terrible listened to and was influenced by. He alone told him the truth.

In this passage, as in the four that preceded and the two that follow, Jesus is indirectly saying something about himself. By quoting the Torah, which came from God, and extending or amending it, he was implicitly claiming an authority which no teacher of his time would have dared to claim. Who can “extend” or “amend” God’s teaching but God? The significance of this was not lost on his hearers.

Week 11, Monday

Matthew 5.38-42 On retaliation and other matters

38. You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

39. But I say to you, ‘Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;

40. and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;

41. and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

42. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.’

There is a parallel passage in Luke 6.29-31.

Vv.38-39: Mahatma Gandhi said, ‘An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind,’ while Nikita Khrushchev, the former Soviet leader, said that if anyone struck him on the cheek he would knock his head off.

The original saying is from Exodus 21.24, which may have borrowed it from the Code of Hammurabi where it is found. In the context of its time, it was a measure of restraint. In a tribal society, where raiding for animals was not uncommon, it said, in effect, ‘If someone raids your herd and steals thirty sheep, you may take thirty back, but not forty.’ Jews say that, in practice, it was not done as described, but instead compensation was paid in cash or kind.

Jesus is not recommending it as a course of action. That is clear from the antithesis, ‘You have heard that it was said...’ followed by, ‘But I say to you...’ That is his way of amending or correcting a teaching or current idea. He proposes a way which breaks through the spiral of attack and counter-attack, aggression and retaliation; those simply give another spin to the spiral. You don’t quench a fire by adding fuel to it. In Northern Ireland, the nationalist leader, John Hume, coined the word *whataboutery* to describe an attitude: ‘What about the time when your

side did X to us?' The reply comes back, 'And what about the time before that when your side did Y to us?' It is a common attitude; all it does is perpetuate the mindset that lead to more violence.

Jesus says, 'Do not resist an evildoer,' or 'Offer the wicked man no resistance.' (JB) What we resist, persists. We actually strengthen the evildoer through resistance. Doing so also means that we allow him to set the agenda - we simple react instead of acting. In doing so, we will gradually come to adopt his thinking and mode of action. There is then no moral difference between the attacker and the counter-attacker and the matter ends with two wicked people instead of one.

Offering the other cheek is the last thing an attacker expects; it takes him by surprise. If he is a person with a conscience, with humanity that can be appealed to, it makes him stop and think, perhaps asking himself, 'Why do I attack this person? He's not aggressive. Can I not reason with him instead?' It creates a new mood in which dialogue becomes possible.

But that depends on the other party having a conscience and humanity to appeal to. What can one do when dealing with a Hitler for whom those ideas are despicable, to be crushed as evidence of weakness? Or in dealing with a Stalin who said, 'One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic,' and who acted accordingly, organizing a

famine in Ukraine in the autumn of 1937, resulting in the death of six to seven million people?

When Gandhi organized passive resistance against the British in India, persuading his followers to lie down on the roads in front of British Army trucks, thereby preventing them from moving troops from one place to another, he acted on the (correct) assumption that the British had a conscience and would not drive trucks over living people. But when Hungarians did the same in Budapest in 1956, the Soviets had no scruple in crushing their living bodies to pulp with tanks.

What Jesus proposes is analogous to the difference between debate and dialogue. Debate is about scoring points, playing to the gallery, ridiculing the other and making him look foolish. It is a win-or-lose situation. By contrast, dialogue is a common search for truth; it treats the other with respect, includes a willingness to listen and a recognition that we are all learners. It is a win-win situation.

V.40: This is a quick way to end up naked. Is the language a rhetorical flourish as is said to be the case in Matthew 19.24 where Jesus says, 'it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God'? Was it also hyperbole when he said, 'None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions' (Luke 14.33)? Or when Saint Paul in Colossians said, 'Greed... is the same thing as

worshipping a false god (3.5)”? We should resist the temptation to explain the Gospel by explaining it away; there are hard sayings in it.

Does it mean a willingness to share? It surely includes it. To quote Gandhi again, ‘There is enough in this world for everyone’s need; there is not enough for everyone’s greed.’ A world where rich and poor individuals and nations share will likely be a more just and peaceful one than the past or present.

Generous actions usually evoke a generous response.

V.41: Another translation puts it this way: ‘If one of the occupation soldiers forces you to go one mile...’ But, if you do, you make yourself a collaborator and may pay a heavy price.

Jesus, in these verses, is trying to change patterns of relationships from fixed, hardened attitudes which make no progress but simply remain in a rut, perpetuating old divisions and hatreds. He is asking people to make a leap, firstly, perhaps, of imagination, to think outside the box, and try to visualize what relationships might be after a settlement and then, as it were, work back from there to the present and see what change it calls for.

V.42: In contrast, Shakespeare said, ‘Neither a borrower nor a lender be, for loan oft loses both itself and friend.’ (*Hamlet*, I, 3) My own experience

of lending is that repayment is rare, so that my preference is now not to lend anything but instead simply give it as a gift. The lender-borrower or creditor-debtor relationship is often inimical to friendship, whereas a gift enhances it.

Week 11

Tuesday

Matthew 5.43-48 Love your enemies

43. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'

44. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

45. so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

46. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

47. And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

48. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 6.27-28, 32-36.

V.43: Jesus quotes what may have been a popular saying of his time (It reminds me of the “Love Celtic, hate Rangers” sticker I saw on the back of a car in Belfast.) It is not found in the Bible. Quite the contrary: the first half of the quotation is from Leviticus, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.’ (19.18) And, in his parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus interprets the term “neighbour” to include traditional enemies. (Luke 10.25-37) The Catechism I learned at primary school taught: ‘My neighbour is all mankind, even those who injure me, or differ from me in religion.’ (*A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine approved by the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland*, Gill and Son, Dublin, 1951, Q.279)

Judaism made two great contributions to humanity – belief in one God, and a heightened sense of conscience. The first lays the foundation for human unity, while the second makes life liveable. Judaism taught ideals for both society and the individual, which must have been startling to their Gentile neighbours. Foremost among them were, ‘see justice done for the orphan and the widow’ (Deuteronomy 10.18) and ‘Love the stranger, then, for you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt.’ (Deuteronomy 10.19) Among the Gentiles no one cared about the widow and the orphan, except, perhaps, and only perhaps, their extended family. Pagan religions took little or no interest in moral matters; those were outside their area of interest. As for the stranger in the land, he or she was ripe for exploitation by

robbery, enslavement or murder. Similarly, the jubilee year described in Leviticus 25.8-17, 29-31 sets out ideals about ownership of land and remission of debts which, even if never implemented as stated, at least opened up people's minds to look beyond their own desires to a sense of social justice:

Seven weeks of years shall you count - seven times seven years - so that the seven cycles amount to forty-nine years.

Then, on the tenth day of the seventh month let the trumpet resound; on this, the Day of Atonement, the trumpet blast shall re-echo throughout your land.

This fiftieth year you shall make sacred by proclaiming liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when every one of you shall return to his own property, every one to his own family estate.

In this fiftieth year, your year of jubilee, you shall not sow, nor shall you reap the after-growth or pick the grapes from the untrimmed vines.

Since this is the jubilee, which shall be sacred for you, you may not eat of its produce, except as taken directly from the field.

In this year of jubilee, then, every one of you shall return to his own property.

Therefore, when you sell any land to your neighbour or buy any from him, do not deal unfairly.

On the basis of the number of years since the last jubilee shall you purchase the land from him; and so also, on the basis of the number of years for crops, shall he sell it to you.

When the years are many, the price shall be so much the more; when the years are few, the price shall be so much the less. For it is really the number of crops that he sells you.

Do not deal unfairly, then; but stand in fear of your God. I, the Lord, am your God.

When someone sells a dwelling in a walled town, he has the right to buy it back during the time of one full year from its sale.

But if such a house in a walled town has not been redeemed at the end of a full year, it shall belong in perpetuity to the purchaser and his descendants; nor shall it be released in the jubilee.

However, houses in villages that are not encircled by walls shall be considered as belonging to the surrounding farm land; they may be redeemed at any time, and in the jubilee they must be released.

In respect of social justice, Judaism stands unique among the religions of the past. Powerful prophets like Amos have few rivals in any religion with his self-criticism of his own people and religion: -

The Lord says this: for the three crimes, the four crimes, of Israel,

I have made my decree and will not relent:
because they have sold the virtuous man for
silver
and the poor man for a pair of sandals,
because they trample on the heads of ordinary
people and push the poor out of their path....
(2.6-7)

Seek good and not evil so that you may live,
and that the Lord, the God of hosts, may really
be with you as you claim he is.
Hate evil, love good,
maintain justice at the city gate. (5.14-15)

I hate and despise your feasts,
I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals.
When you offer me holocausts,
I reject your oblations,
and refuse to look at your sacrifices of cattle.
Let me have no more of the din of your
chanting,
no more of your strumming on harps.
But let your justice flow like water,
and integrity like an unfailing stream. (5.21-24)

Woe to those ensconced so snugly in Zion....
lying on ivory beds and sprawling on their
divans,
they dine on lambs from the flock, and stall-
fatted veal;
they bawl to the sound of the harp,

they invent new instruments of music like David,
they drink wine by the bowlful,
and use the finest oil for anointing themselves,
but about the ruin of Joseph they do not care at all.

That is why they will be the first to be exiled;
the sprawlers' revelry is over. (6.1-7)

By the time of Jesus, the precept of Leviticus 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (19.18) had come, in practice, to be understood as 'Love your Jewish neighbour as yourself.' Jesus goes beyond that, to say that it means everyone. (The parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10.25-37 illustrates this powerfully.) This universal love is a dominant feature of Matthew's gospel.

Jesus taught us to love our enemies, and also to love our neighbours; sometimes the two are one and the same. Nowhere in the Gospel does Jesus say we must be nice to people. Neither does he say we must *like* our enemies. Their personality and ours may simply clash and we may never like them. But that does not matter. To love means to will the good of the other. That means to treat them with respect as human beings, to act justly towards them, to speak truthfully about them, and to do whatever good we can towards them. Would you give your enemy a blood transfusion? If you would, then you love them, even if you still do not like them.

Vv.44-47: This teaching must have seemed to Jesus' hearers revolutionary, extraordinary in its radicalness, setting a standard not only impossibly difficult but even beyond reason. In their tradition, the duty of love extended to one's co-religionists and fellow-countrymen, but not beyond.

V.44: Can love be commanded at all? If by love we mean an emotion, the answer must be No. If by love we mean a decision, a choice, a commitment, an act of free will, then the answer must be Yes. If to love is to will the good of the other – to will means to wish *effectively* - then we *can* make a decision to do good to the other, even if that other is one who evokes in us emotions of revulsion, hatred or anger. The person who perseveres in doing good deeds will become a loving person.

Jesus does not ask us to like people or to be nice to them; that's nowhere to be found in the Gospel. He commands us to love them, even if we do not like them, or even if we can't stand the sight of them. That is simply irrelevant. Love is deeper and more wide-ranging than any mere compatibility of personality. It is deeper in that it is able to overlook dislikes and it is more far-reaching in that it excludes no one. Love is indivisible.

Vv.45-47: Verse 46 has the sense of 'If you love *only* those who love you...' The verse carries little impact without the *only*, since the point is that simply returning love to those who show love to you

does not move beyond the *quid pro quo* attitude that might be expected among Gentiles, and he looks for more than that from his followers. Jesus illustrates the non-discriminating character of the love he calls for by pointing to the way God loves in causing the sun to rise, and the rain to fall, on all people, whether good or evil, just or unjust. He points out that even tax-collectors and Gentiles will greet their friends, so what merit is there in doing no more than that? The tax-collectors (or publicans) were widely despised and hated as collaborators with the Roman imperial occupation of Palestine. Gentiles (non-Jews, *goyim* in Hebrew) were seen as outsiders, of whom little or nothing could be said that was good.

V.48: And then, to cap it all, Jesus says, ‘Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.’ This is a wrap-up phrase, concluding not just this passage but the whole series of antitheses in 5.17-47. This may be an echo of, ‘Be holy as I the Lord your God am holy.’ (Leviticus 19.2) And later in Matthew, Jesus said to the rich man, ‘If you wish to be perfect...’ (19.21) His hearers might have thought that this really eclipsed his previous extravagance. Who can possibly be perfect, if perfection means being faultless? No one. Jesus himself had said, ‘No one is good but God alone.’ (Luke 18.19) So, is Jesus asking the impossible?

One view is that the word ‘perfect’ is essentially misleading. It translates the Greek word *telos*, a goal or end, and the adjective *teleios* deriving from it.

They do not refer to perfection in a moral sense. They mean reaching your goal, achieving your end or purpose. So the verse could mean, 'Become what you were meant to become.' In an adult it would mean mature, grown. And what is that? To be an adult son or daughter of God, 'coming to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.' (Ephesians 4.13) For Matthew that means living by the supreme law of love.

This verse may be linked with Jesus' saying, 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.' (Mark 12.31) To love ourselves means first that we need to know and accept ourselves. Many people don't do that; they are ashamed of themselves, belittle themselves and dumb themselves down. No good comes of that. It is an acquired condition, not a natural one. The American psychologist, John Powell, said,

We have laboured so long under the delusion that corrections, criticism, and punishments stimulate a person to grow. We have rationalized the taking out of our unhappiness and incompleteness in many destructive ways.

That is linked to what has been called *musterbation*, or hardening of the oughteries, where the words *must*, *ought*, *should*, *have to*, etc. exercise an inquisitorial control over a person, working through their sense of guilt and hollowing out their potential for growth from the inside, leaving them feeling useless and empty. The Irish author, Seán Ó Conaill,

wrote, 'The thing that most separates us from God is self-dislike.' (*Scattering the Proud*, The Columba Press, Dublin, 1999, p.38) Self-dislike is a long way from Jesus' saying, 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.' (John 10.10)

Week 11

Wednesday

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-18 Almsgiving, prayer and fasting

Jesus said:

1. Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.
2. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.
3. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
4. so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
5. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.
6. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in

secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

16. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

17. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

18. so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

This message of Jesus addresses a potential danger in a culture where religious observance had high priority. Among Jews, prayer, almsgiving, and fasting were held in high esteem, and the danger of doing them in order to make an impression and win praise was real.

In a culture like ours today, where religious observance has little priority, the message might seem superfluous. Would anyone really pray, give alms or fast in order to be seen doing it? Unlikely. If they did, they would invite derision, or condemnation as hypocrites. Is that because the message of this passage has got through? Maybe, or maybe not.

There's nothing wrong with being seen praying, giving alms or fasting; what is wrong is doing them in order to be seen.

Some time after the Iranian revolution of 1979 there was a football match in a stadium in Tehran. Just before it was about to begin, a Muslim religious leader arrived and announced that the start of the match would be postponed because he was going to lead the spectators in prayer. He did so; the crowd prayed for a while – I don't remember how long – and then the match began.

Some Irish people – Catholics – hearing about that, expressed admiration for the strong faith of those Muslim men, saying that they really believed their faith and were committed to it - 'not like us.'

What would have happened if, before a match in Croke Park, the Archbishop of Dublin arrived and announced that he was delaying the start of the match because he was first going to lead the spectators in the Rosary, and then the match could begin?

He would be shouted down before he even started the first prayer. There would be howls of protest from the crowd – mostly Catholics - about religion being shoved down people's throats. And the media would make great play with it.

Passing through an airport in London with some Irish holiday-makers, I saw a group of Muslims unroll prayer mats in the open concourse, turn them towards Mecca and begin to pray. My fellow-

travellers – Catholics - praised them for the courage and conviction of their faith.

Suppose that a group of Catholics publicly said the Angelus at Dublin airport, or grace before meals in an airport restaurant, what would the reaction be? I think it is likely that they would be denounced by their fellow Catholics as fanatics or hypocrites.

There seems to be a double standard: if Muslims do it, it's great; if Catholics do it, it is fanaticism or hypocrisy. And it is Catholics who would call it that. Why are so many Catholics afraid to profess the faith, ashamed of being known as believers, or even hostile to the faith? But, at their death, those same Catholics will expect the last sacraments and the full rites of Christian burial at their local church.

Week 11

Thursday

Matthew 6.7-15 On prayer

7. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

8. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

9. Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

10. Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

11. Give us this day our daily bread.
12. And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13. And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.
14. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your
heavenly Father will also forgive you;
15. but if you do not forgive others, neither will
your Father forgive your trespasses.

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 11.2-4.

V.8: ‘Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.’ Prayer of petition often sounds like trying to cajole God into doing what we want. Jesus is saying that God already knows what we want, so there’s no need to bombard him. Prayer of petition sometimes comes close to superstition, which is trying to subordinate the divine to the human. Maybe prayer of petition should be about bringing our will into line with God’s; then we will get what we ask. ‘We do not pray in order to change a divine decree, but, by asking, people deserve to receive what the all-powerful God has decreed from all eternity to give them.’ (Saint Gregory the Great, quoted by Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, II, question 83, article 2.) That sounds a bit like shooting an arrow, following it, drawing a ring in the ground around it, and then announcing ‘Bull’s eye!’ Meister Eckhart said

something similar, ‘If God does not want what I want, then I must want what God wants.’ Both are clever, and maybe true. But they are poor consolation to, for example, a mother who prays in vain for her child’s recovery.

Matthew has seven petitions in his rendering of the Our Father. He also has seven parables (13.3ff.); forgiveness is to be given seventy-seven times (18.22); and there are seven “Woes” for the Pharisees. (23.13ff.) It may be that his version – substantially longer than Luke’s - has its origin in liturgical use in the growing Christian community.

V.9: God is here spoken of as Father. In John, the word Abba, meaning Daddy or Papa, is used twice of God. (1.17-18; 1 John 4.9) Here Matthew adds ‘in heaven,’ maybe because people felt that Abba was excessively familiar. Luke 11.2 simply has ‘Father.’

Thinking of God as father was already part of Jewish tradition. In Hosea, God says, ‘

When Israel was a child I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt.... I was like someone who lifts an infant close against his cheek; stooping down to him I gave him his food. (11.2-4)

And in Deuteronomy (1.31), ‘The Lord carried you as a man carries his child, all along the road you travelled...’ God is also thought of as a mother, in

Isaiah, where God asks, ‘Does a mother forget her baby at the breast or fail to cherish the child of her womb? Yet, even if these forget, I will never forget you. (49.14-15)

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks of God as Father. Some fear this as an endorsement of patriarchy. Thus the American theologian, Mary Daly wrote, ‘If God is male, then the male is God.’ (Quoted by James M. Byrne, *God: Thoughts in an Age of Uncertainty*, Continuum, London, 2001, p.67) God, of course, is neither male nor female.

Patriarchy elevates domination and control into guiding principles: -

the patriarchal urge to dominate and control may be understood as an attempt to reduce the awesomeness of life to manageable proportions. Our problem now is that we consider the primary reality to be that which has ensued from our reductionist exploits. And this is beginning to prove deeply dissatisfying to the human spirit. Intuitively, we know there is so much more to understand and experience. (Diarmuid Ó Murchú, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1997, p.29)

Patriarchy makes God into *the* role model for male self-sufficiency: -

The single, greatest betrayal of the vision of Christ has been the manner in which the feminine face of God has been subjugated and rendered secondary. (Linda Rainberry and Patrick Treacy, *Integritas*, p.35) A healthy feminism opposes machismo and patriarchy, not masculinity.

Patriarchy has a hierarchical mindset: -

The hierarchical worldview is classically male and patriarchal. It understands the organization of life in terms of more advanced forms of life building on lower forms and become increasingly rare as the level of complexity and knowledge heightens. Power and decision-making is enjoyed by the more advanced, and is dispensed downwards in a manner that subjugates the lower orders upon which the hierarchy has evolved. (Linda Rainberry and Patrick Treacy, *Integritas*, p.11)

The Church... has... declined greatly by placing a false God, namely, the clerical power of the institution, before the honouring of the movement of the Spirit. (Rainberry and Treacy, *ibid.*, p.29)

Diarmuid Ó Murchú wrote, ‘Our human desire for neatness, precision, and clarity seems to be a misleading delusion, an inherited “controlling” device of the patriarchal mindset...’ (*Quantum Theology*, p.29) This is especially noticeable in

the creation of dogmatic formulae. But ‘... patriarchal dualisms and distinctions are seen for what they really are: destructive, controlling devices that fragment and alienate.’ (Ó Murchú, *op. cit.*, p.77)

The term “Abba” for God is adult language, not baby-talk. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, writing in *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus*, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1979), states: -

Jesus’ conception of the fatherhood of God is critical of human patriarchy.’ (p.114)

Far from being a sexist symbol, the “father” was for Jesus a weapon chosen to combat what we call “sexism.” (p.103)

In his setting, Jesus’ use of the term ‘Father’ meant something similar to ‘mother’ in developed modern society. (p.81)

The Father is spoken of as ‘Our.’ In Christian prayer, we always use a plural, e.g., ‘We make this prayer through Christ our Lord’, not, ‘I make this prayer through Christ my Lord.’ We pray as members of a community of faith; we don’t do solo runs. There is one exception: when we confess our sins, we take responsibility for them; we don’t try to offload the blame onto someone else. We say, ‘I am sorry for *my* sins...’ ‘through *my* fault...’

‘Hallowed by your name’: the name of God is synonymous with God. Jews commonly use the word *Hashem*, meaning name, for God. God is present wherever his name is invoked, and to call on God is to invite his presence. The phrase is like saying, ‘May you, God, be held holy.’

V.10: ‘Your kingdom come.’ May God’s plan for the universe be accomplished. May God’s rule be present. The ‘kingdom’ has been described loosely as the world as God would like it to be, the world as it would be if God’s will were done on earth as it is in heaven. To pray this verse implies a commitment on our part to bringing it about.

‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ This is essentially a repetition of the previous prayer. Like the previous phrase, it is not simply a wish but a commitment. To do God’s will is, for Matthew, the special mark of the disciple of Jesus, e.g., in 5.19, 7.21 and 12.50. ‘Your will be done’ was the commitment of Jesus to God his father in the garden of Gethsemane (26.42) But it involves more than human cooperation. Essentially it is God’s work, and it has a more than human character since it applies to heaven and to earth.

The will of God is not to be spoken of lightly, as if we could say at the drop of a hat what God wishes or thinks about anything that comes into our head. ‘The will of God is a curse for demons [and slaves], law

for the servants of God, and freedom for the children of God.’ (Alexei Khomiakov)

The first three petitions are prayers that God’s will be done; the next four are prayers for meeting human needs.

V.11: ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’ Give us what we need; we do not ask for luxuries, or even wants, just for needs.

V.13: ‘Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil,’ or, ‘Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.’ These are two different ways of saying the same thing. God does not incite us to evil, but he does sometimes put us to the test, just as Jesus himself was tested in the agony of his passion. The test is hard to endure while we undergo it, but ultimately it is a sign of God’s favour and it brings a blessing. But we pray that evil may not have the victory over us.

Vv.12, 14 and 15: These need to be taken together. V.15 may sound like God playing tit for tat, but there is a sense in which we cannot receive what we are not prepared to give. If we close the door against giving forgiveness, can it be open to receiving it? Giving and receiving are reciprocal: ‘It is in giving that we receive...’ Life is larger than logic.

The Russian Orthodox Archbishop Anthony Bloom says that when we say this prayer we take our

salvation into our hands because we make God's forgiveness of us conditional on our forgiveness of others. 'To forgive one's enemies is the first, the most elementary characteristic of a Christian; failing this we are not Christians at all.' (*Living Prayer*, DLT, London, 1975, p.31)

Saint Francis of Assisi's paraphrase of the Our Father

Our Father: most holy, our Creator and Redeemer, our Saviour and our Comforter.

Who art in heaven: in the angels and the saints. You give them light so that they may have knowledge, because you, Lord, are light. You inflame them so that they may have love, because you, Lord, are love. You live continually in them and you fill them so that they may be happy, because you, Lord, are the supreme good, the eternal good, and it is from you all good comes, and without you there is no good.

Hallowed be thy name: may our knowledge of you become ever clearer, so that we may realize the extent of your benefits, the steadfastness of your promises, the sublimity of your majesty and the depth of your judgments.

Thy Kingdom come: so that you may reign in us by your grace and bring us to your Kingdom, where we shall see you clearly, love you perfectly, be happy in your company and enjoy you for ever.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven: that we may love you with our whole heart by always

thinking of you; with our whole mind by directing our whole intention towards you and seeking your glory in everything; and with all our strength by spending all our energies and affections of soul and body in the service of your love alone. And may we love our neighbours as ourselves, encouraging all to love you as best we can, rejoicing at the good fortune of others, just as if it were our own, and sympathizing with their misfortunes, while giving offence to no one.

Give us this day our daily bread: your own beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to remind us of the love he showed for us and to help us understand and appreciate it and everything that he did or said or suffered.

And forgive us our trespasses: in your infinite mercy, and by the power of the Passion of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the merits and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all your saints.

As we forgive those who trespass against us: and if we do not forgive perfectly, Lord, make us forgive perfectly, so that we may really love our enemies for love of you, and pray fervently to you for them, returning no one evil for evil, anxious only to serve everybody in you.

And lead us not into temptation: hidden or obvious, sudden or unforeseen.

But deliver us from evil: present, past, or future.
Amen.

In the *Major Life of Saint Francis* by Saint Bonaventure we read that ‘When the friars asked him to teach them how to pray, Francis said, “When you pray, say the Our Father.”’ (Chapter 4, section 3, p.655, in Marion A. Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, Franciscan Press, Quincy College, Illinois 62301-2699, USA)

In Russian Orthodox tradition, the Lord’s Prayer is occasionally recited backwards: -

Deliver us from evil and lead us not into temptation. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Your Kingdom come.

Hallowed be your name,

our Father who art in heaven.

(See Archbishop Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer*, DLT, London, 1975, chapter 2)

Being sincere with God

Do not say *Father* if you do not behave like a son or daughter.

Do not say *Our* if you live in isolation and selfishness.

Do not say *who art in heaven* if you think only of the things of earth.

Do not say *hallowed be thy name* if you do not honour it.

Do not say *Thy kingdom come* if you confuse God's kingdom with material success.

Do not say *Thy will be done* if you do not accept it when it is burdensome.

Do not say *Give us this day our daily bread* if you are not concerned about people who have no food, education, or means of a decent living.

Do not say *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us* if you maintain anger against your neighbour.

Do not say *Lead us not into temptation* if you intend to continue sinning.

Do not say *deliver us from evil* if you do not fight evil.

Do not say *Amen* if you do not take seriously the words of the *Our Father*. (Anonymous)

Johannes Tauler, the fourteenth century German Dominican mystic said, 'No prayer is as full of love and worship as the sacred Our Father which our sovereign master Christ Himself taught to us, and it conduces to true essential prayer better than any other. It is a heavenly prayer, which the blessed sing and meditate upon without ceasing.' (*Meditations on the Life and Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*, Burns, Oates and Washbourne, London, no date, p.84)

Saint Teresa of Ávila was once asked by a person what to do about contemplative prayer. She replied:

'Say the Our Father - and spend an hour at it!' And also, in *The Way of Perfection*, 'It is very possible that while you are reciting the Our Father or some other vocal prayer, the Lord may raise you to perfect contemplation. By these means His Majesty shows that He listens to the one who speaks to Him.' (Chapter 25, section 1) 'You do much more by saying one word of the Our Father from time to time than by rushing through the entire prayer many times.' (Chapter 31, section 13)

Week 11

Friday

Matthew 6.19-23 Treasure, and a sound eye

19. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;

20. but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.

21. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

22. The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light;

23. but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

Vv.19-21: Power, position and possessions are the great lures. Jesus had himself fought a battle with them in the desert. (Matthew 4.1-11) And yet, they are all external to us; they do not change us within. (*Within* is where the real battle is.) People may be possessed by their possessions. Perhaps the poorest person is the one who can never bring themselves to say, 'I have enough.'

Mahatma Gandhi, said, 'There is enough in the world for everyone's need; there is not enough for everyone's greed.' It is true. Greed always wants more. But, as long as basic human needs are met, there is much to be said for being content with that. Many people have learned by hard personal experience that wealth may indeed be fleeting, and their financial circumstances may change overnight from wealth to relative poverty.

The early Fathers of the Church taught that whatever we have in excess belongs *by right* to the poor. 'It is not possible for a person to be wealthy and just at the same time,' said Saint John Chrysostom. And he asked bluntly, 'Do you honour your excrement so much that you deposit it in a silver chamber-pot while a person made in the image of God dies with cold?' The particular concern of Jesus in vv.19-21 seems to be that concern for things brings people to a state where their heart is no longer free and priorities are skewed.

Vv.22-23: If our eyes are healthy, we see clearly; if they are not, we don't. If the eyes of our soul (e.g., perceptiveness) are unhealthy, then we suffer accordingly, we are diminished. Perception is (almost) everything. We see others as we see ourselves. A great part of the Gospel is a wake-up call; Jesus is constantly people questions to get them to think. He said, 'Do you have eyes and fail to see?' (Mark 8.18)

The Franciscan, Saint Bonaventure, spoke of the three-fold eyes of the person: those of the body that give information; those of the mind that give understanding; and those of the soul that give wisdom. And the poet, T. S. Eliot, asked the question,

'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge,
Where is the knowledge we have lost in
information?'

(*Choruses from The Rock*, I, from his *Collected Poems, 1909-1966*, Faber and Faber, London, 1974, p.161; written in 1934 – years before the computer!)

Week 11

Saturday

Matthew 6.24-34 Priorities, and 'Do not worry'

24. No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted

to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

25. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

26. Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

27. And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

28. And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin,

29. yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

30. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith?

31. Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'

32. For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

33. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.'

Trust in God who cares for us might be a summary of vv.25-34.

V.24: The Aramaic language spoken by Jesus and his compatriots seems to have had limited ways of expressing comparatives or preferences. When someone wished to say that one thing was better than another, it seems that the way to do so was to say that one was good and the other bad. So, to make a point about priorities in serving a master, Jesus says that a slave will hate one and love the other. There is something similar in Luke 14.26, where Jesus says, 'If any man comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sister, yes, and his own life, too, he cannot be my disciple.' Yet, strangely, Matthew manages a comparative in 10.37, where he has Jesus say, 'Anyone who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me. Anyone who prefers son or daughter to me is not worthy of me.'

The commandment remains in place: 'Honour your father and your mother', and it is described as the only commandment with a blessing attached, 'so that you may have long life and may prosper in the land that Yahweh your God gives to you.' (Deuteronomy 5.16; Exodus 20.12) In view of the

primacy of the command to love throughout the Gospels, we may safely rest assured that Jesus does not command anyone to hate another person.

The focus is on loving God more than money. ‘We’re all worshippers of mammon now,’ once remarked the life-long socialist, Tony Benn. It’s about priority. By definition, a person may have only one priority (Latin, *prior*, first). One way to find out what our priority really is may be to ask ourselves two questions, ‘What do I spend my money on?’ and, ‘What do I spend my time at?’ Our answers to those give a good clue to our priority in life. For most people the answer to both questions, directly in the first and indirectly in the second, is “family.” Family is their priority.

Vv.25-26: Jesus speaks against *worry* about material things. He doesn’t say that we should do nothing about them. He knows we need them; he himself worked for a living as a carpenter. (Mark 6.3) Knowing that you need something, and being worried about it, are two different things. Neither does his reference to ‘the birds of the air’ suggest that people do nothing and wait for God to feed them. Has anyone ever seen a lazy bird? They spend most of their waking hours looking for food. But they seem content to be themselves and are free from the stresses that cause tension and burn-out among humans.

V.27: Jesus urges people not to worry. That is not to suggest irresponsibility. Worry does not solve problems; it makes them more difficult to solve.

Vv.28-32: Jesus speaks of how the Gentiles (i.e., those with little or no faith) worry about food, drink and clothing. The questions listed in v.31 might have been spoken by the writers of fashion magazines, Sunday supplements, or the producers of a multitude of TV cookery programmes. There has been an extraordinary preoccupation with those matters in recent times. This is evidence of people's insecurity about themselves, of their feeling that they are not good enough as they are, but need to attain to some externally imposed standard in order to be acceptable. Jesus is trying to free people from those unnecessary and unhelpful impositions. In effect, he is saying, 'Relax. It's OK to be yourself.'

V.33 is a wrap-up phrase, which might loosely be paraphrased as, 'Follow God faithfully, and the rest will fall into place with its real significance.'

V.34 perhaps comes from a different context from the preceding. It urges people to take one day at a time. The fact is that we have no more control over the past than over the future. 'Yesterday's history; tomorrow's a mystery. Today is a gift, and that's why we call it the present.' (Anon.) We are able to do something about this time and place, the here and now. This is where we really live. It is in the present that we may experience the Presence.

Week 12

Monday

Matthew 7.1-5 On judging

1. Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.
2. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.
3. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?
4. Or how can you say to your neighbour, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye?
5. You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.

In the Bible, to judge often means to condemn. An example is in John 8.15, where Jesus says of himself, 'I judge no one.'

But we must judge actions. As children, our parents told us, 'Do this; it's the right thing to do,' or, 'Don't do that; it's wrong.' If they had not done so, how would we ever have learned the difference between right and wrong? As we grew up we gradually learned for ourselves why some actions are right and others wrong. Being able to make an

intelligent judgment about right and wrong is the basis for moral action.

Sometimes when people say one should not be judgmental they seem to imply that nothing should be said about right or wrong, good or bad, because these are said to be subjective, different for each person - 'What's right for you may not be right for me' – and that any attempt to generalize is to push one's own ideas down people's throats. This undermines morality and community.

Jesus here, in this passage is telling us not to judge people's attitudes, their motives for doing what they do. Given the reality of human nature's enormous capacity for self-deception, we cannot be sure even of our own motives for acting. Usually we act for a mixture of motives, even in those situations where we may feel that our intention is wholly pure. Bearing that in mind, how could we possibly presume to be able to judge what are the motives of another? How could I claim to enter the mind of others and to know why they did what they did? It is not possible.

But that does not stop us from doing it. Even if we do not openly speak our judgments very often, we make them in the privacy of our minds pretty often. And we can be harsh in our criticism, especially if there is a clash of personality between the other and us, if we simply do not like them.

The faults we criticize most harshly in others are usually those we refuse to acknowledge in ourselves. If I'm a thief, and something goes missing - at work for example - I will likely jump to the conclusion that someone has stolen it, when, in fact, it may simply have been mislaid. Sometimes we respond to our failings by proxy, criticizing them when we see them in others and giving ourselves the bogus satisfaction of imagining we have dealt with them. Also,

We have laboured so long under the delusion that corrections, criticism, and punishments stimulate a person to grow. We have rationalized the taking out of our unhappiness and incompleteness in many destructive ways. (American psychologist John Powell)

William Shakespeare had a point when he wrote, 'Suspicion haunts the guilty mind.' (*King Henry VI*, Part 3, v, 6) And someone else has written that, when we point a finger in accusation at another, there are three fingers pointing back at ourselves.

Jesus is saying, 'Put your own house in order first. Clean up your own act, and then you'll be able to see clearly what to do.'

Week 12
Tuesday

Matthew 7.6, 12-14 Three teachings

6. Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

12. In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

13. Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.

14. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

V.6: It is difficult to know to what or whom this verse applies. It does not sit well with the prohibition on judging in v.1. It has been used on more than one occasion to humiliate, hurt or insult people. Was it a later interpellation?

“Dogs” and “pigs” were used occasionally, it seems, by Jews as polemical terms in reference to Gentiles.

I once saw a Gnostic priestess at their eucharistic liturgy give communion to a dog - on the grounds of being inclusive! It became for me the most powerful argument against the ordination of women that I have seen or heard. Saint Thomas Aquinas, in the Office he wrote for Corpus Christi, spoke of the Eucharist as “non mittendus canibus.” (Not to be

given to dogs. The phrase is still used in the Sequence of the Mass of the solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ: ‘The bread for God’s true children meant, that may not unto dogs be given.’) There have been instances in which Catholic churches were attacked by Muslims, the tabernacles broken open, and the Communion Hosts given to dogs.

V.12: In this, his “Golden Rule”, Jesus put positively what many other religious leaders had put either less strongly or negatively: -

Baha’i: ‘Blessed is he who prefers his brother before himself.’ (*Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, 71)

Buddhism: ‘Do not hurt others in ways you yourself would find hurtful.’ (*Udana-Varga*, 5.18) The Buddha said, ‘Love all that lives.’ (Ven. Dr. Walpola Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Haw Trai Foundation, Bangkok, 2002, p.108, *Vatthupama-sutta*, *Majjhima-nikaya*, Sutta no.7)

Confucianism: ‘Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.’ (*Analects* 15.23) And ‘The moral law is not distant from us... The wise man.... has as his principle: ‘Do not do to others what you would not wish done to you.’ (Chung Yung, *Equilibrium and Norm*, 13)

Hinduism: ‘This is the sum of duty: do nothing to others which would cause pain if done to you.’ (*Mahabharata* 5.1517)

Islam: 'None of you believes (completely) until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.' (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*, no.13)

Jainism: 'A man should... treat all creatures in the world as he himself would be treated.' Sutrakrtanga. And 'In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self.' (Lord Mahavira, 24th Tirthankara)

Judaism: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Leviticus 19.18)

Native American: 'Respect for all life is the foundation.' (*The Great Law of Peace*)

Shinto: 'Be forgetful of self, be doers of good to others: this represents the summit of friendship and compassion.' Dengyo Daishi (also called Sacho) who lived 767-822 AD. (See W. T. De Bary, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, New York, 1958, vol.1, p.127)

Sikhism: 'Don't create enmity with anyone, as God is within everyone.' (*Guru Arjan Devij* 259, *Guru Granth Sahib*)

Taoism: 'Regard your neighbour's gain as your gain, your neighbour's loss as your own loss.'

Zoroastrianism: 'That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.' (*Dadistan-I-Dinik*, 94.5)

Elsewhere Jesus went further than he did here. In John he says, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' (15.12) That love was self-sacrificial to the point of death.

Indirectly, Jesus here is implying that a person does not have to be an intellectual to be a Christian. The faith is not a system of knowledge. What it calls for is love, and that is something everyone can do, through an act of free will. The least educated, the mentally defective or ill, can love. And that is what is asked.

The phrase, ‘the law and the prophets,’ is a kind of short-hand for the whole body of Judaism’s teaching. Jesus boils it down to the essentials. He was not unique in doing so. Rabbi Hillel, one of the two biggest names in Jewish scholarship at the time – the other was Shammai - had said the same thing.

It has been said, tongue-in-cheek, but with much truth, that the world’s version of the Golden Rule is that he who has the gold makes the rules!

Vv.13-14: It is the same message in each verse, like thesis and antithesis. Scripture scholars say that the words “many” and “few” are formulae, not meant to be understood statistically. But nonetheless the message is dramatic. The coming of God among us in human form is not a routine event which may adequately be responded to by sitting on the fence or giving a shrug of the shoulders. These verses call on people to make up their mind and decide for or against Jesus, one way or the other. They are like the call of God through Jeremiah, ‘Yahweh says this: “Look, I now set in front of you the way of life and the way of death.”’ (21.8) And similarly in

Deuteronomy, 'Today I set before you life and prosperity, death and disaster.... Choose life then....' (30.15-20)

Week 12

Wednesday

Matthew 7.15-20 A tree and its fruits

15. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.
16. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?
17. In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.
18. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.
19. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
20. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

V.15: Who are the false prophets dressed in sheep's clothing but are inwardly ravenous wolves? Historians say that between the time of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD there were several figures who claimed to be the messiah. In Matthew 24.4, Jesus, perhaps in reference to them, said, 'Take care that no one deceives you; because many will come using my name and saying "I am the Christ," and they will deceive many,' and again, in 24.24, 'false Christs

and false prophets will arise and produce great signs and portents, enough to deceive even the chosen, if that were possible. There; I have forewarned you.'

The word "Christ" is English, and "Christos" is Greek for the Hebrew "Mashiah," which is also translated as "Messiah." It means "anointed." (Think of chrism, one of the blessed oils used in anointing). After Israel became a monarchy under King David, the title began to have a political character, and this may explain the reluctance of Jesus, especially in Mark's Gospel, to use it. But in Zechariah, the Messiah became one of the poor. The Christ was one to whose coming the Jewish people looked forward in expectation for centuries, believing that he would make Israel what it was meant to be. *Christ* is a title, not a surname. It was not a divine title. "Lord" is the divine title the New Testament gives to Jesus, especially after the resurrection.

V.20: 'You will know them by their fruits.' (Matthew 7.16) A good way of discerning the Christian character of a new movement or idea is to ask, 'What are its fruits? What does it produce? Good or evil?' In vv.16-19, Jesus uses a simple down-to-earth image to express this idea, one reiterated in Matthew 12.33-35: -

Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.

You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure.

Perhaps also the false prophets are those people described in the following passage, Matthew 7.21-23.

An example of someone who perhaps was a genuine prophet, but most likely never thought of herself as such, is from the life of the Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, from his train journey into imprisonment in Siberia: -

At a quiet station called Torbeyevo,... Solzhenitsyn caught sight of a small peasant woman in the usual shabby clothing.... Suddenly the prisoners who were lying on the top bunks sat up to attention. Large tears were streaming from the woman's eyes. Having made out our silhouettes... she lifted a small, work-calloused hand and blessed us with the sign of the cross, again and again. Her diminutive face was wet with tears. As the train started to move again, she still went on making the sign of the cross until she was lost to view.

A Jewish acquaintance once told me he could tell by Jesus' sense of humour as revealed in the Gospel that he was Jewish. There is an example of it above:

‘Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?’ (Matthew 7.16) Elsewhere Jesus spoke of:

- fishermen becoming fishers of men (Mark 1.17);
- generous givers hiring trumpeters to advertise their charity (Matthew 6.2);
- people picking from another person’s eye the speck of sawdust they can see through the plank in their own (Matthew 7.3);
- guests of honour deliberately sitting far from the top table in order to attract attention to themselves when moved up (Luke 14.10);
- people filtering out a gnat, while swallowing a camel (Matthew 23.24);
- people putting a lamp under a bed instead of on a table (Matthew 4.21);
- oppressive rulers demanding to be called benefactors. (Luke 22.25)

He mocked useless teachers, calling them ‘blind guides.’ (Matthew 23.16)

He asked his hearers what they went out into the desert to see – was it a reed shaking in the wind, or a man wearing fine clothes? (Matthew 11.2-11)

Two of his followers, tied to their mother’s apron strings, who then got exaggerated notions about themselves, he nicknamed ‘sons of thunder.’ (Mark 3.17)

He enjoyed the lively repartee of the Canaanite woman. (Mark 7.24-30)

He may have laughed in surprise at Nathanael's shock at his statement about seeing him under the fig tree: 'Do you believe just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree?' (John 1.50)

Jesus appreciated puns and used gentle irony.

Week 12

Thursday

Matthew 7.21-29 Living and doing the word of God

21. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

22. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?'

23. Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

24. Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

25. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.

26. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

27. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell - and great was its fall!

28. Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching,

29. for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

There are passages similar to vv.21-23 in Luke 6.46 and 13.26-27, and to vv.24-27 in Luke 6.47-49.

V.21: Maybe the false prophets of Matthew 7.15 include those Jesus speaks of here, who talk but do not do. They are not unlike the teachers he warned against in Matthew 5.19: 'Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.'

What does 'Lord' mean? It seems, in the Synoptic Gospels, to be no more than a title of respect, like 'Sir.' In Paul and in Acts, especially in association with the resurrection or the second coming, it goes beyond its usage in the Greek world when applied to kings or Roman Caesars and implies that Jesus is divine. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, Lord (Greek, *Kurios*) is the normal title for God.

The focus of this verse appears to be on doing God's will rather than merely professing to, as in Matthew 25.31-46. It is not what we think, or believe, or say, that counts in the end but what we do. This is reinforced by v.24: 'Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.'

Vv.22-23: 'On that day' refers to the day of judgment, a pervasive theme of the New Testament. Some may then claim to have prophesied, exorcized, or worked miracles in the name of Jesus. He will reject them, saying he does not know them. It is difficult to understand this, which may be why the *Lectionary* omits it. After all, those are deeds done in the name of Jesus; they would seem to fulfil his call to go beyond words and into action, in keeping with his command to the twelve in Matthew 10.8: 'Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.' He had said, 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.' (Mark 3.35)

But there are examples in every age of history of people who have been able to perform wonders, who seemed to have, perhaps did have, astonishing powers, but whose manner of life was far from Christian. Rasputin comes to mind. I once spoke with a man who, as a teenager, had interviewed Prince Felix Yussupov, the leader of the group that killed him. He asked him, 'How does it feel to have

murdered Rasputin?’ Yussupov replied, ‘I did not murder a man; I killed the devil incarnate.’

Vv.24-27 give the example of someone who builds a house in a *wadi*, a river-bed which floods when the rains come. These are a not uncommon occurrence; they come after heavy rain, are very powerful, running over ground baked hard and dry by months of sunshine, and they sweep all before them. To choose such a place as a site for a house is seen as being almost proverbial in its folly. (People in Ireland built houses on flood-plains during the Celtic Tiger.) A site on one of them might attract by its low price, but the risk of flooding would be so high as to be almost a certainty. By contrast, a foundation of rock, though much harder to work on than the soft sand underneath the crust of the *wadi*, is secure. Jesus’ point is that people who base their life on his teaching have a sure foundation, while those who instead listen to false prophets will go astray. Since the time of Jesus there have been many ideologies, philosophies, theologies, spiritualities, political systems and so on, offering themselves as messiahs, saying in effect, ‘I am the one; follow me.’ They have come and gone, often leaving immense suffering in their wake. Jesus is constant and still draws people to himself. No one in human history has had such influence; his message resonates with the human spirit.

Those who interiorize, assimilate, and “digest” the words of Jesus, and then act on them, will be as solid

as a rock, unshakeable when the storms of life beat down on them. But those who only listen, without resulting action, will be shallow and superficial, will come down with a crash when faced by the storms of life, like a house built on sand. God is not amenable to the neutral observer; God is 'Father' for believers. Jesus wants disciples, not students. He looks for commitment, not the kind of academic enquiry which does not go beyond the level of words. The best way to learn about the Bible is to try to live it.

Vv:28-29 form a type of wrap-up phrase used elsewhere by Matthew to conclude a teaching. In 11.1, we read, 'Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities,' and, similarly in 19.1 and 26.1, 'Jesus had now finished what he wanted to say....' They are similar also to Mark who wrote at the conclusion of a teaching that the people said, 'Here is a teaching that is new – and with authority.' (1.27)

The emphasis on authority is interesting. As far as we know, Jesus had no official teaching position. But 'he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.' (v.29) The latter proffered second-hand goods - as most of us do; there are few original thinkers - while he gave what came from his intimate relationship with God. He said of himself, not simply, 'I teach the truth,' but 'I am the truth' (John 14.6), an extraordinarily arrogant claim to make for anyone who was not of God.

Week 12

Friday

Matthew 8.1-4 Jesus heals a leper

1. When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him;
2. and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.’
3. He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.
4. Then Jesus said to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.’

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 1.40-45 and Luke 5.12-14.

The term *leper* was used widely to denote not only a person suffering from leprosy (Hansen’s disease) but from a variety of skin diseases, such as ringworm or eczema. In a society where soap was a luxury, diseases such as scabies might be described as leprosy. In Leviticus 13.47-59, “leprosy” – maybe nothing more than mildew - is described as affecting clothing, while, in Leviticus 14.33-53, it affects houses – perhaps wood rot. (See Leviticus 13 for leprosy, uncleanness, etc.) In similar fashion, the

term “paralysis” is used loosely to describe any illness that confines a person to bed, “fever” is anything that gives a person a high temperature while “possession” may be epilepsy or some form of brain disorder or mental illness.

People knew that Hansen’s disease was contagious and were afraid of it because it disfigured so badly and led to ostracization from the community. In a society where medical care was commonly useless or worse, quarantine was a natural and probably necessary response to a contagious disease. Leviticus prescribed that: -

The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out, 'Unclean, unclean!'

As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean, since he is in fact unclean. He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp. (13.45-46)

Sometimes it was seen as punishment from God. The normal reaction was to avoid lepers and to keep a distance from them. By contrast, Jesus goes within arm’s reach of the man and touches him.

The man knew what he wanted and, in his request, went straight to the point and asked for it. He knelt before Jesus and called him “Lord,” both of which hint at recognition of divine status. Jesus seemed to

warm to direct approaches and immediately granted the man his request.

V.4: Was Jesus not asking the impossible when he said to the man, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone’? How could anyone keep such a matter to themselves? Even if, *per impossibile*, the man said nothing, his relatives and friends could not but ask him what had happened, who had healed him, etc. Maybe Jesus wanted him to go straight to the priest and make the offering prescribed by the Torah in Leviticus 14.1-32, so that the priest might see the genuineness of the healing and *he* and other priests might be healed of their opposition to Jesus. Maybe this is what is meant by the phrase ‘as a testimony to them.’

But the process was required in any event for a healed leper to be re-admitted to the community. It may also be that Matthew, writing primarily for a Jewish audience, wanted to show Jesus meeting the requirements of tradition as he had taught in 5.17. It also links him to Moses, a major theme for Matthew.

Mark, in 1.40-45, describes what is almost certainly the same story, but with a different ending: the man ‘went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.’ In Mark’s account, the leper is re-integrated into the community but Jesus is excluded from it; they

exchange positions. Luke's ending (see the story in 5.12-16) is a blend of the two: -

now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases.

But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray. (5.15-16)

Jesus' contact with the leper would have made him, according to Jewish custom, ritually unclean and excluded from public worship until he went through a ritual purification. (The uncleanness was seen as physical, not moral.) He ignored that and met the human need that he saw before him. For him, the person always came first.

Week 12

Saturday

Matthew 8.5-17 Jesus heals a centurion's servant

5. When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him

6. and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.'

7. And he said to him, 'I will come and cure him.'

8. The centurion answered, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.

9. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this," and the slave does it.'

10. When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.

11. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,

12. while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

13. And to the centurion Jesus said, 'Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the servant was healed in that hour.

14. When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever;

15. he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him.

16. That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick.

17. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.'

Vv.5-13 have a parallel in Luke 7.1-10. There is a somewhat similar, but probably different, story in John 4.46-53. Vv.14-17 have parallels in Mark 1.29-34 and Luke 4.38-41.

A centurion was a middle-ranking officer in the Roman army which occupied Palestine, nominally

commanding one hundred men. Whatever about his personal character his position would have made him a figure of hatred among the local population. The Romans were cruel rulers, for whom mercy was weakness. Julius Caesar, for example, boasted in his autobiographical *On the Gallic War*, of how he had killed about one-third of the population of France in order to consolidate Roman rule there; that was what Rome expected of him and its people applauded him for doing it. So, when a Roman centurion approached Jesus asking for help, some of his disciples might have expected Jesus to dismiss him with contempt.

V.5: The scene opens in Capernaum, Jesus' 'own town' (Matthew 4.13; 9.1), where he began his teaching, and worked signs and wonders, but which later provoked him to curse it (Matthew 11.23) for its unbelief.

What is remarkable here is the centurion's humility. He went to see Jesus, though his entourage might have expected him to summon Jesus to him, since he represented the conquering power. 'He came up and pleaded with him...' There is an emotional intensity to his action, and he wastes no time on preliminaries but comes to the point directly, asking him to heal his servant. That was an approach which evoked a favourable response from Jesus.

Luke describes the servant - “servant” and “slave” were often inter-changeable terms - as ‘a favourite’ or as ‘intimate.’ (7.2) What did that mean? Roman officers were changed from one posting to another and often brought with them a personal servant, or batman, who would cook, clean and perform household services.

An article on the internet has this to say about the passage: -

The usual word for a slave or servant was *doulos*. But the word used in this passage is *pais*, perhaps because it produces a play on words with the Greek word for paralysis. At the time, *pais* could mean one of five things: - a son or boy; a servant who ruled other servants and cared for his master's children; a servant who was his master's male lover; the junior partner in a homosexual relationship; an attractive young male.

Instead of *pais*, Luke, in 7.1-10, uses the term *entimos doulos* which means *honoured slave*. This would be a common expression for a slave who had an especially close relationship with his master. We can exclude all but two (explanation to follow) potential definitions: either this was a slave who managed the household, taking care of his master's servants and children, or he was in a romantic or sexual relationship with his master.

The head of a Roman household would, likely, treat his slave as sexual property. Until late in the Roman Empire, the adult male had the right to maim or kill his slaves on a whim. Even after laws to protect slaves were enacted, they were largely ignored. At no point in Roman history were laws enacted to prevent the rape, sodomy, or sexual exploitation of a patriarch's human property; such actions were always within his legal authority. Both Jesus' audience and the early Roman and Jewish hearers to whom the Gospels were first preached would have known that.

In the ancient world, homosexual armies were commonplace. The elite fighting forces of the Greeks, Romans, Spartans, Cretans, and Boeotians, were based on homosexual relations. Rome continued this tradition of military homosexuality as a means of improving morale, bravery and fighting capacity.

To promote homosexual armies, the Emperor Augustus, about the year 13 BC, banned certain ranks of soldiers, including centurions, from marrying. This lasted until 197 A.D, so, during the years that Jesus lived and the Gospel writers wrote, a centurion was generally childless, single, and engaging in homosexual acts. Furthermore, while he was at war, a centurion did not have the right to have regular slaves

save one, namely, a chosen, trusted, physically fit male - as long as he would later free him to join the Roman army (only free men could serve in it). This allowed the centurion to have sexual release while away at war, allowed also for the slave to train in war with a senior soldier, and - most importantly to the Romans - for a bond to form that would not be broken.

This bond was the overarching goal of encouraging homosexual relations in the military. Four hundred years before Christ, Romans had begun advocating that their armies be composed entirely of homosexual males. One such battalion, the three hundred members of the Sacred Band of Thebes, was lauded by the military captain Pelopidas (via Plutarch), saying 'a bond cemented by friendship grounded upon love is never to be broken and is invincible, since the lovers, ashamed to be base in sight of their beloved, and the beloved before their lovers, willingly rush into danger for the relief of one another.' And a monument was built in their honour.

Knowing that a centurion was forbidden to marry, was not allowed to have children or regular slaves, and was encouraged to have a special slave as a homosexual lover give us great clarity as to their relationship. A *pais* would pass to a centurion at about the age the age of thirteen, whereas the centurion would be

in his twenties or thirties. This passage deals with underage sex slavery, not a willing union of adults.

One cannot argue that both Old and New Testaments do not make very strong statements against homosexuality. However, ancient and modern homosexuality are essentially dissimilar. (The Bible never actually uses the word homosexuality, as it - neither the concept nor the practice - had truly culturally occurred in the form we have today until the 1800's.) Those who wish to have the Bible make a clear statement about modern homosexuality are simply asking the bible to exist in a time other than its own. It does not address the issue, as the passages often cited as dealing with homosexuality are in fact about a substantially different concept.

What is that difference?

1. In the Old Testament, and for almost all but the military class in the New, just about everyone was married by the age of sexual maturity.
2. Procreation was considered a cultural, national, and religious obligation.
3. Most importantly, being penetrated was seen as a sign of weakness - a lowering of men to the status of women. For one man to have sex with another was to shame him and express dominance over him, and the man being

penetrated often did not have a choice in the matter. This is why, throughout the scriptures, homosexuality is never spoken of outside of orgies or temple prostitution. The story of Sodom in Genesis 19 expresses succinctly what homosexuality was to the ancient world: a group event, defined around shaming the penetrated one, usually with the latter an unwilling participant, or, alternatively, someone willing, for whatever reason, to consent to the humiliation.

What Jesus says and does not say is what gives the story its meaning and which set Jesus apart as dramatically different from others who claimed the title of Messiah. Jesus does not quote Leviticus 18.22, ‘You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.’ (Abominations called for the death penalty.)

Instead he says, ‘I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ This is nearly identical to what he said about drunkards, tax collectors, and prostitutes, namely, that they will enter into the kingdom of God before the devout.

Jesus' interaction with the centurion gives us an insight that is more valuable than simply what our position should be on homosexuality, and which is especially important for those who do not struggle with homosexuality or homophobia.

Healing someone's ailments neither condemns nor condones their behaviour, even if it caused the ailment. In this passage, Jesus' healing the centurion's sex slave is not a teaching about homosexuality. It does show that, for Jesus, reconciliation of Israel's enemies is more important than moral condemnation or indignation. Jesus healed the servant *because of the faith of the centurion* (v.13).

The story is a parable in action, and its meaning is clear: God's generosity knows no bounds; it is a scandalous mercy. It is precisely those who were contemptuously called "sinners" for whom there is room at Jesus' table - and not just any seat, because they are the ones for whom the party is being thrown in the first place!

Jesus both breaks and fulfils the expectations placed upon him; the story overflows with a mercy that was deeply scandalous. There is perhaps no greater story from which Jesus emerges as a great philosopher, dynamic political leader, and transcendent character for

both his time and ours. (*An edited quote from an anonymous internet article.*)

V.6: There is great humility here on the part of the centurion, coupled with manliness and strength of character. He was taking a risk, exposing himself to the possibility of a humiliating rebuff. Without grovelling, he makes known his need and asks for help. And it is not for himself, but for his servant.

The word *paralyzed* has a wider range of meanings than ours today; it may also mean *seriously ill* or *in dire straits*.

V.7: Jesus' response is simple and direct; he agrees to do it. That sounds easy but it took courage and more. The Romans were the occupying power, and they were hard: to kill one of their subject people meant nothing to them. Here was Jesus showing himself willing to help one of their leaders – in other words, he was collaborating with the occupiers. He could have said, 'We Jews owe you Romans nothing; you have no claim on us. Go back to where you came from, and, while you're at it, tell your boyfriend (*pais*) to do the same.' Had he done so, the crowd would have been delighted, probably applauded, and revelled in the humiliation and dismissal of a representative of their enemy. But then Jesus would not have been Jesus. By agreeing to help a Roman, he put himself at risk from the Zealots who made a point of targeting the Romans in their soft under-belly, their local collaborators.

Furthermore, Jesus could hardly have been unaware of the possible sexual relationship, but it made no difference to his response. He expressed no moral indignation but immediately offered to go and cure the man.

Vv.8-10: Then the centurion responds in a way that amazed and greatly impressed Jesus. He wants to save Jesus the trouble of going to his house, points to his own power to command men, acknowledges Jesus' greater power and makes clear his belief that Jesus can heal at will; all he need do is give an order and it will happen. This powerful expression of unquestioning faith stands in such contrast to the attitude of Jesus' own Jewish people that Jesus exclaims, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.'

Vv.11-12: This episode seems to have come as a dramatic turning point for Jesus, with his realization that the best hope for the fulfilment of his mission lay with the Gentiles, the despised outsiders. This is a key theme of Matthew, who was a Jew writing for Jews. Jesus says that many will come from east and west, and will eat – an earthy image - in the kingdom of heaven. This is one of many universalist perspectives in Jesus. He is not imprisoned by narrow loyalties. But it grieved him that his own people – 'the heirs of the kingdom' - were so resistant.

V.13: Jesus told the centurion that he could go back home, because, on account of his faith, what he had asked for had been done: Jesus had healed the servant.

Jesus' works of power always take place in a context of faith, that is, of trust and self-abandonment, and their purpose is primarily to point to him and what his mission was. Matthew makes the same point again in 9.2, 22 and 28 in the miracle stories which follow this.

Vv.14-15: There are parallel passages in Mark 1.29-31 and Luke 4.38-39. The reference to Simon Peter's mother-in-law makes it clear that he was married, as, according to tradition, were all of the twelve apostles, except John. She suffered from "fever," often a term that covered anything that gave a person a temperature. Jesus simply touched her hand and the fever left her. All three Synoptics say that, having been healed, she began to serve food. Matthew has it that she served Jesus, while in Mark and Luke she serves 'them,' presumably all present.

Vv.16-17: This passage has parallels in Mark 1.32-34 and Luke 4.40-41. Matthew sees these healings as a fulfilment of Isaiah 53.4a. Such fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies by Jesus is a major consideration for Matthew throughout his Gospel. A deeper meaning of the text is that Jesus not only took away bodily illness but also, as the Suffering Servant

spoken of by Isaiah, took away sin, thereby healing the whole person.

Week 13

Monday

Matthew 8.18-22 Some wish to follow Jesus, but...

18. Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side.

19. A scribe then approached and said, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.'

20. And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have dens, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'

21. Another of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'

22. But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'

There is a parallel passage in Luke 9.57-62.

V.18: The 'other side' [of the lake]: Lake Tiberias was also called Lake Gennesareth or the Sea of Galilee. This verse is not so much telling us about Jesus' itinerary - Mark, for example, sometimes becomes confused and has Jesus "cross" to the side he was already on! - as it is marking a new stage, like crossing a threshold.

Here it marks a break from Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount to a period of miracles. Matthew has Moses in his thoughts all through his Gospel: Jesus is the new Moses. Just as Moses gave the commandments and the covenant, so Jesus gives the beatitudes, the charter of his covenant, which is for all. But he also draws a line of difference between them: where Moses brought ten plagues on Egypt (Exodus 7.14-12.30), Jesus, in chapters 8-9, worked ten beneficent miracles.

Jesus was popular at this stage of his ministry: great crowds followed him, listening to him intently; he performed signs and wonders so that there was a sense of expectation that great things would follow; his teaching was new and with authority. Some expected and wanted him to expel the Romans and restore the ancient Kingdom of Israel. It should not be a matter of surprise if some people, caught up in the excitement of the moment, would want, without considering the matter, to follow him: everybody loves a winner.

V.20: Jesus drew the scribe's attention to the cost of discipleship. He pointed to the insecurity and homelessness of his position. More than that, it may be intended to suggest that Jesus was not at home with any of the schools of thought or power groups then existing; he was a stranger to them all. And there was much tougher than that to come. Jesus urges caution. He wants the man to think of what he was doing before acting.

Vv.21-22: Jesus appears harsh. But, in the context, it seems he was not prohibiting the man from attending his father's funeral. Rather, the man's meaning was that he would follow Jesus after the death of his father and the settlement of his affairs – whenever that might be, and it could be years away. In effect, Jesus says, '*carpe diem*' – 'seize the day!' There is an urgency about the work of God's Kingdom and it takes priority even over family ties. Prudence is a guide for action, not a substitute for it, or an excuse for inaction. (How often, in its usage by Christians, is the virtue of prudence reduced to caution!) There is a moment of opportunity, and it needs to be seized, as it may not last. Luke, the gentle evangelist, in a parallel passage (9.59-60), adds the demanding sequel, 'your duty is to go and spread the news of the kingdom of God.' To be a disciple is to be a missionary.

In each case, Jesus leaves the person to make his own decision; he does not make it for them. That was his way of doing things.

Week 13

Tuesday

Matthew 8.23-27 Jesus calms the sea

23. And when he [Jesus] got into the boat, his disciples followed him.

24. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep.

25. And they went and woke him up, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’

26. And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you of little faith?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm.

27. They were amazed, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’

There are parallel passages in Mark 4.35-41 and Luke 8.22-25.

V. 23: Matthew does not tell us who the disciples were. Was Peter among them, or was he at home in his house? (8.14) He went through a test on water in Matthew 14.24-33 where Jesus said to him, in a phrase repeated almost *verbatim* here, ‘Man of little faith, why did you doubt?’

V.24: Jesus, like Jonah, is asleep during a storm and has to be awakened to save the situation. (Jonah 1.4-6)

The book of Genesis (3.14-19), using poetic imagery, represents nature as rebelling against humanity following humanity’s (Adam’s) rebellion against God. But here, Jesus, the new Adam, restores that lost harmony through actions such as the above. He performs actions which the Psalms describe as proper to God: -

‘[The Lord]... spoke and raised a gale, lashing up towering waves....

The Lord rescued them from their sufferings, reducing the storm to a whisper, until the waves grew quiet...’ (Psalm 107.25, 28-29)

V.25: The disciples call Jesus ‘Lord,’ (usually a divine title), not simply ‘Master’ as in the parallel passages in Mark and Luke. They trust that he will save them.

V.26: ‘Why are you so frightened, you of little faith?’ Faith is the nub of the matter. Jesus is not a magician performing tricks. Some faith on the part of the petitioner is always required. Saint Augustine wrote, ‘God created us without us, but did not will to save us without us.’ (Sermon 169.11.13; PL 38.923) Faith, confidence, trust – these words are close to synonymous in the Gospels.

Not only the disciples but the people see what has happened and marvel. This is perhaps the point of the incident, to bring people to ask themselves the question. ‘Who is Jesus?’

(A similar story is told by Buddhists of the Buddha.)

Week 13

Wednesday

Matthew 8.28-34 Jesus expels demons

28. When he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way.

29. Suddenly they shouted, ‘What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?’

30. Now a large herd of swine was feeding at some distance from them.

31. The demons begged him, ‘If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.’

32. And he said to them, ‘Go!’ So they came out and entered the swine; and suddenly, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the water.

33. The swineherds ran off, and, on going into the town, they told the whole story about what had happened to the demoniacs.

34. Then the whole town came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighbourhood.

There are parallel passages in Mark 5.1-20 and Luke 8.26-39.

V.27: ‘the other side’ refers to the east bank of the River Jordan; it was predominantly Gentile territory. The Gadarenes, also called Gerasenes, were not

Jews. (The fact that they kept pigs is evidence of this.)

Belief in demonic possession was widespread in Jesus' time, which is surprising, as, in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), there are no instances of it. Matthew's Gospel contains many references to it: 4.3; 9.33; 10.1; 12.22-28, 43-45; 15.22; 17.14-20. Mark tells this same story at greater length (5.1-20), as does Luke (8.26-39). Was demonic possession a reality, or was it simply a general term for mental illnesses accompanied by violent disturbance, especially if not understood but feared, or a disorder like epilepsy, as "fever" was a general term for anything that gave a person a temperature? Illness was often seen as a punishment for sin (e.g., Matthew 9.2; John 9.1-2), and possession as evidence of great sinfulness.

Jesus' response to possession was sometimes, as here, an act of expulsion, or, at others, as in Matthew 9.33-35, a cure. The former would not make sense if there was nothing there to expel in the first place, unless Jesus was accommodating himself to people's understanding, however mistaken; that seems unlikely.

For the Gospel writers Jesus' action was highly significant. For them, his destruction of the power of Satan was evidence of his messianic mission. It was significant, too, that, as in Mark, it was the evil spirits who were the first to recognize who he was,

saying, 'What do you want with us, Son of God?' (v.29) This latter title was not Jewish but Christian, and had divine significance.

V.29: 'The time' spoken of is the Day of final Judgment. At the end of time, evil will finally be destroyed (Revelation 20.7-10). People and spirits alike will then be judged, but here Jesus is taking the initiative in acting against evil first. In Matthew 26.18, Jesus speaks of his approaching passion and death, the climax of his mission, as 'my time.' Elsewhere he refers also to 'the harvest time' (13.30) and 'vintage time' (21.34).

V.31: The demons ask to be sent into the herd of swine. They run headlong into the water and drown. (But swine can swim.) The Jewish audience that Matthew wrote for might well have considered it appropriate that unclean spirits should die by entering unclean animals. (Deuteronomy 14.8)

V.33: The swineherds run back to the town and tell everyone the whole story, including 'what had happened to the demoniacs.' But Matthew does not say what had happened to the two men. Were they healed? We may assume so, but Matthew does not actually say it. Did they stay where they were, go into the town, follow Jesus; were they drowned, too, or what? Matthew does not say. Mark (5.19), who has only one demoniac, has the man asking to follow Jesus but being told by him to go home, tell his

friends what had happened and give thanks to God. Luke has a similar ending (8.38-39)

V.34: The townspeople ‘begged him [Jesus] to leave their neighbourhood.’ This is almost comical. Jesus brings peace and calm, where before there had been fear and violence, and the people’s response is that they want him out. Was it because of the loss of the pigs? Did they fear being punished for having had them? Were they afraid of a man with such dramatic power in case he might use it against them? But fear in the face of extraordinary goodness is not uncommon. Herod feared John the Baptist, ‘knowing him to be a good and holy man’ (Mark 6.20); and after the miraculous catch of fish, Peter asked Jesus to leave him, saying, ‘Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.’ (Luke 5.8)

If Jesus came to earth today, the unclean spirits he would want to free people from might be the demons of addiction, e.g. to power, money, sex, alcohol, drugs, unforgiveness, bitterness, hatred, fear, etc. Those have power over people, bind them, hold them in thrall, take away their freedom and control them. And Jesus wants to set people free. Of that we can be sure. On one occasion, when a leper came to him saying, ‘If you want to, you can make me clean,’ Jesus replied, ‘Of course I want to! Be made clean!’ And he healed him. (Mark 1. 40-41)

What would Jesus do to set addicts free? One part of whatever he might do would surely be to bring the

truth out into the open. He said, ‘The truth shall make you free.’ (John 8.32) And it is likely, too, that he would use human solidarity in respectful listening to enable a person to unburden themselves of what bound them.

Week 13

Thursday

Matthew 9.1-8 Jesus heals a paralyzed man

1. And after getting into a boat he [Jesus] crossed the sea and came to his own town.
2. And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’
3. Then some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’
4. But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’
5. Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’?
6. But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins - he then said to the paralytic – ‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’
7. And he stood up and went to his home.
8. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 2.1-12 and Luke 5.17-26. In John 5.1-18, there is a story which is essentially similar, different only circumstantially.

V.1: As is common in the Gospels, crossing the sea, or lake, indicates a transition, a movement from one phase to another, like crossing a threshold. Here Jesus moves back to his home ground, his own town. His own town is now Capernaum, since he left Nazareth for there after the arrest of John the Baptist. (Matthew 4.13)

V.2: The centrality of faith in healing is underlined here. Matthew later notes that Jesus did not work many miracles in Nazareth, *because of* their lack of faith. (13.58)

Jesus appears to accept a causal link between sin and suffering, by saying: 'Your sins are forgiven.' Clearly, in some instances, there may be such a link: for example, people who abuse their body through persistent heavy drinking or drug-taking will experience physical suffering as a consequence. The human person is one: body, mind, spirit and soul interact on each other, so that the well-being (or harm) of one affects the others. There is a similar causal link in John 5.14 where Jesus says to a man he had healed, 'Now that you are well again, be sure not to sin any more, or something worse may happen to you.' But, in most cases, there isn't a causal link,

and Jesus was anxious to separate the two. It's not either-or, but both-and.

V.3: The scribes' reaction is puzzling. Though Jesus could have said, 'I forgive your sins,' he did not do so. What he said was, 'your sins are forgiven.' He does not here claim that he forgives sins; he declares them forgiven. But in v.6 he does make such a claim.

There is a similar situation and reaction in Luke 7.48-49: 'Then he [Jesus] said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Those who were with him at table began to say to themselves, "Who is this man, that he even forgives sins?"' At another time and place, they would say to him, 'You are only a man and you claim to be God.' (John 10.33) Jesus' use of the passive form was his reverential way of referring to God, a common practice at the time; it was equivalent to saying, 'God has forgiven you.'

V.4: Jesus knew what the scribes were thinking. He did not need a supernatural gift for this. He understood their thinking, he would have been taught it from childhood; it was part of tradition: only God could forgive sins, so who did Jesus think he was?

V.5: Jesus takes up the challenge, saying, 'Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Stand up and walk"? It is easier to say the first, because no one knows whether the sins will in fact

be forgiven. But to say the second is to make a promise the fulfilment of which, or the failure to fulfil, will be evident for all to see. If Jesus can do the more difficult - and he does in the next verse - then he can also do the easier. So he answers their challenge.

Vv.6-7: Here Jesus says he is doing this in order to prove that the Son of Man [he himself] has the power on earth to forgive sins. Then he tells the paralytic to pick his bed and go home, and the man does so. The Gospel does not record any expression of thanks from him.

V.8: The people respond with reverential awe, doubtless asking themselves who this man really was. This may be the point of the story. Healings and other works of power were signs, pointers which posed a question, while at the same time pointing to the answer. In effect, they say here, 'Who do you think Jesus is? Who can do such things as you have seen today with your own eyes?' They are meant to strengthen faith.

The phrase *Son of Man* means a human being. It was Jesus' preferred self-designation. It is a messianic title, used widely in the Gospels, but only of Jesus, and not at all in the Letters. It is as Son of Man that Jesus suffers and dies. In Daniel 7.13, the Son of Man is a triumphant figure. Jesus combined in himself the two figures of Suffering Servant from Isaiah and Son of Man from Daniel.

Forgiveness is good news, not something to be afraid of, or to fight against. Everyone needs forgiveness, and most people long for it, would like something or other they did in the past not to have been done, would like to put right a wrong they did, etc. Jesus is saying that God does it, that we need not carry the burden of guilt around with us, that we can confess our sins to him and be forgiven. But there are many who continue to beat themselves up about their past, as if a simple offer of forgiveness is not complicated enough or demanding enough to be credible. In today's world, we find it hard to take seriously things which are not complicated or difficult. All that is asked of us is to accept the forgiveness which is always on offer – and a word of thanks would be good, too.

Week 13

Friday

Matthew 9.9-13 Jesus calls Matthew

9. As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

10. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.

11. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'

12. But when he heard this, he said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

13. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 2.13-17 and Luke 5.27-32.

V.9: To the people of his time it must have been astonishing, even shocking, that Jesus called a tax collector to be one of his disciples. As a class, they were hated because they collaborated with the Romans, the occupying power. They were the local face of the *imperium*, and did well out of their collaboration. This suited the Romans just fine: they got the tax revenue but it was their local agents, not they, who earned the opprobrium of the citizens. It was an example of divide-and-conquer at work.

It shows remarkable honesty on the part of Matthew the Gospel writer that he freely admits his old profession of tax collector.

V.10: In the Gospels, “sinners” meant non-observant Jews, those who didn’t keep the *minutiae* of the Torah, and prostitutes. Jesus became ritually unclean by eating a meal with them; that meant he could not worship in the temple.

V.11: Jesus caused scandal to those who watched. He did not observe the rules of the official religious teachers. How could someone who did such things be a teacher of God's law? The Pharisees followed a religion of observances; the sinners saw the primacy of relationships.

V.12: If we could save ourselves, or be saved by observances, we would not need Jesus. A saint is someone who admits to being a sinner and asks for God's mercy. Jesus chose the sinner, Matthew, to come and follow him. Matthew did so, and was changed by the experience. The implication is that, where God leads, we should follow. Pope Francis uses the image of the church as a field hospital, adding, 'We must not become "starved Christians" talking theology over tea.'

V.13: Matthew lost a comfortable job but found a destiny. Jesus was saying that, even if a person has a past, they can have a future. He looked, not so much at what a person was, but at what they could be. Charity is an active hope for what the other can become - with the help of my fraternal support.

Jesus contrasts the tax collectors and prostitutes, who refused initially to do God's will, but changed and did it, with the Pharisees, who talked about doing God's will, who saw themselves as the specialists in the field, but who did not do it. Theirs was a cautious, measured religion of rules; what Jesus was looking for was uncautious generosity,

especially in forgiveness. One group knows their need of God, while the other feels that it has put itself in the right with God by fulfilling prescribed laws and rituals. The Pharisees are dead; pharisaism is not.

Week 13

Saturday

Matthew 9.14-17 A discussion about fasting

14. Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’

15. And Jesus said to them, ‘The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

16. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made.

17. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.’

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 2.18-22 and Luke 5.33-39.

V.14: John's disciples' question (which could easily have been from a Pharisee) shows a fundamental difference of understanding between them and Jesus as to what religious faith was about. Fasting was one of the pillars of Jewish devotional life, the other two being prayer and alms-giving. It probably surprised, maybe even shocked, the disciples of John and the Pharisees, that Jesus' disciples, apparently, did not fast. What could be the explanation? For them, there was a series of laws, observances, rituals and purity codes to be followed; by doing so faithfully, people could bring themselves to be in good standing before God. (Many good, sincere Christians believe the same.) To them, Jesus seemed to breeze through these with casual ease, saying that the rules were made for people and not people for the rules. (See Mark 2.27) He had also said, 'In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you.' (Matthew 7.12) They must have felt that that bypassed a large part of tradition. Where would it all end, they wondered, if a religious teacher could take so free-and-easy an attitude to their heritage?

For Jesus, grace was not an achievement; it was a gift. People could not, by *any* means, make themselves right before God. We were sinners and would never be otherwise, and that applied to everyone without exception. (That put "sinners" and "the righteous" on an equal footing before God.) It was all pure gift, given freely by a loving and generous God, to be received with a grateful heart.

All we had to do was to say, 'Thank you.' As God's presence in the world, Jesus gave it a reason to rejoice, so, forget the fast and have a feast.

V.15: Jesus' reply pointed in a different direction, moving the question away from fasting towards considering who he might be. No one fasts at a wedding ceremony, he said. He was the bridegroom, so why would his followers fast? His hearers would have been aware of the significance of his allusion to a bridegroom, and, a moment later, to wine. They would have known that, in Jewish tradition, the analogy of Messianic times to a marriage-feast was common. The prophets had spoken of God as Israel's bridegroom: - 'Your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name' (Isaiah 54.5), and Jeremiah called Israel to repent, saying, 'I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride.' (2.2) There may, too, be a link with John 3.29, where the Baptist said, 'The friend of the bridegroom [John himself], who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's [Jesus'] voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.' Jesus is the 'bridegroom,' so it is a time for rejoicing. There is also an allusion to it by Jesus himself in the parable of the bridesmaids in Matthew 25.1-13.

Messianic times were seen as a time of feasting, when God himself would prepare a banquet for his people. Isaiah speaks of a banquet for all peoples, in which God is the host and the best of food and drink

is prepared for the guests. But, further than that, God removes a burden of some kind from all people (“the veil” - perhaps death) and restores harmony, removing tears and shame: -

On this mountain, for all peoples, Yahweh Sabaoth is preparing a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines, of succulent food, of well-strained wines.

On this mountain, he has destroyed the veil which used to veil all peoples, the pall enveloping all nations;

he has destroyed death for ever. Lord Yahweh has wiped away the tears from every cheek; he has taken his people's shame away everywhere on earth, for Yahweh has spoken. (Isaiah 25.6-8)

By hinting that he is the bridegroom and that feasting is appropriate while he is present, Jesus is leaving his hearers to draw the conclusion that he is the Messiah who has come among them.

But there is also a hint of his coming passion when he says that, ‘The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’

Christianity is a religion of incarnation: Jesus not only was with us; he is with us. And so, rejoicing and feasting are close to the living of the Christian

life. The English Catholic writer, Gilbert Keith Chesterton wrote,

‘Wheree’er the Catholic sun doth shine,
there’s music and laughter and good red wine.
At least I have always found it so,
Benedicamus Domino.’

Saint Francis of Assisi used to say that, on Christmas Day, even the walls should have meat rubbed into them, so great was the cause for celebration. For a Christian, every day gives grounds for celebration because God is *always* with us - whether we are with God or not.

In this passage, Jesus did not give a straight answer to a straight question. Indeed, he rarely did: one estimate is that, in the four Gospels, he gives a straight answer to a straight question just four times. What he did here was to take a question of secondary importance and give it an answer of primary importance. The question was about fasting; his answer was to direct their attention to who he was. In effect, he asked his questioners a question – answering one question with another was a favourite technique of his, probably to wake people up – namely, ‘Who am I? Am I the bridegroom spoken of by the prophets? Are my disciples not fasting because, with my presence, the time of the messianic banquet has come?’

Jesus was a teacher who did not feed answers into people's heads to save them the bother of thinking; he paid them the compliment of believing they could think. Very likely he knew that an answer which people discover for themselves has a deeper and more lasting impact than one they are served up on a plate leaving them with nothing to do but nod their heads in assent. So his reply is an attempt to get them to think. Not everyone likes that; sometimes people *are* like sleeping dogs, they prefer to be left to lie in comfort.

Vv.16-17: There is a time to recognize that something new has broken onto the scene, when patching and mending no longer meet the need, when old systems are redundant and must be replaced, and a new beginning made. Jesus' coming was such a time. As so often in the Gospel, Jesus is saying, 'Wake up! Open your eyes to something new and different. Look beyond your narrow perspectives; lift up your eyes and look at the horizon.' Just occasionally, they got it, 'Here is a teaching that is new – and with authority!' (Mark 1.27) But, mostly, they were too set in their ways to change. What Jesus represented was not a reform of Judaism; it was new, and it shook the foundations. Are we at such a stage in the life of the church at present?

Week 14

Monday

Matthew 9.18-26 Jesus heals a woman and raises a girl

18. While he [Jesus] was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.'

19. And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples.

20. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak,

21. for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.'

22. Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well.

23. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion,

24. he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him.

25. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.

26. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 5.21-43 and Luke 8.40-56.

This is a severely shortened version of a story with a “sandwich” story within it told at much greater length by both Mark and Luke. Matthew reduces it to the bare bones, almost a telegram. But he holds onto the essentials, namely, Jesus’ willingness to help, and the faith of the petitioners.

V.18: Matthew, in contrast to Mark, likes to portray Jesus with lofty, sometimes remote, dignity, so he has the synagogue leader kneel before him. The man pours out his appeal from the heart and does not hesitate to ask for the seemingly impossible.

V.19: Jesus’ response is immediate – he goes, and take some disciples with him. This is their on-the-job training.

Vv.20-21: Why is a second story inserted into the first? Is it just, by delaying, to heighten the tension a little, to whet the readers’ appetite by keeping them waiting? That is an understandable explanation in the longer versions of Mark and Luke but hardly here when the story is so short anyway. Or is it simply because that is just the way it actually happened?

The woman’s hesitant, almost furtive, approach likely expresses fear and embarrassment on her part, the former because a woman was not supposed to take the initiative in speaking to a man, especially a religious teacher, the latter probably because her

haemorrhage was related to menstruation. If she touched him, that would render him ritually unclean, so she did the next best thing by touching not even his cloak, but just its fringe. The image Matthew creates is one of a woman in whom hope struggles to stay alive in the face of fear and hesitation.

V.22: Jesus' response suggests someone completely in command of the situation, as if he knew beforehand what would happen; there is no suggestion of surprise or even a question. He recognizes her faith and tells her to take heart ('Courage' in JB). This is like the messianic, 'Do not fear' of Joel 2.21, and the same phrase, also messianic, of Zephaniah 3.16. Her faith heals her.

V.23: In some cultures, and Palestine's was one, professional mourners were hired for funerals. Their job was to weep and wail with lots of impressive noise and tears which could be turned on or off at will. It is not difficult to imagine Jesus being annoyed by this performance and chasing them off. I saw the same as a missionary in Zambia where such mourners, though not professionals, were enthusiastic volunteers. They would stop on being told to do so.

V.24: Jesus sends them out. All three Synoptics quote him as saying that the girl was not dead, but sleeping. (Mark 5.39 and Luke 8.52) If that really and truly means that she was only sleeping, then, not only were her father (v.18) and the mourners

mistaken, but Jesus does nothing special and the story has no point. But if she really were dead, why did Jesus say, ‘the girl is not dead, but sleeping’? Some see it as a hint in some way of his power to raise the dead, or of his own resurrection. But they both presuppose death as a reality. Is it a way of saying that, to God, human death means nothing even though it means everything to us? Again, that presupposes real, not merely apparent, death. Maybe we just have to settle for saying that we do not know.

V.25: Matthew makes it sound simple, effortless and instantaneous: ‘the girl got up.’

V.26: In contrast to Mark where Jesus ‘strictly ordered them that no one should know this’ (5.43), Matthew calmly, and, one might say, more realistically, says that ‘the report of this spread throughout that district.’ The gospel writers felt free to tell their story in their own way to make the point they wished to make: each was writing his story rather than history.

Week 14

Tuesday

Matthew 9.32-38 Jesus heals a dumb demoniac

32. After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute was brought to him.

33. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were

amazed and said, ‘Never has anything like this been seen in Israel.’

34. But the Pharisees said, ‘By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons.’

35. Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.

36. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

37. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few;

38. therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’

There are passages similar to this in Mark 7.31-37, Luke 11.14-15, and also in Matthew at 12.22-24. There is a passage parallel to verses 35-38 in Luke 10.2-3.

V.32: The ‘they’ presumably refers to the two blind men Jesus healed in Matthew 9.27-31.

‘a demoniac who was mute’ – what does that mean? Does it mean a person who did indeed have the power of speech but was prevented from exercising it by a psychological block of some kind, such as might arise from severe stress, what we today call post-traumatic stress disorder? During the early years of this millennium, Empress Michiko of

Japan appeared to suffer in such a way, but recovered the power of speech during a visit with her husband to a small island off Japan's coast where she was received with great kindness by the local people. Was it their kindness that released the tension, stress or anxiety that had held her bound? It does not sound improbable. If a person in that situation was met instead with fear, ridicule, incomprehension, avoidance or isolation, those would likely reinforce the condition.

Jesus's way, it seems, was to give the person in front of him his undivided attention. One could not imagine him asking someone 'How are you?' while walking past them and not waiting for an answer. He ignored the strictures of ignorance by touching lepers, for example, and the rules of convention by allowing himself to be touched by women. Maybe this was the first time someone gave the dumb man some really focussed attention.

V.33: In this passage, Matthew's primary interest seems to be on people's reactions to what Jesus did, more than to the actions themselves. Here the crowds are amazed, saying that it is without precedent in Israel. This suggests that they saw him as the fulfilment of Israel's destiny. Their reaction finds an echo in a broadly similar story in Mark 7.31-37 where the people, following a similar healing, 'were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak."'

V.34: By contrast, the Pharisees' attitude can only be described as perverse. To attribute a good work to evil exhibits a cynicism that refuses to accept good as good but chooses to misrepresent it. That is an option taken by some people, present as well as past; it is destructive.

This is an indicator of things to come. The Pharisees, representatives of official Judaism and, in their own eyes, its most faithful adherents, reject Jesus despite the evidence, while ordinary people are able to look with open eyes at what is in front of them and call it by name.

V.35: Jesus went on a tour, teaching in the synagogues. This was a common practice among rabbis in his time. The verse re-echoes 4.23: 'Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.' The two verses are like brackets at the beginning and end of a series of teaching and miracle stories which show Jesus in a messianic role.

Jesus went, 'proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.' The kingdom of heaven is the central theme of Matthew's Gospel, and his other themes are subordinated to it. The phrase "kingdom of heaven" occurs thirty times in Matthew, and "kingdom of God" four. He uses the term more often than do the other Gospel writers, and the terms

“king” and “kingdom” interchangeably. The kingdom comes with Jesus, whose teaching and miracles are in the messianic tradition. Matthew’s point is to show that Jesus was the Messiah (which was not a divine title). Jesus is the king of the kingdom, not one like royalty of any time, but a humble one. Zechariah 9.9 reads:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud,
O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to
you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble
and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a
donkey.

The beatitudes (Matthew 5.3-10) are the charter of the kingdom and the Eucharist seals the new covenant.

In the Hebrew Bible, God was king and Israel the kingdom. By the time of Jesus, this ideal had been secularized into the vision of a political kingdom of Israel free of Roman, Greek or any other foreign control.

Jesus taught and proclaimed. Is there a difference? Is it like catechesis and evangelization respectively? He wasn’t starting from a clean slate. His hearers were Jews, probably already well-versed in the Torah, and it is from within that context and commitment that he spoke. He had come not to abolish the Torah, but to fulfil it. (Matthew 5.17)

V.36: He had compassion on the crowds, because ‘they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.’ Today, soap operas and so-called reality programmes (more realistically, perhaps, unreality programmes) show people without values to live by or hopes to live for, without an anchor in life, people who do not know what they want, are manipulated by commercial interests, and are driven by fashions and fads, hormones and emotions. Blaise Pascal once asked, ‘What good is it to tell people who do not know themselves that they should make their own way to God?’

Vv.37-38: The harvest is an image widely used in the Bible of messianic times and of judgment; Matthew himself has it in 13.9 and 13.24-30. This has commonly been presented as asking people to pray for “vocations” to the priesthood and religious life. That fits, but the appeal has wider application; it includes everyone who serves God’s kingdom in any capacity.

Week 14

Wednesday

Matthew 10.1-7 Jesus chooses and sends out twelve

1. Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

2. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John;

3. Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;

4. Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

5. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans,

6. but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

7. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 3.13-19a, and Luke 6.12-16.

V.1: Jesus gave the twelve disciples whom he summoned authority to do as he had done: to cast out unclean spirits and to cure ‘every disease and every sickness.’ There is no mention here of proclaiming the kingdom of God as previously in 9.35. Is that significant or not? Probably not, as it comes, just a little later, in 10.7.

The people who come closest to curing ‘every disease and every sickness’ are doctors, nurses and research scientists – many of whom today are not

Christian even in the most extended sense. But, by their work, they show respect for the person, and compassion, too, as Jesus taught and did. They would do well if judged according to the parable of judgment in 25.31-46. A blessing on them!

Vv.2-4: This is the first mention of the twelve in Matthew. The list is not fully consistent with others: see Mark 3.16-19, Luke 6.13-16 and Acts 1.13. Perhaps some came and went because of varying degrees of commitment. The Gospel writers seem more concerned to maintain the idea of a *group* of twelve without being too concerned about their identity.

Why twelve? - presumably to inherit the mantle of the twelve sons of Jacob (Genesis 35.23-26), and the twelve tribes of Israel. Mark, however, gives the twelve more significance.

V. 1 speaks of twelve 'disciples', while v.2 speaks of twelve 'apostles.' Are they the same? In this context, probably yes. The word 'apostle' means 'one sent.' The word does not yet have the character of an office or title, but seems to be a functional description of a mission. Among the twelve, Matthew gives the first place to 'Simon, also known as Peter.'

Judas is mentioned at the end of the list in 10.4, with a sense of shame.

Vv.5-6: Jesus sent them out, not to gentiles or Samaritans but rather ‘to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ Was that Jesus or Matthew speaking? In either case, it emphasizes one of Matthew’s themes, which is the rejection of Jesus by Jews and the consequent opening up of the Gospel to gentiles. In Matthew 4.23-25, Jesus’ fame spread ‘throughout all Syria’, ‘and great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.’ This was after preaching in their synagogues (4.23), so it is likely that those who followed him were Jews living in gentile territories rather than gentiles. But Jesus was open to gentiles such as, for example, the Roman centurion who asked for healing for his servant (Matthew 8.5-13), the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4.1-42), and the Greeks whom Philip brought to see him (John 12.20-22).

V.7: Here he says that ‘the kingdom of God has come near.’ Is it merely quibbling to ask whether it would not be more accurate to say that it had already come – with Jesus? But the same phrase is used also in Matthew 3.2 and 4.17.

Clearly it is not possible to pin down the kingdom to any point in space or time just as it is not possible to pin down heaven to a place. Perhaps one may say that wherever Jesus is, there also is the kingdom.

Week 14

Thursday

Matthew 10.7-15 The mission of the twelve

Jesus instructed the twelve as follows: -

7. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'

8. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

9. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts,

10. no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food.

11. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave.

12. As you enter the house, greet it.

13. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.

14. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

15. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 6.6b-13 and Luke 9.1-6.

V.7: The proclamation of the kingdom is the central theme of the preaching of Jesus. It is good news, not good advice, nor a new moral burden, an obstacle course that has to be cleared if one wants 'to go to heaven.' It is God going much more than

half way to meet us. It means that God is in us, more than the air in our lungs or the blood in our veins, and that we are in God. (To be ‘enthused’ literally means ‘to be in God.’)

V.8: The mission of the twelve is the same as that of Jesus. It is more broad-ranging than that of John the Baptist. It includes new elements such as raising the dead and cleansing lepers. (The term “leprosy,” it seems, applied to many different skin diseases.) These works of power are those Isaiah spoke of as signs of the messianic age: ‘Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame will leap like a deer and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy; for water will gush in the desert and streams in the wastelands.’(35.5-6)

Their service is to be given without charge, just as it was received without charge. Does that mean that their mission was to be temporary or local? Were they to live solely on voluntary contributions or would they continue to support themselves as before by their ordinary work as fishermen, etc.? If the latter, then how would they fulfil the commission to spread the news of the kingdom?

Clearly, the disciples and apostles of Jesus today do not, and cannot, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cure every disease and every sickness. (v.1) Does that mean that we have failed, or what does it mean?

On one occasion in Zambia, before my time there, the first bishop of the diocese, Timothy Phelim O'Shea, a Corkman, came to the mission in Mangango for a while, probably for confirmation. Early one morning, he went out into the garden and was shocked to see a man lying on the ground, apparently dead. But a quick examination made it clear that he was not dead - just dead drunk! The bishop spoke to him and he woke up, gradually got his bearings, and stood up. Unknown to the bishop, all this had been watched by a passer-by, who put two and two together, made twenty-two of them, and then ran around telling everyone that the bishop had raised a dead man to life! The story remained alive for years to come, no matter how often it was denied.

Vv.9-10: This suggests something like a quick missionary raid, sustained by trust in God who provides for those who serve him. It also suggests that these journeys will not go far afield or be of great duration. They are not to carry institutional baggage but to travel light. Since then the church has burdened itself with a great deal of this, so that much, perhaps most, of the energy of apostolic workers is spent on maintenance, not mission. Our insecurity makes us put our faith in money, buildings and organizational structures, but they often become a dead weight, or even an impediment to mission as when we mute the Gospel message in case of prejudicing the institutions. I remember the bishops of Zambia modifying a pastoral letter they

had drafted following consultation with UNIP, the (sole) ruling party whose ideology was Marxist-Leninist because it had objected to some of its contents. Similarly, in South Africa, in the days of apartheid, the bishops' criticism of the system was often muted (their pastoral letter of 1957 was an exception), the reason given being that they feared state action against church institutions. Those are difficult judgment calls to make but I have learned to be suspicious when I hear church leaders speak of prudence. It often smells of cunning, calculation, cowardice, cop-out or cute hooring. At the present time, the church, in the western world at least, is losing its institutions because we no longer have the personnel and the money to maintain them. That may prove to be a liberation, as the "loss" of the Papal States was in the nineteenth century, freeing us from issues of power and control and enabling us to focus on mission.

Vv.11-13: As a missionary in Zambia, I found that a different dynamic was at work when I went to visit people in areas distant from the mission than when I was at base and people came to see me. In the former, I was the guest, and met people in their environment and on their terms. In the latter, the converse was the case. One difference I remember was that in the former I found myself thinking as well as speaking in the local language (Silozi) because of being immersed in it 24/7.

I can recall, too, being disappointed when the diocese decided to build a pastoral centre to which local church leaders would come for training. It was a kind of reflex – when it doubt, build; it gives the feeling of doing something. I felt that it would have been pastorally better – and far cheaper – to have a team who would go to the people, meet them in their environment on their terms, with all its limitations and offer training to *all* the local church members, not only those who could afford the time and money to go to a centre with the consequent risk of elitism and jealousy.

Vv.14-15: Some early missionaries in the north-east of Zambia followed this literally. If people rejected them, they went to the boundary of their village, took off their sandals, shook the dust from them, and told the people why they did so. The memory this left behind was one of fear and shame.

Week 14

Friday

Matthew 10.16-23 Coming persecutions

Jesus instructed the twelve as follows: -

16. ‘See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

17. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues;

18. and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.

19. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time;

20. for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

21. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death;

22. and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

23. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.'

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 13.9-13 and Luke 12.11-12 and 21.12-19, with a not dissimilar warning in John 16.1-4.

V.16: The world can be a tough place, and a faithful Christian can indeed be like a sheep among wolves.

'Use your head; don't be naïve or stupid.' Is that what Jesus is saying here? 'Why should the devil's brass band have all the best tunes?' Be child-like, not childish. Those who do the work of Jesus should

use the methods of Jesus – and be prepared for the end Jesus suffered. Christ is always the role model for the Christian. Between 1994 and 1998, 499 Catholic priests, religious brothers and sisters were murdered in various countries around the world; that is an average of about two a week. (*Mondo e Missione*, quoted in *The Far East*, May/June 1999) Not necessarily all of those were killed out of hatred of the faith (*odium fidei*); in some cases, other motives were at work, such as robbery. When in Zambia, I recall an official from the U.S. embassy expressing astonishment that missionaries were unarmed. To him, it seemed like no more than basic common sense that we should have guns in our houses. Such a thought had never occurred to us, we had never felt the need of them, and we were safer without them.

V.17: There were small, local sanhedrins in Israel as well as the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. The word means a council, from the Greek *synedrion*. This reference to persecutions in sanhedrins suggests that, by the time Matthew's Gospel was written, the split between Jews and Christians had taken place. The specific mention of flogging has its "fulfilment" in Acts 5.40: 'when they called in the apostles, they had them flogged.'

V.18: Being called to account before councils and tribunals will be opportunities to bear witness to Jews and Gentiles. The book of *Acts* gives several examples of this.

Vv.19-20: Disciples are simply to trust in ‘the Spirit of your Father’ to speak through them, without preparing or rehearsing beforehand. That asks for a great act of trust on their part, but there are precedents. When Moses was told by God to ask Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go, he pleaded his inability: -

Moses, however, said to the Lord, ‘If you please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past, nor recently, nor now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and tongue.’

The Lord said to him, ‘Who gives one man speech and makes another deaf and dumb? Or who gives sight to one and makes another blind? Go, then! It is I who will assist you in speaking and will teach you what you are to say.’
(Exodus 4.10-12)

Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah pleaded his limitations:

‘Ah, Lord God!’ I said, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am too young.’

But the Lord answered me, ‘Do not say, "I am too young." To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak.

Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you,’ says the Lord.

Then the Lord extended his hand and touched my mouth, saying, ‘See, I place my words in your mouth!

This day I set you over nations and over kingdoms, to root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant.’ (Jeremiah 1.6-10)

And John’s Gospel has Jesus say, ‘When the Advocate comes... the Spirit of truth who comes from my Father, he will testify on my behalf.’ (15.26) *Acts* gives examples of the apostles speaking boldly, empowered by the Spirit, in contrast to their earlier timidity. (4.8, 31)

V.21: The saddest part of this is that betrayal may come from within, even from within one’s own family. ‘One’s foes will be members of one’s own household,’ said Jesus in Matthew 10.36. He experienced this himself when Judas, one of his chosen twelve, turned against him. History affords many other examples, such as that of Blessed Margaret Ball of Dublin, betrayed by her son, Walter: -

In 1581, on his [Walter’s] orders [as mayor of the city], his mother was arrested, drawn through the streets on a hurdle, and thrown into a dungeon in Dublin Castle where the harsh conditions of life wore her down. She was arthritic, and her cell was cold, damp, and lit

only by a candle. She died there in 1584, aged about seventy.

V.22: Blind, cold, irrational hatred of the Christian faith and Christians is not unknown, whether in the past or the present, sometimes on the part of people who know little or nothing about the faith. ‘Is there anything more stupid than hating what you do not know?’ asked David Irvine (of the Progressive Unionist Party in Northern Ireland)? Maybe not, but the reality is that such hatred is there. Examples are to be found in some of the media in Ireland, where some journalists give vent to hatred of the Christian faith or church in a way that is as uninformed as it is venomous.

‘The one who endures to the end will be saved.’ Repeated in Matthew 24.13, this is not a promise that the person’s life will be saved, much less that the story will have a happy ending. It has to be taken as a promise of eternal life for those who give their life in fidelity to God.

The passage is a stark, intimidating warning from Jesus that his disciples must expect persecution. ‘A servant must be as his master’ (Matthew 10.24); if Jesus was persecuted, so will be his disciples. Another consideration is that it illustrates the failure of the mission of Jesus, and later of the disciples, to Jews and the necessity of turning to Gentiles.

V.23a: As at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, there is a sense of urgency, even of speed, as if to say, 'If people reject you, don't stop to argue about it; just get up and keep going.'

V.23b: This has sometimes been interpreted to mean that the conversion of the Jews must precede the Second Coming of Christ. Others see it as a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Week 14

Saturday

Matthew 10.24-33 Have no fear

Jesus instructed the twelve as follows: -

24. 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master;

25. it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

26. So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.

27. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.

28. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

29. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

30. And even the hairs of your head are all counted.

31. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

32. Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven;

33. but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

There are passages parallel to vv.24-25 in Luke 6.40, John 13.16 and 15.20, and to vv.26-31 in Luke 12.2-7.

Vv.24-25: The phrase in v.24 may have been a popular saying; it was common in rabbinic writings. In Jewish tradition, that disciple was considered best who could replicate the master's teaching most faithfully. It did not ask for, or welcome, innovation. (For Christians, too, innovation has often been a bad word.)

If Jesus is called Beelzebul (he was in Matthew 9.34 and 12.24), his disciples should expect nothing else. Jesus' point seems to be that, just as he has met with opposition and will meet with suffering and death, so will some of his disciples. As for Christ, so also for the Christian.

Vv.26-31: The message ‘have no fear’ is repeated in v.28, ‘Do not fear,’ and again in v.31, ‘Do not be afraid.’ Its use three times in one short passage is a reminder of how very often this occurs in the Bible – several hundred times, in fact. It is not a promise that everything will go smoothly and all will live happily ever afterwards. Some may be killed, and that is a reality we are made aware of frequently in news bulletins as we hear of persecution of Christians in many countries today. The phrase looks to the ultimate, not the short-term, outcome: people will be persecuted, and some will be killed, as Christians are by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria at present (2015). Of them it may be said,

The souls of the just are in the hands of God, no torment shall ever touch them. In the eyes of the unwise, they did appear to die; their going looked like a disaster, their leaving us like annihilation. But they are in peace.

If they experienced punishment as people see it, their hope was rich with immortality. Slight was their affliction, great will their blessings be.

God has put them to the test and proven them worthy to be with Him. He has tested them like gold in a furnace, and accepted them as a holocaust. (Wisdom 3.1-6)

Jesus was speaking to Jews. Their descendants must have prayed their hearts out during the Holocaust, must have used the many prayers of deliverance, those in the Psalms for instance, must

have thought of God's promises to them under the covenant – but they were killed all the same. They asked themselves what it could possibly mean that they were the chosen people of God - and they found no answer. They asked themselves, 'Chosen for what? For suffering? For annihilation?' Is that what God wants?

It is no wonder that, not only for Jews, but for others too, Auschwitz is an insuperable obstacle to faith in a loving God. Here is a sample of some writings on the topic: -

'the horror of Auschwitz is a stark challenge to many of the more conventional ideas of God. The remote God of the philosophers, lost in a transcendent *apatheia*, becomes intolerable.' (Karen Armstrong, *A History of God. From Abraham to the Present: the 4000-year Quest for God*, Heinemann, London, 1993, p.431)

The Jewish writer, Daniel C. Matt, asks how, after Auschwitz, we can speak of a caring, compassionate, personal God. (*God and the Big Bang: Discovering Harmony between Science and Spirituality*, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 1996, p.30)

A Jewish theologian, Richard Rubenstein, 'was convinced that the deity conceived as a God of History had died for ever in Auschwitz.'

Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, put the challenge most powerfully and inescapably, saying, 'Whatever you want to say about God, you must be able to say over a pit full of burning babies.'

And not only Auschwitz: The Vietnamese writer, Bao Ninh, describes a scene in the Viet-Nam war: 'A rain of arms and legs dropping before him onto the grass by the Sa Thay river during a night raid by B52's. Hamburger Hill, after three days of bloody fighting, looked like a dome roof built with corpses.' (*The Sorrow of War*, Minerva, London, 1994, p.82)

Only a crucified God can make sense of such situations. Perhaps with vv.29, 31 in mind, the Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh, wrote that,

'Only God thinks of the dying sparrow
in the middle of a war.'

(*Lough Derg*, written about 1942-3, during the Second World War)

What is there to say, except, perhaps, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'? (John 20.29)

V.27: Jesus could not speak the full truth of who he was because people could not have understood or accepted it. Only his death and resurrection could make it credible. Therefore, he speaks 'in the dark'

while his disciples, after the resurrection, must 'proclaim it from the housetops.'

V.28: This body-soul distinction was foreign to the Jewish mentality. Perhaps it is meant to contrast the body and the whole person.

Does the second half of the verse refer to God or to the devil? God is not a destroyer; the devil is. Is it saying that one should fear the evil one, as one would fear hell.

Vv.32-33: Jesus calls for loyalty to him and courage in professing the faith in difficult circumstances.

Week 15

Monday

Matthew 10.34-11.1 For or against Jesus

34. 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

35. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

36. and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

37. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;

38. and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

39. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

40. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

41. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;

42. and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple - truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'

11.1. Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.

There are passages parallel to vv.34-36 in Luke 12.51-53, to vv.37-39 in Luke 14.26-27, to v.40 in Mark 9.37, Luke 9.48 and 10.16, to v.41 in John 12.44-45 and 13.20, and to v.42 in Mark 9.41.

Vv.34-35: This passage makes for difficult reading. At a time when religions are widely criticized for being divisive, for being the occasion, the excuse, or the cause of hatred, for being part of the problem of human disunity rather than part of the solution, this plays right into it.

A person who makes a large impact will make enemies as well as friends, and the larger the impact the more polarized the reactions may be. Jesus made such an impact, and it is only to be expected that some would react against him. He challenged vested interests, he upset established positions of mind and soul, he forced people to get off the fence, he ignored conventions, he tried to widen narrow minds, he made people look at themselves in truth, he woke up those who wanted to doze their way through life – and people don't like that. Most of us are lazy and want to be left alone, but Jesus did not believe in letting sleeping dogs lie.

The wording of the verses suggests that Jesus actually set out to create division, not simply that division would, regrettably, follow as a consequence of what he stood for.

V.36: Jesus had plenty of experience of his own household being, if not enemies, then at least uncomprehending. At an early stage in his ministry some of his relatives questioned his sanity. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' (Mark 3.21) And John says, 'Not even his brothers believed in him.' (7.5) His relations with Mary, his mother, do not suggest a harmonious mother-and-son love and affection. (See Mark 3.31-35; John 2.4 and 19.26)

In Nazareth, his own people ‘took offence at him.’ (Mark 6.3) Luke, describing the same visit by Jesus to the synagogue in the town, has him remark, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown’ (4.24), and Matthew 13.57. He experienced rejection by his own people, the Jews, the wider household of faith, with increasing intensity, until, finally, they contrived to bring about his execution. In summary, ‘He came to his own, and his own received him not.’ (John 1.11)

Vv.37-38: These verses continue broadly in the same vein, but with lesser intensity. They involve comparatives – this more than that rather than the all-or-nothing of the preceding verses. Jesus asks his followers to make him the priority above all other relations. In doing so, he follows in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible that the Lord is a jealous God, and thereby implicitly makes a claim about himself : -

God is jealous because of the idols in the temple (Ezekiel 8.3, 5);

‘Thus says the Lord God... I will be jealous for my holy name’ (Ezekiel 39.25);

‘I the Lord your God am a jealous God.’ (Exodus 20.5);

‘The Lord, whose name is jealous [el kanná], is a jealous God.’ (Exodus 34.14);

‘the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God.’ (Deuteronomy 4.24);

‘I the Lord your God am a jealous God’ (Deuteronomy 5.9);

‘The Lord your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God.’ (Deuteronomy 6.15)

God can make absolute claims; a human being may not, though dictators have done so, such as Benito Mussolini, ‘Everything in the State and for the State and by the State; nothing outside or above or against the State.’ (Cited by Don Luigi Sturzo, "Giuseppe Toniolo and Christian Democracy", in *Blackfriars*, Vol. XVII, No.194, May 1936, p.366) Stalin used to have his image projected onto clouds above the adoring crowds in Red Square so that he would look down on them like a deity. Jesus makes absolutist claims for himself in these verses. He was either a raving megalomaniac or God-made-man.

Vv.38-39: ‘Taking up the cross’ was not then the anodyne conventional religious cliché that it has now become. It scared the wits out of people. They would have seen crucifixions, and knew them for what they were - deliberately cruel, slow, agonizing deaths. If ever a slogan was designed to scare people off, this was it. It was surely quite deliberately intended to force people to make a choice, to say yes or no to Jesus, while knowing full well that most of us happily settle for a fudge, for muddling through, neither fish nor flesh, neither too hot nor too cold. (See Revelation 3.15-16) Jesus knew very well that a little comfortable religion is the death of religion, and he wanted none of it. If he had settled for that, he would not have ended his days on a cross but in a smooth accommodation with the high priests, Herod

and Pilate. He risked everything, including death, and he wants his followers to be ready to do the same.

V.39: ‘If it is not paradox, it is not orthodox,’ say the Orthodox. This statement is just such an example. A logician would go crazy with frustration at it – but it is true and the experience of life confirms that. Mark 8.35 has it also, adding, ‘and for the sake of the gospel.’ Luke 9.24 and 17.33, and John 12.25 also have it, the repetition suggesting that it is a foundational teaching from Jesus himself.

Vv.40-42: These verses offer the other side of the coin, the positive offer of a reward for those who give even the smallest help.

Taken as a package, the reading from v.34 to v.42 is demanding, uncompromising, hard-hitting. Perhaps there is another meaning in it, namely, that only God could make such demands, so, there is a conclusion to be drawn about him.

11.1 is a wrap-up phrase leading into a new phase.

Week 15

Tuesday

Matthew 11.20-24 The consequences of rejection

20. Jesus began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.

21. ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!
For if the deeds of power done in you had been done
in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long
ago in sackcloth and ashes.

22. But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be
more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

23. And you, Capernaum,
will you be exalted to heaven?

No, you will be brought down to Hades.

For if the deeds of power done in you had been done
in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

24. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will
be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for
you.’

There is a parallel passage in Luke 10.13-15.

Luke locates this narrative at the end of Jesus’
ministry in Galilee rather than here at this relatively
early stage. It gives powerful expression to Jesus’
frustration at the negative response of his hearers.
Just a little earlier, he had said: -

‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is
like children sitting in the marketplaces and
calling to one another,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not
dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and
they say, “He has a demon”;

the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.' (Matthew 11.16-19)

It is difficult to cope with people locked into negativity, who, in any situation, will find something cynical, destructive or belittling to offer by way of response. I can recall situations where a government declared its intention of doing something which most people welcomed, but there were still some who responded by saying that the government was doing it for the wrong reasons, or in the wrong way, or it was costing too much, or it should have been done a long time ago. They seemed unable simply to welcome it as good and leave it at that.

V.20: Those places where most of Jesus' deeds of power had been done offered the poorest response. In Zambia, and in other countries in Southern Africa, it was common to find that people who lived nearest the mission, with easy access to daily Mass and the sacraments, made little effort to avail of them, while those in remote regions were prepared to go to great trouble to attend them. I remember spending time visiting people in their villages along the banks of a stream, encouraging them to come to a prayer session. I did not have enough time to visit the villages along another riverbank. But I, and my companion also, noticed independently, that those who came to the prayer session were entirely from

the area we had not visited, and not even one person came from those villages directly invited by a personal visit. In Ireland, people have a saying, ‘The nearer to the church the further from God.’ It is an analogous process to that described by Matthew.

In the background is the theme of judgment, which is found in all four evangelists, but perhaps most prominently in Matthew. God never takes away people’s free will. We always, in any circumstance, retain the freedom to determine our own attitudes. The choices are ours to make – and the consequences that follow from them.

Vv.21-22: Jesus points to two Jewish towns where he had met with a negative reception, and contrasts them with two Gentile ones, both outside his homeland, where he had been welcomed. The Jewish towns seem to have assumed that because they were God’s chosen people, the people of the covenant, that all would be well with them in God’s sight, whereas they looked down on the Gentiles as deserving of nothing. Jesus turns that upside-down. It is like what he said later, ‘many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’ (Matthew 19.20)

Vv.23-4: Jesus speaks even more strongly about Capernaum, his home town since moving there from Nazareth. He puts it on a lower level than Sodom, one of the two cities of the past – the other was Gomorrah – proverbial for their sinfulness, and destroyed for their rejection of God’s messengers. This re-echoes what Jesus said of those who reject

the Gospel, ‘Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for [them].’ (Matthew 10.15) Sodom, in Jewish tradition, was destroyed by God because its people had insulted and rejected the messengers sent to it by God for its salvation. (Genesis 18.20-19.25)

The two Jewish revolts, in 66-70 AD and 132-135 AD, both savagely suppressed by the Romans as was their habitual practice, were seen by some Christians as God’s punishment on Jews for rejecting Jesus. There have also been some who have seen the Holocaust in the same light. In this broad context, Pope John Paul II wrote: -

erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility towards this people. (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *We remember: a Reflection on the Shoah*, 12 March 1998, III)

The passage is all part of the wider theme of the rejection of Jesus by Jews and of this opening up the way to bring the Gospel to the nations. Historically, the three Jewish towns named – Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum – have long since disappeared, while Tyre and Sidon are now substantial cities. This is in accord with what Jesus said of the faith of the centurion: -

When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (Matthew 8.10-12)

Week 15

Wednesday

Matthew 11.25-27 Praise God for the little ones

25. At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;

26. yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

27. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

There is a parallel passage in Luke 10.21-22.

This passage links into at least two themes that are common in the Gospels: it is the outsiders, not the insiders, who get the message; and, Jesus and the Father are at one.

With God one may always expect the unexpected. One might have expected that the religious leaders of Judaism – the high priests, Pharisees and scribes – with their deep knowledge of the Torah, drawn from a lifetime of study, would have seen Jesus as the Messiah and welcomed him with open arms. Instead, we see a pattern of increasing hostility on their part culminating in a plan to kill him, using the Romans as their instrument.

But it was the “infants,” in other places the “little ones,” who received him. These are not children, much less babies, but adults who are ignorant of the Torah. Many people, such as the illiterate, who probably formed a majority of the population, were described by priests and Pharisees as, ‘This crowd, which does not know the law - they are accursed.’ (John 7.49) They had said to the man born blind to whom Jesus had given sight, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ (John 9.34) The Old Testament took a similar view:

Daniel said that it belongs to God ‘to confer wisdom on the wise, and knowledge on those with wit to discern’ (2.21);

Ben Sirach had said that wisdom ‘is not accessible to many’ (6.23);

Wisdom delivers her message at the city gates, ‘You ignorant people, how much longer will you cling to your ignorance?’ (Proverbs 1.22)

This man was a “little one” in the sense in which Jesus uses the expression here. In contrast to the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, these “infants” receive and accept Jesus. They know that they do not know, they know they are sinners; they accept that, and so they turn to Jesus to lead them to God. For this he gives thanks to God his Father.

For Jews, the Torah was the covenant in writing; it was the God-given constitution of society, foundational to Judaism. Sometimes the term refers to the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, at others, to the entire Hebrew Bible. The Torah was the teaching, less accurately called the law; it was didactic more than regulatory. Fidelity to the law was the aim of observant Jews, especially the scribes, Pharisees and priests. Their ambition was to be able to say, ‘I have been scrupulous in keeping the Law.’ (Sirach 51.25, JB) But this made it into an obstacle because it gave them the (false) impression that, by this means, they could win favour in God’s sight.

Righteousness before God is always a gift, not an achievement. Huff and puff as we will, we will never come to God by the road of the law. Jewish tradition had often spoken of ‘the yoke of the law’; ‘Put your necks under her yoke.’ (Sirach 51.26, JB) But it is only faith in Jesus that brings a person to God: ‘The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.’ (John 1.17) That is a load off mind and soul, and opens the

gate wide to those for whom the fulfilment of the law is, for whatever reason, an unattainable goal. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* has a similar idea, saying: -

In the exercise of the power of knowledge God must remain ever incomprehensible. Whereas in the exercise of love he may be fully comprehended.... By love he may be grasped and held; by thought never. (Robert Llewellyn, editor, *The Dart of Longing Love: daily readings from The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counsel*, Saint Paul Publications, Bandra, Bombay, India, pp.6, 14)

Not everyone can know; but anyone, even the most ignorant of the law, may love. Jesus asks people to come to him in trust, to accept him, and to find forgiveness of their sins in him.

These verses, taken with the following vv.28-30, may originally have been a hymn from the early Christian community, the fruit of its reflection on the turn of events that led from the rejection of Jesus by Jews to his acceptance by Gentiles.

Week 15

Thursday

Matthew 11.28-30 Come to me...

Jesus exclaimed,

28. 'Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

29. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

30. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’

Vv.28-30: NCCHS regards this as the end of a hymn which begins with v.25. It contrasts the rejection of Jesus by others and, here, acceptance of him.

Perhaps one of the “heavy burdens” that Jesus had in mind is the Torah, the Law, with its multiplicity of detailed prescriptions and prohibitions. Jews had 365 proscriptions (one for every day of the year), and 248 prescriptions or laws of direction (one for every bone in the body, it was said), making 613 in all. It was impossible to remember them, never mind live by them, especially as, in many if not all cases, the rules were sub-divided into sections and sub-sections. An example might be the commandment (the 3rd) to keep holy the Sabbath day. Among other things, that meant not working on it. But what constituted work? Rabbis listed thirty-nine different categories which were forbidden on the Sabbath.

Jesus got into trouble on several occasions with the Pharisees and scribes for breaking the rules, as, for example, in the following passage, Matthew 12.1-8. Questions discussed by them under this heading included such matters as: was it a violation of this commandment for a parent to lift a child on the

Sabbath? What about putting on a bandage? – was that work? Lighting a fire? – that was definitely work. Feeding animals? A farmer considers it work, but should the animals then go hungry? Etc., etc., etc., many times over. Was this burdensome? – definitely, yes!

Peter, in *Acts*, spoke to the first Christians in Jerusalem of the burden of the Torah, saying, ‘It would only provoke God’s anger now, surely, if you imposed on the disciples the very burden that neither we nor our ancestors were strong enough to support.’ (15.10) Paul spoke similarly, ‘When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit yourselves again to the yoke of slavery.’ (Galatians 5.1) Jesus came to lift that burden from people. In its place he called for commitment to himself as the one who is the way to God. (John 14.6)

Much of Christian tradition has been taken up with re-imposing new moral burdens to replace those of the Torah. I remember an official of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, (then known as the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office), Father Sebastian Tromp SJ, explain the new rule of an hour’s fast before receiving Communion. He declared that every hour had sixty minutes, every minute had sixty seconds, and therefore every hour had 3,600 seconds, not 3,599 or anything less!

Post-Christian practice does likewise in the form of dogmatic, non-negotiable political correctness.

As intended by God, the primary purpose of the Torah was to teach and to motivate rather than to regulate. When it came to be used as an instrument of regulation, that is when it became a burden. The same may be said for any moral system.

Many Catholics today do not know the Ten Commandments; some do even know that there are Ten Commandments. William Penn, the founder of the US state of Pennsylvania, a Quaker, said that humans have a choice: we can obey the Ten Commandments of God or we condemn ourselves to having to obey the ten thousand commandments of men imposed by statute and penal law. In Ireland, to a substantial degree, we have opted for the latter, and the result is a multiplicity of organizations, structures and litigation to monitor and control our behaviour. One result of that is a culture of suspicion and mistrust.

If we choose to follow the Ten Commandments, life becomes simpler, more communitarian and more trusting. We follow them by a deliberate choice, and they have no regulating authority other than our self-discipline. The Commandments are like being given a map and compass in a wilderness and being shown how to use them; that is better than being left clueless as to where we are or are going. They are

like the fence at the edge of a cliff to save us from ourselves in our foolish moments.

But, in Ireland, faced with a choice between self-discipline and imposed discipline, we have opted for the latter. (Yet we still like to imagine ourselves as rebels!) Examples are: -

- the plastic bag levy: people dropped bags out of their hands on the street without a thought, until they had to pay for them and then they remembered;
- the smoking ban imposed on smokers the discipline of having to think about non-smokers and take their needs into consideration, where previously exhortations had failed;
- the excesses of the Celtic Tiger are too many to mention. We did not have self-discipline – not only the banks but the ordinary citizen, too – so we got instead the imposed discipline of the troika, which we accepted with scarcely a murmur, almost as if we felt guilty and had deserved it;
- the rules of the road: a Garda chief superintendent in charge of the Traffic Corps said that the principal impediment to reducing road deaths was the public attitude that breaking the law is OK - as long as you get away with it.

The prophet Jeremiah said to the people of Israel: ‘Thus says the Lord, “Stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies, and walk in it and find rest for your souls.”’ But they said, “We will not walk in it.”’ (6.16) And so said all of us.

A simple positive example is that if people observe the sixth commandment – ‘You shall not commit adultery’ we would have greater trust all round, less marital breakdown, better family relationships and fewer disturbed children.

Jesus, while re-affirming the Ten Commandments, re-directs the focus of attention from observance of law to fidelity to himself. He puts responsibility for behaviour on people’s shoulders and makes it personal. ‘What would Jesus do?’ is a good question to ask, and someone who is familiar with the Gospel will generally not have great difficulty in answering it. If we find and follow the answer the Gospel gives, we will also find that it brings us peace and contentment.

V.30: What does this passage say to those people – and they are not few - of good will and honest effort who carry a great, often heavy, burden of suffering with them in life through no fault of their own but simply as a by-product of circumstance? They do not find the yoke of life easy or the burden light. What can be said to them? Words will likely mean little, but a listening ear and a helping hand may mean a

lot. The 'rest' Jesus promises in vv.28, 29 may be a hint of a life that only God can give.

Week 15

Friday

Matthew 12.1-8 Jesus is lord of the sabbath

1. At that time Jesus went through the grain-fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.
2. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, 'Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.'
3. He said to them, 'Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?'
4. He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests.
5. Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless?'
6. I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.
7. But if you had known what this means, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice," you would not have condemned the guiltless.
8. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.'

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 2.23-28 and Luke 6.1-5.

Vv.1-2: The Torah laid down, 'For six days you shall labour, but on the seventh day you shall rest, even at ploughing time and harvest.' (Exodus 34.21) Seemingly, in Jesus' time, there was an understanding that you could walk some (limited) distance without breaking the Sabbath precept to rest; you could also take ears of grain and eat them without its being considered theft. Deuteronomy stated, 'If you go through your neighbour's standing corn, you may pick the ears with your hand...' (23.25) But you were not permitted to roll or crush them in your hands, because that would be considered work. The Pharisees spotted an infringement of some sort in the disciples' behaviour and were on to it straightaway to register a complaint. They did not understand that life is larger than law.

Even though the Pharisees are long since dead, pharisaism is alive and well, and probably always will be. It is a recurring temptation. We Catholics had a good deal of it in relation to Lenten fasting and abstinence, and to the conditions necessary for a plenary indulgence, e.g. on 2 November. Here are samples: -

'Communion is forbidden under grave sin even though one has taken only the smallest amount of food or drink, e.g. a few drops of medicine.'
'Swallowing blood from bleeding gums does not break the fast. However, if one swallowed

the blood sucked from a bleeding finger the fast would be broken.’

‘That which is taken must, according to the common opinion, be digestible. Hence, the fast is not broken by smoking, swallowing a hair, a few grains of sand, a piece of chalk, glass, iron, wood, and probably not by swallowing pieces of fingernails, paper, wax or straw.’

The fast was not broken by chewing tobacco unless one swallowed the juice, nor by inhaling dust, steam, raindrops or an insect, nor by a priest who swallowed a piece of cork from the wine bottle in the split second before drinking from the chalice.

The same book goes on to deal with the problem (!) of particles of food caught between the teeth, and sucking cough-drops or lozenges before midnight the night before receiving the Eucharist. (Heribert Jone, *Moral Theology*, translated by Urban Adelman, Mercier, Cork, 1947, nn.507–8)

Pharisaism can persuade people that they are being faithful and observant, true disciples, when they are really trying to earn grace, or to gain a lever of control on God by being able to say, in effect, ‘I’ve kept the rules; therefore, I have a claim on you; I’m entitled to rewards for good conduct.’ Grace is ever and always a gift; that is what *gratia* means (as in an *ex gratia* payment). The same mentality may make people aggressively busy sorting out other people’s consciences for them. Doing so can make us feel

good: 'I'm putting the world to rights; why can't they all be like me?'

Vv.3-5: Jesus defends his disciples by referring to the story in 1 Samuel 21.3, 4, 6, when David said to the priest, 'Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.' The priest answered him, 'I have no ordinary bread at hand, only holy bread.... The priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence.' (The bread of the presence is described in Leviticus 24.5-9.) David and his men took the bread and ate it, simple need justifying their action. And, in v.5, Jesus went on to point out that, on the Sabbath, in accordance with the Law (e.g., Numbers 28.9), the priests did manual work, such as handling, lifting, and killing animals to be offered in sacrifice. In fact, on the Sabbath, they usually did more work rather than less.

Vv.6-7: Having disposed of his critics' argument, Jesus sets out his own teaching: 'I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.' That must have shocked them, and raised the question, as so often elsewhere, 'Who is this man claiming to be? Who does he think he is?' Then he went on to quote Hosea 6.6, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' This phrase was, in fact, a favourite theme of the prophets, who continued to recall Israel to it. Jesus had quoted it in Matthew 9.13 in response to a similar complaint from the Pharisees about his eating with "sinners." (In passing, it is worth noting

that Jesus puts the antithesis very strongly – this not that, mercy not sacrifice, rather than this more than that. This was a matter of linguistic usage about priorities and was not meant, especially in Matthew, to exclude sacrifice.) The Hebrew Bible, e.g., in 1 Samuel 15.22, itself gave priority to obedience over sacrifice: ‘Is the pleasure of the Lord in holocausts and sacrifices or in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Yes, obedience is better than sacrifice.’ If the Pharisees had understood the mercy of God, they would not have condemned the disciples, whom Jesus declares not merely pardonable but blameless.

V.8: And then he comes to the point of it all. He says of himself, ‘For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.’ To Jews, the Sabbath was God-given, not an optional extra but a foundational part of their identity. In declaring himself its Lord, Jesus was making a claim about himself which must have shocked his hearers even further, leaving them speechless. Who was Lord of the Sabbath, but The Lord God and no other? So what was Jesus saying about himself? In John’s Gospel, a similar claim, based on a different incident, becomes a harbinger of trouble: ‘It was because he did things like this [healing a person] on the Sabbath that the Jews began to persecute Jesus.’ (5.16) Bad enough that what he did changed Sabbath observance, but what was worse was that he justified doing so by making a claim to be its Lord. (See also John 5.18: ‘For this reason the Jews all the more were seeking to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath,

but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.‘) Jesus does not spell it out for his listeners; he leaves them to draw the conclusion themselves.

There is another message as well: the person, whether considered individually or in community, always has priority. The law, including the law of God, is there to serve the person, not the other way round. To love is the greatest and the first of the commandments, and all of the Torah must be interpreted in that light.

Week 15

Saturday

Matthew 12.14-21 Jesus is God’s servant

14. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

15. When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them,

16. and he ordered them not to make him known.

17. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

18. ‘Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.

I will put my Spirit upon him,

and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

19. He will not wrangle or cry aloud,

nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.

20. He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smouldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
21. And in his name the Gentiles will hope.’

V.14: This new attitude adopted by the Pharisees echoes a similar statement in John 5.16: ‘It was because he did things like this [healing a person] on the Sabbath that the Jews began to persecute Jesus.’ Clearly, their attitude towards him was hardening. Initial curiosity or interest had given way to suspicion, but now that, too, has been superseded by a determination to be rid of him as a threat. A threat to whom or to what? Did they see him as making a claim to divinity? If so, they were right; they understood the significance of what he meant by saying that he was Lord of the Sabbath. Did they think of asking the question, ‘Could it be true?’ Seemingly not, and, perhaps understandably so, at least at this stage. In Jewish tradition, God was utterly transcendent. The idea that God might become human, one like us, with the limitations of humanity, was probably, in the most radical sense of the word, unthinkable. And someone could not be allowed to make such an extravagant, even blasphemous, claim with impunity.

Vv.15-16: Jesus left the area and ordered people not to make him known. In Mark’s Gospel, such orders are common. Perhaps he wanted more time to continue his proclamation of the Reign of God. He

must have known that matters would come to a head sooner or later, but he did not want it at this stage. His time had not yet come, and, when it did, it would be of his own choosing.

Vv.17-21: A major theme of Matthew's is that Jesus fulfils Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, such as the one given here, from Isaiah 42.1-4, about the Servant of the Lord. Elsewhere he presents Jesus as the Son of David (e.g., 9.27; 12.23; 15.22; 20.30, 31; 21.9, 15) and the Messiah-King (21.1-17). Matthew works and re-works material to create such fulfilments.

The Greek word *pais* has the meaning of son as well as servant. In the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3.17), the voice of God says of Jesus, 'This is my Son [*pais*], the Beloved; my favour rests on him.' In Matthew 4.3, 6, Satan recognizes Jesus as 'Son [*pais*] of God.' And, at the transfiguration, a similar phrase is used. (Matthew 17.5)

The text from Isaiah speaks of the Servant of God, chosen and loved by him, endowed with the spirit of the prophets, and proclaiming right relationships with God. He will do so in gentleness until he has led the truth to victory. He will be a source of hope to the Gentile (non-Jewish) nations, people who, at best, figured only marginally in the Jewish people's understanding of God's plan for the world.

Week 16

Monday

Matthew 12.38-42 A sign is sought

38. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’

39. But he answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

40. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

41. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

42. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!’

There is a passage parallel to this in Luke 11.29-32, while Mark 8.11-12 and Matthew 16.1-4 are similar.

V.38: There is something trivializing about the request of the scribes and Pharisees. It is like saying, ‘Do some tricks for us,’ ‘We’d like to see a few gimmicks.’ By a “sign” they meant evidence that

would substantiate Jesus' authority, and identify in whose name he worked. Jesus was not a performer who did things to impress people, just to make them gape and gasp with amazement.

If the scribes and Pharisees genuinely wanted signs that would authenticate Jesus and his ministry, they had already had them. While Matthew's Gospel does not necessarily follow a strict chronological order, there are accounts in 4.23-25; 8.1-17, 23-34; 9.1-8, 18-34 and 12.9-14 of signs that precede the present encounter. So what more were they looking for?

V.39: Jesus seems clearly angered by their request, calling them an 'evil and adulterous generation.' In this context adulterous means unfaithful, as understood by Hosea: 'When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said this to him, "Go, marry a whore, and get children with a whore, for the whole country itself has become nothing but a whore by abandoning the Lord.' (1.2) Israel is like an unfaithful wife who goes whoring with other gods. Jesus gives an almost identical answer to scribes and Pharisees who come to him later on with another request for a sign. (16.1-4)

Throughout the Gospels, 'this generation' is a phrase with a negative connotation, perhaps like 'this lot.' Jewish tradition was that the Messiah's generation would be unworthy. Extreme language was used to make a point emphatically.

‘No sign will be given to it’ - the use of the passive voice rather than the active ‘I will not give you a sign’ was a recognised convention in speaking of the activity of God. It was seen as more respectful.

This challenge about a sign was a recurring issue, and Jesus sounds weary with it, as in John 4.48, when he says, ‘So you will not believe unless you see signs and portents,’ while Mark has, ‘with a sigh that came straight from the heart he said, “Why does this generation demand a sign?”’ (8.12) They are like prosecutors who want to put Jesus in the dock to cross-examine him, demanding that he present his credentials, mount his defence and account for himself to them. It was like saying that they would meet him only on their own terms.

But one could well wonder why they were asking for signs when they had already had plenty of them. What else were Jesus’ many works of power if not signs as to who he was and in whose name and authority he acted?

Saint Paul, in his time, was to experience similar resistance in his ministry, ‘Jews demand miracles and Greeks look for wisdom...’ (1 Corinthians.1.22)

Vv.39-41: Jesus makes a reply, clearly allegorical: ‘no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for

three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.’

Vv.41-42: This is a reference to Jonah 2.1, where Jonah spends three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. Jesus comments, ‘When Jonah preached they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here.’ (v.41) This last phrase is reminiscent of where Jesus said of himself, ‘I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.’ (1.26) He refers also to ‘the Queen of the South’: ‘she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!’ Her story is in 1 Kings 10.1-10.

Jesus’ reply is a challenge as well as a promise. In effect, he says to his hearers that the Gentile peoples of Nineveh, where Jonah preached, and those of Sheba where the Queen of the South came from, had more respect for the word of God than do they who are his chosen people. It is like what the Lord said of Jerusalem in Ezekiel, ‘This is Jerusalem, which I have placed in the middle of the nations, surrounded by foreign countries. She is so perverse that she has rebelled more against my observances than the nations.’ (5.6) And Jesus himself was to say later, ‘Still you do not believe.’ (John 6.35)

In his reference to Jonah, Jesus was pointing to his resurrection: ‘so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.’ (v.40) Jesus did not in fact spend three days and three

nights in the tomb, but only from Friday evening until early on Sunday morning; the phrase is conventional rather than accurate chronology. Jesus' resurrection would be the definitive sign, greater than any other, but, even then, some would still not believe. A person can choose not to believe, can refuse, withhold, reject belief, no matter what the evidence. Human perversity does exist. Luke has the story of the rich man and Lazarus, at the conclusion of which the rich man says, '... father Abraham,... if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' Abraham said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' (16.30-31) For Christians, someone has risen from the dead – Jesus.

There is a world of difference between the person who says honestly, 'I am not able to believe,' and the one who says, 'I refuse to believe, no matter what the evidence.'

Week 16, Tuesday

Matthew 12.46-50 True brothers and sisters of Jesus

46. While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him.

47. Someone told him, ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’

48. But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’

49. And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’

50. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’

There are parallel passages in Mark 3.31-35 and Luke 8.19-21.)

Vv.46-48: there is something sad about this description of Jesus’ mother and brothers standing outside wanting to speak to him. When the message is passed to Jesus, his response is, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ (v.48)

V.47: ‘your brothers.’ (The term is used also in Matthew 13.55, while v.56 adds “sisters”, also in Mark 3.31-35, Luke 8.19-20, John 2.12; 7.3,5, and Acts 1.14.) James is described as ‘the brother of the Lord.’ (Matthew 13.55; Mark 6.3; Galatians 1.19) Did Jesus have blood brothers, that is, siblings? In many tribal societies, such as in Africa today, the term “brothers” is used for almost any male relative, or a peer in terms of age, and indeed, may at times be used of any man of the same tribe or social group.

There is a tradition in the Orthodox churches that, before marrying Mary, Joseph had been married to a woman called Salome, who had borne him children. She died, and he then married Mary. Salome's children would then be (half-)brothers of Jesus. This is also offered as an explanation of why Joseph is often depicted by artists as an old man.

Christian tradition is that Mary remained a virgin all her life. Her virginity is 'best understood as consecration to her Son and his redemptive work.' (NCCHS, 663f)

Vv.49-50: Jesus makes it clear that kinship is not, and cannot be, the basis of discipleship. That is based on faith, not blood lines: 'whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'

It is worth while looking at other Gospel passages about the relationship between Jesus on the one hand, and Mary and his relatives on the other.

When Jesus was a child of twelve he was lost in the Temple in Jerusalem and then found by Mary and Joseph. (Luke 2.41-50) The dialogue runs: -

When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.'

He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'

But they did not understand what he said to them. (vv.48-50)

At the wedding feast in Cana (John 2.1-12), the dialogue reads: -

When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'

And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.'

His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' (vv.3-5)

At an early stage in Jesus' public ministry some of his relatives begin to question his sanity. 'When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."' (Mark 3.21) And John says, 'Not even his brothers believed in him.' (7.5)

At the cross, there is no dialogue, but Jesus gives directions about Mary in John: -

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (19.25-27)

In John 2.4 and 19.25, Jesus addresses his mother as “Woman.” This was the normal greeting for a man to use in speaking to a woman he did not know. But there is no precedent in Hebrew literature for a son addressing his mother by this title. (See John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1976, Entry “Mary”)

Perhaps the passage reflects a theme common to the Synoptics, that the “insiders” – relatives, priests, scribes, teachers, Pharisees – rejected Jesus, while the “outsiders” – Samaritans, Gentiles such as Romans, “sinners” such as prostitutes, tax-collectors and the non-observant – accepted him. ‘He came to his own, and his own received him not’ (John 1.11) and ‘Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house.’ (Matthew 13.57)

In Acts, after the resurrection, Mary is present among the disciples: ‘All these [the disciples] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.’ (1.14) Saint Augustine wrote, ‘Mary is more blessed because she

embraces faith in Christ than because she conceives the flesh of Christ.’ (*On Virginity*, n.3; PL 40.398)

The commitment in faith of a person with no ties of blood, nationality, language, culture or social class to Jesus has a quality of generosity and purity which evoked praise from Jesus, as, for example, in the preceding passage, Matthew 12.41-42.

Week 16

Wednesday

Matthew 13.1-9 The parable of the sower

1. That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.
2. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.
3. And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow.
4. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.
5. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.
6. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.
7. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.
8. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

9. Let anyone with ears, listen!

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 4.1-9 and Luke 8.5-8.

Vv.1-2: Sound carries better over water than land, so there was an advantage in Jesus' getting into a boat. The presence of great crowds is a mark of this relatively early stage in his ministry with its palpable sense of excitement, growth and hope.

V.3: 'he taught in parables.' This is common, and indeed, a little later, Matthew goes further when he says, 'without a parable he told them nothing.' (13.34) Matthew 13 is the great chapter of parables.

Jesus taught in parables. He left no writings. Although he could write, we don't know what he wrote. (John 8.6) In this he is similar to Siddhartha Gautama: 'Buddha's state of mind surpasses human thought; it can not be made clear by words; it can only be hinted at in parables.' (*The Teaching of Buddha*, Buddhist Promoting Foundation, Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, Tokyo, 1987, 137th revised edition, p.33)

Parables, allegories, symbols and metaphors are the best, perhaps the only, ways in which supernatural truths can be communicated. (But there is a problem about using these words; hearers tend, unwittingly, to insert the words 'only a' before them,

and then to feel that this is to diminish them. It is like describing the parable of the prodigal son as ‘only a story.’ Yes, it is a story, but much more than a story.)

Parables may take the form of actions or words; they are social and individual. In either case, they are tentative; they evoke more than lecture; they engage more than infuse; they are concrete more than abstract; they are icons in words - you look through them rather than at them, they point beyond themselves; they give questions to answer more than answers to questions. They are a mirror held up to us, asking, ‘Who do you identify with in the story?’ and our answer reveals to us something of ourselves. Parables are new, creative ways of looking at reality, especially human relationships. They shift the focus from the abstract to the practical, from fence-sitting to commitment - God is not amenable to the detached observer. They have an intensity, an emotional character, that reveals dry, “objective” detachment as a cop-out. Parables are universal: you don’t need to be “religious” to appreciate them; you just need to be human. They surprise us, ambushing our assumptions, turning our expectations inside out. And there is always something in a parable that eludes us; as Peter Kreeft says, ‘Lightning will not stand still while you paint its portrait’ - and that is all to the good; God will not be domesticated.

Parables are realistic (differentiating them from fables): -

There is a reason for this realism of the parables of Jesus. It arises from a conviction that there is no mere analogy, but an inward affinity, between the natural order and the spiritual order; or, as we might put it in the language of the parables themselves, the Kingdom of God is intrinsically *like* the process of nature and of the daily life of men.... This sense of the divineness of the natural order is the major premise of all the parables.' (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Fontana Books, London, 1969, pp.20-21)

Henry Bettenson wrote: -

Christian theology was formed in the matrix of words and ideas, despite Jesus teaching in parables, the medium of images. It has been said many times in recent years that one of the principal obstacles to the renewal of the Christian community today is a failure of imagination. We seem to have got our theology into a conceptual strait-jacket. (*Documents of the Christian Church*, OUP, Oxford, 1979, p.6)

Western theology was formed in the matrix of words and ideas; it takes as literal things never meant to be taken literally, as, until recently, the creation story in Genesis. While most of us have left that particular literalization behind us, we are often afraid similarly to re-think concepts such as the

resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and the perpetual virginity of Mary, to name a few. When we “literalize” mysteries it leads to problems. For example, when the faith of the Christian community in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is literalized into the theology of transubstantiation, the result may be, and sometimes is, a crass materialization of the sacrament, so that the Eucharist is reduced from an action to a thing, from an encounter with the living Christ to a “holy pill” that produces its effects when you swallow it as if by magic. That is not what the sacraments are meant to be.

Western theology has acquired a defensive ideological burden and ceases to liberate. It is hard not to feel some sympathy for Tertullian, who wrote, ‘What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? What between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians... Away with all projects for a “Stoic,” a “Platonic” or a “dialectic” Christianity! After Christ Jesus we desire no subtle theories...’ (*De praescriptione Haereticorum*, 7, in Henry Bettenson, editor, *Documents of the Christian Church*, OUP, Oxford, 1979, p.6) Our theology of human relationships and sexuality has run into a *cul de sac* where its focus on the finality of the sexual act has cut it off from its rightful context in human relationships, and, as a result, it has not been received (as in *tradition* and *reception*) by the church. There is a credibility gap, whether admitted or not.

Protestants fall into bibliolatry: the word, the word, the word – but the word is only a finger pointing at the moon; all language involves interpretation. Catholics fall into ecclesiolatry: the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord - see Jeremiah 7.1-15 and the wonderful parable in 1 Samuel 4.1b-11. The word of God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1.14), and we have spent two thousand years turning the flesh back into words. ‘There are... many who are disappointed that he [Jesus] taught mysteries in parables rather than systems in syllogisms and who try to remedy this “failure.”’ (Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensées Edited, Outlined and Explained*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1993, p.222) The East speaks in symbols: the jewel in the palm of the hand, the monkey mind, the raft you leave behind having crossed the river, etc. Parables embrace words, images, and symbols. How good it will be if the one world of East and West breathes with both lungs!

Rabbi Lionel Blue says that Jews joke, saying, ‘We Jews don't have theology; we leave that to Christians; we just tell stories’. Jesus was a Jew; he taught in parables.

Vv.3-9: Jesus tells the parable of the sower; an explanation follows in vv.18-23.

V.9: The Gospel is ever and always a wake-up call. When we open our Bibles we are not meant to

shut our minds. This phrase is used also in Revelation 2.7 and 13.9.

Week 16

Thursday

Matthew 13.10-17 Why does Jesus teach in parables?

10. Then the disciples came and asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’

11. He answered, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.

12. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

13. The reason I speak to them in parables is that seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.

14. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

15. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn - and I would heal them.’

16. But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

17. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 4.10-12, 25 and Luke 8.9-10, 18.

This is a difficult passage. Jesus appears to be saying that the reason why he teaches in parables is because people do not perceive, listen or understand them. (v.13) (Mark, in 4.11-12, and Luke, in 8.9-10, put it even more strongly, saying that he teaches thus *so that* people will not understand.) And what little understanding they have will be taken from them. (v.12a) That makes no sense; it would seem to make Jesus' mission pointless. He also appears to say that the disciples do understand and so they will be given greater understanding. (vv.11-12) Yet there is abundant evidence in the Gospels, especially Mark's, of the disciples' failure to understand. The Synoptics have Jesus say that 'the mysteries [or secret, in Mark] of the kingdom' are revealed to the disciples but not to people generally. That has a Gnostic ring to it, and seems at variance with the purpose and character of Jesus' mission. But the passage overall is in keeping with a major theme of Matthew's, namely, that Jews do not accept Jesus, and so the message will be proclaimed to the Gentiles who will inherit the kingdom.

V.10: The 'them' referred to here and in vv.11, 13 and 14 presumably refers to the people.

V.12 which is repeated elsewhere, e.g. Mark 4.25; Luke 19.25, troubles some people as it seems unjust. It would be so if it were a principle of social justice. Its meaning seems to be different: to whom would you rather give a present – a person who used and enjoyed it or someone who let it lie unused? The answer is obvious. A pianist who practises will become a better pianist; an athlete who doesn't exercise will lose muscle condition. And similarly, by analogy, God gives more grace to those who use it than to those who don't, and they will be rewarded (vv.16-17)

Was this passage simply an expression of frustration at people who were slow in understanding? Was it that they wanted to be spoon-fed and were too lazy, unwilling, or unable to think for themselves? People can be conditioned into not thinking, or into wanting their thinking done for them. Advertisers know that and use it to sell products. Hitler, too, has been quoted as saying, 'Fortunately for me, most people don't think.' Or was it that Jesus was looking, above all, for disciples, that is, for people who committed themselves wholeheartedly to him, but found mostly negativity, cynicism, or trap setting by people more interested in scoring points than in knowing the truth. And there will always be people who sit on the fence, avoid commitment, watch to see what way the

wind is blowing and then go with it. Were they the people Jesus had in mind, especially in v. 13?

By contrast, parables engage people actively; they require them to think matters through and search for the meaning, doubtless on the sound pedagogic principle that what people discover for themselves will remain with them longer and at a deeper and more engaged level than answers handed to them on a plate. Maybe Jesus, after his best efforts at teaching, just got blank looks: ‘their hearts were hardened.’ (Mark 6.52) Or is it saying that, if all people do is carp, criticize, be negative or cynical – and there was plenty of that, especially from the scribes and Pharisees – then there is little point in talking to them? Matthew constantly underlines the stubbornness of Jews and says that a new Israel will be created of Gentile and Jew who receive the word into their hearts. People sometimes resist truth and refuse to accept it, even while knowing that it is true. Perversity exists.

But there may be more to this difficult passage than simply an expression of frustration by Jesus at the slowness of his hearers in understanding his teaching. There is another approach to the interpretation of this text. Two biblical scholars offer their views: -

This whole passage is strikingly unlike in language and style to the majority of the sayings of Jesus.... These facts create at once a

presumption that we have here not a part of the primitive tradition of the words of Jesus, but a piece of apostolic teaching. (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Fontana Books, London, 1969, pp.14-15)

And,

it can be shown, and in fact scholars all but universally recognize this, that Mark 4.11b-12 [= Matthew 13.11-13] originally was an independent saying, and that it was Mark who inserted it into chap. 4 with the parables. (Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, SCM Press, London, 1966, p.11)

And this leads Jeremias to the conclusion that ‘The saying refers to the whole of Jesus’ preaching, and means that his proclamation of God’s rule... can be understood only by believers, and is bound to remain a riddle to unbelievers.’ (p.12) (By way of analogy, stained-glass windows in a church reveal nothing to someone on the outside, but, to someone viewing them from within, they present a clear picture.)

Their mode of interpretation is in keeping with the 1964 Instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, entitled *The Historical Truth of the Gospels*, which: -

...points out that there are three stages of tradition behind the Gospels as we know them

today. There are first of all the original words and deeds of the historical Jesus which were delivered according to the methods of reasoning and exposition which were in common use at the time. The second layer of tradition is made up of the oral proclamation by the apostles of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.... The third layer consists in the compilation of this apostolic preaching into the written form of the Gospels as we know them today. (Dermot A. Lane, *The Reality of Jesus: an essay in Christology*, Veritas, Dublin, 1975, p.25)

It is necessary to ask what audience, or readership, the Gospel writer had in mind. Was it the early Christian community, a Jewish or a Gentile one? - in Matthew's case, almost certainly Jewish. We must also ask who it is that is speaking: have we the very words of Jesus, what scholars used to call the *ipsissima verba*, or the teaching of Jesus as reflected on by the community of faith at the time the Gospel was written several decades after his life and in the light of its situation? More likely the latter.

Dermot Lane offers a broader perspective,

In the context of the historical Jesus this means situating the life of Jesus in the mainstream of Judaism. This in turn demands that we approach the history of Jesus from within a position of basic faith or more specifically of basic Jewish faith. We can only search out the significance of

the life of the historical Jesus from the background of basic Jewish faith. It would be impossible to fully appreciate the life of the historical Jesus from a neutral position outside faith. (Lane, *ibid.*, p.28)

In the decades which followed the resurrection, when Christians and Jews began to part company and form distinct bodies, that divorce was accompanied by strong feelings and it is perhaps those that this text reflects.

Week 16

Friday

Matthew 13.18-23 The parable of the sower explained

Jesus said to his disciples:

18. Hear then the parable of the sower.

19. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.

20. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

21. yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.

22. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

23. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 4.13-20 and Luke 8.11-15.

Strictly speaking, this story is an allegory rather than a parable: each detail counts, and more than one point is being made. It is a parable about parables, or, more accurately, about how to hear them. It makes the point that a response is required and that people are accountable for their response. It does not happen without human effort. Saint Augustine wrote, 'God created us without us, but did not will to save us without us.' (Sermon 169.11.13; PL 38.923)

The background appears to be that of the early church where one of the great puzzles for the evangelists and others was why Israel had not accepted Jesus. Prior to Pentecost, the response was tiny. Jesus had come among them, taught them like none had before, worked many signs and wonders, yet people turned their backs on him. Worse, their leaders had brought about his death. How could this

have happened? Why did they not welcome Jesus with open arms and hearts? The explanation given here is an attempt to answer that question. Paul comes to it later, 'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.' (1 Corinthians 3.6)

C. H. Dodd makes this comment on the explanation: -

The parable of the sower (Mark 4.2-8) [= Matthew 13.2-9] has come down to us with an elaborate interpretation on allegorical lines. It is not necessary... to show once again that the interpretation is inconsistent with itself, and does not really fit the parable. But it is worth while observing that it is a striking example of the way in which the early Church reinterpreted sayings and parables of Jesus to suit its changing needs.... This homiletic style is unlike what we know of the teaching of Jesus. In trying to understand the parable we shall do well to leave it aside. (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Fontana Books, London, 1969, p.135)

NCCHS states, 'The explanation [given in vv.18-23] is universally acknowledged by scholars to stem, at least in form, not from Jesus himself, but from the primitive Church.' (724g) To say that is not to dismiss it but to set it in a context where it makes sense. Running through the text is an emphasis on accountability by people for their response, or lack of it, to the Gospel proclamation.

The allegorization of the text is uneven: sometimes the seed represents the preaching of the Gospel, at others the response to it.

V.18: ‘Hear then...’ may be an echo of the great call to Israel, the *Shema*, in Deuteronomy 6.4: ‘Hear, O Israel...’

V.19: For Matthew it is important that the message be understood. He has this in v.13 in the parable, and again both here and in v.23.

Vv.20-22: This is most likely a reflection by the early Christians on the diversity of response to the Gospel message and reveals their disappointment with it.

V.23: Implicitly, this appeals to hearers to understand what they hear, because then the sown seed will bear fruit abundantly.

A point worth noting is the use of the phrase ‘the kingdom’ [of heaven] in v.18. It is repeated in the series of parables that follows: see vv.24, 31, 33, 38, 44, 47, 52.

Week 16

Saturday

Matthew 13.24-30 The darnel in the wheat

24. He [Jesus] put another parable before them: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;
25. but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.
26. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.
27. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?"
28. He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?"
29. But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.
30. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.””

An explanation of this parable is found in Matthew 13.36-43.

It is a parable of the kingdom of heaven, to be followed shortly by four others. It helps to give us God’s view of things, enables us to see how the world might be if God’s will were done on earth as it is in heaven. It is a picture of the world as God would like it to be.

It deals with the topic of the mixing together in life of good and evil. The struggle between them has been the basis for countless stories, philosophies and conflicts since humanity began.

Darnel, sometimes called tares, is a weed of cereal crops, found especially in Mediterranean countries; it can poison bread made from the wheat in which it grows.

What should be done about the mixing of the two, the wheat and the darnel, good and evil? The parable counsels against the temptation to try an extermination policy of pulling them up and burning them. Inquisitions, crusades, campaigns and wars have been fought with the idea that we're right, they're wrong, and the response to that tension is for "us" to get rid of "them." The ongoing "war against terror" in the Middle East is witness to its destructiveness and futility.

As an alternative, the parable suggests letting them live together, even though that involves tension that we would rather resolve. All matters are in God's hands, God is the ultimate judge, and it is best to leave judgment to God. Implicit, too, is the idea that we live in an imperfect world, and that is something to be accepted without anxiety. The attempt to make it perfect may end up destroying the good for the sake of the best.

It may be that the context in which this story arose was that the early Christian community, beginning to experience persecution, and, with it, abandonment of the faith by some out of fear, had to face the problem of what to do about them. Should they be uprooted, that is, excommunicated and thrown out? Some in the community said yes. Others counselled a more modulated approach. Perhaps this parable was put into the mouth of Jesus by Matthew.

Maybe the parable also points to what Carl G. Jung called 'the shadow.' It is not evil or sin. It is anything in us that is unacceptable to us, anything we do not want to be, or do not want others to know about, or do not even want to know about ourselves (though the latter is dangerous). It may be the (often culturally) unacceptable dark side of whatever we do, e.g. using talents ego-centrally. The best response is acceptance of it, not trying to be perfect. The shadow is like the gargoyles on the parapet of the cathedral; they are part of the structure.

On 27 November 1095, at Clermont, France, Blessed Pope Urban II preached on a hillside the opening part of a campaign for the first crusade. Among other things, he said: -

The [Seljuk] Turks, a Persian people.... have seized more and more of the lands of the Christians, have already defeated them seven times in as many battles, killed or captured many people, destroyed churches, and have

devastated the kingdom of God.... I, not I, but God exhorts you as heralds of Christ... to hasten to exterminate this vile race from our lands and to aid the Christian inhabitants in time.... I address those present... For all those going thither there will be remission of sins.... This I grant to all who go, through the power vested in me by God.

He went on to describe the Turks as ‘despicable, degenerate and enslaved by demons.’ The crowd responded to his call with shouts of ‘God wills it!’ (Above quotations from *Fulcher of Chartres: a History of the Expedition to Jerusalem (1095-1127)*, English translation by Frances R. Ryan and H. S. Fink, University of Tennessee Press, 1969)

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, of the crusader, outside the walls of Jerusalem just before its capture, asking his superior officer, ‘The city is full of Christians, Jews and Muslims. How can we tell the difference?’ and being met with the reply, ‘You can’t; so kill them all; the Lord will recognize his own.’ The reply was easy to understand and was executed enthusiastically. The Crusaders entered Jerusalem on 15 July 1099. The bishop of Pisa wrote to Pope Urban that, ‘Jews were burnt alive in the synagogue, and in the portico of Solomon and in his Temple our men rode in the blood of the Saracens up to the knees of their horses.’

Those are the kinds of things that can happen when someone decides to sort others out at whatever cost and ‘all for the good of the cause’ or ‘for their own good.’ The Gospel may have been in less dangerous hands when the wine, women and song popes held office than in the days of the reforming popes, because it was the latter who organized crusades and inquisitions with the sincere intention of purifying the church of its (real) corruption and, so to speak, uprooting the darnel from the field of the Lord. It is a cruel irony that Urban II was genuinely a reformer who worked with great effort to clean up the church.

Week 17

Monday

Matthew 13.31-35 The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast

31. Jesus put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;

32. it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’

33. He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’

34. Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.

35. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.'

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 4.30-32 and Luke 13.18-19.

These two parables have a post-resurrection feel. Perhaps they come from the experience of the early Christian community of slow growth, less than expected, and possibly a disappointment to some. They make the point, by reference to the small seed becoming a big tree, and a handful of yeast fermenting three measures of flour, that something may indeed be small and seemingly insignificant at the start but still grow, almost unnoticed, into something much greater. Some have allegorized v.32 so that the birds of the air nesting in the branches of the tree represent the nations of the earth in the church.

Vv.34-35: Jesus taught in parables; they were his preferred method of teaching. But scripture scholars have differing views about this: -

- In all the rabbinic literature, not one single parable has come down to us from the period before Jesus. (Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, SCM Press, London, 1966, p.10.)

- Geza Vermes says that Jesus was a Hasid, an itinerant holy man who exorcized, healed and taught, and that his teaching in parables was typical of that group. (*Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1981)
- Among Jewish teachers the parable was a common and well-understood method of illustration, and the parables of Jesus are similar in form to Rabbinic parables. (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Fontana Books, London, 1969, p.16)
- When Jesus chose to speak in parables he was following a convention familiar to his hearers. (Wilfrid J. Harrington O. P., *Mark: Realistic Theologian*, Columba Press, Dublin, 1996, p.49)

Jesus was a man of his time, place and culture; he was not culturally neutral. It seems likely that his method of teaching was a recognized one at the time.

Jonathan Swift once gave a colleague a copy of his *Gulliver's Travels* to read. Some time later they met, and Swift asked him if he had read it. The man said he had, so Swift asked him what he thought of it. The colleague was embarrassed, beat around the bush for a while, before finally saying that honesty compelled him to admit that he really did not believe it!

Parables are existentially rather than historically true. Literalism in interpreting them kills them as does the attempt to render doctrine into “definitive” formulae, valid for all people and for all times.

Jesus shows us how passion can be a better moral tutor than loyalty to established order....The meaning of the parable [of the Good Samaritan] is that it is compassion, not code, that is the basis for a truly human universal ethic. (Richard Holloway, *How to Read the Bible*, Granta, London, 2006, pp.91, 99)

A parable is a new, creative way of looking at things, especially human relationships. Part of the message of the parables... of Jesus are about risk, commitment, sensitivity to the surprise of life, reversal of expectations, inversion of priorities, shattering of human assumptions, vulnerability in openness, sensitivity to social justice and enthusiasm. This means being out of step with current cultural values. (From Daniel Liderbach, *The Numinous Universe*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, USA, 1989, pp.126-130)

A parable is figurative language, an extended simile or metaphor, not necessarily exclusive of allegory, which communicates in narrative form something disclosive of God, the world, or human life.... Parables have become a

privileged source for hearing the authentic voice of Jesus. (Roger Haight SJ, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, Orbis Books, New York, 2005, pp. 80-81)

The typical parable... presents one single point of comparison.... Details of the story are there simply to build up the picture of a sudden crisis... calling for... urgency. The parable has the character of an argument, in that it entices the hearer to a judgment upon the situation depicted, and then challenges him, directly or by implication, to apply that judgment to the matter in hand... and not through the decoding of the various elements in the story. (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Fontana Books, London, 1969, p.21)

In reading parables: -

- they need to be read in context so as not to inject a meaning into them, but to draw out the meaning intended; this is the most important principle of interpretation;
- parables make one point, not many; they are generally not allegories: in those the details have significance;
- parables are open to many meanings;
- the person we identify with in a parable tells us who we are;
- the punch-line pointing to the meaning of the parable is usually near the end.

Jesus taught in parables, both oral and in action, but also in paradoxes. He said, 'He who is not with you is against you,' (Luke 11.23) and also, 'He who is not against you is for you.' (Luke 9.50) He spoke of hating the world and loving it, honouring parents and hating them. He said, 'Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.' (Luke 17.33) The Orthodox say that unless a teaching is paradox it is not orthodox.

Week 17

Tuesday

Matthew 13.36-43 The parable of the darnel explained

36. Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.'

37. He answered 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man;

38. the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one,

39. and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

40. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.

41. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers,

42. and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.
43. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears, listen!'

This is Matthew's explanation of the parable - perhaps more properly the allegory - of the darnel in the wheat in 13.24-30.

Vv.36-37: This is a common feature of Jesus' teaching in parables: he explains things to his disciples away from the crowds. See, for example, Matthew 17.19; Mark 9.28; Luke 10.23.

V.37-43: What is this parable about? About judgment? Or about Jesus' practice of mixing with sinners and eating and drinking with them, to the scandal of the Pharisees? The former seems more likely.

V.43: The conclusion has something of the character of the Psalms to it. In them, judgment is seen as something to look forward to, as it will be the vindication of the righteous. C. S. Lewis comments: -

The ancient Jews, like ourselves, think of God's judgment in terms of an earthly court of justice. The difference is that the Christian pictures the case to be tried as a criminal case with himself

in the dock; the Jew pictures it as a civil case with himself as the plaintiff. The one hopes for acquittal, or rather for pardon [with Jesus as defence counsel]; the other hopes for a resounding triumph with heavy damages. (See Chapter 2, 'Judgment' in the Psalms, *Reflections on the Psalms*, Fontana, London, 1964, pp.15-16)

He adds that the 'fatal confusion between being in the right and being righteous soon falls upon them,' and, 'There is also in the Psalms a still more fatal confusion between the desire for justice and the desire for revenge.' (*Ibid.*, p.22)

Whereas, in the parable, the workers wanted to uproot the darnel and destroy it (v.28), this passage says, in effect, 'judgment is God's.' (Deuteronomy 1.17)

Week 17

Wednesday

Matthew 13.44-46 The hidden treasure and the pearl

44. 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

45. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls;

46. on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.’

In the first case (v.44), the person simply discovers a hidden treasure, while, in the second (vv.45-46), the finding is the result of a (perhaps prolonged) search. In each case, however, the moment of discovery evokes from the finders a decision to commit themselves whole-heartedly to following through on it. *Carpe diem* (seize the day) is their response. They take a risk; they sell everything they have to make the most of the opportunity.

Clearly, Jesus is not teaching business methods; these are parables of *the kingdom of heaven*. What he is saying is that when people become aware of the kingdom of God, they should give everything they have to it, not doing things by halves. Giving God second place amounts to giving him no place. It is the same message as that given to the rich young man in Matthew 19.16-22, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.’ Readiness to give up everything for God is a major theme of Matthew’s: 4.18-22; 8.21; 9.9. The spirit of these parables is expressed in the words of Charles de Foucauld of Tamanrasset, founder of the Little Brothers of Jesus, ‘The moment I realized that God existed, I knew I could not do anything other than live for him alone.’ It was in a similar spirit that Saint Augustine wrote, ‘you have made us for

yourself, Lord, and our hearts will know no rest until they rest in you.’ (*The Confessions*, 1.1)

Week 17

Thursday

Matthew 13.47-53 The parable of the dragnet

47. ‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind;

48. when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

49. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous

50. and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

51. ‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’

52. And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’

53. When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

This is a parable of judgment, of the separation of good and evil, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

Vv.47-48: The world is a mixture of good and bad. We see kindness and cruelty, justice and injustice, etc. all around us, and are mostly powerless to change it.

Vv.49-50: Perhaps the judgment described here is intended as a message of hope, assuring people that, even if cruelty, injustice and evil do often triumph on earth, they will not do so ultimately. God is a just judge.

V.51: To whom is Jesus' question addressed? – the people or his disciples? Whoever they are, they answer 'Yes.' This is unusual. More commonly, the disciples do not understand, and Jesus has to explain things to them later on in private. It is difficult to read this in conjunction with Matthew 13.10-17 where a first reading suggests that Jesus, in order to create a fulfilment of Isaiah 6.9-10, did not want people to understand.

V.52: It has been suggested that this a reference to Matthew himself, that he is a scribe 'who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven,' and 'who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old,' that is to say, who draws upon the two treasures, Jewish and Christian, and creates links between them.

The parable is a simple one, and we should resist the temptation to load it with allegorical meanings. Complexity is not necessarily evidence of depth or subtlety, and simplicity is not necessarily evidence

of naïveté or superficiality. The Swedish botanist, Carl von Linné (Linnaeus), used to say, ‘Natura in minimis maxime miranda est.’ (Nature is most to be admired in the tiny things.) There is an affinity, a resonance, between the orders of nature and grace, and this is not to be surprised at, since the one God is the author of them both.

V.53 need not be taken as giving any significant information about Jesus’ movements. More likely, it is a transitional phrase to mark a break from one phase of his teaching to another.

There are differences between the Old and New Testaments in their ideas of judgment. C. S. Lewis gives one this in his *Reflections on the Psalms* (Fontana, London, 1964): -

‘The ancient Jews, like ourselves, think of God’s judgment in terms of an earthly court of justice. The difference is that the Christian pictures the case to be tried as a criminal case with himself in the dock; the Jew pictures it as a civil case with himself as the plaintiff. The one hopes for acquittal, or rather for pardon; the other hopes for a resounding triumph with heavy damages.’ (pp.15-16)

‘the fatal confusion between being in the right and being [self-]righteous soon falls upon them.’ (p.22)

‘There is also in the Psalms a still more fatal confusion between the desire for justice and the desire for revenge.’ (p.22)

The Psalms, of course, were written several centuries before belief in an afterlife became standard among Jews. In the Psalmists’ time, if there was to be vindication of the wronged, it had to be here on earth.

Week 17

Friday

Matthew 13.54-58 Jesus is rejected at Nazareth

54. He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power?’

55. Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?

56. And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?’

57. And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house.’

58. And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 6.1-6 and Luke 4.16-24.

V.54: This was no triumphant homecoming with the newspaper proclaiming “Local Boy makes Good.” At first people are astounded, and seemingly pleased. But then things change and they resent his wisdom and power. ‘He’s just one of us. What’s so special about him? Who does he think he is? What right has he to be different from the rest of us? How dare he excel when the rest of us are happily mediocre? Etc., etc.’ It is an illustration of parochialism, of small-town narrowness, and it is to be found universally. Or was it that they found it impossible to believe that God works through the human, that God’s ordinary way of working is through ordinary things, people, situations, etc.?

Vv.55-56: James, Joseph, Simon and Judas are the “brothers” of Jesus. And his “sisters” were all there with them. See the entry under Matthew 12.46-50 above.

The Greek text uses the word *tekton* of Jesus’ trade, and it is traditionally translated as carpenter, though that designation has its source only in apocalyptic literature. Its real meaning is that of a manual worker of any kind.

V.57: ‘They took offense at him.’ The rejection of Jesus runs through the Gospels: ‘He came to his own, and his own received him not.’ (John 1.11) But it must have been particularly hurtful to have met

with such a response from the people of the village where he had grown up, including, most likely, some of his relatives. But, for Matthew, this fulfils a prophecy: Moses had experienced somewhat similar difficulties (Exodus 4.1), and Jesus is the new Moses. The actual phrase, ‘Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house’ does not appear to be a quotation from scripture but to originate with Jesus himself. Or perhaps it was a conventional saying. The rejection of Jesus by his fellow-villagers in Nazareth prefigures his later rejection by the Jewish people as a whole.

Matthew has inbuilt a memory device into his text:

V.54a: home town;

V.54b: where?

V.55a: is not?

V.55b: are not?

V.56b: where?

V.57b: home country.

V.58: ‘And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.’ Miracles are not magic, and Jesus was not a *magus*, a wonder-worker, much less a pedlar of gimmicks, dealing in smoke-and-mirrors. Miracles require belief and do not occur without them. It is not necessary that belief be strong but it needs to be genuine. In Mark 9.24, Jesus asked a man who had sought deliverance for his son, ‘Do you believe that I can do this?’ Torn between the

desire for his son's healing and his own wavering faith, the man gave an honest answer, 'I believe, Lord; help my unbelief.' Jesus healed his son. In saying that, the man spoke for all humanity.

Week 17

Saturday

Matthew 14.1-12 John the Baptist is beheaded

1. At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus;
2. and he said to his servants, 'This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.'
3. For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife,
4. because John had been telling him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her.'
5. Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet.
6. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod
7. so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask.
8. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.'

9. The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given;
10. he sent and had John beheaded in the prison.
11. The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother.
12. His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.

There is a passage parallel to this in Mark 6.14-29 and minor references in Luke 3.19-20 and 9.7-9.

Vv.1-2: This was the Tetrarch, Herod Antipas, a grandson of King Herod of the infancy narratives. A tetrarch was ruler of a quarter of a territory, Palestine in this case, though the term was sometimes used loosely of any subordinate ruler. The other three were Archelaus, Herod Philip II and Antipas. On the death of Herod “the Great” Emperor Augustus had divided his kingdom between them when they had contested the will. Antipas does not seem to have been religious, but, because of his position, probably felt it expedient to go through the motions of observance. In v.2, he sounds superstitious and may have confused that with being religious. Mark 6.20 says that ‘When he [Herod] heard him [John], he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.’ In Luke 23.8, we read that he had wanted for a long time to see Jesus ‘because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.’

V.3: Philip had acted against the law of God because he had taken his brother's wife for himself while his brother was still alive. Or she may, in the view of some scholars, have been his niece. There is an abundance of confusion about the names of the Herods.

The rest of the story bears a remarkable resemblance to another in the Old Testament book of Esther. In that, King Ahasuerus (Greek Xerxes) 'gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers' (1.3); 'drinking was by flagons without restraint' (1.8); 'when the king was merry with wine' (1.10), he quarrelled with his queen, Vashti, and dismissed her. Then Esther comes on the scene: 'the girl pleased him (2.9); 'she won his favour and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen.' (2.17) Another banquet, called "Esther's banquet", followed: 'As they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled"' (7.2) Esther asks for the life of her 'foe and enemy' (7.6), and her wish is granted; he is killed. (7.10)

The parallels between the stories are too strong to be merely coincidental. The book of Esther is unusual: it makes no mention of God; alone of Old Testament books, no remains of it in Hebrew were found among the Dead Sea scrolls at Qumran; and modern biblical scholars describe it as an historical romance. Why did Matthew introduce allusions to

such a problematic source? They diminish the credibility of his account as history, an account which some regard as ‘evidently legendary.’ (Wilfrid J. Harrington O. P., *Mark: Realistic Theologian*, Columba Press, Dublin, 1996, p.24)

So, if the story is not historically true, why include it at all? It may be that Matthew wanted to create parallels between the lives of John and Jesus. Perhaps the story of the unjust killing of a popular hero has been given that spin; indeed it seems likely. It shows signs of editorial work undertaken with a view to creating an impression: ‘His [John’s] disciples came and took the body and buried it.’ (v.12) In Matthew 27.57-59, Jesus’ disciples do the same for him. Ironically, it was Herod who spoke of John’s resurrection, saying, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead.’ (v.2) This may have been intended by Matthew to foreshadow the resurrection of Jesus in 28.1-8.

John was killed cruelly and unjustly as the prophets were before him; that places him firmly in the prophetic line. Jesus will be killed cruelly and unjustly for similar reasons. John is his forerunner in death as in life. Perhaps that is the point between made by Matthew.

Week 18
Monday

Matthew 14.13-21 Jesus feeds five thousand

13. Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

14. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

15. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.'

16. Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.'

17. They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.'

18. And he said, 'Bring them here to me.'

19. Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

20. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

21. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 6.30-44, Luke 9.10-17, John 6.1-3 and another within Matthew at 15.32-38.

Jesus taught in parables. Sometimes they were communicated in words, sometimes in actions. The above was an action parable. A parable is not “just a story.” The Czech writer, Milan Kundera, said, ‘Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love.’ So it is with parables: they open up meanings and possibilities; they don’t deliver a sealed package of information. Parables don’t say, ‘Look at me;’ they say, ‘Look at what I point to.’

What is this parable saying? A number of points jump out at the reader: -

- Jesus’ concern for basic human needs, such as feeding the hungry;
- where people make their contribution, however inadequate it may be – five loaves and two fish for five thousand men, to say nothing of women and children – God does the rest, as in nature. (Gandhi said, ‘There’s enough in this world for everyone’s need, not enough for everyone’s greed.’)
- a world where people share what they’ve got is a better world, a win-win situation;
- the twelve baskets left over suggests a superabundance of generosity on God’s part – generosity evoking generosity, as it does in life.

But are these points the heart of the matter? Bearing in mind that a parable, unlike an allegory,

makes just one point, what is the key idea? Some see the parable as pointing to the Eucharist, describing it as a sacrament or parable-in-action of God's unlimited self-giving.

The passage is the start of a larger section which climaxes in Peter's profession of faith in Matthew 16.16. Bread features here in 14.13-21, again in 15.32-39, and finally in 16.6-12. The passage, 14.13–17.21, focuses on Jesus teaching his closest disciples, and bringing them to begin to understand who he was.

The passages about feeding the crowd in 14.13-21 and 15.32-39 are given a messianic character and fit into the pattern of such events as described in the Old Testament: Moses in Exodus 16.14-18; and particularly Elisha in 2 Kings 4.42-44 to which Matthew seems to allude:-

A man came from Baalshalishah bringing food from the first-fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, 'Give it to the people and let them eat.'

But his servant said, 'How can I set this before a hundred people? So he repeated, 'Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, "They shall eat and have some left."

He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

If 2 Kings 4.42-44 fulfils the word of the Lord, Matthew 14.13-21 fulfils the word of Jesus, suggesting a conclusion for the reader to draw. The reference to the desert in v.15 and to grass are allusions to the feeding of the Hebrews in the desert during the exodus, and to the messianic shepherd who leads people to meadows of green grass. (Psalm 23.2)

The language used has Eucharistic overtones: in v.19 we read, ‘taking the five loaves and the two fish, he [Jesus] looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples...’ In the narrative of the institution of the Eucharist the text is, ‘Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples...’ (Matthew 26.26) Both take place in the evening: 14.15 and 26.20. In 14.19, Matthew has the disciples in the role of ministers of the blessed bread.

It seems that Matthew has deliberately and carefully re-cast the story to give it a Messianic and Eucharistic character.

V.21: Matthew gives a figure of about five thousand men, besides women and children. If the women and children equalled the men in number, that makes for a total of some ten thousand people in all. In 15.32-39, Matthew gives a figure of ‘four thousand men, besides women and children.’ How likely is it that the Roman authorities would tolerate a gathering of people in such numbers? Its

preoccupation was with control of the provinces. It seems unlikely that such a gathering would have been allowed to take place.

Week 18

Tuesday

Matthew 14.22-36 Jesus walks on water

22. Immediately he [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

23. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,

24. but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

25. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

26. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear.

27. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

28. Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.'

29. He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

30. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'

31. Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’
32. When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.
33. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’
34. When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesareth.
35. After the people of that place recognized him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him,
36. and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 6.45-52 and John 6.16-21. The story is like Matthew 8.23-27 where Jesus calms a storm. Both are instances of his exercising a divine attribute, that of control over nature, including storms.

V.22: Another transition is indicated by a lake crossing where Jesus sends his disciples ahead by boat while he dismisses the crowd. He wanted to be alone so that he could give himself to prayer. (Jesus goes similarly to pray in Mark 1.35 and John 6.15)

V.24: Left to their own devices, the disciples make heavy going of it, as the wind is against them.

V.25: The fourth watch of the night was between 3 and 6 a.m.

V.26: What is probably more significant than the wind ceasing (v.32) is Jesus' appearance to the disciples walking on the lake in the early hours of the morning. It is sudden and, to them, terrifying.

V.27: But, as always in such cases in the Bible, the divine response is 'Do not be afraid.' (There are varying estimates of the number of times this or equivalent phrases appear in the Bible, from as few as eighty-three – surely enough even for slow learners - to a maximum of three hundred and sixty-five.) Then Jesus says, 'it is I' or, literally, 'I am.' As elsewhere this has divine resonance - e.g., John 8.58: Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am' - referring back to God saying to Moses 'I am who I am.' (Exodus 3.14)

V.28: Peter said, 'Lord, if it is you...' In John 21.7, in an analogous situation, he said simply, 'It is the Lord;' he was learning.

V.29: Jesus says to Peter 'Come', and he comes. As is the case throughout the Gospels, when people do as Jesus says, good things happen.

V.30: Peter's uncertainty and fear in v.28 and here has echoes in Matthew 28.17 where the disciples hesitate. It was not until Pentecost that these fears and hesitations were dispelled.

V.33: Is this a profession of faith in Jesus' divinity? Possibly yes, or maybe not until after the resurrection.

Vv.34-36 seems to re-emphasize, if it was necessary, that the power of Jesus over nature is a healing power.

There is in this story a testing and training of Peter, and he grows through it. But the larger element seems to be that of Jesus exercising power proper only to God, and, in consequence, evoking from the frightened disciples a response of awe and reverence. Such manifestations were reserved for close disciples rather than for the people in general. It was part of their training for the mission they would receive at Pentecost.

In an extended sense, the story is sometimes seen as a parable of the church, which has often been represented in art as a boat – and called the barque of Peter. (It may also be given an individual interpretation.) It is at sea, and battling against a headwind, getting nowhere. Jesus is elsewhere, and Peter is trying to manage the job by himself. The boat is battered by the waves, and far from the land, for the wind was against them. They were at least discouraged, and possibly afraid.

But then Jesus comes to their aid, although in such an unexpected manner that they were terrified,

saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. Jesus tells them not to be afraid, and calls for an act of trust. With all the love of his generous heart, Peter, alone of those in the boat, responds and goes to meet Jesus, walking on the water. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and began to sink, crying out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saving him.

It is an image of the church or an individual person, battling with the storms of life, discouraged by failure, afraid, and feeling alone. Jesus reaches out a helping hand to lift them up. He asks for an act of trust and his manner of responding may be entirely different from what we expected. The message for us seems to be, 'Don't be afraid; trust.'

Week 18

Tuesday, alternative reading

Matthew 15.1-2, 10-14 What is clean and unclean

1. Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,
2. 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.'

10. Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand:

11. it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.’

12. Then the disciples approached and said to him, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?’

13. He answered, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.

14. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.’

There is a passage parallel to this in Mark 7.1-13.

Vv.1-2: A drearily familiar scene presents itself: Pharisees and scribes come with their fussy preoccupation with the externals of religion. Rituals and purity rites are important to them. They need to be able to tick the boxes to show they have measured up to the requirements of the law. It bothers them that Jesus and his disciples not only do not observe these rules but are unconcerned about them. Where will it all end?

Vv.10-11: For Jesus, all foods were clean. In response to a request from Peter in v.15, he explains what he means: -

But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.

For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.

These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile. (15.18-20)

It was not what went into a person's mouth that made them unclean, but what came out of it: lies, perjury, slander, calumny, detraction, etc.

V.12: This bothered the Pharisees. One would think that Jesus was pointing to the greater priorities, but they were so preoccupied with the details that they lost sight of the bigger picture. They missed the wood for the trees.

How did this situation come about in the first place? It may be that the washing of hands before eating, introduced initially as a simple hygienic measure, was reinforced by religious sanction. That was an abuse of religion and diminished it. Abuse redounds on the abuser.

Vv.13-14: There is a tone of despair in Jesus' voice. It is as if he is saying, 'I give up on the Pharisees; they are impossible to reason with. They don't know where they are going, or what they are doing, so how can they lead anyone?' This is a further step towards a parting of the ways between Jesus and the Temple in all its branches.

Jesus' disciples came to understand what he was saying, and its significance. In Acts, there is an episode involving Peter and a Gentile, Cornelius: -

The next day, while they were on their way and nearing the city, Peter went up to the roof terrace to pray at about noontime.

He was hungry and wished to eat, and while they were making preparations he fell into a trance.

He saw heaven opened and something resembling a large sheet coming down, lowered to the ground by its four corners.

In it were all the earth's four-legged animals and reptiles and the birds of the sky.

A voice said to him, 'Get up, Peter. Slaughter and eat.'

But Peter said, 'Certainly not, sir. For never have I eaten anything profane and unclean.'

The voice spoke to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you are not to call profane.'

Later, Peter said, 'God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean.'
(10.9-15, 28)

Paul understood the matter more radically, 'He [Jesus] has abolished the law with its commandments and its ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two [Jew and Gentile], thus making peace.'
(Ephesians 2.15) And also, 'The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"' (Galatians 5.14),

and 'love is the fulfilling of the law.' (Romans 13.10b)

All the way through his Gospel, Matthew emphasizes the primacy of love: that is the greatest commandment.

Week 18

Wednesday

Matthew 15.21-28 Jesus and the Canaanite woman

21. Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

22. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'

23. But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'

24. He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

25. But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'

26. He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

27. She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'

28. Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

There is a passage parallel to this in Mark 7.24-30.

V.21: Jesus goes north to the coastal region of today’s Lebanon, that is to say, to Gentile territory, outside Palestine, his homeland. This was contrary to his instruction to his disciples, ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ (Matthew 10.5-6) Perhaps he confined his work in that region to Jews living there. (There is a hint of this later where it is said of the early Christians that ‘they usually proclaimed the Gospel only to Jews.’ Acts 11.19)

V.22: The woman was a Canaanite, a descendant of the original inhabitants of Palestine, those that the invading Hebrews had not slaughtered. She calls Jesus Son of David, a title found elsewhere in Matthew, e.g., 9.27; 12.23 and 21.9. It had a messianic character, but with a heavily political overtone. Jesus did not use it of himself, preferring “Son of Man.” She pleads for her child.

V.23: Jesus ‘did not answer her at all.’ He ignored her. He put himself in the role of the man inside the house in Luke 11.5-8, who does not want to help his friend but eventually agrees, as the line of least

resistance, giving him what he wants in order to get rid of him. The disciples want to be rid of her in order to have an end to her shouting. The Douai version reads, 'Send her away for she crieth after us.' NRSV, widely regarded as the translation most faithful to the original, is almost identical, 'Send her away for she keeps shouting after us.' But JB has, 'Give her what she wants because she is shouting after us.' The latter explains the difference by saying it is like the situation in Matthew 18.27 where 'the servant's master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt,' where sending the person away means giving the petitioner what they ask as a way of getting rid of them. All language involves interpretation, but here it seems that translation may have crossed a border and injected into the text a meaning it does not bear.

V.24: Jesus refers to his understanding of his mission, as he communicated it to his disciples in Matthew 10.5-6 above. But, to her, it must have come like a rebuff, in effect saying to her, 'You're a Canaanite, not one of us, so you have no claim on me.'

V.25: The woman showed great love for her child. Undeterred by rebuff and humiliation, she knelt before Jesus, and put her plea in the simplest, most appealing terms, 'Lord, help me.' It could only have been great love for her child which made her persevere in the face of such treatment. Surely Jesus would hear her.

V.26: But worse was to come. Jesus virtually calls her a bitch – she and her daughter are likened to dogs - a term even more offensive in that culture than it is to us today. The word *dogs* was used by Jews in Jesus' time as an insult to Gentiles.

V.27: The woman – bless her tenacity and wit! – turns Jesus' dismissal back on to him, saying, in effect, 'We may be only dogs, but even dogs are given something!'

V.28: At last Jesus relents, recognizes the greatness of her trust and self-sacrifice, and heals her daughter.

Why did Jesus treat her so harshly? To say that it was to test her faith makes him seem manipulative and cruel. Who would put a person through such an emotional wringer in order to *test* them? In the story, it might be said that this Canaanite woman converted Jesus from a narrow interpretation of his mission to a universalist one, from a "Jews only" view to an all-embracing one. Mission is about receiving as well as giving, learning as well as teaching. Jesus 'grew in wisdom and knowledge' (Luke 2.52), and the Canaanite woman was his teacher.

The woman – what a pity we do not know her name! – is the heroine of the story. For the love of her child, she put up with being ignored, fobbed off, humiliated and insulted. She had courage,

determination, and quick wit – all of them the by-products of her love for her child.

Week 18

Thursday

Matthew 16.13-23 Who do you say that I am?

13. Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’

14. And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’

15. He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’

16. Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’

17. And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

18. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

19. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’

20. Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

21. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief

priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

22. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’

23. But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 8.27-33 and Luke 9.18-22.

V.13: Who is Jesus? That question is constantly there in the background of the Gospels. Much of what Jesus said and did was designed to bring people to ask themselves that question. Here Jesus raises the question explicitly. He does so at Caesarea Philippi, a largely Gentile town, where King Herod, known as “the Great” – he was a great builder - had built a temple in honour of Augustus; Philip, his son, dedicated it to Caesar the Roman emperor, while adding his own name. It was a place associated with political power.

Vv.14-16: Jesus first asks his disciples what the people say about him, and they give their replies. They refer to the prophets, because they have messianic significance. Then Jesus turns the question around to the disciples, asking them who *they* think he is. Simon Peter speaks up, saying,

‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ It is only in Matthew that the divine title ‘Son of the living God’ is included. Mark 8.29 and Luke 9.20 have Peter say only that Jesus is the Messiah, which was not a divine title.

Vv.17-19: Jesus warmly commends Simon for this, saying that his statement was not his own human opinion but revealed to him by God. Jesus goes on to give Simon the new and unique title of Peter (*rock*), adding,

on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (vv.18-19)

The saying about the keys of the kingdom of heaven is repeated in Matthew 18.18 where it is directed to the whole community of disciples. Nothing in this text provides the basis for an imperial papacy such as has developed in the church, especially since Vatican I.

In the four Gospels, there are only two references to the church; they are these in Matthew 16.18 above, and Matthew 18.17, ‘If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such

a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.’
Jacques Dupuis writes,

In Matthew 16.18, the “foretelling of the Church” has been retouched editorially in the light of the Easter event; in Matthew 18.18, [it] refers to a local community without necessarily having any technical meaning. (*Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Orbis Books, New York, 1997, p.343)

The word *church* translates the Hebrew *qahal* and the Greek *ekklesia*, meaning an assembly called together. It is a term often used in the Hebrew Bible in reference to the Chosen People of God, especially when they were in the desert. Christians saw the church as the successor to the assembly of the Jewish people.

V.20: Jesus ‘sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.’ In his time the title had the wrong connotations.

V.21: Having led his disciples to the point of acknowledging him as Messiah, Jesus then shatters their ideas of what that meant. Speaking in the very place associated with political power, he says that he will fulfil his role by going to Jerusalem, the place of kingship, and there ‘undergo great suffering... and be killed.’ That was probably the last thing they expected or wanted to hear, so much so that his next

words ‘and on the third day be raised’ very likely did not register with them at all.

Vv.22-23: Peter - loving, impulsive, unthinking, anxious to correct Jesus’ “mistakes,” takes him aside privately for a quiet word. (This had happened elsewhere, for example, in Matthew 17.19 and 24.3.) He is going to put Jesus right, will protect him from his folly, but gets the shock of his life. In what is surely the sternest rebuke in the Gospels, Jesus says to him, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’ (v.23)

It could hardly have been more hard-hitting. Peter, the foundation rock of the church a moment ago, is now Satan, the adversary, the enemy! He must have been stunned. But he needed a shock to wake him up, to bring him to see that Jesus was turning his ideas and standards, and those of the world, upside down. He was saying to him as emphatically as he could, so that he would not mistake it, that his way was not that of power, whether political or otherwise, but of identifying with suffering humanity. It was not by control but by surrender to God that the kingdom of God would be brought into being and achieve its goal. Because this is so contrary to human expectations, it is a message which always needs to be re-learned.

Week 18

Friday

Matthew 16.24-28 Taking up the cross

24. Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

25. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

26. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

27. For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

28. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 8.34-9.1, Luke 9.23-27; 14.27; 17.33; and John 12.25

Having just spoken so strongly of his own suffering, Jesus now goes on to speak of the suffering which his disciples must expect. He does this also in Matthew 10.37-39.

V.24: ‘Take up their cross’ – Luke adds ‘daily’- must have been puzzling, even incomprehensible or perhaps shocking to Jesus’ disciples. The idea of “taking up the cross” had no idealistic or heroic connotations for them; the cross was an object of

fear and revulsion. Crucifixion was painful, prolonged, and humiliating, and intended to be so. Death came through loss of blood, shock, or, most commonly, asphyxia. (See Pierre Barbet, *A Doctor at Calvary: the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ as described by a Surgeon*, Mercier, Cork, 1953) Crucifixion was invented by the Persians and then copied by the Romans. It usually took place at cross-roads so that it would be seen by as many people as possible, and terrorize them. So abhorrent was crucifixion that, for the first two or three centuries of the Christian era, Christian churches did not have a cross on their walls; it was an embarrassment, a shame. Graffiti by early anti-Christian scribblers mock Christians by holding up Jesus to derision because of his crucifixion. Some speculate that this verse was put into the mouth of Jesus by the Christian community after his death and resurrection, or, alternatively, that he spoke it during his appearance to his disciples on the shore of Lake Tiberias after his resurrection. (See John 21, especially vv.18-19)

V.25: Jesus adds to the challenge, calling in paradoxical language for a great measure of self-renunciation.

V.26: This continues here, though the Douai Bible puts it more strongly by using the word 'soul' where NRSV and JB use 'life.' The use of 'soul' suggests eternal implications, not evident in the word 'life.' The Hebrew word *nepesh* means self, soul or life.

V.27: Jesus goes on to speak of judgment, a common theme throughout the Bible. This verse seems to refer to the final judgment of all humanity, when people will be judged according to their works, not, *pace* Luther, according to what they believed in. Job puts it this way, ‘According to their deeds he [God] will repay them, and according to their ways he will make it befall them.’ (34.11) The Psalms have it also, ‘you [God] repay each person as their works deserve.’ Jeremiah has the same message, ‘I [the Lord]... give each person what their conduct and actions deserve.’ And, of course, Jesus, in Matthew 25.31-46, repeatedly emphasizes that it is what a person does, or has failed to do, that determines how they are judged. This only reiterates what Jesus had said elsewhere, ‘Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.’ (Matthew 7.21)

V.28 is taken by some scholars to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem but it is difficult to see how this follows from the text.

Matthew gives great prominence to the idea of a messianic kingdom, mentioning it fifty-two times. He and the other evangelists have Jesus emphasizing repeatedly that what is in mind is not a political institution, that he is not a new king of Israel who will drive out the Romans. ‘My kingdom is not of this world.’ (John 18.36) Perhaps it is worth asking

whether, if Jesus were on earth today, he would use a different term such as the “republic of God,” which has a more egalitarian connotation than kingdom. He was more egalitarian than hierarchical.

It is a kingdom which has come with Jesus; it is therefore already present. ‘The kingdom of God is at hand.’ (Matthew 4.17) But it is also a future kingdom which awaits fulfilment at the end of time, and for which disciples should pray, ‘Thy kingdom come.’ (Matthew 6.3) ‘God’s kingdom is the revelation of the divine life here on earth, the birth of new hearts, new minds, new possibilities.’ (Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, cited in *The Plough*, No.33, March 2005, p.6) Wherever people recognize and respect the humanity of others, the Kingdom of God is there; see Matthew 25.31-46. But the kingdom is also a mystery. (Matthew 13.11)

There is a problem: ‘the New Testament writers... presented the kingdom not as a concept but as a symbol.’ (Daniel Liderbach, *The Numinous Universe*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, USA, 1989, p.108) But ‘Westerners have been trained to expect to find in reality logic, consistency and ordered systematization. That makes us unreceptive to ideas of the kingdom.’ (Liderbach, *op. cit.*, p.119) He suggests, (p.109), that Augustine turned Christianity away from seeing it as a symbol to seeing it as a concept.

When we use the word symbol we (probably unconsciously) prefix the word “only,” so that it becomes “only a symbol.” That becomes like saying that a parable, myth or metaphor is “only a story.” Is it that the challenge is not to de-mythologize the Gospels but to re-mythologize ourselves?

Week 18

Saturday

Matthew 17.14-20 Jesus heals an epileptic

14. When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him,

15. and said, ‘Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water.

16. And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.’

17. Jesus answered, ‘You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.’

18. And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly.

19. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’

20. He said to them, ‘Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.’

21. 'But this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting.'

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 9.14-29; 11.23 and Luke 9.37-43; 17.5-6.

Vv.14-16: A man comes, making his request. He does so simply, asking for help for his epileptic son. Epilepsy was widely considered a form of demonic possession, an attitude probably largely formed by fear at the troubling sight of a person in convulsions. He had previously brought him to the disciples but they were unable to cure him.

V.17: Jesus exclaims with anger and frustration, not at the father, whose faith was evident, but at the lack of faith among his disciples. He uses very strong language, calling them 'a faithless and perverse generation.' This same expression is later used by Peter in Acts 2.40 after Pentecost. Jesus calls for the troubled son to be brought to him.

V.18: 'Jesus rebuked the demon.' John L. McKenzie states, 'Belief in diabolical possession does not appear in the OT.' [Old Testament] But popular Judaism of the times before and after Jesus actively believed in demons. Are Matthew and the other Gospel writers simply accommodating themselves to current thinking and language? Are there, in reality, personal spirits of evil, or is the

word *demon* no more than a word used for realities such as various kinds of mental illness which people had no other means of describing but which frightened them? (See McKenzie, articles *Demon*, *demonology*, and *Possession, Diabolical*) Sometimes evil has persistence and intelligence which seems more than merely human. Much has been said about the “banality of evil,” and it need not come in scary forms such as this story describes, but may be dressed in a business suit, with good manners, good looks and personal charm - but an absence of conscience or concern for the human consequences of decisions.

Jesus cures the boy instantly, seemingly without effort. There was no struggle, no convulsions, no resistance on the part of the demon.

V.19: The disciples ask why they could not do it, and Jesus tells them simply that it was because of their lack of faith, a word which is very similar in meaning to trust.

V.20: Jesus uses two exaggerations – as small as a mustard seed, and uprooting a mountain. They were proverbial expressions for the smallest thing visible – elsewhere Matthew calls it ‘the smallest of all the seeds’ (13.32) - and doing the impossible. In Mark 11.23, Jesus says, ‘Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, “Be taken up and thrown into the sea,” and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.’ It is hard to see that such a claim was

validated in human experience. Has it ever happened? And, if not, was it simply that the person doubted, unable to believe that it would happen? It seems to ask the impossible. Sometimes parents, to take an example, pray for their child's recovery to health with all the faith they can muster, but recovery does not come. They then feel guilty that it was the deficiency of their faith which led to the child's death. That is very hard on them.

V.21 This verse - 'But this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting' - is often omitted. Neither NRSV nor JB has it, though the Douai has. It is found only in some manuscripts and is considered to be at variance with the thrust of what Jesus has just said. For him, it was faith that counted, while, in v.21, it is prayer and fasting that matters. But they require faith, so perhaps there is no conflict.

Week 19

Monday

Matthew 17.22-27 Jesus and the Temple tax

22. As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands,

23. and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.’ And they were greatly distressed.

24. When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, ‘Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?’

25. He said, ‘Yes, he does.’ And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, ‘What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?’

26. When Peter said, ‘From others,’ Jesus said to him, ‘Then the children are free.

27. However, so that we do not give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that

comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.’

Vv.22-23: This was the second time that Jesus told his disciples of his forthcoming passion, death and resurrection. The first was in Matthew 16.21-23 and the third in 20.17-19. They clearly understood what he was saying because, ‘they were greatly distressed.’ JB has it that ‘A great sadness came over them.’

But they seemed to miss the all-important ‘on the third day he will be raised.’ Was it that they were so shocked by the first part of the statement that they did not hear the last? Was it Jesus’ use of the word “betrayal”? Were they asking themselves, as they did later, ‘Surely not I?’ (See Matthew 26.22) Or were they afraid to ask? When the passion came, it seemed to shock them all, and the resurrection appears to have been a total surprise. Why, when they had been told about it three times? It is puzzling. And Peter was no less shocked than the others, even though he should have remembered the savage telling-off he received from Jesus when he objected to such a thing happening. (Matthew 16.21-23)

Or is it that the story, being recounted by Matthew several decades later in the light of the resurrection,

has the benefit of hindsight and so things seem clear when they were not so at the time?

Vv.24-27: This is a strange juxtaposition by Matthew. The moment of high drama is followed by the quasi-comical episode of the temple tax, from the sublime to the ridiculous, one might say.

It was once memorably said, 'You can't run the church on Hail Marys.' The temple needed money to keep it going, and every Jewish male over the age of twenty was expected to pay for its upkeep. The tax was two *denarii*, that is, two days' wages for a labourer.

The fact that Jesus pays the tax suggests that, at the time when Matthew wrote, the break between Christians and Jews had not yet come about. V.25 clearly suggests that Jesus considered himself and his disciples to be part of the Jewish community of faith. Matthew presents the story as one where Jesus, though feeling no obligation to pay the tax, does so in order not to give scandal to others.

He goes on to give the story a magical character, suggesting first, in v.25, that Jesus was aware of Peter's prior conversation with the tax collectors, and then the bizarre story of finding a coin sufficient to pay for Peter and himself in the mouth of a fish.

Is the story to be taken as literally true? That seems most unlikely. It has the character of magic: we almost expect to hear the words, 'Hey, presto!

Abacadabra!’ It involves the use of supernatural power by Jesus for mere personal convenience, something entirely at variance with his works of power everywhere else in the Gospels. They always took place in a context of faith and were at the service of others. Is it going too far, or not, to say that the story is a trivialization which risks diminishing the credibility of the Gospel?

Week 19

Tuesday

Matthew 18.1-5, 10, 12-14 Who is greatest? and The lost sheep

1. At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’
 2. He called a child, whom he put among them,
 3. and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
 4. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
 5. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’
-
10. ‘Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.’
 - [11. For the Son of Man came to save the lost.]
 12. ‘What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not

leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

13. And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

14. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.’

The *Lectionary* here combines two quite different stories without any immediately obvious reason.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 9.33-36 and Luke 9.46-47, and a similar story in Matthew 19.13-15.

Vv.1-5: Many people, from Muhammad Ali, aka Cassius Clay, (‘Me, I’m the greatest’) to a long line of dictators, want to be Number One. Hitler is quoted as having said, in the closing days of the Third Reich, that the German people were not worthy of him. Ambition can be a motivator for excellence and achievement or it may be a binge of self-seeking.

Here the disciples want to book their places in the kingdom. In Matthew 20.20-28 and Mark 10.35-45, James and John (or their mother, Salome) ask to be given the two top places in the kingdom, one on Jesus’ right and one on his left. They are thinking in terms of the pyramid of esteem, status, power and self-aggrandizement. That seems hard-wired into the

human condition, part-and-parcel of the mind of the Organization Man who wants to climb his way to the top of the greasy ladder with the spinning rungs.

In effect, Jesus tells them they have placed their ladder against the wrong wall. He proposes a most unlikely role-model for the greatest in the kingdom – a child. No one else would have thought of such an idea; it was truly revolutionary. It is the humility of the child that he particularly proposes as a model. (v.4) And whoever - presumably this means adults - welcomes the child welcomes Jesus himself. (v.5)

Humble people know and accept themselves in truth. They are thus able to love their neighbour *as they love themselves*. (This evokes what was said by the Russian Orthodox saint, Seraphim of Sarov, ‘Acquire inner peace and thousands around you will find their salvation.’) They are aware of their emptiness and are thus receptive to being filled by God. They do not act out of the ego – Ego being defined as Edging God Out. They have nothing to lose, so they can speak the truth. If they are elbowed out of the way by assertive power, it does not trouble them. Because they are God-based, not self-based, they have persistence in the face of failure and opposition; they have tenacity that overcomes obstacles and even their own blunders and stupidities do not impede them from pressing on. A Capuchin saint, Seraphin of Montegranaro captured this spirit when he said, ‘I’m fit for nothing but ready for anything.’

This passage is a priority for Jesus in view of its frequent repetition and inclusion in the three Synoptics.

There are close similarities between vv.10-14 and the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15.1-7.

V.10 serves as an introduction to the main text in vv.12-14. It is directed to the Pharisees, the people who despised the “little ones” – not children, but people who were “sinners,” that is, ignorant of the Torah or not observant of it. It is a warning against judgment of others.

V.11 is missing from many early manuscripts and is omitted from NRSV and JB, but not Douai. But it is in Luke 19.10, and is entirely in keeping with the character of the passage.

Vv.12-14: ‘What do you think?’ As always, Jesus is prodding people to think. He didn’t feed answers into their heads; he engaged them in the thinking process. It was an approach taken up very much later by a Christian saint, and educator, who wrote,

It is chiefly by asking questions and in provoking explanations that the teacher must open the mind of the pupil, make him work, use his thinking powers, form his judgment, and make him find out the answer for himself. (John Baptiste de la Salle)

Parents worry over the sick child, not the healthy one. You worry over the person who gets into trouble, not the one who stays out of it. God wants people to be saved, not lost. Part of being ‘saved’ is being integrated in a community; being ‘astray’- not as strong a word as ‘lost’- is being out of it, like the sheep. The community needs the missing member – for its wholeness, completion and integrity - as much as the missing member needs the community.

The Lord God is depicted in Ezekiel 34.11-31 as a good shepherd, who cares for the sheep: -

The Lord Yahweh says this: ‘Look, I myself shall take care of my flock and look after it.

As a shepherd looks after his flock when he is with his scattered sheep, so shall I look after my sheep. I shall rescue them from wherever they have been scattered on the day of clouds and darkness.

I shall bring them back from the peoples where they are; I shall gather them back from the countries and bring them back to their own land. I shall pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the inhabited parts of the country.

I shall feed them in good pasturage; the highest mountains of Israel will be their grazing ground. There they will rest in good grazing grounds; they will browse in rich pastures on the mountains of Israel.

I myself shall pasture my sheep, I myself shall give them rest - declares the Lord Yahweh.

I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the injured and make the sick strong. I shall watch over the fat and healthy. I shall be a true shepherd to them.

As for you, my sheep, the Lord Yahweh says this: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and he-goats.

Not content to drink the clearest of the water, you foul the rest with your feet.

And my sheep must graze on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have fouled.'

Very well, the Lord Yahweh says this: 'I myself shall judge between the fat sheep and the thin sheep.

since you have jostled with flank and shoulder and butted all the ailing sheep with your horns, until you have scattered them outside,

I shall come and save my sheep and stop them from being victimised. I shall judge between sheep and sheep.

I shall settle them round my hill; I shall send rain at the proper time; it will be a rain of blessings.

I shall raise up one shepherd, my servant David, and put him in charge of them to pasture them; he will pasture them and be their shepherd.

I, Yahweh, shall be their God, and my servant David will be ruler among them. I, Yahweh, have spoken.

I shall make a covenant of peace with them; I shall rid the country of wild animals. They will be able to live secure in the desert and go to sleep in the woods.

The trees of the countryside will yield their fruit and the soil will yield its produce; they will be secure on their soil. And they will know that I am Yahweh when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the clutches of their slave-masters.

No more will they be a prey to the nations, no more will the wild animals of the country devour them. They will live secure, with no one to frighten them.

I shall make splendid vegetation grow for them; no more will they suffer from famine in the country; no more will they have to bear the insults of other nations.

So they will know that I, their God, am with them and that they, the House of Israel, are my people' - declares the Lord Yahweh.

'And you, my sheep, are the flock of my human pasture, and I am your God' - declares the Lord Yahweh.

Matthew sees Jesus as exercising that role, thereby fulfilling the scriptures. (Jesus as the good shepherd is a theme taken up in John 10.)

The image of humanity as a flock of sheep is unflattering, and it goes against the grain with us. Everyone knows that sheep are stupid, and we're

not, are we? But with 250 wars between 1945 and the year 2000, maybe we are in a class of slow learners that makes sheep seem smart.

The story also underlines the importance Jesus attaches to the individual. ‘Is fearr duine ná daoine,’ – ‘The person is more important than people’ - wrote the Irish poet, Piaras Ó Feiritéir.

Week 19

Wednesday

Matthew 18.15-20 Winning back your brother

15. ‘If your brother sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained the brother.

16. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

17. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

18. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

20. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’

Vv.15-17: Jesus here shows a way of dealing with the problem of division in the community – it is the way of dialogue. He offers a process of several steps, starting with simple, informal ones and proceeding to more formal and structured ways. In either case, the aim is the same - reconciliation.

The medieval church took up this idea and legislated as follows in one of its canons: -

He who is the object of an enquiry should be present at the process, and, unless absent through contumacy, should have the various headings of the enquiry explained to him, so as to allow him the possibility of defending himself. As well, he is to be informed not only of what the various witnesses have accused him of, but also of the names of those witnesses. (Fourth Lateran Council, 1215)

Now, in the twenty-first century, the church has different procedures which I will illustrate by reference to cases known to me, including my own.

I wrote an article in the periodical *The Furrow*, (March 2010, pp.166-175) entitled *On including Gays* in which I proposed, on the grounds that homosexuality is a facet of the human condition, that the church accept sexual relationships between consenting adults of the same sex as morally

legitimate. Following that, on 23 October 2010, I received, through my provincial, a letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) to the General Minister of the Capuchins. Referring to me, it states, ‘from now on he may not publish or write anything without first submitting it to an ecclesiastical censor.’

This was the first I heard that there was a case against me; I had been delated to Rome anonymously, there were no hearings, and I was told nothing of an appeal system.

A colleague of mine, who found himself in a similar situation, followed advice and went to Rome to dialogue with the CDF. After discussions, an agreed position was reached and all seemed well. But then, after he returned home, a new head of the CDF re-opened the case concluded by his predecessor, and said the agreed position was unsatisfactory.

Another Irish colleague was told by the CDF that, if any news of sanctions imposed on him by it reached the media, they would assume that he was responsible and he would, without further process, be dismissed from the priesthood and religious life with no financial support. He would be thrown out, penniless, in his seventies.

Another priest was called to account by the CDF for a book he had written. I had read it, and found

him ultra-cautious; he put nuances on his nuances. In Rome, he had the impression that his CDF interlocutors had not read the book but were relying on selected extracts compiled from different parts of it by someone else. In response, he wrote a 260-page reply to what he felt was the tendentious creation of a bogus position by juxtaposing sentences taken from different contexts. When it came to a hearing, the cardinal prefect of the CDF admitted he had not read the reply, saying they did not have time to read everything, but went on to pronounce a negative judgment anyway.

The same cardinal once said that sometimes the church finds it necessary in the interests of *communio* to set aside the demands of natural justice. How ironic that the CDF is the body charged by the church with upholding the integrity of doctrine! ‘The CDF is notorious among theologians... because it manifestly fails to follow the principles of natural justice when it investigates complaints.’ (Editorial in *The Tablet*, 7 July 2012, p.2) Should not those who claim to do the work of Christ use the methods of Christ?

My colleagues and I would have had fairer treatment if we had been living eight hundred years ago in the days of the fourth Lateran Council, or, even more so, two thousand years ago in the days when Jesus taught as in vv.15-17.

V.18: This verse must rank as one of the most abused in the history of the Catholic church. It has been cited in justification of almost any teaching or course of action decided on by church authorities. At face value, it seems to give *carte blanche* to those to whom it is addressed – who are they?

Scripture scholars take it as referring to members of the church generally and conferring on them the authority given to Peter in Matthew 16.19, ‘I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ NCCHS states, ‘The power and authority which Peter exercises in his own person are the power and authority given by Christ to his community.’ (729h) Could anything so sweeping have been meant? It would mean that “heaven” – that is, God – would back up ‘whatever you bind on earth.’ That has an absolutist character – “whatever” is an absolute – and absolute power corrupts absolutely. May God deliver us from it!

V.19: This is a sweeping promise, in keeping with similar thoughts expressed elsewhere: -

‘Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who

knocks, the door will be opened.’ (Matthew 7.7-8)

‘Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, “Be taken up and thrown into the sea,” and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.’ (Mark 11.23-24)

‘will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.’ (Luke 18.7-8a)

‘Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.’ (John 6.23b)

‘Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.’ (John 14.12-14)

‘If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.’ (John 15.7)

‘The Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.’ (John 15.16)

‘Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.’ (John 16.24)

‘we receive from him [God] whatever we ask.’
(I John 3.22)

‘if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask,
we know that we have obtained the requests
made of him.’ (I John 5.15)

Does human experience bear out those promises and statements? I find it hard to see that it does. At a simple level, what happens if two ‘agree on earth about anything you ask,’ but another two agree for the same thing not to happen? How can it be done for them both by God? NCCHS states, ‘Any cell of the messianic community shares this privilege granted to the Church of obtaining infallibly [!] from the Father... what they ask.’ (729h) True?

V.20: The link word ‘For’ at the start of this verse joins it to the preceding. It offers the reason why the above is true, and “works,” namely, that Jesus is present wherever people pray in his name. It is a good motive for prayer.

Week 19

Thursday

Matthew 18.21-19.1 The unforgiving servant

21. Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’

22. Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

23. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.
24. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;
25. and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.
26. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."
27. And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.
28. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe."
29. Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you."
30. But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.
31. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.
32. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.
33. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"
34. And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

35. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’

19.1. When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.

There is a passage parallel to vv.21-22 in Luke 17.4.

Vv.21-22: Peter probably thought he was being pretty good when he suggested forgiving as many as seven times; it was further than many would have been willing to suggest. But implicit in his question was another, ‘At what point do I earn the right to retaliate?’ And Jesus’ answer, ‘Seventy-seven times’ or, in other texts, ‘seventy times seven’ – they both have the same meaning – is that there is no limit. There is never to be a point at which one may say, ‘No more forgiveness.’

Matthew goes further than Luke (17.4), in that, while Luke speaks of the offender repenting and forgiveness then being given, no such precondition is attached here. Offenders should be forgiven regardless of their attitude.

Vv.23-35: And then a parable elaborates on this. The figure of ten thousand talents in v.24 is an exaggeration, a fantastic sum beyond anyone’s reach; the taxes paid in Galilee and the neighbouring

area of Perea in 4 B. C. were one fiftieth of that amount. The denarius (Latin, plural *denarii*) of v.28 is a labourer's wage for a day. The first figure is greater than the second by a factor of 600,000! The numbers are deliberately exaggerated to heighten the effect.

The servant who was forgiven refuses to forgive. He received but was unwilling to give, even though the appeal of his fellow-servant (v.29) was couched in the same words he had used in making his appeal. (v.26) He did not recognize reciprocity. The adjective used to describe him in v.32 has the connotation of miserly.

Jesus said, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' (Matthew 6.12) In his Gospel, Luke has a similar message, 'If he [your brother] wrongs you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you and says, "I am sorry," you must forgive him.' (17.4) Sirach spoke of those like the unforgiving servant, 'Showing no pity for a man like himself, can he then plead for his own sins?' (28.4) And James likewise, 'There will be judgment without mercy for those who have not been merciful themselves, but the merciful need have no fear of judgment.' (2.13)

Forgiveness – giving and receiving it, and the two are inseparable – are at the heart of the Gospel, and there is no understanding it without that. This is something that pharisees of the past and the present

do not understand. The tabloids are part of that tradition. They carry headlines like, ‘Rot in hell’ about whomever it is that people love to hate at the moment. They scream “Shock Horror” at someone’s crimes, and pour hatred on anyone who dares speak of forgiveness, as if to do so were to condone evil. Lord Longford, for example, was heaped with abuse for suggesting that Myra Hindley, the media-designated Moors murderer, was truly sorry for her crimes and deserved compassion. Their own sins – bugging phones, intercepting emails and text messages, and how much else besides – they furiously deny, then “vigorously contest” in court, before admitting them when convicted. And then, with an air of righteous anger, they gear up for an assault on their next victim, claiming to do it in the public interest. Is pharisaism dead?

A point of significance is that the sale of a person for debt (v.25) and the torture of debtors (v.34) were forbidden in Jewish tradition, although widely practised in the pagan world. Matthew writes for a Jewish audience and perhaps did not want to offend their sensibilities, so he sets the story in a pagan context.

The world-renowned scripture scholar, Raymond E. Brown, wrote, ‘the number of people who turn away from the church where they have not found forgiveness is legion.... To the extent that the churches listen to Jesus speaking to his disciples in this chapter, they will keep his spirit alive instead of

memorializing him.’ (*Christ in the Gospels of the Ordinary Sundays*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1998, p.33)

Matthew makes the point of the story clear in the final verse. It is not merely a matter of wiping the slate clean; it is forgiving ‘from your heart.’ That is a gift.

19.1 is a typical Matthean phrase to denote the end of one section and the beginning of another.

Week 19

Friday

Matthew 19.3-12 Divorce and re-marriage

3. Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?’

4. He answered, ‘Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning “made them male and female,”

5. and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”?’

6. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.

7. They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?’

8. He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.'
9. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
10. His disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.'
11. But he said to them, 'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given.'
12. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.'

There are passages parallel to, or similar to parts of this, in Matthew 5.31-32, Mark 10.1-12, Luke 16.18, Romans 7.2-3 and 1 Corinthians 7.

Was Jesus married? To some, the question is almost blasphemous. Why? Is it because we undervalue the humanity of Jesus, whom we proclaim in the Creed to be true God and true man? Is it because, despite all our assertions to the contrary, we regard sex as tainted, not fully right, not as "heavenly" as abstinence, not as good as its voluntary renunciation? That might be a view held by some Christians, but it was, and is not, a Jewish

one. Jews have a saying that, at the end of life, God will call us to account for every pleasure which we did not enjoy.

The tradition of the Christian church from late in the second century is that Jesus did not marry. This is based on the silence of the Gospels about any wife, marriage, or children of his.

The argument from silence cuts both ways. Jesus was a Jew, brought up according to Jewish custom. He was often a non-conformist, but his parents were not. The Gospels emphasize their fidelity to custom (Luke 2.21-23, 39, 41-42), and Jesus' subjection to them. (Luke 2.51) A Jewish father was considered to have five responsibilities towards his son: - to circumcise him; to redeem him (those two went together); to teach him the Torah; to teach him a trade; and to find a suitable wife for him. The Gospel provides evidence that Joseph fulfilled the first four in relation to Jesus. That would seem to offer a presumption in favour of his fulfilling the fifth requirement also.

The norm in Jewish tradition was that every person would marry. In the time of Jesus, the two great scholars, Hillel and Shammai, said, 'No man may abstain from keeping the law which says, "Be fruitful and multiply."' (Genesis 1.22) That was the first of the positive precepts of the Torah. To be a rabbi one had to be married. To reproduce was considered a duty in Jewish circles because one's

child might be the Messiah. The celebration of human love, of sexuality, and of marriage so strongly expressed in Psalm 45, and the Song of Songs (or *Song of Solomon*), is in the mainstream of Jewish tradition. The Hebrew Bible uses marriage as an image of the covenant relationship between God and his people. Jesus used images drawn from weddings as metaphors for his own messianic presence, and for heaven (e.g., Mark 2.19; Matthew 22.1-14), and ‘the first of his signs’ was at a wedding. (John 2.1-11)

If Jesus were unmarried, it seems strange that his many critics did not question him about something so unusual. They were not shy about asking awkward questions, including ones relating to marriage, such as the woman who had had seven husbands. (Matthew 22.23-33) A young man was considered marriageable by the age of sixteen, and Jesus did not begin his public life for another fourteen years or so after that. Was he single all that time?

Luke states that Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. (3.23) He was often called Rabbi, though that was a title sometimes used loosely. Rabbis were ordained at about thirty and were expected to be married.

If Jesus were like us in all things except sin (Hebrews 4.15), if he redeemed every human situation, if he were truly man, not role-playing, isn’t

marriage more likely than not to be part of his life? If Jesus were celibate, why did Paul (in 1 Corinthians 7.5-8) not refer to it as a clinching argument in his case for celibacy, which, instead, he bases on his own experience? If original sin were, as Saint Augustine suggested, a sexually transmitted condition, would a faithful marriage by Jesus not have been the most expressive way to redeem it?

In Luke, it is said that,

Soon afterwards he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. (8.2-3)

It seems unlikely, at the least, that Jesus and his twelve closest followers - all married men, except perhaps John, - would have travelled round the country accompanied by women who were not their wives. What does seem likely is that some of those women were wives of the twelve. Paul wrote, 'Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?' (1 Corinthians 9.5) Was Jesus the only one among them not to have

his wife with him? If that were so, why is there no mention of it? (The Greek word for women also means wives, as is also the case in other languages.)

In Matthew 19.1-12, Jesus reiterates the teaching on divorce found in Mark. This evokes an astonished reply from the disciples: ‘His disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” But he said to them, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”’ (Vv. 10-12)

What is Jesus talking about here? Is it perhaps celibacy after a divorce, as punishment for one too lightly entered into? Can it really be the case that he was proposing an ideal which, it seems, none of his immediate circle followed? Bachelorhood was not well thought of in Jewish tradition: ‘It is not good for man to be alone’ (Genesis 2.18), and ‘Where there is no wife, a man will become a fugitive and a wanderer.’ (Sirach 36.30)

It seems that the balance of probabilities is against a celibate Jesus, leaving the burden of proof to rest on those who wish to maintain that he was such.

(The above draws on James Wesley Stivers, *Hierogamy and the Married Messiah*, Idaho, 2003; and www.grailchurch.org/marriedjesus.htm)

Under Mark 10.1-12, there is coverage of the issue of divorce and re-marriage. It applies to this text also, although Matthew is perhaps even more emphatic than Mark in pointing to Jesus' exclusion of divorce and re-marriage: he points to the disciples' incredulity at what he is saying and their astonished response in v.10, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.'

Unlike Mark or Luke, Matthew has an exceptive clause which has raised controversy. In v.9, Jesus says, 'I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.' This is very similar to Matthew 5.32, 'I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on grounds of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.'

Different theories about this focus on two points. The first is the meaning of 'unchastity' (Greek *porneia*). It is sometimes understood to mean some kind of marriage within a forbidden degree which renders it invalid from the beginning. That would mean that Jesus here allows a couple who have entered such an invalid "marriage" to break up and marry (not "re"-marry). That interpretation seems

unlikely in view of the context, the whole thrust of which is excluding divorce and re-marriage, not about creating loopholes around such exclusion.

The second is about the phrase ‘causes her to commit adultery.’ (5.32) This is understood as meaning that, by divorcing his wife, a man causes her to commit adultery because, in the circumstances of the day, she would have no other option but to re-marry, thereby committing adultery. The exception in this case is that, if she has already committed adultery anyway, then he is not forcing her to do it.

Some scholars suggest that the excepting clause, “except on the ground of unchastity” (Matthew 5.32 and 19.9) is not originally from Jesus but is a later insertion. (NCCHS 873k) This seems likely.

Fidelity to marriage was constantly upheld as an obligation for Christians: ‘Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.’ (Hebrews 13.4) ‘This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honour, not with lustful passion.’ (1 Thessalonians 4.3-5a)

Week 19
Saturday

Matthew 19.13-15 Jesus welcomes children

13. Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them;

14. but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.'

15. And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 10.13-16 and Luke 18.15-17, with related narratives in Luke 9.46-48 and Matthew 18.1-4.

The laying on of hands sometimes signifies the conferring of an order, as in 1 Timothy 4.14, where Paul writes to Timothy, 'Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.' In v.12, he had written, 'Let no one despise your youth...'

Here, however, there appears to be no such significance. A variety of phrases is used in the parallel passages: Jesus 'took the children in his arms,' he 'lifted them up,' he 'touched them,' etc. It seems to be a gesture of affection, nothing more.

But Jesus makes this an occasion for teaching, perhaps because of his disciples' reaction to the

arrival of the children: ‘The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them’ (v.13); ‘The disciples spoke sternly to them’ (Mark 10.13); ‘when the disciples saw them, they sternly ordered them not to do it.’ (Luke 18.15) Why? Were they tired and tetchy? Were they anxious to claim a role as guardians of access to Jesus? Were they just fussy, unable to leave things alone?

Whatever their reasons, Jesus was having none of it. He blessed the children. And then he gave the disciples the message, ‘It is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.’

In keeping with his presentation elsewhere of Jesus as aloof and dispassionate, Matthew here removes any reference to Jesus being angry with the disciples for wanting to send the children away, as in Mark 10.14 and Luke 18.16, and also any sign of affection towards them as in Mark 10.16. Instead Matthew makes it the occasion for a statement by Jesus on entry into the kingdom – another favourite theme of his – and a simple laying on of hands, presumably in blessing.

What are the qualities in little children that Jesus was pointing to? Perhaps that they are true to themselves, they do not posture, they are unpretentious; if they have needs they make them known simply and directly; and they are at ease about admitting it when they don’t know something. Those characteristics are so different from those of

the Pharisees and scribes who were such a thorn in Jesus' side.

Jesus does not ask people to be childish but child-like.

Week 20

Monday

Matthew 19.16-22 How to have eternal life

16. Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?'

17. And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.'

18. He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness;

19. Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

20. The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these from my youth; what do I still lack?'

21. Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

22. When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 10.17-22 and Luke 18.18-23.

V.16: The “someone” here is identified in v.20 as a young man, though Mark implies that he was older by having him use the phrase, ‘from my youth’ (10.20), while Luke states that he was a ruler (18.18), and therefore unlikely to be young. In any case, he was thinking of eternal life as an attainment, something which might be won by fulfilling terms and conditions. He was thinking in terms of a *quid pro quo*: ‘What do I have to do, so that God will give it to me?’ He wanted to strike a deal. But eternal life is always a gift, not an achievement. That is something which the children, in vv.13-15 above, probably recognized even if they could not articulate it.

V.17: The man had addressed Jesus as ‘Teacher’ or, in some texts, ‘Good teacher.’ Jesus’ response is strange: ‘Why do you call me good? There is only one who is good,’ a clear reference to God. Mark and Luke have, ‘No one is good but God alone.’ At first sight, this would seem to indicate that Jesus did not regard himself as divine. But, in view of everything else in the Gospels, whatever he meant, he can hardly have meant that.

Jesus sounds tetchy, irritated. Why? Did he feel patronized by the ‘good’? Surely he would be above that: feeling patronized suggests insecurity about oneself. Was he saying, in effect, ‘God is the answer

to your question; follow what he has already said in the commandments.’ The meaning is unclear, and perhaps it will remain so.

V.18: The man asked about the commandments, ‘Which ones?’ Jesus recites them for him, not all ten, but only five that relate to people, without the first three that relate to God, and then, in conclusion, the one that includes them all, the love of neighbour. It was meant to be a summary, no more.

V.20: The young man said, ‘I have kept all these from my youth. What do I still lack?’ But can anyone truly say about the commandments, ‘I have kept all these?’ Scripture says, ‘The just man falls seven times a day.’ Did the man know himself? Had he thought of what he was asking?

V.21: But he was generous and wanted to do more, so Jesus offered him a way: ‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ Perhaps it was to make it more attractive to him that Jesus spoke of ‘treasure in heaven.’ The man was rich and clearly liked his riches; the idea of having treasure may have struck a chord.

“Perfection,” for Matthew, seems to have meant unstinting generosity and love for those in need. It is a call addressed to all Christians, not to a special few.

V.22: But clearly it was not enough. When he heard this ‘he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.’ The man was possessed by his possessions; they possessed him rather than he them. And that could be the case with a poor person also; possessiveness is not exclusive to the rich. A rich person could be generous and a poor person greedy, possessive or covetous.

But the Gospel, especially Luke, the evangelist of the poor, is emphatic that wealth is a danger: ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions’ (12.15); ‘Sell your possessions, and give alms’ (12.33); ‘You cannot serve both God and wealth’ (16.13); Zacchaeus, being converted, gives half his possessions to the poor (19.8); and, most radically of all, ‘No one can be my disciple unless he gives up all he possesses.’ (14.33)

Saint Paul, too, is no less strong: - ‘The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil’ (1 Timothy 6.10); and, ‘Be sure of this: no... one who is greedy (that is, an idolater) has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.’ (Ephesians 5.5) It is very difficult, maybe impossible, to gain great wealth entirely by just means, and, if our use of it focuses only on the self, then that shuts out the rest of humanity.

The focus of the teaching is less on self-denial, which could simply be an ascetical exercise, than on

love of neighbour which will include self-denial but go further and deeper, and with, perhaps, a greater motivation.

Selling the goods and giving the money to the poor, great though that be, nonetheless was only a first step; the second was to follow Jesus. (v.21) The first step was to unload the baggage, so to speak, so as to enable him to travel light in the second.

In Matthew 13.44-46, Jesus had set before people the ideal of going for broke, of staking everything on the kingdom of God: -

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

This was too much for the rich man, who went away 'grieving.' (v.22) Jesus probably grieved, too – for him. Perhaps the man had heard Jesus say elsewhere, 'Foxes have dens, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' (Matthew 8.20) Perhaps the loss of security implicit in that scared him. Or maybe he had heard Jesus say,

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16.24-25)

Greater than selling possessions and giving them to the poor is the challenge to surrender self, to let go and let God.

Is this the only passage in the Gospel where Jesus is refused when he gives a person a direct face-to-face challenge? If not, it is among the most poignant.

Week 20

Tuesday

Matthew 19.23-30 The danger of riches

23. Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

24. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

25. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, 'Then who can be saved?'

26. But Jesus looked at them and said, 'For people it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.'

27. Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?'

28. Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

29. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.

30. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 10.23-27 and Luke 18.24-27.

Kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are the same thing. Jews, out of respect, preferred to avoid using the word God, substituting “The Name” (Hashem), or “heaven,” as we do in, ‘For heaven’s sake!’

The passage is clearly a follow-up to the preceding story of Jesus and the rich man. It is about riches, but also about commitment, choices, priorities.

The Gospel seems to see riches as inherently unjust, that is, exploitative, the promotion of one’s personal enrichment at the expense of others. (This was to become a major theme with the Fathers of the church, such as Saint John Chrysostom, who held that a person was entitled to the necessities of life,

but that the acquisition of more necessarily involved the deprivation of others. They would have endorsed what Mahatma Gandhi said, ‘There is enough in this world for everyone’s need; there is not enough for everyone’s greed.’)

V.23: Living as we do in a culture that values wealth above almost everything, this Gospel is shocking. We idolize wealth, using it as the measure of worth. Newspapers publish lists of the wealthiest people in the country, telling us what they are “worth.” We try to talk our way out of the Gospel’s challenge, to water it down, to “interpret” it, to explain it by explaining it away. It cuts too close to the bone for us. We know too well what it means and we want to get away from that.

V.24 has been explained by saying that the entrance to a camel’s pen was called the “needle,” and that it *was* possible for a camel, with some shoving, to squeeze its way into the pen to shelter for the night. And so, on that basis, the rich could also squeeze their way into the kingdom of heaven. The point about the needle and the pen may be true, but it does not draw the sting out of what Jesus is saying. Another attempt to explain the challenge away was to say that the text should read, not a camel (*camelos*) but a rope (*camilos*), and that *camelos* was a copyist’s error. In fact, in later rabbinic literature the camel-and-needle image became proverbial as an expression for the impossible. He had already said that ‘it is a narrow

gate and a hard road that leads to eternal life.’ (Matthew 7.14) The majority of the followers of Jesus were people for whom riches were a word, not an experience.

Vv.25-26. The disciples - echoed faithfully by us - are astounded, saying: ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jews would have been especially shocked by this teaching as the tradition of the Wisdom books was that wealth was a sign of God’s favour. Jesus answered by echoing Genesis 18.14, ‘Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?’ and the words of the angel to Mary in Luke 1.37, ‘Nothing will be impossible with God.’ What is impossible for the person is possible to and with God; this is a recurring biblical theme, especially in Saint Paul.

V.27. Peter asks, in effect, ‘What about us?’ He and the rest of the Twelve had left everything to follow Jesus and he wanted to know what they would get out of it. He wants to know about the reward as well as the cost of discipleship. (We ask the same thing, if less explicitly.)

Vv.28-29. Jesus tells them they will be rewarded at the final judgment. Matthew omits Mark’s specific list of rewards which will be received in this life, too, though not without persecutions. (10.30) Similarly Luke 18.30.

V.30: This verse is repeated just a little later, following the parable of the vineyard labourers in

Matthew 20.1-16, where it forms the conclusion, though in reverse order. Luke 13.30 has it also, but in a different setting. In each case, however, the context is about the expected order of things being turned upside down on the day of judgment.

Week 20

Wednesday

Matthew 20.1-16 The labourers in the vineyard

Jesus said to his disciples: -

1. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.
2. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.
3. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;
4. and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.
5. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.
6. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?'
7. They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'
8. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the labourers and give

them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’

9. When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

10. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.

11. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,

12. saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’

13. But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’

14. Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.

15. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

16. So the last will be first, and the first will be last. (For many are called but few are chosen.)

A parable is intended to make one point, not several. It is important to discover that point or risk distorting the story and injecting a meaning that is unintended. So what is the intended meaning here? Furthermore, a question always worth asking is: who do I identify with in the story?

At first sight, it seems like a parable of social injustice. The workers who laboured all day receive no more than the last-minute arrivals. That would be unjust – and a clear disincentive to work. (We see the parable as unjust until we see that the late arrivals who are treated with special generosity are us! And then we agree that it is a good way of doing things.) The parable is not about labour relations. But what then is its meaning?

As is always the case, the context matters. Perhaps Peter's question just a few verses earlier sets it: 'we have left everything and followed you.' What then will we have?' (Matthew 19.27) And two parables that follow also shape it: the wicked tenants in Matthew 21.33-45, and the wedding banquet in 22.1-14. All three are parables of *the kingdom*. That is a world of different standards and priorities. In each of the three, people's normal expectations are not met and the story makes its own point about God.

It seems clear that the landowner represents God and the labourers his disciples, of whom the first arrivals may be Jews, while the last are Gentiles – us! The vineyard is the world in which they live. The chief priests and the Pharisees (see 21.45) had a sense of entitlement because of Israel's (in their view) long fidelity to God; they were the chosen people while the Gentiles were Johnny Come Latelies who did not deserve to get as much because they had not borne the burden of observance of the

Torah. The former were like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. (Luke 15.29-30)

Who do we identify with? It may be that we identify with the early arrivals who feel that they are hard done by, though, in fact, in our life we might actually live like the late arrivals who barely make it to the gate of the kingdom at all and have made little effort in God's service. We might then be very glad that the "landowner" is generous and gives us more than we deserve.

As is usually the case with parables, there is a clue at the end of the story. In vv.15-16, the landowner asks, 'are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last. For many are called but few are chosen.' (This last phrase is not found in all texts; but it is at the end of the parable of the wedding banquet in 22.14.)

Or perhaps the parable means that the eleventh hour workers, who had waited all day in hope of being hired, were disappointed at getting only one hour's work. The owner was generous, and felt he could not decently send them home to their families in the evening with only a small fraction of a day's wages in their pocket; it would be too little. So he acts generously, and gives them the full wage. This evokes a response of begrudgery from the others.

The punch-line is about the goodness of God who gives generously, not equally, to all. Love is not

divisible. Parents with three children do not love each of them with one third of their love, and then, if a fourth child is born, re-allocate it so as to give each of the four a quarter. Love does not work like that. They try to love each child with all their love. God makes room in heaven for those who turn up at the last minute and wriggle under the gate. God's approach is to include rather than exclude. 'Why be envious because I am generous?'

The poet, e. e. cummings, says,

Whoever belongs to the kingdom of God
has an eye for goodness but no ear for
grumbling;
is constantly amazed and never bored;
is full of wonder and praise;
His goodness shall follow me always to the end
of my days.

Week 20

Thursday

Matthew 22.1-14 The parable of the wedding banquet

1. Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:
2. 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.

3. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.
4. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.'
5. But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business,
6. while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.
7. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.
8. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.'
9. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.'
10. Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.
11. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe,
12. and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless.
13. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'
14. For many are called, but few are chosen.

There is a passage close to this in Luke 14.16-24, while Proverbs 9.1-6 is reminiscent of it: -

Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her pillars.

She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.

She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town,

‘You that are simple, turn in here! To those without sense she says,

‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.’

To modern ears, the casual reference to slaves in vv.3, 4, 6 and 10, to seizing, mistreating and killing people who brought a wedding invitation (v.6), and then killing people and burning their city for refusing the invitation (v.7), jars. Strange also is the severe punishment of a man for not wearing a wedding garment, when he had just been called in off the street as a passer-by. (v.13)

The *Jerusalem Bible* has this to say on the text, (Note a): -

A parable with allegorical features; in this, as in the lesson it teaches, it resembles the one that precedes it. The king is God; the wedding feast is the happiness of the messianic age and the king's son the Messiah; those sent with invitations are the prophets and apostles; the invited who ignore them or do violence are Jews; those called in from the streets are the sinners and the pagans; the burning of the city is the destruction of Jerusalem. At v.11 the scene changes to that of the Last Judgment. Matthew, it seems, has combined two parables: one akin to Luke 14.16-24 and another whose concluding verses are found in vv.11ff; these verses explain that the man who accepted the invitation should have been dressed for the occasion – in other words, good works must go with faith, cf. 3.8; 5.20; 7.21f; 13.47f; 21.28f.

The two parables (22.1.-10 and 11-14) taken together point to Jews rejecting the Messiah, just as they rejected, and sometimes killed, the prophets before him. And so the kingdom is opened to others. But these also must not take things for granted but be prepared for the final judgment. Simply to be there at the wedding feast is not enough; there must be commitment. They warn, too, against constant postponement. (A wedding feast was a common image of messianic times; see John 3.28-30.)

Matthew's telling of the parable differs from Luke's, partly because he is writing for Jews whom the message concerns directly. He says that 'they made light of it,' (v.5) while the Jerusalem Bible says 'they were not interested.' The second invitation brings a mixed group of people, 'the bad and the good.' (v.10)

This leads into the second parable, or allegory, in vv.11-14. It leads up to the Last Judgment, and his particular point is that mere membership of the church is not enough; there must be works of love – the “garment”: ‘strength and dignity are her clothing.’ (Proverbs 31.25) It may be from this that there arose the (now archaic) phrase ‘clothed with the virtues.’

V.14 is, in Matthew's style, a summary which includes an exhortation. In Aramaic tradition, the word “many” is open-ended, implies no exclusion, and could equally well be translated as “all.”

Week 20

Friday

Matthew 22.34-40 The greatest commandment

34. When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,

35. and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

36. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?'
37. He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'
38. This is the greatest and first commandment.
39. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'
40. 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 12.28-31, Luke 10.25-28 and John 13.34.

This passage, in varying forms, has a degree of prominence in the Gospels which is probably without parallel. It does not contain a new teaching, but a reiteration by Jesus of what was already there in Jewish tradition, which stated: -

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6.5)

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19.18)

Unlike many other teachings, it is found not only in the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke) but also in John; (see references above.) Other New Testament writers, Paul, James and John, take it up

and repeat it, underlying its foundational character.
In Romans 13:8-10, we read: -

Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

The commandments, You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet; and any other commandment are summed up in this word, Love your neighbour as yourself.

Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

The whole law is summed up in a single commandment: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Galatians 5.14)

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law of scripture: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (James 2.8)

I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. (1 John 2.7)

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4.12)

It could be said that Jesus carried it a step further in saying, ‘I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another.’ (John 13.34) What was new about this? (1 John 2.7 had said it was not new, presumably referring to Leviticus 19.18, or its various New Testament equivalents.) What was new was the emphasis *just as I have loved you*. Jesus is saying that we should love others not simply as we love ourselves, but as Jesus loved us. How did Jesus love us? By sacrificing his life for us even to death on the cross. That sets a new standard.

What was new also was that Jesus joined the two commandments in one. He had been asked which was the greatest. In reply he gave Deuteronomy 6.5, from the *Shema*, the daily prayer of every Jew, but then went on, unasked, to add Leviticus 19.18 to it. For him, what God had joined together, no one should put asunder; the two were one. Relationships are interdependent.

He focussed on essentials, cutting through the classification of the 613 Jewish precepts into 365 proscriptions (one for every day of the year), and 248 prescriptions (one for every bone in the body, it was said), and these, in turn, subjected to further distinctions about which there was endless argumentation. His point is that they all depend – “hang” (Latin, *dependere*, to hang down) – on these two. In their living, they become one. Love is indivisible.

Matthew's Gospel repeatedly emphasizes the primacy of love: -

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'

But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect'. (5.43-48)

'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.' (7.12)

'I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' (9.13 = 12.7)

He said to them, 'Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out?

How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'

Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. (12.11-13)

'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'
(19.19)

This Gospel passage is easy to understand, demanding to fulfil.

Week 20

Saturday

Matthew 23.1-12 What Christians should not do

1. Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,
2. 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat;
3. therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.
4. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.
5. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.
6. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,
7. and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

8. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.
9. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father--the one in heaven.
10. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.
11. The greatest among you will be your servant.
12. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

There are passages similar to 23.1-12, in whole or in part, in Mark 12.38-40 and Luke 11.43-46, 20.45-47, with an echo in Romans 2.17-24.

It is possible for Christians, in reading Matthew 23, to become pharisaical towards the Pharisees, to point the finger at them in judgment or condemnation and to assume, unwittingly perhaps, that 'This doesn't apply to us. It was directed against the scribes and Pharisees, and we are not they. What a pity they're not around to hear this! They needed it!' The Pharisees are the people everyone loves to hate, universally accepted as the bad guys, two-faced hypocrites, saying one thing and doing another. But, glasshouses and all that....

The Gospels were written for everyone. It is possible for religion – creed, code, cult and community – to become not merely narcissistic but idolatrous, in which the idol it worships is itself. This is a recurring temptation from which no

generation can claim exemption. It is possible for the synagogue to become the religion of the synagogue, for the church to become the religion of the church, for the mosque to become the religion of the mosque. Each may become an enclosed system, self-referencing, self-justifying, self-validating, an end in itself instead of a means to an end. It is possible for it to become self-serving instead of God-serving or people-serving. If that happens it has truly lost direction; it will die and, in such a state, it needs to, so that a resurrection can take place and create something that will serve the purpose of religion, which is to bring people to God. If the church has lost credibility it will regain it when it loves Jesus and the Gospel more than it loves itself.

In this context, the following is stimulating: -

I am a Jew

I am a Jew, because my faith demands no abdication of the mind.

I am a Jew, because my faith demands all the devotion of my heart.

I am a Jew, because, wherever there is suffering, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew, because, whenever there is despair, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew, because the message of our faith is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew, because the promise of our faith is a universal promise.

I am a Jew, because, for the Jew, the world is not complete; people must complete it.

I am a Jew, because Judaism places humanity above nations, above even Judaism itself.

I am a Jew, because Judaism recognizes that, above humanity, which is the image of God, there is the all-embracing one God. (Adapted from the Jewish prayer-book, *Siddur Sim Shalom*.)

Could Christians truthfully substitute the words “Christian” for “Jew,” and “Christianity” for “Judaism” in the above declaration, especially, perhaps, the second last one?

Chapter 23 is a sustained blast by Jesus against the scribes and Pharisees. He takes them to task on many grounds. What is noticeable, though, is that it cuts close to the bone. As in the past, so the Christian community of today faithfully does all that Jesus here told it not to do. It is as if he had never said anything. The Pharisees are dead; pharisaism is not. It is a constant presence in the church and probably always will be – *Ecclesia reformata est, sed semper reformanda* (the church has been reformed and is always in need of reformation.)

A notable feature of Judaism is that it embraces a substantial element of self-criticism. Indeed, there were few more severe critics of Jews than the Jewish prophets. Take Jeremiah, for example: -

How dare you say, ‘We are wise, and we possess the law of the Lord?’ But look at how it has been falsified by the lying pen of the scribes! The wise shall be shamed, caught out, confounded. Look how they have rejected the word of the Lord! So what use is their wisdom to them? (8.8-9; or, similarly, against priests in 7.1-15)

Vv.1-2: Insofar as scribes and Pharisees teach what Moses taught, they are to be followed. But, as Jesus made clear elsewhere – in Matthew 5.20-48, 12.1-14, 15.1-20, 16.6, 11-12 and 19.3-9, for example - much of what they taught was such that he found fault with it.

V.3: ‘they do not practice what they preach.’ This was a long-standing complaint, as in Jeremiah 8.8-9 above, and in Romans 2.17-24: -

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector to the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob

temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” (Ezekiel 36.20)

V.4: ‘They tie up heavy burdens...’ In Luke 11.46, this applied to lawyers also. Jesus had said of himself, ‘My yoke is easy and my burden light.’ (Matthew 11.30) But it is hard to avoid the question whether Jesus himself did not lay a heavy burden on people’s shoulders when he entirely excluded divorce and re-marriage. (See Matthew 5.32; 19.9; Mark 10.11-12; Luke 16.18) Living in a loveless marriage must be the nearest thing to hell on earth.

The Catholic church tied up a heavy burden on people’s shoulders when it taught in the encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, of 25 July 1968, that ‘each and every use of the marital act [quilibet usus matrimonii] must remain open to the transmission of life.’ (n.11) For couples wishing to limit the size of their family for all sorts of good reasons, that is a next-to-impossible requirement. (It was taught as being based on natural law, and therefore applicable not just to Catholics but to all people.) Did clergy lift a finger to move the burden? What is noticeable is that, of the 100,000 or so priests who left the priesthood between the end of Vatican II in 1965 and the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005, the very great majority married and had

two children. Did they follow *Humanae Vitae* while so limiting their families?

Vv.5-7: Phylacteries and tassels were outward symbols of faith. But these, like VIP seats, special forms of dress or titles, may easily become status symbols of or claims to special position. They are steps, so to speak, on the pyramid of esteem. The verses have a familiar resonance as they correspond so closely to what actually happens in the Christian community. In Matthew 6.1-8, Jesus gave similar warnings.

Vv.8-10: These are regarded by many scholars as an addition to the original discourse. Jesus' disciples are not to be called Rabbi, Father or Teacher. Why? Because 'you have only one Master and you are all brothers' (JB), 'you have only one teacher, the Christ.' Should a disciple not call a teacher teacher, or a child call its father father? Can this teaching have been meant literally? Hardly. But at the least it is a call to reject status-seeking, even, or perhaps especially, if an attempt is made to justify that by saying that it is appropriate to the office rather than to the office-holder. The phrase 'you are all brothers' [and presumably sisters] should not be explained by explaining it away.

Mediators are meant to be a help, not a hindrance, meant to lead people to God, not to themselves. To many people, the church is a hindrance, an obstacle, or, in theological language, a scandal, not only by

reason of abuses of power, real though they are, but also because of some of its teachings. Someone wrote, 'Nothing so obscures the face of God as religion.' That statement, attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Buber and others, is one which should give any religious leader pause for thought.

To be able to see God as father (an idea which has its roots in the Hebrew Bible), and to have direct access to him is what Jesus points to here. He himself, especially in John, constantly speaks of God as his Father. Early Christians quoted not the apostles but Jesus in their writings, and yet I heard an archbishop say that he had been told off by the papal nuncio for not quoting the pope often enough in his sermons. There is something incestuous about the popes quoting from and canonizing one another, or in the church's 1917 *Code of Canon Law*, which, in its 2,414 canons, never quoted the Gospel or used the words God, Jesus or Holy Spirit!

V.11: Such a saying would have won Jesus no friends among the elite of his time and place, among groups like the Sadducees or the rabbis. (The word *rabbi* literally means *my great one* so this verse is probably a pun on that.) They wanted the servants to remain servants and for themselves to remain at the top of the pile. People like Nano Nagle, Edmund Rice and John Baptiste de la Salle, founders of teaching congregations, were viewed with suspicion by many precisely because they were educating the poor, a process which would inevitably lead to those

poor challenging their inferior status in society. It's not hard to imagine someone thinking of Jesus, 'Why can't he just leave things alone?'

In the church, regrettably, the word *service*, like *communio*, when used in the context of relations between the local churches and Rome has become a code-word for the exercise of power and control by the latter over the former. The spirit of service enables; the spirit of power and control disables.

V.12: This verse is echoed in Matthew 20.25-28: -

Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' (See also Matthew 18.4, Luke 1.52-53, 14.11 and 18.14.)

A message repeated so often must be regarded as a priority.

The entire passage, but vv.8-12 in particular, have an egalitarian character which does not rest easily with the almost obsessive hierarchism of the Catholic church. In an age when humanity is

moving, however fitfully, towards more democratic models of government, this is something we could helpfully take on board rather than react against defensively. Wilfrid J. Harrington writes,

‘.... Jesus ... envisaged a discipleship of equals. He surely did not have in mind (given his distinctive view of authority) a patriarchal model of authority, with its pattern of domination.’ (*Mark: Realistic Theologian*, Columba Press, Dublin, 1996, p.66)

Week 21

Monday

Matthew 23.13-22 Woe to Scribes and Pharisees

13. But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.

14. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance you make long prayers; therefore you will receive the greater condemnation.

15. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

16. Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but

whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.'

17. You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred?

18. And you say, 'Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.'

19. How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

20. So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it;

21. and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it;

22. and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.

There are passages parallel to this in Mark 12.38-40 and Luke 11.39-48, 52.

These are not curses, wishing God's anger on people. They are statements that God's anger is already there, and regretting the fact. They point to dangers that are real, especially in religions that set much store by punctilious adherence to observances and rules. It is easy to be scrupulous about the details and the minutiae, while missing the essentials. This can happen to anyone in any age of history, outside of religious circles as well as in them. How readily secular society sets great store on adherence to social mores and man-made conventions that change readily and yet may be

given higher priority than some of the basics such as respect for humanity!

The text re-echoes appeals for sincerity in worship, and an end to the abuse of religion, especially by its leaders, as previously expressed in, for example, Malachi 2.7-9: -

For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.

But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts,

and so I have made you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction.

And again, ‘How can you say, “We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us,” when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie?’ (Jeremiah 8.8)

There are seven ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!’ in the passage. Seven is a significant number in many religious traditions, especially perhaps in the Judaeo-Christian. It is a symbol of completeness. So, in the New Testament, there are seven loaves leaving behind seven baskets of fragments (Matthew 15.34, 37); the expelled

demon brings back seven worse than itself (Matthew 12.45); seven demons were expelled from Mary Magdalen; and, in Matthew 18.21-22, one should forgive even in multiples of seven, an unlimited number. In Acts 6.3, seven men are chosen to assist the twelve in Jerusalem. The book of Revelation has numerous uses of seven: churches in 1.4, lamps in 1.13, stars in 1.16, spirits in 4.5, seals in 5.1, trumpets in 8.2, heads in 12.3, and plagues in 15.1. The presentation of these seven blasts in a single diatribe suggests careful editorial work by Matthew.

They express powerfully the anger and frustration of Jesus at the persistence of resistance to his message. His hearers appear either unable or unwilling to learn. They had a hardened carapace of complacency which had to be broken through before they would be ready to listen. It is commonly the case that it is only the experience of suffering that breaks down such resistance. It strips away false masks and forces people to come face-to-face with the truth about themselves that we are all naked under our clothes.

Week 21

Tuesday

Matthew 23.23-26 More woes

23. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice

and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

24. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

25. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

26. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

Jesus takes the scribes and Pharisees to task for being scrupulous about the trivia of religion, while neglecting its essentials. People were expected to pay a tax to the Temple of a tithe (a tenth) of the corn, wine and oil they grew, but this had been extended to cover all crops.

Vv.23-24: These verses are a summary of the entire passage from v.13 to v.30. For Jesus, the law of love is primary, and every religious rule must be subordinated to it; the Pharisees' rulings lost sight of that. Their priorities were wrong, their standards mistaken. They chose self-righteousness over confession of sin. It is only the person who is aware of having been forgiven that can respond to God with love.

Vv.25-26: The Pharisees are people that everyone loves to hate, but for the most part they weren't hypocrites as Jesus describes them here, though some individuals among them surely were. Mostly

they were mostly honest, sincere people who believed it was possible for a person to win righteousness in the sight of God by conscientious observance of the Torah, in all its details – but there were so many of those that their fulfilment became impossible. They seemed not to understand that growth in faith is always a gift, never an achievement. There is a constant risk of believers failing to see the wood for the trees, becoming self-righteous, losing a sense of priorities, and becoming censorious of those whom they deem not to have made the grade. With such a frame of mind, they could never be receptive to Jesus' message. Perhaps it was only a powerful, angry denunciation such as that in Matthew 23 that could break through their insulation and open them to receptiveness. Jesus could have washed his hands of them and walked away, leaving them to the false security of their closed minds, but instead he chose to try to shake them out of it, and get them to lift up their heads and look at the horizon. He failed.

There are Christians of good-will and sincerity who are like Pharisees in one respect, that is, in their view of what it means to be a faithful follower of God. One hears people speak of “the credit and debit side of the ledger” and express the hope that the first will outweigh the second, or they see the Christian life as a moral obstacle course, so many hurdles they have to clear if they are to attain eternal life. And the punishment for failure is hell. For them, if you clear the jumps, you're OK, and, if you don't, you're not.

The other side of that coin is that they may feel that, if they do live a moral life, then they have a claim on God, and an entitlement to heaven. They may become like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son: -

Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" (Luke 15.29-30)

Jesus thinks outside the box and leaves aside the ledger and the hurdles. He frees people from those burdens, saying, in effect, 'Focus on the essentials - justice, mercy and faith – and trust in God.' Our task is simple: it is to surrender, in trust, to God who is always generous in giving.

Week 21

Wednesday

Matthew 23.27-32 Killing the prophets

27. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.

28. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

29. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous,

30. and you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'

31. Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets.

32. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors.

Vv.27-28: Religious people (and non-religious, too) give high priority to appearances, to wanting to look well, to be well thought of, to not wanting to be out of place. 'What would people think?' – is a question that has beaten many people into tame conformity and compliance when questions were called for. When we reflect on the scandals in Irish life in the past, we know that a great many more people were aware of what was going on than are now prepared to admit it, and fewer still were prepared to speak up. For the sake of a quiet life, perhaps, or because of lack of imagination which disabled their capacity to think of a better alternative, they just trundled along in the accepted groove, looking neither left nor right. The priority given to appearances may silence the search for truth and justice, and that applies to the present no less than to the past.

Vv.29-31: Many of the prophets of the past had been killed. So, not long before, had John the Baptist (Matthew 14.1-12), and Jesus had already spoken of his own coming fate. (Matthew 16.21; 17.22-23; 20.17-19) The great prophets of the past came to be recognized as such and spoken of with honour only after their death - and then people built monuments in their honour.

It is a little like the men of 1916: as they were being led to captivity in Britain following the collapse of the Rising, crowds of Dubliners on the streets called to British soldiers escorting them, shouting, 'Bayonet the bastards!' 'Bayonet the bastards!' But, once the British executed some of them, opinion turned and the prisoners became heroes. (Source: Ernest Blythe, Minister for Finance in William Cosgrave's first government in 1922, speaking at UCC in 1966)

The late Jim Mitchell TD, who headed the Dáil Public Accounts Committee, which, promptly and at little cost, uncovered corruption among public officials, was voted out of office in the general election of 2002, while, in the same constituency, people gave more votes to a man who had been arrested for involvement in an attempted kidnapping. If people there had been asked why they did so, many would likely have replied that they didn't know. Not uncommonly, people sleep-walk or day-dream their way through life.

People sometimes do not think, they go with the flow without asking questions, or they are afraid of not conforming, or they don't want to be unpopular, etc. There are many reasons why people just go along to get along.

And when the wind turns and blows in the other direction, people go with it, running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. So the scribes and Pharisees honoured the prophets whom their ancestors killed, each generation of them thinking they were right and congratulating themselves on what they had done.

Public opinion is fickle: the people who called 'Hosanna!' in honour of Jesus on Palm Sunday (John 12.13), shouted, 'Crucify him!' on the following Friday (Matthew 27.22). Jesus lost a referendum to Barabbas – who was a murderer! (Matthew 27.17-23) He must have been well aware from the early days of his ministry of the likely outcome of his mission.

V.32: He appears to throw down the gauntlet to his hearers, challenging them to continue the tradition of their ancestors who killed the prophets by killing him also.

In these passages from Matthew 23, as elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus is trying to get people to wake up and think, to look beyond going with the flow, to

search for the truth and to stand for what was right. It is a lonely task and he did not succeed in it.

Week 21

Thursday

Matthew 24.42-51 Be ready for the Day

42. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

43. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

44. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

45. Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time?

46. Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives.

47. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions.

48. But if that wicked slave says to himself, 'My master is delayed,'

49. and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards,

50. the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know.

51. He will cut him off and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

There are passages broadly similar to the above in Mark 13.35-37 and Luke 12.39-40.

‘Keep awake’ (v.42), ‘stay awake’ (v.43), ‘be ready’ (v.44) – this is Jesus’ call to his disciples in view of the coming ‘day of the Lord.’

What is this ‘day of the Lord’? It may refer to: -

- the day of the individual’s death: ‘Stay awake for you do not know either the day or the hour’ (Matthew 25.13); and ‘If you do not wake up, I shall come to you like a thief, without telling you at what hour to expect me.’ (Revelation 3.3)
- a unique moment of crisis in a person’s life, a *kairos* moment, as when Jesus said of himself, ‘Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be betrayed into the hands of sinners.’ (Matthew 26.45)
- the end of time: ‘The Day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done in it will be disclosed.’ (2 Peter 3.10)

Sometimes these ideas overlap in the texts. Common to many of them is the idea that the Day will come suddenly, without forewarning.

The Day is clearly spoken of as a day of judgment, when each one's work will become visible. (1 Corinthians 3.13; 1 Thessalonians 5.2-11, etc.)

Perhaps, most of all, it is the day when Jesus returns in triumph to bring God's Reign to completion. It was, therefore, a message of hope, perhaps all the more necessary for a community facing challenges and threats. It is also, implicitly, a warning against placing hope in false Messiahs who promise a so-called "Final Solution" to this or that question; it is God alone who will bring it about.

Belief in the Parousia (Greek, presence, arrival) of Jesus is clearly indicated throughout the New Testament. '[That] the impression of the proximity of the Parousia...was common in the early Church seems to admit no doubt.' (See *Parousia* in John L. McKenzie) Examples in Matthew are: 'I tell you solemnly, you will not have gone the round of the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes' (10.23), and 'I tell you solemnly, there are some of these standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming with his Kingdom.' (16.28) (Some scholars see those latter texts as a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem which took place in 70 AD.)

The parable of the servant in vv.45-51 may be seen as a call to disciples to faithful service, while awaiting the Day of the Lord – whenever it comes.

Week 21

Friday

Matthew 25.1-13 Another wake-up call

1. Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.
2. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.
3. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them;
4. but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.
5. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.
6. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'
7. Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.
8. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'
9. But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.'
10. And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.
11. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.'

12. But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'

13. Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

This parable is similar to Luke 12.35-38.

The punch-line is in the final verse; it's what the parable is about. It is the same message of vigilance, of keeping oneself awake and aware, or, negatively, of not day-dreaming or sleep-walking one's way through life. The two groups of women faced the same challenge with the same resources; but one was vigilant, the other not. When the bridegroom, that is, the Messiah, comes, some are ready, the others not. (In Jewish tradition, the analogy of Messianic times to a marriage-feast was common.)

The parable has allegorical overtones. The cry of the foolish bridesmaids, 'Lord, Lord' in v.11 recalls Jesus' warning that, 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.' (Matthew 7.21) There is a toughness and rigour to the parable which we would rather talk our way around.

The presence, or coming, of Christ implied in the parable relates to the present as well as to the future. Christ is present in the here and now: -

- 'where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' (Matthew 18.20);
- in his Word, for it is he who speaks when the scriptures are read – 'This is the word of the Lord';
- in the community of faith: 'he who hears you, hears me.'
- in an informed and sincere conscience;
- in the world: 'I am with you always, even to the end of time.' (Matthew 28.20)
- in creation: 'through the beauty and grandeur of creation, we contemplate its Author.' (Wisdom 13.5)
- in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. 'In the sacrifice of the Eucharist he is present both in the person of the minister... and above all under the species of the Eucharist. For in this sacrament Christ is present in a unique way, whole and entire, God and man, substantially and permanently. This presence of Christ under the species is called "real," not in an exclusive sense, as if the other kinds of presence were not real, but *par excellence*.' (Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery, *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, 25 May 1967, Chapter 1, E)
- in the poor: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25.40)

But it takes the eyes of faith to be aware of these presences of Christ: -

Earth's crammed with heaven
and every common bush afire with God:
but only he who sees takes off his shoes.

The rest sit around...

and pluck blackberries.

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1806-1861,
"Aurora Leigh", Book VII, Browning: Poetical Works)

Sometimes we think of religion as a soother, that it is about making us feel good, or providing comfort and consolation. But the Gospel is often challenging and discomfiting. In this parable, Jesus invites us to take responsibility for ourselves, to be awake and aware, alive and alert. Its message is: 'Get your act together,' or, even more bluntly and briefly: 'Wake up.'

We may feel that the five sensible bridesmaids were a bit mean. But there are some things others cannot do for us. No one can see something on our behalf; no one can understand something for us, or in our name. We either see and understand, or we don't; and if we don't, maybe it's because we don't look.

The gospel is about choice, decision, commitment; it is against putting things on the long finger, or treating life as a series of experiments, forever

waiting to see how things work out, but without committing ourselves.

Rights and responsibilities are reciprocal, two sides of one coin. If we claim rights, we have to accept the responsibilities that go with them. With power comes responsibility. We cannot on the one hand claim power or authority, and then, on the other, disclaim responsibility if we mess things up.

The parable is a tough one: it is about facing responsibility. One group acted irresponsibly and negligently, and then expected others to provide a safety net for them. They knew what they should have done, but postponed it until it was too late.

V.12: The punch-line is about judgment at the end of our life.

Week 21

Saturday

Matthew 25.14-30 The parable of the talents

14. For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them;

15. to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

16. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents.

17. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents.

18. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

19. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

20. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.'

21. His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

22. And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.'

23. His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

24. Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed;

25. so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

26. But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?’

27. Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.

28. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

29. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

30. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

There are passages similar to this elsewhere in the Gospels, e.g., Luke 19.12-27.

This story is a good illustration of the idea that a parable intends to make one point, not several, and that it is necessary to find out what that one point is in order to interpret it with the mind of the evangelist rather than intrude the reader’s subjective perspectives.

Like the previous parable of the ten bridesmaids, it is a parable of the kingdom, of what things would be like if God’s will were done on earth as it is in heaven.

The parable is not teaching about distributive justice. Its point is different: to whom would you

rather give a present – someone who used it and enjoyed it, or someone who put it away safely and allowed it to go unused? The answer is obvious. Disciples have been given talents by God; they are expected to use them and will be held accountable for their use or non-use of them. The master gave the servants talents, *‘each according to his ability.’* (v.15) A point similar to this parable is made in Matthew 13.12: ‘For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.’ This is in keeping with Luke 16.10 where Jesus says: ‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.’ Paul, too, writes on a similar note: ‘all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.’ (2 Corinthians 5.10) And the parable is analogous to the point Matthew makes in the parable of the steward in 24.45-51.

V.14 is reminiscent of Mark 13.34: ‘It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.’

Vv. 26-30 pour scorn on the ‘wicked and lazy slave.’ Matthew seems to feel contempt for him, perhaps all the more so as, in vv.24-25, he had sought to blame the master for his failings. Fear is the enemy of faith.

Talents given are expected to be developed and used, and in the service of others. We will be held accountable by God for our use of them. That seems to be the core message. The master's anger at the third servant's timidity, lack of imagination, and unwillingness to take risks is a challenge to that view of prudence which reduces it to caution. Prudence is a guide, not a substitute, for action, nor is it an excuse for inaction. It is better to try, and fail, than not to try for fear of failing.

Week 22

Monday

Luke 4.16-30 Jesus rejected at Nazareth

16. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,

17. and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: -

18. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

19. to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

20. And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

21. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

22. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph's son?’

23. He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” And you will say, “Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”’

24. And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.

25. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land;

26. yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

27. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’

28. When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

29. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

30. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

There are passages parallel to vv.14-15 in Matthew 4.17 and Mark 1.14-15, and to vv.16-23 in Matthew 13.54-58 and Mark 6.1-6.

Vv.14-15: The Spirit is the starting point of Jesus' public life which begins in Galilee. He was not "doing his own thing," but going where God led him. In other places in the Gospel, he is 'led' by the Spirit. The evidence of this latter is in his healing and teaching ministry. He taught in the synagogues, which was normal practice, but in time went beyond it.

His fame spread; he became popular, and people began to speak well of him. With the benefit of hindsight, it is hard not to feel, 'How long will the good times last?' From what follows immediately, it seems not very long. Rejection came from where one might least have expected it - his own.

Vv.16-19: Jesus was brought up in Nazareth, but moved to Capernaum, perhaps after his baptism, which seems to have been a decisive turning-point for him that resulted in a clearer sense of his mission. The two towns are not more than 30 km. apart, with Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee (also known as Lake Tiberias or Lake Gennesareth), and Nazareth to its south west. Jesus went to the synagogue, 'as was his custom.' It was a matter of custom, not of obligation binding under pain of sin; that was good.

From Isaiah 61.1-2, he read what might be called the mission statement of a servant of God. It is about freeing people from what weighed them down: poverty, captivity, blindness and oppression. The interpretation of these need not be limited to the literal; they are works associated with the Messiah. 'Being saved' means being delivered from whatever diminishes a person's humanity, especially sin.

Jesus was literate. Probably a higher proportion of Jewish men was literate than of most of the surrounding peoples. With the Torah occupying such a central position in Jewish life, this is not surprising.

Vv.20-21: Having read the text in Hebrew, Jesus probably gave an Aramaic version of it, as classical Hebrew was no longer understood by the great majority of the people, who spoke Aramaic as their day-to-day vernacular. (Aramaic is still spoken today in parts of Syria, such as Maalula.) Then he sat down and the eyes of the people looked on him expectantly.

His statement, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,' does not necessarily imply a claim to be the Messiah, but implies that he makes the mission statement his own; he puts himself in the Messianic tradition. The Hebrew word *Mashiach* (English, Messiah) is translated into Greek as *Christos*, a title meaning anointed. The word carried

varying connotations for Jews. It included the idea of a future kingdom of Israel which would be God's kingdom; this became especially prominent with the establishment of the monarchy. Among post-exilic writers, the future Messiah was seen as a returning King David. But Zechariah scales down this grandiosity with a different image: -

Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy,
O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall
come to you; a just saviour is he, meek, and
riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.
[See Matthew 21.1-6; Mark 11.2-6 and Luke
19.30-34]

He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim, and
the horse from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow
shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace
to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to
sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.
(9.9-10)

The ambiguity around the meaning of the term with its heavy political overtones explains Jesus' reticence in claiming the title for himself and his insistence on silence from those he healed.

Later, when he was asked by the disciples of John the Baptist, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (Luke 7.20), his answer drew on Isaiah: -

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offence at me. (Luke 7.22-23, drawing on Isaiah 35.5-6; 26.19 and 61.1-2)

These are the signs that the Kingdom of God is present.

V.22: 'All... were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.' Whether this refers to this particular occasion or to others is not clear. People were surprised that a local man, one whom they knew as the son of Joseph, spoke so well. There is something very human about this: an expert is someone from far away carrying a briefcase, while a local person is never expected to be much good. The unfamiliar is exotic; the familiar is routine. In Ireland, Our Lady of Knock isn't half as good as Our Lady of Lourdes or of Fatima!

Vv.23-27: Jesus' response to this mixture of adulation and - was it resentment or envy? - is strange. It seems provocative, as if he set out to annoy them. He seems dismissive of their praise, as if to say that he never expected them to accept him. Is there here a throwback to his move from Nazareth to Capernaum? Did something happen in Nazareth that caused him to move and which left a lasting mark?

Vv.25-30: these verses are seen by some scripture scholars as coming from a later period, although inserted at this stage. They hold that they are from the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and are a way of saying that he was rejected by his own people both at the beginning and end of his ministry, leaving the apostles free to turn to the Gentiles.

It is in keeping with Luke's universalist outlook that the catalyst for the rejection of Jesus by his own people was his reference to God's works of power among the Gentiles. In v.26, he refers to a widow who lived at Sidon in Lebanon; her story is described in 1 Kings 17.7-24. In v.27, he refers to Naaman, a Syrian, his people then, as now, enemies of Israel; his story is in 2 Kings 5.1-19. Both were Gentiles.

Jesus is saying that God is God, not only of Jews, but of Gentiles, too. He is calling on his people to look beyond the local, but they were locked into it, bound by narrow loyalties. Try to open people's minds, and you may find that they want to keep them closed. The poet, T. S. Eliot wrote, 'Humankind cannot bear much reality.' (Burnt Norton, I, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber and Faber, London, 1974, p.190) Challenge people's sense of identity and you may expect a reaction, even a violent one. There is a Japanese saying, 'The nail that stands out is the one that feels the hammer.'

The message from the people of Nazareth was: 'Conform, or be rejected.'

It is not difficult to see parallels to that parochialism today. People make themselves prisoners of their own propaganda, coming to believe their clichés, slogans and catch-phrases. Loyalty to "our" religion, tradition, culture, language, ideology, sexual orientation, politics, social class, educational background, race, flag, sports team etc. may be idolatrous - closed, sectarian, petty and excluding.

The reaction to Jesus was furious. Tangle with people's sense of their identity, no matter how childish its basis may be, and it often is, and they react with anger. You have questioned their sense of themselves. Irrational it often is, but it is there. Try to wake people up, to get them to look to broader horizons, and they may see you as a traitor to the cause and respond accordingly.

V.29: The details of this story pose a problem, a minor one. While Nazareth is hilly, there is no cliff there. But a lot may happen in two thousand years: - earthquakes, landslides, soil erosion, cultivation, building, demolition and re-building.

V.30: Everything about Jesus suggests a powerful personality; he was self-possessed in all circumstances. His many encounters with opponents show a man who was strong-minded, not open to

manipulation, whether by deceit, flattery, or threat. He was his own master – and totally a servant of God.

Week 22

Tuesday

Luke 4.31-37 Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit

31. He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbath.

32. They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority.

33. In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice,

34. ‘Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’

35. But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ When the demon had thrown him down before them, he came out of him without having done him any harm.

36. They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, ‘What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!’

37. And a report about him began to reach every place in the region.

There is a passage similar to this in Mark 1.21-28.

V.32: Most teachers and preachers are dealers in second-hand goods. We pass on what we have learned from others. There is nothing wrong with that; we can't all be original, at least not very often. Now and then, we "discover" something, that is to say, "discover" it in terms of our previous experience, so that, although it may not be new to others, it is new to us and has a power and a freshness that gives what we say about it an authority lacking at other times, because it has struck a chord within us. It resonates with our experience. Those are peak experiences, rare occasions - and all the more precious for that.

Jesus was an original thinker. He was aware of what had been said by the prophets of the past, but he wasn't bound by them. Much of what he said went against the grain of what is called "common sense," such as, 'Hit back if you're hit.' (On one occasion, the late Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, said, 'If anyone hit me on the cheek, I'd break his jaw.') And William Shakespeare said, in *Hamlet* (1.3), 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be, for loan oft loses both itself and friend', which is "common sense." But Jesus said,

If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting

nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. (Luke 6.34-35)

That goes against the grain of conventional wisdom, but it has the authority of (difficult) truth. Jesus was a man who asked the question ‘Why?’ and didn’t stop at the first answer, but went on to ask it again and again until he found root causes. He saw things in simplicity; he went to the heart of the matter in a way that few thinkers have done. That enabled him to speak ‘with authority.’ He was the author of his thoughts. This point is reiterated in Matthew 7.28-29 and Mark 1.22.

Vv.33-34: The man shouts at Jesus, but ambiguously: ‘Let *us* alone! What have you to do with *us*, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy *us*? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ Three plurals – ‘us’- become an ‘I.’ Is this a slip of the scribal pen, or something more? Is it to suggest that Satan is living up to his reputation as the father of lies, reluctant to disclose anything about himself, hiding behind a fog of equivocation?

As in Mark’s Gospel particularly, the evil spirits are the first to recognize who Jesus is. The title ‘Holy One’ was usually applied only to God himself.

V.35: Jesus, completely in control of the situation, simply gives command, first to silence, and then to

leave the man unharmed, despite having thrown him down.

Vv.36-37: Luke notes the reaction of the crowd at the scene and then how news of the event spread to ‘every place.’ The point that people seize upon seems to be especially that Jesus had the power to give effect to his teaching, which was, in many cases, not substantially different from that of Jewish tradition before him.

Week 22

Wednesday

Luke 4.38-44 Jesus heals and teaches

38. After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her.

39. Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them.

40. As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them.

41. Demons also came out of many, shouting, ‘You are the Son of God!’ But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

42. At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and

when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them.

43. But he said to them, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.'

44. So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea.

There are passages parallel to vv.38-41 in Matthew 8.14-17 and Mark 1.29-34, and to vv.42-44 in Matthew 4.23-25 and Mark 1.35-39.

These are the early days of Jesus' public ministry, and the story is one of hope, happiness, and joyful expectation on the part of the people.

V.38: Jesus, at this stage, teaches in the synagogue. Later on, perhaps because of the size of the crowds, he goes out into public areas. At some point, though, the incipient hostility of synagogue authorities probably also begins to push him in the same direction.

Luke here introduces Simon abruptly; he has not been mentioned before. He is Jesus' host, but first asks him to help his ill mother-in-law.

V.39: Jesus 'rebuked' the fever; it is spoken of almost as a personal entity being scolded for bad behaviour. In Luke 13.11, we read of a woman 'with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.' And, in 13.16, Jesus describes her as someone

‘whom Satan bound for eighteen long years.’ Was this something psychosomatic, or is it a semantic matter, simply a mode of expression peculiar to one time, place or culture?

Jesus’ action seems effortless; he simply does it: ‘it left her.’ Her generous response is to think first, not of herself, but of her guests. She prepares food. She might have been tired after her fever, but she is not going to be deficient in her duty of hospitality. Women are like that.

V.40: The news has got around and, in a place where medical services were, for practical purposes, non-existent, people recognize an opportunity and want to make the most of it. Who could blame them, even if, for Jesus, it might have been tiring? No one could expect them to give his need for rest priority over the pressing and possibly painful needs of themselves, their family and friends.

V.41: The possessed, or insane, recognize him for what he is and shout it out aloud. They have no hidden agenda or inhibitions; political correctness or the dictates of social convention means nothing to them. In Zambia, when I was there, I noticed that mentally ill people were often the most fluent speakers of English and would sometimes show remarkable insight, such as the man who used to shout aloud, ‘The man who brought money to Africa brought poverty to Africa!’ He had a point.

Healing, exorcising and teaching are three forms of Jesus' service to people at this time. He stands and acts in the tradition of the prophets, not that of priest or king.

V.42: Jesus often felt the need to be alone, for peace and quiet, for time and space to rest and reflect, perhaps to be able to process what had happened and try to discern what lay ahead.

He did not get the chance. People went looking for him, found him, and wanted him to stay. This must have been encouraging for him, even if it was tiring; there was here none of the carping negativity and fault-finding that was to develop later.

V.43: But he would not be bound by or held captive to the wishes of any group; there were others who needed him as much, and he felt obliged to serve them, too.

This is Luke's first mention of the kingdom of God. He points out that Jesus says, 'I was sent for this purpose.' For Jesus, it is always what God the Father wants that counts, not his own will.

V.44: Some manuscripts say 'in the synagogues of Judea' while others say 'of Galilee.' It hardly matters; sometimes "Judea" was short-hand for the whole land of Israel. (See Luke 7.17)

Week 22

Thursday

Luke 5. 1-11 Jesus calls his first disciples

1. Once, while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,
2. he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.
3. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.
4. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.'
5. Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.'
6. When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.
7. So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.
8. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'
9. For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken;
10. and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus

said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’

11. When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 4.18-22 and Mark 1.16-20.

Vv.1-2: Why does Luke bother with geographical and practical details? Partly, it is probably because, as a good story-teller, he knows the value of setting a scene. But there is another element: throughout Luke, the Lake of Gennesaret, (also called the Sea of Galilee or Lake Tiberias) is where Jesus manifests himself significantly.

V.3: Sound travels well over water. Maybe Jesus recognized this, and used it so that his voice would carry to a large crowd. This passage is like Mark 4.1-2: -

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.

He began to teach them...

Vv.4-6: If the fishermen had caught nothing at night, their chances of catching anything during the day were slim. The message might be: do what Jesus tells you and results will follow, even if the odds,

humanly speaking, are against it. Something similar is found in John 21.3-6: -

Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.'

He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.

Vv.6-7: Jesus does things in abundance. He doesn't measure out God's gifts with a teaspoon. Generosity in giving is a feature of all his activity. This is echoed in the abundance of gifts in nature and in human talent. A single plant may produce enough seed to produce thousands more of its kind, and human beings have immensely more talents than most of us ever become aware of and brain capacity than we ever use.

V.8: The name Simon is used four times in this passage, until Luke, probably anticipating later developments (see 6.14), in this verse calls him Simon Peter.

Peter was a humble man. His reaction to the unexpectedly, even miraculously, large catch of fish, was to say, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ It is a not uncommon response in analogous situations.

Vv.9-10: Jesus had a sense of humour, Jewish humour. His play on words is clearer in Mark 1.16-17 (JB): - ‘... they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men”.’ It is not as clear to us in this text, but it may have been to Jesus’ Aramaic-speaking hearers.

V.11: this suggests an instantaneous response. Was it really as quick as that? They were married men, perhaps with families. Could they – should they – just walk away from them? Jesus called his first disciples on that day, beginning by showing them something of the abundance of power-for-good that they could expect to witness. In Peter’s case, if Luke’s order is chronological, he had already seen Jesus heal his mother-in-law in 4.38-39, which might explain why he addresses him as ‘Master.’ (v.5)

‘They left everything and followed him.’ This, for Luke, is part of being a disciple. It recurs in 5.28 at the call of Levi, with the rich young man in 18.22, and elsewhere.

Week 22, Friday

Luke 5.33-39 A question about fasting

33. Then they said to him, ‘John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.’

34. Jesus said to them, ‘You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?’

35. The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.’

36. He also told them a parable: ‘No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old.’

37. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed.

38. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.

39. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, “The old is good”!’

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 9.14-17 and Mark 2.18-22.

These are separate pieces drawn together by Luke as also in Matthew and Mark. Were they all spoken together by Jesus as the texts suggest? It seems unlikely, as they deal with different subjects: fasting in vv.33-35, and the renewal or replacement of the

old in vv.36-39. And yet there is a link between the two.

Vv.33-35: Fasting was seen by the Pharisees as a badge of merit, an accomplishment, something a person could be proud of: 'I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all my income.' (Luke 18.12) They wanted to know why Jesus' disciples did not do it, pointing to the fact that John the Baptist's did as well as the Pharisees. Jesus defended them by reference to the theme of the Messianic banquet. He was the Messiah; his presence was cause for celebration, not fasting, just as at a wedding feast no one fasts. But when his death comes – 'when the bridegroom will be taken away from them' (v.35) – then will come the time for fasting. In Jewish tradition, the analogy of Messianic times to a marriage-feast was common. In John 3.29, John the Baptist spoke of Jesus as the bridegroom. Luke taps into the same theme in 12.35-36: -

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;
be like those who are waiting for their master to
return from the wedding banquet, so that they
may open the door for him as soon as he comes
and knocks.

Jesus is saying that, with him, something new has come into being and the old presuppositions no longer apply. The Pharisees should not try to interpret him, his actions and teaching in the light of

received tradition, because things were being re-built on a new foundation.

Vv.36-38: Jesus offers two simple analogies to illustrate his point that there are times - and his coming is such a time - when a break with the past is necessary, when continuity is disrupted and something new is brought about. Sometimes the old is simply redundant, has outlived its usefulness and should be let go. To attempt to integrate the old and the new may destroy both of them.

V.39: Only Luke has this verse. On the face of it, its message would seem to contradict the preceding, as it gives preference to the old over the new. But the essential point of discontinuity, of making a choice between one and the other, remains. Or is that Jesus' hearers preferred a safe, predictable, controllable religion of observances and rules over one of relationships? Were they saying, 'Gimme that old time religion; it's good enough for me'? Or could it be that a copyist, shocked by the radicalness of what Jesus said, decided to correct his exuberance and bring him back to orthodoxy? People want to tame and domesticate Jesus and draw the teeth of the Gospel, making it toothless, with no bite. It happens: people try to "explain" Jesus by explaining him away.

Here, as elsewhere in his Gospel, Luke, like the other three evangelists, brings the reader to ask, 'Who is Jesus? What is his mission?' The story is

meant to suggest that Jesus is not just another rabbi, nor even another Old Testament prophet. To understand him one needs to think outside the box, to make a leap beyond the predictable and the expected, to stretch the imagination. Jesus is the Messiah.

Week 22

Saturday

Luke 6.1-5 A question about Sabbath observance

1. One Sabbath, while Jesus was going through the grain-fields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them.
2. But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’
3. Jesus answered, ‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?’
4. He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?’
5. Then he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.’

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 12.1-8 and Mark 2.23-28.

This is a question about the Sabbath, but, more fundamentally, a question about Jesus.

V.1: The Sabbath had become the touchstone of Jewish orthopraxy, and there was voluminous commentary on any and every aspect of it. A Jew who did not observe the sabbath could hardly be considered a Jew at all. To pick and eat in passing some ears of grain or other fruit was not considered stealing. The point at issue was not theft, but the obligation of rest. The issue is a live one for Jews, even today. In recent years, in a suburb of Jerusalem populated largely by orthodox Jews, an ambulance responding to an emergency call was stoned because it was doing so on the sabbath.

The word Sabbath come from a Hebrew word meaning *rest* or *cease*. It was very beneficial to have a day of rest which was recognized by everyone, and this applied all the more in a society based on slavery. This carried over into Christian teaching and was extended to holy days, which, in time, came to be called holidays. During medieval times, apart from Sundays, the number of holy days, local, regional or international, was such that they amounted to about eight weeks of rest during the year. (See Hutton Webster, *Early European History*, D. C. Heath, London, 1924, p.435)

V.2: The commandment was ‘Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.’ (Exodus 20.8; Deuteronomy 5.12) This was explained more fully: -

The Lord said to Moses,

‘You must also tell the Israelites: Take care to keep my sabbaths, for that is to be the token between you and me throughout the generations, to show that it is I, the Lord, who make you holy.

Therefore, you must keep the sabbath as something sacred. Whoever desecrates it shall be put to death. If anyone does work on that day, he must be rooted out of his people.

Six days there are for doing work, but the seventh day is the sabbath of complete rest, sacred to the Lord. Anyone who does work on the sabbath day shall be put to death.

So shall the Israelites observe the sabbath, keeping it throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant.

Between me and the Israelites it is to be an everlasting token; for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, but on the seventh day he rested at his ease.’

When the Lord had finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the commandments, the stone tablets inscribed by God's own finger. (Exodus 31.12-17)

For the Pharisees, the point was that the disciples had rubbed the heads of grain in their hands; this was considered to be reaping, and therefore work. The Pharisees could have quoted chapter and verse of the commentaries to explain why it broke the Sabbath prohibition on work. They listed thirty-nine different types of work which infringed this

prohibition. One commentary – though not of the main stream - even went so far as to declare the collection of firewood on the Sabbath to be a capital offence. But some Catholic teaching of the past about “servile work” was fiddly and fussy, sometimes leading to anxiety and scrupulosity.

Vv.3-4: In reply, Jesus referred to an incident recounted in 1 Samuel 21.3-6, where David said to the priest Ahimelech: -

‘Now, then, what have you at hand? Give me five loaves of bread or whatever is here.’

The priest answered David, ‘I have no ordinary bread at hand, only holy bread – provided that the young men have kept themselves from women.’

David answered the priest, ‘Indeed women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition...’

So the priest gave him the holy bread; for there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence...’

The bread of the Presence was supposed to be eaten only by priests, but here, in a case of necessity (or fear, perhaps?), was given to David and his soldiers. The point Jesus makes is that human need has priority over religious observance. Not every teaching carries the same weight; there is a hierarchy of value and human need is at the summit.

V.5: ‘The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.’ This phrase, included by both Matthew and Mark, would have astounded Jesus’ hearers. No teacher of his time would have dared say such a thing about himself. If the immediately preceding passage (5.33-39) had suggested that Jesus was the Messiah, this goes further. God was Lord of the Sabbath. So who was Jesus (whose preferred self-designation was *Son of Man*) claiming to be?

This was to bring problems: -

For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. (John 5.18; see also Matthew 12.14; Mark 3.6; Luke 6.11 and John 5.16)

Week 23

Monday

Luke 6.6-11 Healing a man with a withered hand

6. On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered.

7. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him.

8. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come and stand here.’ He got up and stood there.
9. Then Jesus said to them, ‘I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?’
10. After looking around at all of them, he said to him, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He did so, and his hand was restored.
11. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 12.9-14 and Mark 3.1-6, and analogous stories in Luke 13.10-17 and 14.1-6.

V.6: Once again, the Sabbath provides the setting for an issue being made out of what should have been a non-issue. Perhaps for the scribes and Pharisees the issue was authority: who gave Jesus the authority to do things on the Sabbath which their interpretation forbade? Who does he think he is?

V.7: It is difficult not to feel a sense of sadness on reading this passage. It is an example of how religion – any religion - can become inward-looking and self-serving, can come to see itself as an end in itself instead of a means to an end, as having the final word rather than being limited and provisional. Its representatives look to see if Jesus will heal someone, not so that all could join in celebrating his

recovery, but so that they could use the healing as a weapon to use against Jesus. How blind and stupid they had become! How they had turned the purpose of God upside down!

V.8: It was not difficult for Jesus to know what they were thinking. (The phrase recurs in Luke 11.17) He had already had experience of how their attitude towards him had changed from initial curiosity to querulous niggling, and then to hardened opposition: see Luke 5.21; 5.30; 5.33 and 6.2.

V.9: When Jesus challenges them, he appears to wait for a response, but there was none. They play dumb and make no reply. They are going to sit on the fence and avoid committing themselves. The question should have been easy enough for anyone to answer, and yet they avoid it, maybe thinking they were clever in doing so. They seem indifferent as to the outcome for the man with the withered hand. They would happily use him, if they could, as a stick to beat Jesus with, while not lifting a finger to help him. They had lost sight of priorities: the person should come first. Indeed, a good test of anyone's attitude towards God is their attitude towards the person. If you do what's right by the person, then, by God, you're not far wrong.

A noticeable difference between Luke's account and Mark's is that Mark says that Jesus at this point was 'grieved at their hardness of heart.' (3.5) Luke plays down emotions in Jesus, perhaps in case that

might reduce his appeal to a Roman readership who liked their heroes to be dispassionate.

V.10: Jesus healed the man; to him, the person mattered. There is no description of how he did it, just the simple statement, ‘his hand was restored.’ That was enough.

V.11: The reaction of the scribes and Pharisees was small-minded, to say the least. There is no hint of appreciation of what Jesus has done for the man, no asking the question, ‘Where did Jesus get this power?’ Instead, ‘they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.’ They seemed impervious to learning anything, unwilling to look beyond their position. Their minds were fixed and closed: Jesus did not fit their system. The system could not be wrong, so Jesus must be. A gesture of kindness had, for them, become a challenge to the system, a political problem: how to deal with Jesus who was rocking the boat. The prophet, the layman, had challenged the power-centres and that, for them, was an unforgivable sin. Authority – their authority as they saw it - must be upheld. If people were allowed to ignore the Sabbath, where would it all end? An example must be made. The long-standing tension between the prophet who speaks from the margin and the priest who speaks from the sanctuary underlies the story. There is something disturbingly *ecclesiastical* about the scene.

How about the healed man? We don't have his name; is that significant? How did he feel in all this? Initially embarrassed, perhaps, at being the centre of attention. He may have developed a habit of keeping his hand out of sight. And now he was being called upon to stand up where everyone could see him, and their attention would be fixed on his hand. Perhaps his hopes were raised that this Jesus, of whom he had probably heard, might be able to do something for him. But what? The man may have felt that his condition, if it was from birth, came, indirectly at least, from God, that it was in some way a punishment for sin, a mark that God had branded him as a sinner. He might have been afraid to raise his hopes for fear that they would be dashed. Then Jesus asked him to stretch out his hand. There was no escaping people's attention now. Yet he dare not refuse. 'He did so, and his hand was restored.' (v.10) Initial disbelief, joy, relief, sheer delight, perhaps tears of happiness, maybe running round to show his hand to everyone. Did he think of saying thanks? It is surprising how few of those healed are recorded in the Gospel as doing so.

Week 23

Tuesday

Luke 6.12-19 Jesus chooses the twelve apostles

12. Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.

13. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles:
14. Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew,
15. and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot,
16. and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.
17. He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.
18. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.
19. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 10.1-4 and Mark 3.13-19a.

Vv.12-13: In Luke, prayer is a major part of Jesus' life and teaching. For example: -

- at the time of his baptism, 3.21;
- he would withdraw to deserted places to pray, 5.16;
- before asking his disciples who the people said he was, 9.18;
- before his transfiguration, 9.28-29;

- before teaching his disciples how to pray, 11.1;
- he told his disciples to pray always and not lose heart, 18.1;
- he told them to pray for strength, 21.36;
- he prayed before his passion, 22.41, 44;
- he told his disciples to pray that they might not come into temptation, 22.46;
- at the moment of his death, 23.46.

For Luke, and indeed, throughout the Bible, mountains and the desert have special significance as places of prayer and revelation. Horeb, Carmel, Tabor, and Calvary come to mind. By contrast, revelations in the Temple are rare.

V.13. Jesus must have prayed for God's guidance in choosing the twelve of his disciples whom he would name apostles. The word *apostle* means *one who is sent*. They were a group of those closest to him and mentioned frequently in the Gospel, especially in the case of Peter, James and John. The number twelve is surely linked to the twelve tribes of Israel whom Jesus said they would judge. (Luke 22.30) Twelve is a symbolic number, the multiple of three and four, themselves symbolic numbers. They constitute a "college," and, on the death of Judas, it is referred to as 'the Eleven' (Luke 24.9) until the choice of Matthias restores it to completion. (Acts 1.26)

A question without an answer: when Jesus chose Judas, did he know that he would betray him?

Vv.14-16: Luke gives the names of the twelve as does Matthew in 10.1-4 and Mark in 3.13-19. Their lists share ten names in common: Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, James and John, sons of Zebedee, Philip and Bartholomew, Matthew and Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. Matthew and Mark have Simon the Cananaean who may be the same person as Luke's 'Simon who was called the Zealot.' While Matthew and Mark have Thaddaeus, Luke has Judas, son (or brother) of James. In Acts, also written by Luke, he repeats his list, though in different order. (1.13) The differences may be accounted for by different names being used by different people or in different settings, or possibly even by some comings and goings among the Twelve.

Vv.17-18 have parallel passages in Matthew 4.23-25 and Mark 1.35-39. Luke here describes an early stage in Jesus' public ministry, one characterized by hope, expectation, and a sense of a bright promise coming to fulfilment.

The people who came from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, both Gentile areas, were - most likely - Jews.

V.19: The phrase 'for power came out from him and healed all of them' suggests almost magical power, but the Gospels are consistent in emphasizing

that healing, or indeed any work of power, always takes place in a context of faith. A miracle is not holy magic.

Week 23

Wednesday

Luke 6.20-26 Blessings and woes

20. Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

‘Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

21. Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

22. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

23. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

24. But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

25. Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

26. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.’

There is a passage similar to this in Matthew 5.1-12.

V.20: Jesus did not say, 'Blessed is poverty.' The only people who rhapsodize about poverty, perhaps equating it with a simple, uncomplicated life, are those who have never experienced it. Jesus must have seen, and perhaps experienced, what poverty brings - hunger, disease, pain, suffering and deprivation, inadequate clothing and housing, a lack of choices - none of which does anything for the human condition. Poverty is not an act of God or of nature but a by-product of human decisions. The fact that a minority can, in some cases, transcend poverty to live a truly human life does not take from its damaging character.

Where Matthew has 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' Luke simply has 'Blessed are the poor.' Are they the same? It seems unlikely. Some scholars interpret 'poor in spirit' to mean being aware of one's need of God, being conscious of one's spiritual emptiness or poverty, and therefore - potentially at least - receptive to God. 'God is wherever there is a heart open to receive him,' said Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

But Luke has simply, 'Blessed are the poor.' It seems he refers to material poverty - deprivation of money, goods and property. What does Jesus mean? Has he in mind those spoken of in Zephaniah 2.3 and 3.12? - 'Seek the Lord, all you humble of the

land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord's wrath' (2.3), and, 'I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord.' (3.12) Is it in some way a prophetic reference to the destruction of Jerusalem following the defeat of the Jewish revolt by the Romans in 70 AD? It has been estimated that, in that war, about one-third of the population died, another third was sold into slavery, and the rest were scattered, mostly across the Mediterranean basin. The exceptions were 'the remnant of Israel' (Zephaniah 3.13), that is, those so poor that no one took account of them, so they were left where they were. To that extent, they could be considered blessed.

In both Gospels, this first beatitude is in the present tense: '... yours *is* the kingdom of heaven.' The other beatitudes look to the future, with 'will' instead of 'is.' Jesus is saying that the poor already "have" the kingdom of God. Luke constantly emphasizes God's love for the poor and down-trodden; it is one of the particular characteristics of his Gospel.

It has been said that the beatitudes are to the New Testament what the Ten Commandments are to the Old, a summary of its moral charter. They are not precepts, prescribing or proscribing; they refer to attitudes, saying, in effect, 'If this is the sort of person you are, then you are blessed.' The beatitudes

are “be-attitudes,” that is, attitudes towards being and living.

Vv.21-23: What of these other blessings? They ask people to keep hope alive in the face of suffering and even persecution, ‘on account of the Son of Man.’ Mairéad Maguire, the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize Winner, speaking of peace, said, ‘As long as we believe we can’t get it, we won’t get it. You don’t get anything if you don’t ask for it, if you don’t dream about it.’ That surely applies to more than peace. Perhaps Jesus is calling on us to dare to hope, even for the ultimate, despite seemingly overwhelmingly contrary evidence.

Vv.24-26: There are four ‘woes’ corresponding to the four ‘blesseds.’ Jesus says ‘woe’ to the rich, the well-fed, those who laugh and those who are well spoken of. They have had their reward, while the poor will have theirs in heaven.

Is this offering the poor ‘pie in the sky when they die’? That accusation has been made, and the Gospels have indeed sometimes been (mis)used as opiate theology. Karl Marx called religion ‘the opium of the people,’ but he also called it ‘the heart of a heartless world.’ Nelson Mandela is quoted as saying, ‘Many things seem impossible – until someone does them. And then they seem obvious.’

Everything that Jesus says above goes against normal human expectations. People everywhere

value wealth, good food, fun, laughter and reputation, and look down on, or pity, those who do not have them. Jesus aligns himself with those who do not have those things: he said of himself, ‘The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’ (Matthew 9.58) and he became an outcast. (Mark 1.45) Again and again, Jesus takes “common sense” standards and practices, and turns them upside down. He does not accept a two-tier society, where those at the bottom simply stay there.

Week 23

Thursday

Luke 6.27-38 Love of enemies

27. ‘But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,
28. bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.
29. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.
30. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.
31. Do to others as you would have them do to you.
32. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.

33. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.
34. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.
35. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.
36. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.
37. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;
38. give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'

There are passages parallel to vv.27-31 in Matthew 5.43-48, and to vv.37-42 in Matthew 7.1-5. This lengthy passage might better be taken in two parts, verses 27-36 and 37-38.

Vv.27-31: This text is not an exhortation to let oneself become a doormat, to be walked on by all. Instead it calls for imagination, courage and determination. A message running through it is the need to break through the vicious circle of attack and counter-attack, aggression and retaliation. Human history is a chronicle of such activity and its futility

is painfully apparent in every age of history. When we retaliate we allow the aggressor to set the agenda; we simply re-act, instead of acting according to our own standards. By merely reacting, we guarantee that the cycle will continue. But if we turn the other cheek and make a peaceful response, we chart a different course, and open up the possibility of a new way being found. Far from being starry-eyed idealism, this is down-to-earth realism. Those who return hatred for hatred perpetuate hatred. (You don't quench a fire by adding fuel to it.) There is nothing realistic about imagining that doing so offers a way forward out of hatred, much less a way that is worthy of human beings. According to the UN, there were two hundred and fifty wars between the end of World War II in 1945 and the year 2000. How realistic or practical was that? War begets war. If attack and counter-attack, aggression and retaliation were the way to peace, then the world would have found peace a long time ago. Revenge perpetuates violence; it is forgiveness that brings catharsis.

There are better ways than those of retaliation: Saint Paul said, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him.' (Romans 12.20) If you do, there is a good chance you will turn him into a friend.

Pope John Paul II, at a gathering for peace, in Assisi, Italy, in 1986, made the remarkable statement, 'The demands of peace transcend those of religion.' ('Les exigences de la paix transcendent

ceux de la religion.’) But, at the same gathering, a Jewish representative, Rabbi Singer, said, in a sobering challenge, ‘Religious leaders have always spoken of peace,’ but, ‘in practice, religions have served to foment scores of horrendous and bloody wars.’ It should not be so. Jesus’ teaching on peace, such as that given here has been widely ignored by Christians throughout the last two thousand years. Ironically, in church history, it was the “reforming” popes – and they were genuine reformers in some respects – who were the promoters of crusades, inquisitions and wars.

In the Roman-dominated world where Jesus lived this teaching would have evoked derision or hostility. Roman imperial policy was *Parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*. (To pardon the crushed and to crush the proud.) In his *Gallic War*, Julius Caesar boasted of having killed half the population of Gaul (France) in order to bring it under Roman control, and he won the admiration of his countrymen for doing so. That pattern has been repeated throughout history where rampaging egos, leaving a trail of slaughter and ruin in their wake, are applauded as conquering heroes on their return home. Jesus proposes another way. The British author G. K. Chesterton wrote that Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has simply not been tried.

In summary, Jesus gives what has been called his Golden Rule, ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you.’ (Luke 6.31 = Matthew 7.12)

Vv.32-34 would seem to call for the insertion of the word *only* in order to make full sense of the passage, so that the verses would read: -

32. If you love *only* those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.

33. If you do good *only* to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

34. If you lend *only* to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

Vv.35-36: Luke, the Gentile (and gentle) Gospel writer, has a universalist outlook; he goes beyond looking after one’s own to reaching out to outsiders, drawing them in.

The message of the Old Testament in these areas is ambiguous. For example, ‘Be a father to orphans and be like a husband to their mother’ (Sirach 4.10), but also, ‘Give to the one who is good, but do not help the sinner.’ (Sirach 12.7)

Vv.37-42, the focus is on not judging others. It echoes Matthew 7.1, ‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged’ and James 2.13, ‘Judgment will be

without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.’

V.37: This would seem to apply to judging people’s attitudes, or states of mind. But we can and must judge people’s actions, especially our own. As children we were taught by our parents, ‘Do this; don’t do that. This is right; that’s wrong.’ That was how we learned the difference between right and wrong. The Psalms, to cite just one example in the Bible, have a powerful sense of right and wrong, of the need to do one and avoid the other. The principle ‘Do good and avoid evil,’ which is perhaps the most basic and absolute moral principle, presupposes the ability make a judgment between good and evil. But what we may not do is judge someone’s attitude or motive. It is one thing to say, ‘What Jack did was wrong’; it is another to say, ‘What Jack did was wrong, and he did it because he is selfish, lazy, stupid, etc...’ It is hard enough to understand our own motives for action, so how could we claim to understand another’s?

V.38: The image is from wine production, but has universal application. ‘The measure you give will be the measure you get back’ is a message based on human experience: generosity evokes generosity. Saint John of the Cross wrote, ‘Where there is no love, pour love in and you will draw love out.’

Week 23

Friday

Luke 6.39-42 On not judging others

39. He [Jesus] also told them a parable: ‘Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?’

40. A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher.

41. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?

42. Or how can you say to your neighbour, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.

There are passages parallel to some verses of this in Matthew 15.14; 10.24-25; and John 13.16; 15.20.

V.39: The context is clearer in Matthew 15.14, where it is directed at the Pharisees (here it refers to disciples): they were blind people guiding the blind. They had reduced Judaism to a system and could not see beyond it. Their system, in a sense, made God “redundant.” If you followed it, it would carry you along and you could become righteous in the sight of God. What counted was a good intention, constant study of the Torah and commentaries, and personal effort. So wedded were they to it that they could not understand Jesus’ critique and so became increasingly hostile to him. There have been times – not a few – when Christian spirituality took a similar

direction. The Pharisees are dead; pharisaism is not and probably never will be.

V.40: Jesus is called *teacher* many times in the Gospels, especially in Mark; it is the title most commonly applied to him. The term *Torah*, or Hebrew Bible, often translated into English as the *Law*, more accurately means *teaching*. In rabbinical schools, the disciple was meant to listen to and repeat what had been taught. Independent enquiry was unwelcome. Jesus is here presented by Luke as being part of that tradition.

The Torah formed Jews' identity, so that, when living among Gentiles, they would retain it and not be assimilated. The prophetic tradition was a counterbalance to the Torah's weight. Ideally, the two went together.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells the story of a man (a Gentile, presumably) who came to Rabbi Hillel and asked him to teach him about Judaism, but with one proviso - he did not want to hear anything about rabbinic tradition. Hillel said, 'OK; let's start with the language of the Jews - Hebrew.' And he taught the man some basic phrases, enough to keep him going for a day. The next day, Hillel taught him a new set of phrases to convey the same meanings as he had already learned. When the man grew confused and protested, Hillel said he was only doing what the man asked; he omitted rabbinic tradition. Language cannot exist without shared

understandings as to what words mean, how to express ideas, etc. Sacks' point is that there can no more be an individual morality or religion than there can be an individual language. The person who says, 'This is my truth, my goodness, my justice, etc., even if it's not for anyone else,' or, who says that, 'Talking about right and wrong, truth and falsehood, etc. is making value judgments and you're trying to impose yours on me,' makes discussion about morals impossible, and accelerates the loss of community and the atomization of society. They are making the same mistake as Hillel's student. It recalls Pascal's question, 'What good is it to tell people who do not know themselves that they should make their own way to God?' (Adapted from *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age*, Continuum, London, 2005)

Vv.39 and 40 seem out of place. Coming in the middle of a passage (vv.37-43) about not judging others, they seem unconnected with that teaching.

Vv.41-42 resume the teaching on not judging. We see the faults of others more readily than our own, and may even use an affected zeal for others' improvement as a means of evading the challenge of dealing with our own faults. The faults we criticize most vigorously in others are usually those we refuse to acknowledge in ourselves. Jesus said elsewhere, 'Physician, heal thyself.' (Luke 4.23) The psychologist, John Powell, wrote, 'We have laboured so long under the delusion that corrections,

criticism, and punishments stimulate a person to grow. We have rationalized the taking out of our unhappiness and incompleteness in many destructive way. Saint Francis de Sales is quoted as saying that ‘A spoon of honey will attract more than a barrel of vinegar,’ and there is an Irish saying: ‘Mol an óige agus tíochofaidh sí,’ loosely translated as, ‘Praise the young and they will follow you.’

If, for example, I steal goods from work, and then something goes missing there, I will likely assume that it has been stolen, when it may simply have been mislaid. If I go around announcing my suspicions for all to hear, I am advertising my guilt. Shakespeare wrote, ‘Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind.’ (*King Richard III*, v.6) When a person points a finger in accusation at others, there are three fingers pointed back at himself.

The words *hypocrite* or *hypocrisy* are used twenty-one times in the Gospels – in Matthew fifteen times, Mark twice, Luke four times, and John, not at all. Etymologically, they come from playing a part on stage. They are about simulation, pretending to be what one is not, especially an affectation of piety or morality.

Week 23

Saturday

Luke 6.43-49 Good trees and good foundations

Jesus said to his disciples:

43. 'No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit;

44. for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.

45. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.'

46. 'Why do you call me "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I tell you?

47. I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them.

48. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built.

49. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.'

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 7.15-27, with echoes in Matthew 12.33-35.

Vv.43-45: The meaning of this passage flows from the preceding. The latter condemned judgment of others, hypocrisy and pretence. This passage

illustrates the genuine article. The genuine person does good deeds, and the evil person bad deeds. Jesus said elsewhere, 'You will know them by their fruits.' (Matthew 7.20)

The same applies to speech, 'for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.' (v.45)

A good test of whether a new idea or movement is in harmony with the Gospel is to ask what fruit it bears. If it produces good fruit, then it probably is in harmony with the Gospel; if not, no. 'By their fruits you shall know them.'

Vv.46-49: Jesus is here addressing not scribes and Pharisees but his own disciples. We are the ones who call him 'Lord, Lord,' but do not do what he tells us to. All of the Gospel was written for all of us.

Vv.48-49: Jesus offers illustrations, the first of a person whose response to him is genuine, the second of one whose response is shallow. The first builds his house on a solid foundation of rock, so that when a flood comes, the house stands firm. The second takes the easy way out and builds his house on sand, which is much easier to dig a foundation in than rock. But when the river is in flood, it washes away the sandy foundation and the house comes crashing down. (That evokes memories of some of the Celtic Tiger building boom!)

These Gospel passages are easy to understand. The challenge lies in doing them.

In view of the emphasis laid by these passages, and many others, too, on *doing* rather than simply *thinking*, it is difficult to understand the *sola fides* (faith alone) approach to the faith by some Christians. In practical day-to-day living, we estimate a person's worth not in terms of what they say, or think, or profess to believe in, but by what they actually do. Actions really do speak louder than words: 'All of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what was done in the body, whether good or evil' (2 Corinthians 5.10), and, 'just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.' (James 2.26)

Week 24

Monday

Luke 7.1-10 Jesus heals a centurion's slave

1. After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.
2. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death.
3. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave.
4. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy of having you do this for him,

5. for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.’
6. And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, ‘Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof;
7. therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.
8. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this," and the slave does it.
9. When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, ‘I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.’
10. When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 8.5-13.

This story differs from Matthew’s version in that here Jesus is approached, not by the centurion, but by local Jewish elders speaking on his behalf. It is perhaps surprising that it is not the other way round, as one might expect Matthew, a Jew writing for Jews, to avoid a situation in which Jesus incurs ritual defilement by contact with the centurion, who was most likely a Gentile. Luke, the Gentile writing for Gentiles, seems to show greater sensitivity to this matter. It may also be that he, anxious to avoid

antagonizing Rome, especially after the Jewish revolt that culminated in 70 AD, wanted to distinguish Christians from Jews in Roman eyes, and so here presents the centurion as sensitive to Jewish sensibilities.

The NRSV in this and many other passages uses the word *slave* where other translations, such as JB, use the word *servant*. The NRSV's translation is the more accurate as there was little distinction between one state and the other in ancient times.

The Bible does not make a case for or against slavery; it takes it for granted as a fact of life. There were probably few societies in ancient times which did not accept and practise slavery, and often the slave trade as well. Such was the norm.

In the Old Testament, a slave was property, without rights. There was sometimes a difference in the treatment of foreign and local slaves, the former being more harshly treated. (Exodus 21.1) If a thief could not restore stolen goods, slavery was the punishment. (Exodus 22.1) Slaves were mostly domestic and the preserve of the rich. A mitigating factor was the prohibition in Deuteronomy 23.16 on returning a runaway slave. It has been estimated that, in post-exilic Israel, about one person in seven was a slave, while in contemporaneous Greece and Roman, it was about one in two. (McKenzie, art. Slave, slavery)

The New Testament follows the same tradition. Several texts exhort slaves to be faithful in their duties, while also urging owners to be gentle towards them, e.g.,

Slaves, be obedient to your human masters with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ,
not only when being watched, as currying favour, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart,
willingly serving the Lord and not human beings,
knowing that each will be requited from the Lord for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.
Masters, act in the same way toward them, and stop bullying, knowing that both they and you have a Master in heaven and that with him there is no partiality. (Ephesians 6.5-9)

See also Colossians 3.22-4.1, 1 Timothy 6.1-3 and 1 Peter 2.18-20.

This applies to Jesus also; he uses slavery as a background to some of his teaching, seemingly with implicit approval. One example is the parable of the faithful and unfaithful slaves in Luke 12.42-48. In the film *Twelve Years in Slavery*, this was the text which the slave-owner, played by Michael Fassbender, quoted with such sadistic relish at Sunday morning services to justify the savage

lashings he imposed on his slaves, female as well as male.

Marcus Sidonius Falx with Jeremy Toner, *How to Manage your Slaves*, (Profile Books, London, 2014), is a tongue-in-cheek, yet serious and intelligent, look at the topic. Toner is the author, while Falx is a fictional character who takes the part of a Roman slave-owner. In chapter XI, "Christians and their Slaves," he states that there is no evidence that Christians were better than others in the treatment of their slaves.

Joel S. Panzer, in his *The Popes and Slavery*, (Alba House, New York, 1996), writes: -

The rules of war and society were such that servitude was often imposed as a penalty on criminals and prisoners of war, and was even chosen by many workers for economic reasons. Children born of those held in servitude were also at times considered to be in the same state as those of their parents. (p.3)

This has a bearing on the use of the phrase, 'Unjustly deprived of liberty' in some of the church documents he cites. Panzer quotes many texts from popes down through the centuries opposing slavery. For example: -

Pope Eugene IV, in *Sicut Dudum*, of 13 January 1435, addressed himself to all bishops about the

Spanish conquest of the Canary Islands. The Spaniards had enslaved some of the local people. Eugene wrote: -

These people are to be totally and perpetually free and are to be let go without the exaction or reception of any money. If this is not done, when the fifteen days [he had given for them to be set free] have passed, they incur the sentence of excommunication *ipso facto*, from which they cannot be absolved, except at the point of death,... unless they have first given freedom to these captive persons and restored their goods. We will that the like sentence of excommunication be incurred by one and all who attempt to capture or sell or subject to slavery baptized residents of the Canary Islands or those who freely seek baptism....

Pope Paul III, in *Sublimis Deus* of 2 June 1537, wrote,

Man is of such a nature and condition that he is capable of receiving faith in Christ and that everyone who possess human nature is apt for receiving such faith....

He [Satan] has stirred up some of his allies who, desiring to satisfy their avarice, are presuming to assert far and wide that the Indians of the West and the South who have come to our notice in these times be reduced to our service like brute animals, under the pretext that they are lacking the Catholic faith. And they reduce

them to slavery, treating them with afflictions they would scarcely use with brute animals....
The Indians themselves indeed are true men and are not only capable of the Christian faith, but, as has been made known to us, promptly hasten to the faith... We decree and declare... that the same Indians and all other peoples - even though they are outside the faith - ... should not be deprived of their liberty or possessions....
They... are not to be reduced to slavery....
These same Indians and other peoples are to be invited to the said faith in Christ by preaching and the example of a good life.

Panzer quotes Helen Rand Parish and Harold E. Weidman, *Las Casas en Mexico: Historia y obras desconocidas*, Fondo de Cultura Economica, Mexico, 1992, p.18 as saying: -

The encyclical *Sublimis Deus*... [was] in reality epoch-making. The promulgation of these apostolic letters literally marked the true beginning of international law in the modern world; the first intercontinental proclamation of the rights inherent in all men and the liberty of nations. (Panzer, p.25)

But Paul III allowed slavery in Rome. The slaves were prisoners of war, being kept by the Rome municipal government. For many years they were not held as slaves; the Roman government for fourteen years kept asking him to allow them to be

used for work around the city as the cost of keeping them otherwise was too high. In the end he agreed, though, it seems, unwillingly. Paul's teaching and that of other popes was widely ignored by Catholics, including bishops, priests and religious.

Other documents cited by Panzer include the following: -

Gregory XIV, *Cum Sicuti*, 18 April 1591.

Urban VIII, *Commissum Nobis*, 22 April 1639, decreed excommunication for slavers, but bought slaves for his own use.

Benedict XIV, *Immensa Pastorum*, 20 December 1741, to the bishops of Brazil, the West Indies and America. In it, Benedict complains that previous instructions on the matter have been disobeyed.

Gregory XVI, *In Supremo*, 3 December 1839. (In the nineteenth century there was a noticeable dilution of earlier condemnations of slavery.)

In 1866, the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office and the Inquisition, informally known as the Holy Office, and known today as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued Instruction No.1293 on 20 June to the Vicar Apostolic among the Galla [Ethiopia], in reply to his questions. It refers to those in 'just servitude': -

Servitude itself, considered in itself and absolutely, is by no means repugnant to the natural and divine law, and there can be present

very many just titles for servitude, as can be seen by consulting the approved theologians and interpreters of the canons....

It follows that it is not repugnant to the natural and divine law that a slave be sold, bought, exchanged, or given, as long as in this sale... the due conditions which those same approved authors widely follow and explain, are properly observed. Among these conditions those which are to be especially looked at are whether the slave who is put up for sale has been justly or unjustly deprived of his liberty, and that the seller does nothing by which the slave to be transferred to another suffer any detriment to life, morals or the Catholic faith....

It is permissible for Christians, especially when they act in favour of the faith, to purchase such captives for a just price, and to take and retain them in their own servitude, as long as they are of a mind to treat them according to the precepts of Christian charity, and take care to imbue them with the rudiments of the Christian faith so that, if it is possible, they may be freely and happily led, this being done by no compulsion but only by opportune persuasion and encouragement, through their conversion to the true faith into the liberty of the sons of God which is found only in the Catholic church.

The document goes on,

Indeed, just as slaves can be licitly bought, so they can licitly also be sold.... Everyone can see that Christians and missionaries... are able in good conscience to search for fugitive slaves and force them to return, if indeed they possess a just title to those who have been justly reduced to slavery....

It is clear that those slaves whose flight was gravely illicit are held to reparation while those whose flight lacked all fault are not. (This was a reply to the question of whether a slave had an obligation to make restitution to his master for the expense involved in re-capturing him.)

Many church councils, e.g., a regional council in Toledo in 655, and the general councils of Lateran III in 1179, Lateran IV in 1215, Lyons I in 1245 and Lyons II in 1274 approved slavery and saw no objection to its being used as a punishment or deterrent. Fathers of the church such as Saint Augustine accepted it without demur. King Ferdinand of Aragon made a gift of a hundred slaves to Pope Innocent VIII (died 1492), who distributed them among the cardinals and nobility of Rome.

There is sometimes ambiguity in official statements around the following issues: -

Were the slaves Christians or likely to become such, or not in any way Christian?

Were they considered enemies of the faith, or not?

Were they justly or unjustly in servitude, e.g., through imprisonment as criminals or prisoners of war, or those who offered themselves “freely”? Sometimes slavery, the slave trade, serfdom and indentured labour are confused.

John F. Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church*, states: -

Since the sixth century and right up until the twentieth century it has been common Catholic teaching that the social, economic and legal institution of slavery is morally legitimate provided that the master's title of ownership is valid and provided that the slave is properly looked after and cared for, both materially and spiritually. (Ross, Chichester, USA, 1975, p.10, cited by Panzer on p.5, n.9)

Saint Peter Claver, known as “the saint of the slave trade” did not find fault with the trade itself, but focussed his efforts on mitigating its worst excesses. The famous Dominican, Bartoloméo de las Casas, spent much of his life defending the rights of South America Indians, but - admittedly to his later regret and shame - suggested that African slaves be used instead.

The principle of equality implicit in the fact that all people, slave or free, could receive the sacraments (except orders, from which slaves and ex-slaves were excluded) often amounted to little, partly

because congregations were separated according to their status.

Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, USA, in 1792, gave a convent of Carmelite nuns a present to help with the work of settling into their new house in his diocese. They gratefully accepted it. It was two slaves, a mother and her daughter. (Donald B. Cozzens, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood: a Reflection on the Priest's Crisis of Soul*, 2000, p.92) In the early nineteenth century, most presbyteries and religious houses of the southern states of the United States had slaves.

In the US, before the Civil War, no American Catholic bishop spoke against slavery. In 1840, Bishop John England of Charleston explained to John Forsyth, Secretary of State to President Martin Van Buren that Pope Gregory XVI – see above in *In Supremo*, 3 December 1839 - had condemned the trade in slaves, but that no pope had ever condemned domestic slavery as it had existed in the United States. (Panzer, p.48, quoting James Hennessy SJ, *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1981, p.145.

If there were papal statements against slavery, there were also the opposite. Pope Nicholas V in 1454 granted King Alfonso V of Portugal 'full and free permission... to capture, conquer and subjugate all Saracens and pagans whatsoever and other

enemies of Christ... and to bring their persons into perpetual slavery.' The pope did this 'by apostolic authority, from sure knowledge, and from the plenitude of apostolic power.' (Cited by Joe Dunn, *No Lions in the Hierarchy*, Columba, Dublin, 1994, p.138) This was confirmed by his successor Calixtus III, renewed in 1481 by Sixtus IV, extended to Africa and America in 1493 by Alexander VI, and renewed in 1514 by Leo X. As late as 1799, popes continued to use slaves to power their galleys, chaining them at night and during rest periods, even though major European countries had long since given up such practises

It is worth looking at the record of non-Christians in this regard: -

Voltaire, hailed as the greatest French champion of the Enlightenment and his generation's most courageous spokesman for freedom and toleration, though against slavery, believed that Africans were a different species that mated with orangutans. Voltaire, like Locke and many other Enlightenment thinkers who were against slavery, still chose greed over principle. Voltaire, more than most of the Enlightenment writers, was an "Establishment" man.... He also invested heavily in commerce and trade, which he saw as the lifeblood of a free society. He thus had vested interests in maintaining the colonial system and the slave trade. In fact, when Jean-

Gabrel of Nantes, the leading *negriér* (trader of blacks) for the region, offered to name one of his ships after Voltaire, the philosopher accepted the honour with some delight. (Kenneth N. Addison, *We hold these truths to be self-evident*, 2009, p.46)

Addison also names David Hume and John Locke as among other slave-traders of the time with strongly racist attitudes.

In Nazi-occupied Europe in World War 2, the concentration camps were principally slave labour camps.

In 1952, the last full year of Stalin's rule of the Soviet empire, there were between twelve and fourteen million people in the system that Alexander Solzhenitsyn described in his book *The Gulag Archipelago*. The camps had an annual death-rate conservatively estimated at one-third of a million. These were not an unintended and regretted by-product of the system, but the result of a policy designed to keep numbers from getting out of control. They had to die in order to make room for the fresh annual intake. (Robert Conquest, *Kolyma: the Arctic Death Camps*, Macmillan, London, 1978)

In Mauritania, North Africa, slavery was formally abolished only in 1988. From formal abolition to actual abolition there may be a long time lapse.

In Britain in 2011, Traveller families were found to have held men in slavery for years.

In China today, its penal camp system (*lao-gai*), with between four and eight million prisoners, is also a slave-labour system. It is likely that some of those cheap goods we buy in our shops bearing a “Made in China” label are made by them.

In Asia, one estimate is that more women and children were trafficked from there in the 1980’s than all of the people sold into slavery from Africa in the 400 years of the African slave trade!

In India, the system of indentured labour is perhaps only marginally different from slavery. The condition of being indentured may be passed on to the next generation.

In 2012, the US State Department estimated the number of slaves in the world at about 27 million. (*The Irish Times Weekend Review*, 23 June 2012, p.2.) Toner writes, ‘There are more slaves in the world today than there were at any point in the life of the Roman empire.’ (*Op. cit.*, p.206) These include bonded labourers, enforced labourers and victims of human trafficking, individuals forced to work under threat of violence, without pay or hope of escape. Worldwide today, sex tourism and pornography, especially of children, are other forms of slavery. Counter-trafficking organizations estimate that about 1,500,000 women and girls are

sold into slavery, and trafficked for the sex industry, each year. In the European Union, counter-trafficking non-governmental organizations estimate that 800,000 of those women move through Europe, including Ireland.

In Ireland, there are migrants without work permits, paid less than the minimum wage, their passports taken from them, and isolated from contact with others, whose working conditions are close to slavery.

One bright spot in the overall picture is Saint Patrick, who, in his *Letter to Coroticus*, was entirely unambiguous in his condemnation of slavery. He excommunicated Coroticus, a Christian slaver, describing him as ‘a man without respect for God.’ He called slavers ‘dripping with blood,’ ‘strangers from Christ,’ ‘murderers,’ and ‘wolves,’ saying that no one should have anything to do with them. If they wished to repent they should first free the slaves they had taken, and then ‘make reparation to God through rigorous penance and in floods of tears.’ Patrick, and those who followed him, worked to eliminate slavery in Ireland. They succeeded, but it was re-introduced by the Vikings from the ninth century. A likely reason for Patrick’s intense opposition to slavery was that he himself had been a slave and had experienced its cruelty and injustice at first hand.

Week 24

Tuesday

Luke 7.11-17 Jesus raises a dead man to life

11. Soon afterwards Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him.

12. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town.

13. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'

14. Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!'

15. The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

16. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favourably on his people!'

17. This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

This story is not found in the other Gospels. It may be that it is inserted here to enable Jesus to give his reply to John the Baptist in v.22.

V.12: The scene was a particularly sad one. The mother of the dead man was a widow and he was her only son. That meant a very bleak future for her; she

would have no one to support her, and independent living for a woman was impossible.

V.13: It is not surprising that Jesus felt compassion for her. Did he think, however distantly, of his mother's situation future, or consider that she might find herself in a similar situation? No one is recorded as having asked him to do anything; indeed, what could they ask for? How could they dare to hope for something so far beyond human expectation as a raising from the dead? But Jesus did not wait to be asked; he saw the need and responded to it.

Jesus is here called 'the Lord.' It is very unlikely that the title was used at the time. It means God, and was applied to Jesus only after his death and resurrection. Luke uses it not less than thirteen other times in his Gospel, while Mark and Matthew are sparing in their use of it. It reflects the understanding of the post-Resurrection Christian community.

Vv.14-15: Jesus commands, and things happen. It is like creation in Genesis: 'Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.' (1.3) It is also like Jesus healing the leper, 'He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.' (Matthew 8.3)

What did the young man say? Thanks, perhaps? One would hope so; Jesus did not get much of it. See Luke 17.17.

V.16: Why fear? Why not joy? Is it that God's presence is seen as a judgment? Luke says that when Zechariah saw the angel – God's messenger – 'he was terrified and fear overwhelmed him.' (1.12) In Luke, fear as a response to God's presence or action is mentioned widely: 1.29-30, 65; 2.9-10; 4.36; 5.8-10, 26; 7.16; 8.25, 33-37; 9.34, 43; 24.37; and Acts 2.43; 3.10; 5.5, 11; 10.4; 19.17. But it usually gives way to praise: 2.20; 5.25-26; 9.43; 12.13.

A frequent criticism of religion is that it is based on fear. An Irish atheist said, 'Religion draws its power from fear. Remove fear and you remove religion.' I think it is nearer the truth to say that religion begins with wonder and culminates in thanksgiving.

V.17: Most likely, this refers to the whole land of Israel.

Week 24

Wednesday

Luke 7.31-35 Childish wilfulness in adults

Jesus said to the people:

31. 'To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?

32. They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,
"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep."
33. For John the Baptist has come, eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon";
34. the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"
35. Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.'

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 11.16-19.

Jesus was frustrated: it seemed that, no matter what he or the prophets that preceded him had done, people would not be satisfied. John the Baptist fasted, and they said he was crazy. Jesus didn't fast, and they said he was a glutton and a drunkard. Sometimes people do not know what they want, and they become like wilful, petulant, demanding children. Yet, when given what they asked for, they say they don't want it. You can't please all the people all the time – and some people you can't please any of the time. If they arrived in heaven, they would find something to complain about!

The people most receptive to Jesus were men and women whose concerns were for the ordinary things

of life – earning a living, looking after their families, worrying about illness, trying to make ends meet. They had their feet on the ground, were realistic, did not have ideological axes to grind, but were able to look reality in the face and call it by name. They recognized goodness when they saw it in Jesus. They were like the man who said to him, ‘I believe, Lord; help my unbelief.’ (Mark 9.24) Such people are perhaps the children of wisdom who vindicate it. (v.35)

The least receptive were religious leaders with fixed ideas, who could not accept someone who did not conform to their preconceptions, systematisers with a one-size-fits-all approach to humanity. They had reduced religion to ideology and saw their rigidity as fidelity to God. There was room neither for Jesus nor for John in their system, because they had lost sight of the person. If you do what is right by the person, then, by God, you won't go far wrong. Unwittingly, they had fallen into idolatry: their religion was the idol they worshipped, forgetting that it should never be an end in itself but only a means to the one end that matters – God. This is a constant danger, and it alienates people. It says to them that, essentially, they do not matter; it is the system that counts. They had wrapped themselves in a hardened carapace of complacency which was impervious to reform. Actions have consequences: whether it is the sometimes smug certitudes of atheism, or the agnosticism that questions everything except its own doubts, or the closed mind of

religious people who thinks they have all the answers ready-made – all are equally impenetrable. Peter Kreeft put it simply, ‘God is a lover, not a rapist.’ (*Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensées Edited, Outlined and Explained*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1993, p.198)

Week 24

Thursday

Luke 7.36-50 Forgiveness and love

36. One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table.

37. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment.

38. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

39. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him - that she is a sinner.’

40. Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’ ‘Teacher,’ he replied, ‘speak.’

41. "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

42. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?"

43. Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.'

44. Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

45. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.

46. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

47. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.'

48. Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

49. But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'

50. And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

This story is found only in Luke, whose Gospel emphasizes Jesus' gentleness, especially towards women. There is no basis in the Gospels for associating this unnamed woman either with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who anointed Jesus' feet in John 12.1-8, Matthew 26.6-13

and Mark 14.3-9, or with Mary Magdalene ‘from whom he had cast out seven demons.’ (Mark 16.9; Luke 8.2)

V.36: Some Pharisees tried to be open to Jesus. There is no evidence or suggestion that the host was setting a trap for him.

Vv.37-38: We assume that the woman’s sins were sexual. Perhaps they were, but maybe our assuming so reveals more of us than of her: ‘Suspicion haunts the guilty mind.’ (William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI*, Part 3, v, 6)

What the woman does is something extravagantly generous, a once-in-a-lifetime, forget-the-cost, throw-away gesture that reveals a noble spirit, an overflowing heart, and a deep sense of gratitude.

V.39: The Pharisee, censorious and judgmental as his tradition tended to be, cannot see beyond the woman’s sins – whatever they were. They are a stumbling block he cannot get beyond. Jesus has been ritually defiled by her touch – how could a prophet allow such a thing? The Pharisee saw the woman’s sins and looked no further. Jesus had a love which included an active hope for what the woman could become with the help of some human support.

V.40: Jesus did not need any special insight to have a good idea what the Pharisee was thinking. Indeed, it is quite possible that he may have come

from that tradition himself but grown beyond it. He needed nothing more than ordinary familiarity with the social mores of his time, the conventions of self-styled “polite society” which is often blindly hypocritical, operating by double standards and a lunatic scale of priorities, where, for example, to belch or fart in company may be a greater *faux pas* than to urge a pregnant girl-friend or mistress to get an abortion.

Vv.41-43: Jesus frames an instant parable. Its meaning is simple and obvious, and Simon, his host, understands it without difficulty.

Vv.44-46: Turning towards the woman, but addressing Simon, Jesus points out that she had been a better host than he, better by far, extending warmer and more generous hospitality than he had, even though he was the formal host. Simon must have blushed with embarrassment to be reminded of his failings in the very conventions that he was concerned about.

V.47: Then comes the punch-line, what it is all leading up to. She, like the five hundred denarii debtor, had been forgiven a great deal and, as a result, was deeply grateful. Her actions expressed that. She had shown that the measure of love was to be without measure. By contrast, Simon, who perhaps had not committed great sins, was measured, careful and cautious. He would do the right thing, observe the proprieties, watch his p’s and

q's, but could not appreciate the woman's generosity. Hers was a language he did not understand.

This evokes the memory of the occasion when Jesus, teaching in the temple, said to an audience of chief priests and elders, 'Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.' (Matthew 21.31)

V.48: He tells her that her sins are forgiven, his use of the passive voice the traditional Jewish way of referring to God. It was like saying, 'God has forgiven your sins.'

V.49: Jesus had not said, 'I forgive your sins,' but he had spoken in the name of God. That raised difficulties among his hearers: who was he claiming to be? He was probably well aware of their thoughts, but ignored them.

There was a similar situation in Matthew 9.2-7 when Jesus healed a paralytic.

V.50: Jesus' final word is to the woman. He combines two expressions he used elsewhere: - 'Your faith has saved you' which he said to the blind beggar whose sight he restored in Luke 18.42, and, 'Your faith has made you well; go in peace' to the woman he had healed of an issue of blood in Luke 8.48.

In her later years the woman very likely recalled that day as one of blessing for her, when she got

much more than she gave – the assurance of being saved and the gift of peace.

Week 24

Friday

Luke 8.1-3 Various women accompany Jesus

1. Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him,
2. as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,
3. and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

V.1: Jesus is here fulfilling what he had said he would do in Luke 4.43: 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.'

The twelve are with him. They are a defined group, even if they were not always one and the same body of men. It was only in Luke 6.13 that we read that Jesus, 'called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.' In Luke 9.1-2, he 'called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal' – in other words, to do what he had done.

V.2: There is no reason to assume that the presence of the demons driven out - Mark 16.9 says it was Jesus who drove them out - implies anything of a sexual nature. It could simply have been a severe mental illness of some kind, severity being implied by the use of seven, a number representing abundance. In the Gospels, the word *fever* means anything that could give a person a temperature; *paralyzed* meant being confined to bed for a long time; *leprosy* could refer to a variety of skin diseases, or even mould or mildew; and *possession* could mean a mental or brain disorder of any kind, such as epilepsy.

V.3: Joanna is probably the same person who was at the tomb of Jesus after his resurrection and, with the other women, went to tell the apostles that he had risen. (Luke 24.10) Nothing is known of Susanna, except that she was not the Susanna of Daniel 13. Who were the 'many others'? We don't know; perhaps they were from a wide circle of supporters who came and went as they were able.

Vv.1-3: These verses point to something remarkable. It was most unusual, then and now, for a group of (most likely married) women to travel around the country with a group of (mostly) married men, who were not their husbands. Prevailing attitudes are expressed in the following: -

Philo, a Jewish philosopher of first century, wrote, 'Women are best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house.... A woman, then, should not be a busybody, meddling with matters outside her household concerns, but should seek a life of seclusion. She should not show herself off in the streets before the eyes of other men, except when she has to go to the temple.' (From Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1992, p.66)

Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century, wrote: 'The woman, says the law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man.' (Senior, *ibid.*, pp.66-67)

The women's behaviour must therefore have raised eyebrows, and it is surprising that it passes in the Gospel without raising question or comment. Given the severe restrictions imposed on women by the culture of their time, such freedom of movement and action is staggering. They seem to have been wealthy, and wealth is always able to break rules with impunity, but even that is hardly sufficient to explain it.

It has led to some bizarre (at the least) interpretations. In Zambia, I remember leaders of a

local church citing this text to justify their leaders, while on circuit, bringing with them a number of women, and also recruiting local women in places they visited, for sexual purposes. Their case was simple: what needs do men have? And what resources do women have to provide for those needs? The Gospel is discreet, but you can put two and two together, can't you? They were known widely for it, and it did not seem to do their evangelical mission any harm.

Jesus, unlike a great many religious leaders, Christian and other, was not misogynistic. Quite the contrary, as Luke makes clear throughout his Gospel. Whenever the customs or culture of society were an impediment to the mission that God his Father gave him, he ignored them. But would his going around with a group of married women not have created an unnecessary and avoidable obstacle?

Was Jesus ever in love? He was truly man, and like us in all things except sin. (See Hebrews 4.15) It would seem unlikely that such a primal human experience as falling in love would not have been part of his growth to manhood. 'He grew in wisdom and stature...' (Luke 2.40) In other words, he grew up like any other man. Not to have experienced this would have been a loss which would in some way render his humanity incomplete. To people of a highly sexualized age, like the one we live in, it seems inconceivable that falling in love might not necessarily include sexual activity. But that is our

particular prejudice and reflects our twenty/twenty-first century attitude, not those of every generation. Jesus could have been in love without its necessarily being sexual.

If more of Jesus' followers had experienced love between a man and woman we might not have had the following: -

Saint Clement of Alexandria (died 220): 'A woman, considering what her nature is, must be ashamed of it.' (*Paedagogus*, 2.33, PG 8.430; cited by Garry Wills, *Papal Sin*, p.109, n.19)

Tertullian (died 220): 'The judgment of God upon the female sex endures even today, and with it inevitably their position of criminal at the bar of justice. Women are the gateway of the devil.'

'Do you [women] not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives on in this age: the guilt must of necessity live, too. *You* are the devils' gateway; *you* are the unsealer of that forbidden tree; *you* are the first deserter of the divine law; *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* so carelessly destroyed man, God's image. On account of *your* actions, even the Son of God had to die.' (*On Women's Dress*, 1.1.2 (PL 1.1418), cited by Karen Armstrong, *A History of God. From Abraham to the Present: the 4000-year Quest for God*,

Heinemann, London, 1993, p.145, and Garry Wills, *Papal Sin*, p.109, n.20)

Saint John Chrysostom (died 407): 'Woman is a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil.' (Homilies, 15) and, 'Women do not have the intelligence to be priests.' (*On the Priesthood*, 2.2, (PG 48.633), cited by Garry Wills, *Papal Sin*, p.108)

Saint Jerome (died 420): 'Women are the gate of hell.'

Saint Augustine (died 430): 'Women are not made in the image of God.'

"Augustine agreed; 'What is the difference,' he wrote to a friend, 'whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must be aware of in any woman'", (Karen Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p.145, quoting Letter 243.10.) 'In fact Augustine is clearly puzzled that God should have made the female sex: "after all, if it was good company and conversation that Adam needed, it would have been much better arranged to have two men together as friends, not a man and a woman." (Saint Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, {On the Literal Meaning of Genesis} 9.5.9, quoted by Armstrong, *op. cit.*, pp.145-146)

Pope Saint Gregory the Great (died 604): 'Woman is slow in understanding and her

unstable and naïve mind renders her by way of natural weakness to the necessity of a strong hand in her husband. Her “use” is two-fold: animal sex and motherhood.’

Saint John of Damascus (died 750): ‘Woman is a sick she-ass... a hideous tapeworm... the advance post of hell.’

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (died 1153): ‘There are two things which defile and ruin [male] religious: familiarity with women and daintiness in food.’

Saint Francis of Assisi (died 1226): ‘Avoiding contagion from association with women is, in accordance with Scripture, as easy as walking in a fire without having the soles of one’s feet burned.’ (Thomas of Celano, *Second Life* [of Saint Francis], second book, chap.78, section 112, in Marion A. Habig, *St. Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, Franciscan Press, Quincy College, Illinois, USA p.455. The internal scripture reference is to Proverbs 6.28) This may have fed into the saying that, ‘What straw gains by fire is what a male religious gains by conversation with women.’ (Capuchin Franciscan Constitutions {up to 1968}, n.238) And the idea that women should be kept at home is powerfully expressed by another Franciscan

writer, Francisco de Osuna OFM, (died 1542), author of *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, who wrote to a husband,

‘Since you see your wife going about visiting many churches, practising many devotions, and pretending to be a saint, lock the door; and if that isn't sufficient, break her leg if she is young, for she can go to heaven lame from her own house without going around in search of these suspect forms of holiness. It is enough for a woman to hear a sermon and then put it into practice. If she desires more, let a book be read to her while she spins, seated at her husband's side.’ (*Norte de Estados*, Seville, 1531; cited by Kieran Kavanaugh in the Introduction to Volume II of *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Ávila*, ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, DC, 1980, p.23)

Saint Albert the Great: ‘Woman contains more liquid than man, and it is a property of liquid to take things up easily and to hold them poorly. [This is remarkably similar to the view of Tibetan Buddhism.] Liquids are easily moved; hence women are inconstant and curious... Woman is a misbegotten man and has a faulty and defective nature in comparison with his. Therefore she is unsure in herself. What she herself cannot get she seeks to obtain through lying and diabolical deceptions. And so, to put it briefly, one must be on guard with every woman, as if she were a poisonous snake and

the horned devil.’ (*Commentary on Aristotle’s “Animals,”* 15, ques. 11, cited by Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, Penguin Books, 1990, p.108.)

With all this weakness and inconstancy, how did women ever become martyrs? Saints Jerome, Ambrose, Basil and Gregory said they became honorary men. (Garry Wills, *Papal Sin*, p.120, n.25)

Saint Thomas Aquinas (died 1274): ‘In terms of nature’s own operation, a woman is inferior and a mistake. The agent cause that is in the male seed tries to produce something complete in itself, a male in gender. But when a female is produced, this is because the agent cause is thwarted, either because of the unsuitability of the receiving matter [the mother] itself or because of some deforming interference, as from south winds that are too wet, as we read in [Aristotle’s] *Animal Conception*’. (*Summa Theologiae*, I, ques.91, art. 1 ad 1, cited in Garry Wills, *Papal Sin*, p.107.)

‘Since any supremacy of rank cannot be expressed in the female sex, which has the status of an inferior, that sex cannot receive ordination.’ (*Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, q.39r; in Garry Wills, *Papal Sin*, p.107)

‘Woman is an... incomplete being... a misbegotten male. It is unchallengeable that woman is destined to live under man’s influence

and has no authority from her Lord.’ (from Saint Thomas, no ref.)

Saint Bonaventure: ‘only the male was made in the image of God.’ (*Commentary on the Sentences*, IV, distinction 25, article 2, question 1; in Wills, *Papal Sin*, p.120, n.12), and, ‘women, as the successors to Eve through whom man fell, cannot be the agents of human salvation.’ (*Commentary on the Sentences*, IV, distinction 25, article 2, question 2; in Wills, *Papal Sin*, p.120, n.13)

Pope John XXIII (died 1334): ‘Woman is more bitter than death.’ (From the Bull of canonization of Saint Louis, a Franciscan bishop)

Pope Saint Pius X, addressing the bishops of Italy on 29 July 1904, said, ‘In public meetings, never allow women to speak, however respectable or pious they may seem. If, on a specific occasion, bishops consider it opportune to permit a meeting of women by themselves, these may speak but only under the presidency and supervision of high ecclesiastical personalities.’

Protestant writers were no better: -

Martin Luther (died 1546): ‘Let them [women] bear children to death; they were created for that.’ (See 1 Timothy 2.14-15)

John Knox (died 1572): -

‘... weake, sicke and impotent, foolishe, madde and phrenetike.... And such be al women, compared unto man in bearing of authoritie. For their sight... is but blindness, their strength, weakness; their counsel, foolishnes; and judgment, phrensie, if it be rightlie considered.’
(From *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*)

But there is more to it than the Greek philosophers. The writer of 1 Timothy – generally believed not to have been Saint Paul, though it is usually attributed to him – did not help matters in stating,

A woman must receive instruction silently and under complete control.

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She must be quiet.

For Adam was formed first, then Eve.

Further, Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed.

But she will be saved through motherhood, provided women persevere in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. (2.11-15)

‘She will be saved through motherhood’ finds a nasty echo in the quotations from Pope Saint Gregory the Great and Martin Luther above.

Such ideas suggest repressed sexual feelings which those writers sought to cope with by demonizing the feminine. By contrast, ‘every Jewish male knows that he was born incomplete, and that only by a union of the flesh with a woman can he achieve union with himself, with other people and with God.’ (Michel Benoît, *The Silence of Gethsemane*, Alma House, London, 2012, p.31)

A well-known Irishwoman had this to say: -

Most intelligent men and women can recognise sexist cant, no matter how nobly dressed up, no matter how elevated the speaker, from miles away. So when the Holy Father admits the Church just might have been a teensie-weensie bit sexist at times, we wait for the next obvious statement....

Two thousand years of shameful codology dressed up as theology and, worse still, as God's will....

That old language.... is rapidly becoming a badge of irrelevance and long past its sell-by date. (Mary McAleese, "It won't wash with women," *The Tablet*, 15 March 1997, p.356)

If the above quotations seem misogynistic, what about the following, taken from an article in *The Economist*?

Killed, aborted or neglected, at least 100,000,000 girls have disappeared.

Imagine you are one-half of a young couple expecting your first child in a fast-growing poor country. You are part of the new middle class; your income is rising; you want a small family. But traditional mores hold sway around you, most importantly in the preference for sons over daughters. Perhaps hard physical labour is needed for the family to make its living. Perhaps other sons may inherit land. Perhaps a daughter is deemed to join another family on marriage, and you want someone to care for you when you are old. Perhaps she needs a dowry.

Now imagine that you have had an ultrasound scan; it costs \$12, but you can afford that. The scan says the unborn child is a girl. You yourself would prefer a boy; the rest of your family clamours for one. You would never dream of killing a baby daughter as they do out in the villages. But an abortion seems different. What would you do?

For millions of couples, the answer is: abort the daughter, try for a son. In China and northern India more than 120 boys are being born for every 100 girls. Nature dictates that slightly more males are

born than females to offset boys' greater susceptibility to infant disease. But nothing on this scale.

For those who oppose abortion, this is mass murder. For those such as this newspaper, who think abortion should be 'safe, legal and rare' (to use Bill Clinton's phrase), a lot depends on the circumstances, but the cumulative consequence for societies of such individual actions is catastrophic. China alone stands to have as many unmarried young men – 'bare branches' as they are known – as the entire population of young men in America. In any country rootless young males spell trouble; in Asian societies, where marriage and children are the recognised routes into society, single men are almost like outlaws. Crime rates, bride trafficking, sexual violence, even female suicides are all rising and will rise further as the lopsided generations reach their maturity.

It is no exaggeration to call this gendercide. Women are missing in their millions – aborted, killed, neglected to death. In 1990, an Indian economist, Amartya Sen, put the number at 100,000,000; the toll is higher now. The crumb of comfort is that countries can mitigate the hurt, and that one, South Korea, has shown the worst can be avoided. Others need to learn from it if they are to stop the carnage.

Most people know that China and northern India have unparalleled large numbers of boys. But few appreciate how bad the problem is, or that it is rising. In China, the imbalance between the sexes was 108 boys to 100 girls for the generation born in the late 1980's; for the generation of the early 2000's, it was 124 to 100. In some Chinese provinces, the ratio is an unprecedented 130 to 100. The destruction is worst in China but has spread far beyond. Other East Asian countries, including Taiwan and Singapore, former communist countries in the western Balkans and the Caucasus, and even sections of America's population (Chinese- and Japanese-Americans, for example): all these have distorted sex ratios. Gendercide exists on almost every continent. It affects rich and poor; educated and illiterate; Hindu, Muslim, Confucian and Christian alike.

Wealth does not stop it. Taiwan and Singapore have open, rich economies. Within China and India the areas with the worst sex ratios are the richest, best-educated ones. And China's one-child policy can be only part of the problem, given that so many other countries are affected.

In fact, the destruction of baby girls is the product of three forces: the ancient preference for sons; a modern desire for smaller families; and ultrasound scanning and other technologies that identify the sex of a foetus. In societies where four or six children were common, a boy would almost certainly come

along eventually; son preference would not need to exist at the expense of daughters. But couples now want two children – or, as in China, are allowed only one – they will sacrifice unborn daughters to their pursuit of a son. That is why sex ratios are most distorted in the modern, open parts of China and India. It is also why ratios are more skewed after the birth of the first child: parents may accept a daughter the first time round but will do anything to ensure their next – and probably last – child is a boy. The boy-girl ratio is above 200 for a third child in some places.

Baby girls are thus victims of a malign combination of ancient prejudice and modern preferences for small families. Only one country has managed to change this pattern. In the 1990's, South Korea had a sex ratio almost as skewed as China's. Now, it is heading towards normality. It has achieved this, not deliberately, but because the culture changed. Female education, anti-discrimination suits, and equal rights rulings made son-preference seem old-fashioned and unnecessary. The forces of modernity first exacerbated prejudice – then overwhelmed it.

But this happened when South Korea was rich. If China or India – with incomes one quarter and one-tenth South Korea's levels – wait until they are as wealthy, many generations will pass. To speed up change, they need to take actions that are in their own interests anyway. Most obviously China should

scrap the one-child policy. The country's leaders will resist this because they fear population growth; they also dismiss Western concerns about human rights. But the one-child limit is no longer needed to limit human fertility (if it ever was: other East Asian countries reduced the pressure on population as much as China.) And it massively distorts the country's sex ratio, with devastating results. President Hu Jintao says that creating 'a harmonious society' is his guiding principle; it cannot be achieved while a policy so profoundly perverts family life.

And all countries need to raise the value of girls. They should encourage female education; abolish laws and customs that prevent daughters inheriting property; make examples of hospitals and clinics with impossible sex ratios; get women engaged in public life – using everything from television newsreaders to women traffic police. Mao Zedong said 'Women hold up half the sky.' The world needs to do more to prevent a gendercide that will have the sky crashing down. ("Gendercide", 6 March 2010, p.4)

That is misogyny!

Week 24

Saturday

Luke 8.4-15 The parable of the sower

4. When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable:

5. 'A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up.

6. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture.

7. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it.

8. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.' As he said this, he called out, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

9. Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant.

10. He said, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that

"looking they may not perceive,
and listening they may not understand.'"

11. 'Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.

12. The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.

13. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away.

14. As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.

15. But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 13.1-9 and Mark 4.1-9.

In vv.4-8, Jesus tells the parable; in vv.9-10, questions arise, and, in vv.11-15, Jesus offers the disciples his interpretation.

The parable is about responses to the word of God, and is doubtless inspired by Jesus' own experience of the different types and degrees of response. The early Christian community, in its reflection several decades later on what had happened in the intervening period, may have been trying to make sense of what was, perhaps, for them an experience of disappointment that the faith had not spread as far or as deeply as they had initially hoped. With the benefit of hindsight, however, that spread seems remarkably fast and was also deep enough to survive much persecution.

The Mediterranean basin into which the Christian faith moved was unique. The Roman world

‘was more of an international unity than any society that has existed down to our own day.’ (Christopher Dawson, *Religion and World History*, Part II, Image Books, p.157) It was a society of relatively independent cities loosely federated under Rome, with a common official language, stable coinage, good roads, was without customs or national barriers, and without the large-scale brigandage or piracy of the non-Roman world. It had an efficient central administration and fast communications. It achieved its greatest geographical expansion about the year 90 A.D.

Behind the appearance of stability and security there were serious weaknesses. Rome was a society based on the exploitation of the country by the town, of the slave by the free, of the poor by the rich. It had become a fat parasite which was draining the resources of the provinces. It was filled with hangers-on dependent on the state for bread and circuses (an early version of welfare and telly?) The idealism of the early republic which had provided a moral basis for the unity of society was gone, and with it went belief in the old Roman gods. Among young people there was a turning to eastern religions, while among the political leadership there was the promotion of the cult of the emperor as the focus of unity in a very diverse empire. This effort can now be seen as the clutching at straws that precedes death. When, about the year 40, Emperor Caligula, whose name means “little boots”, declared his horse consul, and Nero (54-68) had his wife

murdered and kicked his mother to death, it was hard to take the claim to divinity seriously.

The empire was both the source and the result of a universalist frame of mind. It was ready for a universalist religion. There was a spiritual vacuum waiting to be filled.

Christianity spread rapidly through the work of soldiers, sailors and merchants. It had an appeal because in an age which was tired of attempts at continuity it was radically different; it demanded moral reform; its disciples were convinced; it appealed to the poor and to slaves; it had an intellectual basis; it had a forward-looking character; it held out hope for the individual in the face of an authoritarian state; most of all it confronted people with the evidence of a new power in the person of Jesus who could and did change people for the better. Christianity's belief in a loving, personal God, its belief in the resurrection, its sense of purpose deriving, among other things, from a linear instead of a cyclical view of time all had an impact. The status of women was enhanced by its teaching on sexual matters. Its appeal is understandable.

V.9: The disciples ask for an explanation. Why? After all, it is not a difficult story to understand. At a time when nearly all agricultural work was manual, the picture Jesus paints would have been a familiar one, even to town dwellers. Was the disciples' question simply a literary device, creating an

opportunity for elaboration and allegorization of the story for use by early Christians in a catechetical context?

V.10a: It is difficult to understand this, as the disciples appear no less uncomprehending than the general body of the people. It was not until after the resurrection that they began to understand who Jesus was, and, even then, it still took time.

V.10b: When all is said in this context about primary and secondary causality, and God's permissive will – none of them part of Jewish ways of thinking - the text remains a mystery. The prophets often criticized their fellow Jews as being stubbornly resistant to God's word, yet the quote from Isaiah from which this verse is extracted appears to make it God's decision: -

And he [God] replied: Go and say to this people: Listen carefully, but you shall not understand! Look intently, but you shall know nothing!

You are to make the heart of this people sluggish, to dull their ears and close their eyes; else their eyes will see, their ears hear, their heart understand, and they will turn and be healed.

'How long, O Lord?' I asked. And he replied: Until the cities are desolate, without inhabitants, houses without a man, and the earth is a desolate waste.

Until the Lord removes men far away, and the land is abandoned more and more. (6.9-12)

Is the verse saying, in effect, ‘Since, on past performance, we can be sure that people won’t listen, God will make them dull and slow so as to remove responsibility from them.’ That sounds far-fetched, but... maybe.

VV.11-15: The explanation lists some reasons – surely not meant to be a comprehensive list - why the preaching of the word may appear to fail, but it concludes on a note of joyful hope because people ‘hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.’ That is a judgment which has been borne out innumerable times in the history of the Christian community.

Week 25

Monday

Luke 8.16-18 The parable of the lamp

Jesus said to his disciples:

16. ‘No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light.

17. For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light.

18. Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who

do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away.’

There are passages similar to this in Matthew 5.15-16 and Mark 4.21-22.

The three verses say different things. They seem to be distinct sayings collected up and put together, without a context, and that makes them difficult to interpret.

V.16: In one respect, the verse says something obvious: it is useless to light a lamp and then cover it. But what is that pointing to? Is Jesus saying that the Pharisees have, so to speak, covered the lamp of God’s truth by their preoccupation with the minutiae of the Torah, so that it no longer gives people light?

In Luke 11.33, the same phrase is used, but is interpreted in vv.34-36 to refer to the need for people to be pure in heart and intentions. Matthew 5.15 has it also in slightly different wording.

V.17: The verse is repeated almost verbatim in Luke 12.2 where the context suggests that it is a criticism of Pharisees who cover up God’s truth. Here it appears to say that the truth will out, as it often does, even if it is many years after the event. Matthew 10.26 repeats it as a call to give good example.

V.18 has another message. Virtually identical to Matthew 13.12; 25.29, Mark 4.25 and Luke 19.26, the message appears to be that where grace is used more grace will be given; where people truly listen to God's word they will learn more, and so, will be able to learn still more. It suggests a meritocracy of grace which calls for alertness of mind and a willingness to make an effort to understand. Anyone looking for spiritual spoon-feeding will find cold comfort in this text.

The three verses illustrate the freedom exercised by the Synoptics in shifting material around from one setting to another as it suited their purpose.

Week 25

Tuesday

Luke 8.19-21 Jesus, his mother and brothers

19. Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd.

20. And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.'

21. But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 12.46-50 and in Mark 3.31-35.

Vv.19-20: There is something pathetic and sad about this picture of Jesus' mother, Mary, left standing outside. The crowd had taken him from her and she was like a spectator, not his mother. She must have felt like she had become an alien in his life.

In Mark's telling of the event, what Jesus said must have been hurtful to his mother and brothers, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' (3.33) Matthew's version is, if anything, stronger than Mark's: -

Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?'

And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! (12.48-49)

V.21: Jesus' family did not understand him or his mission. That seems clear from various Gospel passages:

'They [Joseph and Mary] did not understand what he [Jesus] said to them.' (Luke 2.48-50)

'Then he [Jesus] went home, and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."' (Mark 3.19b-21) JB's translation is stronger: 'When his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, convinced he was out of his mind.' In it, it was

his family, not the crowd, who were convinced that he was out of his mind.

John says, 'Not even his brothers believed in him.' (7.5)

In Luke 11.27-28, when 'a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!' Jesus seems to deflect the woman's praise from his mother, reinforcing his point, made elsewhere also (Matthew 12.46-50; Mark 3.31-35), that it is not the bonds of kinship that determine people's relationship with God but rather that they hear the word of God and keep it. He said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!' (v.28)

In Luke 4.24, after his rejection by the people of his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus had said, 'Truly, I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.'

The point Jesus makes – very powerfully – is that what counts in his eyes is whether a person accepts him as coming from God, or not. The crowd did; his family did not.

Maybe the words of Ezekiel came to Jesus' mind: -

Son of man, the members of your nation are talking about you on the ramparts and in doorways. They keep saying to one another, 'Come and hear the word that has come from Yahweh.'

They throng towards you; my people sit down in front of you and listen to your words, but they do not act on them. What they act on is the lie in their mouths, and their hearts are set on dishonest gain.

As far as they are concerned, you are like a love song pleasantly sung to a good musical accompaniment. They listen to your words, but no one acts on them.

When the thing takes place - and it is beginning now - they will know that there has been a prophet among them. (33.30-33)

The text (v.19) refers to 'his [Jesus'] brothers'? Similar phrasing is used in several other places: - Matthew 12.46, 47, 48; Mark 3.31, 32, 33; Luke 8.19, 20; John 7.5.

One tradition, from Ethiopia, and in a somewhat different form from Epiphanius, is that Joseph first married a woman called Salome and had a family by her. When she died, he then married Mary. So the male children of the first marriage were Jesus' (half-)brothers. But the apocryphal tradition behind this is in conflict with the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke.

Another view is that the term "brothers" is used loosely and may mean cousins, in-laws, or just about any degree of relatively close kinship. This is often the case even today in traditional societies, where, for example, a fellow-tribesman may be called

brother. Among African-Americans, the term has even looser associations: it may mean simply another African-American.

Is there not a third possibility, namely, that Mary did have other children beside Jesus? Would that take from his uniqueness? It is hard to read that into it. Would a loss of physical virginity on Mary's part diminish her commitment to God? It is hard to read that into it either.

But the tradition of the church from earliest times is that Mary was a virgin before, during and after the birth of Jesus. It is defined as an article of faith: -

If anyone does not, according to the holy Fathers, confess truly and properly that holy Mary, ever virgin and immaculate, is Mother of God, since in this latter age she conceived in true reality without human seed from the Holy Spirit, God the Word Himself, who before the ages was born of God the Father, and gave birth to Him without corruption, her virginity remaining equally inviolate after the birth, let him be condemned. (The Council of the Lateran, 649 AD)

Other official references to virginity include: -

Here, then, is the main purpose and the chief meaning of Christian virginity: to strive wholly and solely for the things of God and to direct

one's mind and heart to them alone; to desire to please God in all things; to meditate earnestly on Him; and entirely to dedicate body and soul to Him. (Pius XII, encyclical letter, *Sacra Virginitas*, 25 March 1954, n.13)

It is not on its account, but because it is consecrated to God, that virginity is held in honour.... It is not their virginity that we extol in virgins but their consecration in plighted continence to God. (Saint Augustine, *On Holy Virginity*, chapters 8 and 11; PL 40.400, 401)

The higher excellence of virginity and celibacy, as compared with the married state.... was solemnly defined as an article of faith by the Holy Council of Trent. (Session 24, canon 10, cited in *Sacra Virginitas*, n.29)

Some of our contemporaries are going astray... and are exalting the married state to the point of placing it above virginity. (*Sacra Virginitas*, n.8)

It must be maintained, in accordance with the clear teaching of the Church, that holy virginity is more excellent than marriage.

The superiority of virginity to marriage... is... due, beyond doubt, to the superior purpose which it envisages and to the supremely effective contribution which it brings towards

complete self-dedication to God. (*Sacra Virginitas*, n.22)

Saint Joseph's role has been described by Pope John Paul II in the encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Custos* of 15 August 1989, as follows: -

In this mystery... one finds a true fatherhood... Joseph is the father: his fatherhood is not one that derives from begetting offspring; but neither is it an 'apparent' or merely 'substitute' fatherhood. Rather, it is one that fully shares in authentic human fatherhood and the mission of a father in the family. (n.21)

Week 25

Wednesday

Luke 9.1-6 The mission of the twelve

1. Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases,
2. and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.
3. He said to them, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money - not even an extra tunic.
4. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there.

5. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.’

6. They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.

There are passages similar to this in Matthew 10.5, 8-14 and Mark 6.7-13. It is also similar to the mission of the seventy in Luke 10.1-12.

Vv.1-2: Jesus gave the twelve the same mission as his own: to proclaim the kingdom of God, to heal, and to cast out demons. The ability to heal and cast out demons was a sign of their authority to teach, a badge of their authenticity.

V.3: Jesus sends them out like commandos on a raid: they were to travel light, carrying no baggage – they were just simply to go, bearing the message and trusting in God to provide for them. That makes for a lightning start, with a lot of impact, but it does not obviate the need for constant follow-up.

V.4: Whatever hospitality they were offered, they should accept, and not “shop around” looking for something better. In Zambia, I remember that when I stayed with people in villages, they were hospitable and welcoming, giving me the best of what they had. That changed the relationship: it meant that they received me on their terms, whereas, back at the

mission station, I would receive them on my terms. There was greater mutuality, reciprocity and equality in the former than the latter.

V.5: If people did not welcome them, they should just leave – acceptance of the Gospel cannot be forced. But they should let people know what they (the people) had dismissed. On one occasion, a missionary in Zambia went to a village headman and offered to set up a school in his village. He replied, ‘Batili. Lituto zengata li ka bulaya banana!’ (No. Too many lessons will kill the children!) So the school was built in another place, where it was accepted, and the people in the first place were left with their regrets. (They did get a school many years later.)

V.6: These early days are stories of one success after another; all goes well. The twelve needed some success to prepare them for the harder times ahead.

Week 25

Thursday

Luke 9.7-9 Herod is puzzled

7. Now Herod the ruler heard about all that had taken place, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead,

8. by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the ancient prophets had arisen.

9. Herod said, 'John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?' And he tried to see him.

There are passages similar to this in Matthew 14.1-2 and Mark 6.14-16.

Herod Antipas was clueless. Very likely, he was not religious but superstitious, though he may not have understood the difference.

The country was in a state of ferment, with rumours and chatter about prophets being raised from the dead and Elijah returning. This probably fed Herod's curiosity, not least about Jesus. Here, in v.9, he dismisses the possibility of John being raised from the dead, saying that that matter has been settled once and for all. But, in Mark 6.16, he says, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.' Matthew 14.2 is almost identical.

He tried to see Jesus. This sounds like nothing more than idle curiosity, a bored ruler, weary with the trivia of court life, looking for something new to pass the time. He did see Jesus, much later, in Luke 23.8-9: -

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.

He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer.

When the meeting came, Jesus ignored him; he had not come on earth to indulge the whims of the merely curious. Herod, a playboy, and probably vicious, was a man of little significance, however pretentious he may have been. Those for whom matters of faith were a kind of game found no comfort from Jesus: he was not one to accommodate the dabbings of dilettantes, merely speculative thinkers, or detached observers - he sought commitment. Faith is not meant to be an experiment any more than a relationship is meant to be one; you don't experiment with people, nor with God either. The person who dabbles in a little religion is someone who is searching, not for God, but for an idol made in their own image and likeness, a "God" who meets with their approval. God is a jealous God who looks for unconditional surrender and does not make a truce with other gods, 'The Lord your God is... a jealous God.' (Deuteronomy 4.24; 6.14); 'I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me.' (Exodus 20.2-3; Deuteronomy 5.6-7)

Week 25

Friday

Luke 9.18-22 Who do you say that I am?

18. Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’

19. They answered, ‘John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.’

20. He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered, ‘The Messiah of God.’

21. He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone,

22. saying, ‘The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.’

There are passages similar to this in Matthew 16.13-21 and Mark 8.27-31.

Luke gives no setting for this story, unlike Matthew and Mark who locate it in the highly symbolic area of Caesarea Philippi. Matthew, in particular, invests it with great solemnity, concluding with a powerful endorsement of Peter by Jesus as the rock on which he would build his church, which both Mark and Luke omit. (But see also v.22 below.)

V.18: There is a measure of ambiguity in the text: ‘when Jesus was praying alone’ but ‘with... the disciples near him.’ It does not seem important, just an awkward wording, perhaps.

V.19: Jesus wants to know what the people think of him, what understanding they have about who he is and what his mission is. Initially, they probably thought of him as just a wandering rabbi, of whom, it seems, there was quite a number at the time. But gradually they began to go beyond that – but how far beyond and in what direction? Jesus did not want them to go in the direction of thinking of him as a political messiah, a new King David who would raise the flag of revolt and use his miraculous powers to drive out the Roman occupiers.

Perhaps it is significant that the people think of Jesus in terms of the past – John, Elijah, or one of the ancient prophets, repeating the list as given in the passage about Herod's perplexity in Luke 9.7-9. They have not yet been able to see that, with Jesus, something radically new has begun, leading to a different future.

The disciples – what questions they ask, answers they give, their actions and their attitudes – are a mirror held up to ourselves; they reflect us. It can be helpful (and challenging) to relate our ways to theirs.

V.20: Jesus then turns the question to the disciples themselves. Only Peter is quoted as giving an answer. Were the others silent, or were their replies not recorded because his came closest to the truth?

His answer is, ‘The Messiah of God,’ that is, the anointed one of God. Messiah was not a divine title, but the Messiah’s role was to establish the kingdom of God. The title was used later of Jesus, but in mockery, when the people jeered at him while on the cross, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ (Luke 23.35) They understood that messiahship was part, at least, of what he claimed to be.

V.21: As in many others places in the Gospels, Jesus orders the disciples to keep quiet about this. If they began to spread their confused ideas about it, that could only result in creating a fog of ambiguity around Jesus which would be an impediment to him, and prematurely draw down the wrath of Rome.

V.22: Jesus here makes the first of three prophecies of his coming suffering, death and resurrection. The others are in 9.44-45 and 18.31-34. He was to hint at it again: -

I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! (Luke 12.50)
the Son of Man.... must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation. (Luke 17.24-25)

All of the above was part of a process of leading the disciples forward in understanding Jesus and his mission. Despite this, Luke omits another part of that

process, namely, Peter “correcting” Jesus about his role, and the rebuke which this evoked from Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 16.22-23.

Week 25

Saturday

Luke 9.43b-45 Jesus again foretells his passion

43b. While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples,

44. ‘Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.’

45. But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 17.22-23 and Mark 9.30-32.

This is the second time Luke records Jesus as foretelling his passion, the first being in 9.22, and the third in 18.31-34.

The story is sandwiched between two others, neither of which shows Jesus’ disciples in a good light. It is preceded by their failure to heal a boy with convulsions (9.37-43), and followed by a squabble among them about who was the greatest. (9.46-48).

The story itself does likewise. Despite Jesus speaking so emphatically - ‘Let these words sink into your ears’ (‘mind’ in JB) – the disciples were, it seems, taken entirely by surprise at the turn of events before and during the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. While the people were astounded by what they had seen, and everyone was amazed at all that Jesus was doing, the disciples are presented as slow and dull. (See v.45) One might say suspiciously slow, as if Luke, and indeed other evangelists, deliberately present them so, in order, perhaps, to dramatize the contrast with their post-Resurrection confidence and determination, as in Luke’s companion volume, Acts, for example. This presentation of the story is repeated closely in 18.31-34.

Here, in v.45 and later, in 18.34, we are told that the meaning of what Jesus had said was hidden from them, ‘so that they could not perceive it’ (v.45), and ‘they did not grasp what was said.’ (18.34) The first of those two statements makes it seem as if their slowness was deliberately caused – by what or whom? – in order to block their understanding, but it is hard to see sense in that, in view of Jesus saying so emphatically in v.44, ‘Let these words sink into your heads. The second of the two statements – 18.34 – seems merely descriptive: ‘they did not grasp what was said.’ Perhaps there is no real difference between them; it may be no more than a matter of semantics around the question of causality.

‘They were afraid to ask him.’ This is common in Mark and John especially. There are more than a few passages which reveal this, directly or otherwise, such as in Mark 2.6-12, 8.14-21, 9.32, and 12.34, and in John 14.8-9, 16.17-18 and 21.12. Strangely, Matthew, who sometimes presents Jesus as aloof and magisterial, does not have it. What lies behind it? I do not know.

Week 26

Monday

Luke 9.46-50 Which of us is the greatest?

46. An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest.

47. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side,

48. and said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.’

49. John answered, ‘Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.’

50. But Jesus said to him, ‘Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.’

There are passages parallel to vv.46-48 in Matthew 18.1-5 and Mark 9.33-37, and to vv.49-50 in Mark 9.38-41.

Vv.46-48: One can hear the egos clashing. It sounds almost unbelievably childish, but it goes on in groups of all kinds, especially the more hierarchical: - business, the military, the church and academia. Who's in, who's out, who's up, who's down? Who has the boss's eye? Who's in or out of favour? Who's in line for promotion? Who's getting ahead of whom? Etc. etc.

Jews tell a story about a synagogue cantor who used to chant, 'Lord, I am nothing but dust and ashes.' Hearing this, one of the congregation nudges another, jerks a thumb in the cantor's direction, and whispers, 'Look who thinks he's dust and ashes.'

Jesus was 'aware of their inner thoughts.' He was perceptive; he knew what people had in them; he was attuned to humanity's thinking; people rarely surprised him. His response was to bring out into the light of day what they had been whispering about among themselves. This may have embarrassed them, but he saw it as an issue to be dealt with, not swept to one side.

His way of dealing with it was to place an image before their eyes: a child. If Jesus had been a Greek, he might have begun a discourse with a definition of service or humility, and move on from there to draw

logical conclusions. Instead he imprinted an image on their imaginations, one which ran counter to expectations. Nobody considers a child a role model for leadership. But Matthew is perhaps even more emphatic than Luke: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’ (18.3-4)

‘... the least among all of you is the greatest.’ That statement would have a logician tearing his hair out in frustration; it’s not logical. Like life, it’s larger than logic. Christian authority is about service, not domination, about the other, not the self.

Vv.49-50: And then the disciples report what they see as a threat – competition. Someone not from their circle is doing what they were sent to do. They draw attention to this demarcation issue; like shop stewards they say it should only be those with their accreditation who should be allowed to function: ‘we tried to stop him because he does not follow with us.’

Jesus is not prepared to accept such limitations. God’s grace works where it wills. (See John 3.8) In Numbers 11.26-29, there is an incident in which Joshua, an assistant of Moses, acting out a self-appointed role of vigilante on Moses’ behalf, reports to him that two men were prophesying without fully authorized credentials, and said, ‘My lord Moses,

stop them!’ ‘But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!””

The Gospels have no difficulty in accepting the phrase ‘whoever is not against you is for you’ of v.50 alongside a seemingly contrary statement in Matthew 12.30, ‘Whoever is not with me is against me.’

This passage concludes Luke’s account of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. It is followed by his journey to Jerusalem.

Week 26

Tuesday

Luke 9.51-56 Samaritans reject Jesus

51. When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

52. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him;

53. but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

54. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them as Elijah did?’

55. But he turned and rebuked them,

56. and said, 'You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.' Then they went on to another village.

From here on in Luke's Gospel, there is a change of direction. The rest of the story charts Jesus' path to Jerusalem, the religious and national capital. But this is a theological construct, not a traveller's guide. Luke gives few geographical references - except to Jericho in 18.35 and 19.1 - in what follows until almost at Jerusalem.

Vv.51, 53: Luke presents Jesus' ministry as a journey towards Jerusalem; see also 13.22, 17.11, 18.31, 19.28 and 24.51. (In all, Luke mentions Jerusalem nearly as many times as the other three Gospels combined: 36 times as against Matthew 15, Mark 12 and John 14.) Jerusalem is where the high point will be reached, where things will come to a conclusion. The days are drawing near for him to be "taken up," that is, perhaps, his ascension, but before that, his being lifted up on the cross and his death. Nothing was going to deflect him from that.

Samaritans, with their tradition of hostility towards Jews, want nothing to do with him, so they give him a cold shoulder.

V.52: In John 4.5-42, when Jesus met the woman at Jacob's well in Samaria, his encounter with the

Samaritans was positive: ‘when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.’ (v.40) Perhaps Jesus was hoping for, or expecting, a similar welcome on this occasion. But it was not so.

Vv.54: Not for nothing had Jesus nicknamed James and John ‘sons of thunder.’ (Mark 3.17) Eager, it seems, to prove their commitment to Jesus, and perhaps to use their new-found powers, they offer to sort out those Samaritans once and for all. They propose a simple solution: if people are a problem, kill them. That’s what Elijah, the great prophet of the past, did. (2 Kings 1.10) The two brothers have had many imitators in the course of history.

V.55: What James and John suggest was not the way of Jesus, so he rebukes them. He never used force against anyone. He invited people to follow him as disciples, but never tried to force them. He came not to destroy people but to save them.

Jesus practises what he had told his disciples in Luke 9.5: ‘Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.’ If you are not made welcome, you just simply go. There may be another time, but, even if there isn’t, the matter is in God’s hands anyway. He is the Lord of the harvest. The parable of the darnel in the wheat in Matthew 13.24-30 is a reminder not to take such matters into

our own hands but to leave them to God who knows all things and judges in truth, justice and mercy.

V.56: Perhaps it was another Samaritan village.

Week 26

Wednesday

Luke 9.57-62 Facing up to the challenge

57. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'

58. And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have dens, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'

59. To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'

60. But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'

61. Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.'

62. Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 8.18-22.

With Jesus in these and many other passages, especially in the early parts of the Gospels, there is a sense of urgency, a sense that the time for

commitment is here and now, that something definitively new has happened through him which leaves no room for fence-sitting or postponement. Charismatic leaders have commonly made such demands on their followers: you are with me or against me; which is it to be? The outcome has often been tragic, resulting in abuse of people, or even warfare.

Vv.57-58: To be a follower of Jesus means being willing to let go of security, in this case the security of a home and a steady position in life. Perhaps the man had spoken without having considered the implications of what he was saying.

The phrase 'Son of Man' was Jesus' preferred self-designation. It means a human being. But it also refers to the proclamation of the triumph of his resurrection, as, for example, in Matthew 17.9: 'As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead,"' or to his return in glory, in Matthew 25.31: 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.' When Jesus said before the Sanhedrin in Matthew 26.64, 'I tell you, from now on, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven,' he was making a claim which went beyond that of being Messiah, and his hearers understood it as such, saying he deserved to die for blasphemy. And, in Revelation, it was 'one

like the Son of Man' who directs John to speak to the seven churches of Asia. (1.9-20) Evoking images of the divine figure from Daniel 7 and 10, the Son of Man here appears to be the risen Christ exercising a divine role.

Vv.59-60: Jesus is not trying to make things easy for his disciples. He makes it clear that sacrifice is part of discipleship, with the particular focus here on letting go of family ties. He himself had already made such a break, and it seems to have led to difficult relationships with his kin. (See notes under Matthew 12.46-50, Luke 8.19-21 and 11.27-28.)

The phrase in v.59, 'first let me go and bury my father' is seen, not as expressing a wish to attend his father's funeral, but rather to wait until after his father's death, whenever that might be, and then following Jesus. But Jesus was looking for more, so he said: 'Follow me.'

Vv.61-62: To go and say farewell to those at home seems like no more than a minimum requirement of filial duty. "Honour your father and your mother' is one of the commandments. (Deuteronomy 5.16; Exodus 20.12) In a society without pensions or social security of any kind, it was expected of children that, when they grew to adulthood, they would look after their elderly parents. It was a *quid pro quo*; the parents had looked after them when they were children.

The phrase, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’ was sometimes used in religious orders to pressure young religious who were thinking of leaving their order to remain in it, although it would seem to refer to apostasy from the faith.

Is the teaching in vv.57-62 intended for all, or only for a chosen group? It is hard to see how it could be lived by all. Could people live family life in the presence of such insecurity? It is difficult to see how they could.

Is the teaching an example of what some have called “Semitic exaggeration”? Is the teaching over-sold, so to speak, in order to underline its challenge, to serve as a selection process, so that only those with the strongest commitment would become part of Jesus’ inner group? If that is so, where does it leave the “ordinary” follower?

Week 26

Thursday

Luke 10.1-12 Jesus sends out seventy disciples

1. After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.
2. He said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’

3. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.
4. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.
5. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!"
6. And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.
7. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house.
8. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you;
9. cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."
10. But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say,
11. "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near."
12. I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.'

There are passages similar to this in Matthew 9.35-10.16 and Mark 6.7-13.

Earlier (Luke 9.1-6), Jesus had sent out the Twelve; now he expands it to seventy-two (or maybe just seventy.) NCCHS (779d) regards the two as one sending. He sends them out to prepare the way for

him. They are to go in pairs, faithful to Ecclesiastes:

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Better two than one by himself, since thus their work is really profitable. If one should fall, the other helps him up; but woe to the man by himself with no one to help him when he falls down. They keep warm who sleep two together; but how can a man keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. (4.9-12)

In similar vein, Ecclesiasticus states, ‘When a man has no wife, he is aimless and querulous.’ (36.30) Truly inspired!

V.2: ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few.’ This is also a theme in Matthew (9.37-38), and hinted at in John 4.35: ‘Look around you, look at the fields; already they are white, ready for harvest.’ So they are to pray for more labourers for the work.

V.3: Jesus’ commission is ‘Go on your way.’ He gives them no guarantee of success; indeed quite the contrary: the task will be difficult and risky; the disciples will be like lambs among wolves. (Matthew 10.16 also)

V.4: Jesus heightens the level of risk and dependence by telling them to bring no provisions, presumably depending on the hospitality of those they meet along the way. It seems that the seventy-two did indeed meet with hospitality. Jesus asked

them later, ‘When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?’ They said, “No, not a thing.”” (Matthew 22.35)

They are to greet no one on the road, driven by a sense of the urgency of their mission, not stopping for casual chit-chat. This echoes the instruction given by Elisha to Gehazi in 2 Kings 4.29, ‘take my staff in your hand and go. If you meet anyone, do not greet him; if anyone greets you, do not answer him.’

The instructions in vv.3-4 echo those Jesus gave the Twelve in Matthew 9.3-5.

Vv.5-6: They are to be messengers of peace, bidding ‘Shalom!’ to their hosts. If the latter are people of peace, the greeting will be a blessing on them. If they are not, the blessing will revert to the one who gave it.

Vv.7-8: They are to accept whatever their hosts have to offer, and not “scout around” for better lodgings. Their work is to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God and they deserve to be supported in that. The early Christian community adopted this idea, as seen in 1Timothy 5.17-18: -

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox

while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The labourer deserves to be paid.’

This reminds me of the times I spent in Shangombo, along the Zambian-Angolan border, where the local Makwamashi people made me welcome and brought me daily food, offering me the best of what they had in food, drink and shelter. These directions were adopted by Saint Francis in chapter 3 of his *Rule*, where he said, ‘Eat what is set before you.’

Vv.9: They were to cure the sick. Did the disciples do this? Were they able? Paul did, healing Publius’ father in Acts 28.8. Today we are not able, except through the ordinary means of health care. The sacrament of the sick, founded on James 5.14-15, while it gives a boost to those who receive it with faith and devotion, rarely, if ever, brings physical healing. Have we lost something? Places of pilgrimage, such as Knock or Lourdes, are edifying for the faith that pilgrims bring, but, even there, cures are extremely exceptional. A doctor once said, ‘If the patient gets better, Padre Pio gets the credit; if the patient does not get better, the doctor gets the blame!’ He had a point.

The commission to the seventy-two is almost identical to that given to the twelve in 9.1-6. It is to cure the sick and proclaim the kingdom of God.

Vv.10-12: Not everyone will welcome them. When that happens, they are to accept the fact but to let people know what they have rejected. (See Luke 9.5 above.) This was done literally in Luapula Province in Zambia, where early missionaries, when rejected, stood at the edge of a village, took off their sandals, shook the dust off them, and said to the people that they had rejected the word of God. This was remembered, and people saw it as a curse, so that every subsequent misfortune that befell the village was blamed on it. It sounds like bullying, and is difficult to reconcile with the freedom of spirit which Jesus elsewhere teaches. Paul and Barnabas did it in Acts 13.51 when they experienced rejection at Antioch in Pisidia. But whether people reject the message or not, they are to know that the Kingdom of God is very near. Does that mean the Day of Judgment? It sounds like it.

Week 26

Friday

Luke 10.13-16 The cost of rejecting Jesus

Jesus said to his disciples:

13. 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.

14. But at the judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

15. And you, Capernaum,

will you be exalted to heaven?
No, you will be brought down to Hades.’

16. ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.’

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 11.21-24.

V.13: Jesus, it seems, had preached in Chorazin and Bethsaida, but they had rejected him. Had they simply not listened in the first place? Had they not bothered? Had they listened but not been convinced? Rejection can take many forms: ‘I don’t care’; ‘I’m not interested’; ‘I’m too lazy’; ‘I can’t be bothered’; ‘I don’t give a stuff’; ‘Some other time...’; ‘After the golf, football,’ etc.

V.14: What seems clear here is that Jesus is saying that, with his coming, something definitively and radically new has happened in human history, and it calls for a response. Neutrality is not an option. The fact of God’s coming on earth in itself constitutes a judgment on humanity, one way or another; it is not an event which may be ignored. These two towns of Israel had rejected him, whereas, if the deeds of power (miracles) done in them had been done in Tyre and Sidon, two Phoenician (i.e., non-Israelite) towns on the Mediterranean coast, the latter would have repented long before in sackcloth and ashes. As

is often the case in the Gospels, the “outsiders” get the message, while the “insiders” do not. Jesus ‘came to his own and his own received him not.’ (John 1.11)

V.15: Jesus knows that this applies, too, to Capernaum, his adopted town to which he had moved from Nazareth. (Matthew 4.13; Mark 2.1) This was where he had begun his public ministry, astounding people by teaching with such authority, driving out an unclean spirit, healing a paralytic, Simon’s mother-in-law, the centurion’s servant and the man with palsy. (Luke 4.31-41; 7.1-10; Matthew 9.1-8; Mark 2.1-12) Yet people there had still refused to believe. ‘And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades.’ (v.15)

Judgment is an inescapable part of this passage, as of many others in the Gospels. Choices and actions have consequences; not to choose or not to act are themselves choices. There isn’t a no-man’s-land where we can sit on the fence, uncommitted, waiting to see what way the wind is blowing. That is ever and always the reality of life and Jesus draws attention to it.

Maybe there is an echo of what Jesus was saying in Revelation,

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot.
I wish that you were either cold or hot. So,

because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.... Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you, and eat with you, and you with me.... Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.' (3.15-17, 19b-20, 22)

V.16: This is repeated elsewhere: in Luke 9.48; Matthew 10.40, 18.5; Mark 9.37; and John 13.20. It was already hinted at in Exodus 16.6-8, where complaints about Moses and Aaron are treated as complaints against God.

Where a teaching is found in all four Gospels it has special significance: this teaching appears to say that to reject the teaching of Jesus heard through his disciples is to reject him, and to reject him is to reject God.

Week 26

Saturday

Luke 10.17-24 The return of the seventy

17. The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'

18. He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.'

19. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.

20. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

21. At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

22. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

23. Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!

24. For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.'

These two passages form distinct bodies of teaching. There are passages parallel to vv.21-22 in Matthew 11.25-27 and to vv.23-24 in Matthew 13.16-17.

Vv.17-20: This first passage reflects the high hopes of the early stages of Jesus' ministry. The

seventy return rejoicing at the success of their efforts in the name of Jesus. He cautions them against pride, saying that it is not so important to be able to overcome serpents and scorpions, or even to expel demons, but that their names are written in heaven. His caution about pride may have stemmed from the offer made by James and John, probably only a short time before, to “help” Jesus out by calling down fire on a Samaritan village and destroying it, because it had refused to receive him. (Luke 9.51-56)

Acting in the *name* of Jesus means by his authority, on his behalf and using his methods. In Acts 3.16, Peter and John, having cured a lame man, were idolized by the crowd, but calmed them, saying,

It is the name of Jesus which, through our faith in it, has brought back the strength of this man whom you see here and who is well known to you. It is faith in that name that has restored this man to health, as you can all see.

The submission of the devils to the disciples is a sign of the triumph of Jesus over evil: ‘now the prince of this world is to be overthrown.’ (John 12.31) In Mark’s Gospel, the demons were the first to recognize who Jesus was.

V.19: The Psalmist had sung, ‘You shall tread upon the asp and the viper, trample the lion and the dragon.’ (91.13) The sense of the psalm or the verse

can hardly be literal, but they are vivid metaphors for the powers of evil.

V.20: Jesus says that it is not so important to be able to overcome serpents and scorpions, or even to expel demons, but that the names of the seventy are written in heaven. Revelation has an image of this, ‘

I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. Then another scroll was opened, the book of life. The dead were judged according to their deeds, by what was written in the scrolls. (20.12)

Vv.21-22: This second passage, which has a parallel in Matthew 11.25-27, expresses the joy of Jesus in his Father having revealed ‘these things’ to ‘infants.’ ‘These things’ probably refers to the power to expel demons, while the latter reference is to his disciples. Earlier, Jesus had said to them, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God...’

V.22: Jesus goes on to rejoice in the intimate relationship between him and his Father. They know each other fully, as no one else can, except those to whom they choose to reveal themselves.

Vv.23-24: In Matthew 13.16-17, Jesus similarly rejoices,

Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

The “outsiders” – in this context, the simple and ignorant – are favoured above the “insiders” – the wise and the intelligent. And all this was the Father’s gracious will.

Week 27

Monday

Luke 10.25-37 The parable of the Good Samaritan

25. Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’

26. He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’

27. He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’

28. And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

29. But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’

30. Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of

robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

31. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

32. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

34. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

35. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

36. Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?

37. He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

There are passages similar to this in Matthew 22.34-40 and Mark 12.28-34, but they do not include the parable of the Good Samaritan.

V.25: Luke (and Matthew) say that the lawyer's (or scribe's - Mark) question was intended to test Jesus, to disconcert (*Jerusalem Bible*) him. It is difficult to

see this in it as his question seems straightforward enough.

Vv.26-28: As is nearly always the case, Jesus does not give a straight answer to a question, but throws it back to the lawyer, asking him what was written in the Law about it. That was the rabbinical style; it was a way of opening up discussion and broadening the perspective rather than foreclose it with a “definitive” reply. In reply, he quotes Deuteronomy 6.5, the *Shema*, a basic classic text of the Jewish faith, which every Jew would have learned by heart from childhood. Jesus follows up by saying that, if the lawyer does this, he will have eternal life. It is not enough to know it or to believe it; what matters is to do it.

V.29: The lawyer’s mind comes to the fore; he wants a definition of “neighbour.” Lawyers want clear definitions of terms used in legal texts; that’s the way the law works. In practical terms, the working definition of *neighbour* in use at the time would have been a fellow Jew.

Vv.30-37: Jesus throws the matter wide open. Firstly, he does not give a definition - to *define* means *to set a limit*. Instead, in vv.30-35, he tells a parable. This is meant to draw questioners into the process, to get them to work out the answer for themselves. Jesus wants the measure of love to be without measure, the scope of neighbourliness to be unlimited.

(The *Catechism* had a similar purpose when it asked the question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ and answered it by stating, ‘My neighbour is all mankind, even those who injure me, or differ from me in religion.’ *A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine*, Gill, Dublin, 1951, n.279)

The lawyer’s question focussed on the object of love, while Jesus’ reply focusses on the subject. The lawyer might have debated whether the robbery victim came within the terms of a definition of a neighbour-who-deserved-help, like defining ‘the deserving poor’ in contrast to ‘idle beggars.’ Jesus, by contrast, directs the debate to the lawyer and his attitude: has he, or has he not, the love, to help a person in need, regardless of who s/he is?

The hero of the story is a Samaritan. This must have shocked, even outraged, Jesus’ hearers. Jews and Samaritans hated each other, on religious and political grounds. Jews saw Samaritans as heretics and traitors, worse than pagans. Their political division had its origin early on, in the frosty relationship between Israel and Judah: -

There was no deeper breach of human relations in the contemporary world than the feud of Jews and Samaritans, and the breadth and depth of Jesus’ doctrine of love could demand no greater act of a Jew than that he accept a Samaritan as a

brother. (John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*.)

In Irish terms, it would be like Jesus presenting a parable of the good Provo to an audience of followers of the Reverend Ian Paisley and his Democratic Unionist Party.

The Samaritans, for their part, were equally emphatic in rejecting the Judaism of Jesus' time, especially the teaching of the Pharisees, seeing themselves as the authentic keepers of the Torah. (A possible meaning of their name, Samaritan, is that it comes not from Samaria but from the Hebrew word *samarim*, meaning *keepers of the Law*.)

The anti-heroes of the story are the priest and the Levite, who pass by on the other side, either pretending not to notice, or not wanting to get involved, perhaps out of considerations of ritual purity. They may, possibly, have been on their way to perform ritual religious duties, but clearly what God wanted of them there and then was they should help the man in need, and that is what they failed to do.

But Jewish history also had its tale of good Samaritans. When the latter defeated Israel in battle, taking large numbers of prisoners, a prophet of theirs persuaded them to act generously: -

‘You must not bring the captives in here... or we should be guilty before Yahweh. You are proposing to add to our sins and to our guilt, but our guilt is already heavy and the fierce anger of Yahweh is already hanging over Israel.’ So, in the presence of the officials and of the whole assembly, the army gave up the captives and the booty. Men expressly nominated for the purpose saw to the relief of the prisoners. From the booty they clothed all those of them who were naked; they gave them clothing and sandals and provided them with food, drink and shelter. They mounted all those who were infirm on donkeys and took them back to their kinsmen at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria. (2 Chronicles 28.13-15)

Whether this is fact, fiction or faction, a blend of the two, it still points to humanity in warfare, with Samaritans leading the way.

The best part of Jewish tradition upheld the duty of care for all. Leviticus stated, ‘You must love your neighbour as yourself’ (19.18), while Proverbs said, ‘Do not refuse a kindness to anyone who begs it, if it is in your power to perform it.’ (3.27) The focus was not on thinking or believing the right ideas; it was on *doing* what the Torah required, ‘You must keep my laws and customs. Whoever complies with them will find life in them.’ (Leviticus 18.5) ‘He who keeps the commandment is keeper of himself; but he who despises the word shall die.’ (Proverbs 19.16)

Week 27

Tuesday

Luke 10.38-42 Jesus visits Martha and Mary

38. Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.

39. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

40. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.'

41. But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;

42. there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

V.38: 'As they went on their way...' Their way was to Jerusalem. This theme runs through Luke, especially from 9.51 onwards. Jerusalem was the religious and national capital of the Jews, the place that mattered, the culmination point of the mission of Jesus.

'Martha welcomed him into her home.' In the Middle East, it was (and still is), unusual for a house to be described as that of a woman; it would

normally be described as that of the man who lived there. The fact that it is not described as the house of Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary (see John 11.1-44) has suggested to some that perhaps he was in some way - physically, mentally, socially or otherwise - considered to be not normal, perhaps defective.

Vv.39-40: Mary is depicted as the listener, and Martha as the activist. Hospitality was a highly regarded social duty. To fail in it was a black mark against an individual, and Martha, it seems, was determined not to be found wanting. Someone had to prepare the food and meet the needs of their honoured and welcome guest. If they both just sat down and listened, Jesus might have gone hungry – hardly a cordial welcome!

Vv.41-42: But the story is a parable in action. It makes one point and is not meant to be squeezed for every last drop of allegorical meaning; this could falsify it. Jesus has a point to make: relationships are more important than functions, people than projects, being than doing, contemplation than activity, time *with* than time *for* people. There are times when it is right to let other things go and just listen. There are golden moments which are too precious to be lost because of the demands of practicalities. ‘What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?’ wrote the poet, William H. Davies, (1871-1940, “Leisure.”)

Our world of efficiency and productivity has little time to stop and talk. We are harried by the clock, unable to relax and reflect, always under pressure of one kind or another. (The clock, not the train, is the best symbol of the Industrial Revolution.) The words applied to Martha, ‘distracted’ (twice), ‘worried’ apply to us, too.

But Martha should not be dismissed as a fusspot. She made what was perhaps the greatest profession of faith in the Gospel: ‘Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world.’ (John 11.27) And she is recognized by the church as a saint, with her feastday on 29 July.

Week 27

Wednesday

Luke 11.1-4 The Lord's prayer

1. Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’
2. He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:
Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
/3. Give us each day our daily bread.
4. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.’

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 6.9-13.

Plurals are used throughout: ‘us,’ ‘we,’ and ‘our’ in Matthew. A Christian is always, even in “private” prayer, a member of the community of faith. There is no Lone Ranger spirituality, no DIY salvation, no solo run, no Little Red Hen doing it herself.

Luke’s version is shorter and simpler than Matthew’s, but scripture scholars are in disagreement as to which is more original. (See Jerusalem Bible, reader’s edition, note a: ‘Matthew’s seems more original;’ and NCCHS, 780a, v.1 states, ‘Lk... is very close to the original.’)

V.1: Luke does not concern himself with geographical information; it is of little importance to him, other than to note Jesus’ gradual movement towards Jerusalem, the point of climax.

His disciples must have witnessed Jesus’ prayer on many occasions, or at least been aware of it, when he went off to lonely places to be by himself and to pray. So they ask him for help, citing the example of John who, seemingly, taught his disciples.

V.2: Luke has ‘Father’ – just that, both here and in 10.21 and 23.34. Matthew has ‘Father in heaven’ twenty times, Mark once, and Luke never.

The word Luke uses for 'Father' is *Abba*, an intimate term like 'Daddy,' not the formal 'Father.' Jews used the word Father of God quite widely, but not the word *Abba*; it probably seemed unduly familiar.

'Hallowed be your name.' In the Hebrew Bible, it is God who hallows, or glorifies, himself. But here it seems to mean 'may your name be hallowed (glorified) by people.'

'Your Kingdom come.' The proclamation of the Kingdom of God is the central theme of the preaching of Jesus. This phrase summarizes and says everything. Matthew's 'your will be done' is essentially the same idea repeated. God's kingdom is not complete on earth; it will be complete in the future, at a time which only God knows. The believer's task is to pray and work for its accomplishment. The phrases of the Lord's Prayer express not merely a wish, but a commitment.

V.3: We ask for the necessities, not the superfluities, and for those we need today, not what we may need tomorrow.

V.4: Both Luke and Matthew include the element of reciprocity in this prayer for forgiveness. Being forgiven and being willing to forgive are inseparable.

V.5: Clearly, God does not tempt us to evil. One suggested meaning is, ‘do not allow us to succumb to temptation.’ (NCCHS 780a, 4b) Temptations and trials will come; such is the nature of human existence. This is a prayer that we will not be overcome by them. Some texts add, ‘but rescue us from evil.’

Week 27

Thursday

Luke 11. 5-13 Perseverance in prayer

5. And he said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;

6. for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.”

7. And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.”

8. I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

9. So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

10. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

11. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone; or if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?

12. Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?

13. If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’

There is a passage in Luke 18.1-8 with a message similar to 11.5-8, while Matthew 7.7-11 is parallel to vv.9-13, with a similar message also in John 14.13-14.

Vv.5-8: The message appears to be about persistence in prayer. Even if the friend who is asked for help is reluctant, persistence will finally move him, just as, in Luke 18.1-8, if even an unjust judge may finally be persuaded to act justly in response to dogged persistence, will not a just God act justly?

Judges 14.10-20 has a far from edifying story about Samson’s wife’s persistence – some might call it moral blackmail – finally extracting a favourable reply from him (though with serious consequences for her.) V.17 uses the word ‘nagged’ of her request.

The story is open to the interpretation that the way to get what you want is to make such a nuisance of yourself that the other agrees to give it to you just to

get rid of you. Supermarket managers recognize the value of this pester power when they place sweets beside the checkout, knowing that children will badger their parents to buy them sweets while they wait in line to be served. In order to keep them quiet, the parents may agree. Such tactics sometimes work, but are they to be advocated? What effect do they have on the nagger? Are they not demeaning?

In Matthew 15.21-28, Jesus showed himself receptive to such petition: -

21. Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

22. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'

23. But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'

24. He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

25. But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'

26. He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

27. She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'

28. Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

There the disciples just want to be rid of her because she kept shouting after them, while Jesus appears to play hard-to-get in response to her persistence which, however, eventually wins him over. It's hard not to see it as like someone who holds out a bone for a dog to jump up for, only to move it out of its reach just before it grasps it, before finally relenting because the dog keeps jumping and whining. That may whet the dog's appetite, but is it a model for human relationships? (Sorry, Jesus, for taking you to task, but I think you want us to take you seriously.)

V.9: The passive voice – 'it will be given,' 'the door will be opened' is commonly used to suggest divine action. To avoid using the name of God, e.g., 'God will give,' 'God will open the door' the same idea is communicated indirectly through the passive. The meaning is the same; only the mode of expression differs.

Vv.9-13: Ask, search, knock – these are part of a process of growth. If a person goes through life without asking, searching, or knocking, they are unlikely to get anything. People who commit themselves to a task in life, who seek it with determination, in many, perhaps most, cases achieve their goal. One thinks of Olympic athletes who invest endless effort, time and hope in trying to achieve their goal. They do not always succeed, but, for sure, they will never succeed without the effort.

But will God do for us what we are already able to do for ourselves using gifts already given to us? It seems unlikely.

V.10: The JB translation uses the word ‘always’ not once, but three times: ‘always receives,’ ‘always finds,’ ‘always have the door opened.’ It is hard to see that borne out by the experience of life.

Two Jewish sayings come to mind, ‘If you’re looking for a helping hand, there’s one at the end of your arm,’ and, ‘One hand washes the other.’ I think it is true to say that many people have the experience of asking for something in prayer, even over a long period – I think of religious praying for “vocations” – and the answer appears to be no. No is an answer, even if it is not the one we are looking for. The seemingly blanket guarantee given in v.13 (and even more strongly in John 14.13-14: ‘I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it’) – does not appear to be validated by human experience.

But an attitude of expectancy, of hopefulness, of daring to look for something seems a necessity for human advancement. The gloomy advice sometimes heard, ‘Don’t hope for anything and then you won’t be disappointed’ seems like a self-fulfilling wish for failure. Much better and wiser is that, ‘One is entitled to think that the future of humanity is in the hands of those who can provide coming generations with reasons for life and optimism.’ (Vatican II,

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n.31.)

V.13: ‘If you, then, who are evil...’ This jars. I have seen people at Mass seem hurt on hearing it. Is it an example of so-called “Semitic exaggeration” in which contrasts are painted as strongly as possible in order to make a point? Let us hope so. It would be a pity if it were meant literally.

A huge question about prayer of petition is raised by the Holocaust (*Shoah*). The Jewish people, in all stages of that process, from beginning to end, must have stormed heaven with prayers for deliverance, using the Psalms in which God promises to deliver his people from their enemies, but, in the end, the answer was no. They were herded into gas chambers, and only the arrival of the Soviet Army prevented the almost total annihilation of European Jews. The question, ‘Where was God in Auschwitz?’ does not allow of facile answers. It is a question no less powerful and pressing for Christians than for Jews, even though, for the latter, it clearly has greater emotional impact.

What is the nature of God’s intervention in the world? The fact that God became man in the person of Jesus suggests strongly that it is primarily through the human that God is present. Humanity is made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1.27); it has been redeemed by Christ; the Holy Spirit dwells in the souls of the baptized and the person is destined

for eternal life with God. Humanity is “en-Godded”; it could not not be in God. The Benedictine spiritual writer John Main says, ‘God’s presence is not external to us. It is internal, the presence that makes up and holds together the ground of our being.’ God is not another existing thing apart from us, and for whom we look. God is existence: - ‘The name “He who Is” is the most appropriate of all the divine names.’ (Saint John of Damascus, *On the orthodox Faith*, 1.9) ‘As only in God is essence one with existence, “He who Is” is the appropriate name of God.’ (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, ques.13, art.11)

This is not pantheism, but rather panentheism – all things *are* in God. ‘My God is me, nor do I recognize any other me except my God himself,’ wrote Saint Catherine of Genoa in a saying which is, admittedly, not without ambiguity. (Cited by Gerald W. Hughes, *God of Surprises*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1985, p.161) Saint John of the Cross wrote, ‘The soul’s centre is God.’ (*The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 1.12 in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, revised edition, ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, DC, 1991, p.645) In similar vein, Meister Eckhart wrote, ‘God instands within himself; He is the ground and the encirclement of all being,’ and, ‘True renunciation is not of kingdoms but of one’s perception of oneself as an entity separate from God.’

Without this, a person may unwittingly drift into a practical deism, where God exists but is remote, disconnected from the world, the clockmaker who winds up the clock and then leaves it to itself. While deism is philosophically distinct from atheism, it is psychologically only a short step away from it.

Prayer of petition is an almost impossibly difficult topic. The Irish Anglican writer, C. S. Lewis, who wrote about it extensively, said, at the end, in effect, that it was impossible to disentangle. (See, for example, *Christian Reflections*, edited by Walter Hooper, Fount Books, London, 1980, p.180, "Petitionary Prayer: a Problem without an Answer"; *The Screwtape Letters: letters from a senior to a junior devil*, Fontana, London, 1964, Letter 27; *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, Fontana, London, 1964, p.55)

What a person can do is to trust (Greek: *pistis*), to let go and let God. Jesus told people to pray; he himself prayed, so maybe we should just do it and trust in God. I remember once being asked by a taxi driver, 'Are you good at praying?' I think what he meant was, 'If you pray for things, do you get them?' I said to him, 'I don't know whether I'm good at it or not, but I do it anyway.'

A question worth asking about the prayer of petition is this: is its purpose to pester God into doing what we want him to do (which seems to be what the parable implies), or is it to change us so

that we will what God wills, and, consequently, will always get what we ask.

Week 27

Friday

Luke 11.14-23 Jesus and Beelzebul

14. Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed.

15. But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.'

16. Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven.

17. But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house.

18. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? - for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul.

19. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

20. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

21. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe.

22. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder.

23. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

24. When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.'

25. When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order.

26. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 12.22-32 and Mark 3.19b-30.

(For some reason, verse 14 is missing from the *Lectionary*, making it difficult to make sense of what follows. It is included in the reading assigned to Lent, Week 3, Thursday.)

V.14: This story is, in part, a study of human reactions to Jesus. He gives speech to a man who was dumb. To those present, familiar as they likely were with the scriptures, prominent among them the messianic writings of Isaiah, this should have rung a bell: 'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame leap like a deer and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy...' (Isaiah 35.5-6) These actions were associated with the Messiah, so what did that indicate about Jesus? That question was staring them in the face - but either they missed it or chose not to see it.

V.15: The name Beelzebul, or, less accurately, Beelzebub, means Lord of the Flies. It may have been a contemptuous Hebrew pun – Jews, including Jesus, liked puns - on the Baals, gods associated with pagan fertility cults. Some of those present said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.’ Attributing good to evil, cynicism, sneering, readiness to belittle, are perverse. But one does not need to go back to the New Testament to find them.

V.16: ‘Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven.’ Hadn’t they just had one? What more were they looking for? If the power of speech given to a dumb man is not a sign from heaven, then what would be? The obvious is sometimes that which is most easily missed.

This reminds me a little of people in West Belfast when I lived there becoming very excited over the back of a fireplace in someone’s house. (!) Part of it was covered by carbon in a pattern which someone said showed the face of Jesus, and this was held to be miraculous. People went from a wide area to see it. I have also seen pictures of melting snow on a mountain which left black rock exposed against the white background. Again, someone “saw” the face of Jesus in it. Some people love the bizarre and the strange, associating them with the supernatural, and fail to value the obvious and ordinary, even though they form the great bulk of human life. The search

for the weird is an unhealthy manifestation of religiosity and is not far removed from atheism. It may also lead others to dismiss religion as bunk.

Vv.17-19: Jesus ‘knew what they were thinking.’ He knew what people had in them. He understood human nature and his own people.

Jesus makes the rejoinder that if it is by the power of Beelzebul that he casts out Beelzebul, then Beelzebul is divided against himself. He goes on to challenge his critics by asking by whose power their own exorcists cast out demons.

Vv.20-22: Jesus presses his point further. He has not cast out the demon by the power of Satan, since that would imply division in Satan. It follows, therefore, that it is by the power of God that he has done it. He has shown that his power is greater than Satan’s. That being the case, why do they not accept him?

What is noticeable here is that Jesus takes a more assertive role towards his critics. Instead of simply answering their criticism, as hitherto, he increasingly turns their criticism back on themselves, and demands that they give him an answer.

The expression ‘finger of God’ is significant; it means the power of God. The Ten Commandments are described as ‘the two stone tablets written with the finger of God.’ (Deuteronomy 9.10, and similarly in Exodus 31.17) In Exodus 8.19 (NRSV),

the expression is used by Pharaoh's magicians to acknowledge the power of God working through Moses and Aaron. Jesus' use of that expression should also have rung a bell with his hearers.

V.23: In view of the above, Jesus challenges them – and us - to make up their minds: are they for him or against him? He doesn't want fence-sitters.

In Luke 9.50 (and Mark 9.40), Jesus had said, 'Whoever is not against us is for us'. Here he says, 'Whoever is not with me is against me.' The two are complementary rather than contradictory, with differing applications in differing situations.

Vv.24-26: These are in the nature of a supplementary comment not flowing directly from the preceding verses. They seem to say that, if people do not respond to grace given, they may end up worse than before. One's own experience of failing to challenge sin bears this out. An example from the Old Testament might be that of Pharaoh: 'But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them,' and continued doing so in the face of all evidence. (Exodus 8.15; see also 8.19, 32; 9.7, 12, 35; 10.27, NRSV)

Week 27
Saturday

Luke 11.27-28 True blessedness

27. While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!'

28. But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!'

V.27: The woman in the crowd, clearly impressed by what she had seen and heard in Jesus, spontaneously expresses her wonder and joy, along with admiration for the mother of such a man, as if to say, 'What mother would not be proud of such a son!'

V.28: Jesus seems to deflect the woman's praise from Mary, reinforcing his point, made elsewhere also, (Matthew 12.46-50; Mark 3.31-35) that it is not the bonds of kinship that determine people's relationship with God but rather that they hear the word of God and keep it.

Jesus' relationship with his relatives was difficult. They did not understand him. When he was twelve years old he was lost in the Temple in Jerusalem and then found by Mary and Joseph: -

When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.'

He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. (Luke 2.48-50)

This echoes an earlier phrase in Luke where Mary 'was much perplexed' (1.29) by what the angel of God had said to her.

Luke also recounts an incident which concludes with a phrase almost identical to v.28 above: -

'Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." But he said to them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.' (Luke 8.19-21)

At an early stage in his public ministry, when Jesus preached in the synagogue at Nazareth, his home town (Luke 4.16-30), the townspeople 'got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.' (v.29) In this same passage, Jesus said, 'Truly, I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.' Indeed, it is common for prophets to find that the last people to understand or accept them are their own. (A lesser example in our own time is the mother of Séamus Heaney, the Nobel poet laureate, saying to him,

‘Séamus, whatever you say, say nothing.’) This appears to have been the case with Jesus. Sometimes a separation from the ties of family is necessary for the prophet to be able to fulfil his role; it can happen that mother love becomes smother love.

Later, some of his relatives begin to question his sanity: ‘When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”’ (Mark 3.21) And John says, ‘Not even his brothers believed in him.’ (7.5)

It must have been sad, disappointing and lonely for Jesus to have a family which did not understand or accept him or his mission. It was a portent of his rejection by the Jewish people.

In John 2.4 and 19.25, Jesus addresses his mother Mary as “Woman.” This was the normal greeting for a man to use in speaking to a woman he did not know. But there is no precedent in Hebrew literature for a son addressing his mother in this fashion. (See John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1976, entry “Mary”)

In Acts, after the resurrection, Mary is present among the disciples: ‘All these [the disciples] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.’ (Acts 1.14) Saint Augustine wrote, ‘Mary is more blessed because she embraces faith in Christ than because she conceives

the flesh of Christ.’ (*On Virginity*, n.3; PL 40.398)
Just as Jesus ‘increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour’ (Luke 2.52), so perhaps Mary, his mother, and his relatives also needed to.

Interestingly, as an aside, Mary is mentioned more often in the Qur’ân than in the Gospels, and always with praise.

Week 28

Monday

Luke 11.29-32 The sign of Jonah

29. When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, ‘This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.

30. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation.

31. The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!

32. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!’

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 12.38-42, while Mark 8.11-12 and Matthew 16.1-4 are similar.

V.29a: A sign is a demonstrative wonder which points to the action of God. (Mark 16.20; John 3.2) Jesus himself is such a sign (Luke 2.12, 34), but one that ‘will be opposed.’ (Luke 2.34) In Luke 11.16, the people kept demanding a sign, though they had just had one. (11.14) The people ask for a sign to indicate when the destruction of the Temple was coming. (Luke 21.7) Herod wanted to see Jesus perform a sign (Luke 23.8), as if he thought of him as a circus performer. It is like putting God in the dock and demanding that he establish his credentials to our satisfaction, like saying that we will accept God – but only on our terms. In Luke 1.18, Zechariah had such an attitude, was punished for it and no sign was given to him. Asking for a sign is close to violating the precept of Deuteronomy, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ (6.16)

Vv.29b-30, 32: Jesus points to the story of Jonah and the fish. The book of Jonah, the Hebrew prophet, like the Gospel parables, is intended to teach, without any implication that its story is to be regarded as historical. If it also amuses people in the telling, so much the better. It has a serious message, however, namely, that God will readily forgive at the first sign of repentance. In the book of Jonah, the people of Nineveh, the capital of Israel’s arch-

enemy, the Assyrians, repent at his preaching and are forgiven. This ‘lesson of humility and sincere repentance comes to the Chosen People from their bitterest foes.’ (*Jerusalem Bible*, reader’s edition, p.1141.) It is a theme familiar from the Gospels: the outsiders get the message which the insiders either do not or will not see.

Part of the humour of the story is that everyone repents – except Jonah, the preacher of repentance! It did not occur to him that he needed it, despite his refusal in Jonah 1.1-2 to obey God, and his sulky anger in 4.9 at God forgiving too readily in his view. In this, Jonah mirrors the people Jesus addressed: except for prostitutes, publicans and “sinners,” they did not see that they needed repentance. They lived by a religion of law and they had met its requirements, so there.

Matthew’s interpretation (in 12.40) is different. He focuses on Jonah’s being in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights (Jonah 2.1), seeing it as indicative of the presence of Jesus in the tomb from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. This has led the American Franciscan, Richard Rohr, to write: -

Without the sign of Jonah - the pattern of new life *only* through death (‘in the belly of the whale’) - Christianity remains a largely impotent ideology, another way to ‘win’ instead of the pain of faith. Or it becomes a language of ascent instead of the treacherous journey of descent that characterizes Jonah, Jeremiah, Job,

John the Baptizer and Jesus. After Jesus, Christians used the metaphor ‘the way of the cross.’ Unfortunately, it became ‘what Jesus did to save us’ - or a negative theology of atonement - instead of the necessary pattern that is redemptive for all of us.

Rohr’s point is, I think, that as for Christ so also for the Christian: we must *all* make the descent into suffering, obscurity and nothingness, if resurrection is to mean anything.

V.31: The reference to the Queen of the South draws on the story in 1 Kings 10.1-10 where it describes how the Queen of Sheba came a great distance to learn from the wisdom of Solomon. Jesus says, in effect, that if she went to the trouble of undertaking such a great journey to listen with humility and respect to [a pedantic bore like] Solomon, then Jesus’ own people ought to listen to him with respect, since he is greater than Solomon.

Running through the two stories – Jonah and the Queen of Sheba – is the clear understanding that there will be a judgment (vv.31, 32) in which people will be called to account for their response to Jesus.

Week 28

Tuesday

Luke 11.37-41 Jesus denounces Pharisees

37. While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table.

38. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner.

39. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.

40. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?

41. So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.’

Much of this and what follows, up to 12.3, parallels Matthew 23.

V.37: A feature of Luke’s Gospel is that Jesus is often going to a meal, or at a meal, or coming from a meal. Meals are a big part of Jewish tradition, and, to a lesser extent, of Christian also, pre-eminently in the Eucharistic memorial of the Last Supper.

Jesus did not refuse an invitation from one of a group who was consistently hostile to him, even if, as was sometimes the case, they were setting out to trap him. Luke 7.36 and 14.1 record him as having meals with Pharisees. Meals can be a good way of breaking ice, and getting dialogue going on cordial terms. The word companion literally means someone you’ve eaten bread with. (Latin *cum*, with, and *panis*, bread.)

V.38: The Pharisee, punctilious about dietary observances, was amazed at Jesus' seemingly relaxed ignoring of these rules, of which he was doubtless well aware. (In Matthew 15.2 and Mark 7.2, 5 Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem had come and challenged Jesus on precisely this point, the big guns brought into action over a small issue.) Jesus' host said nothing, perhaps unwilling to risk offending his guest, or because he was afraid of him. There is pharisaism and pharisaism, the pharisaism of the man in this story and the pharisaism of those who are shocked at an individual's social indiscretions – 'S/he doesn't know how to behave in polite society.' And the gaffe – 'Can you believe it? *Quelle horreur!* S/he doesn't know the difference between a serviette and a napkin, between notepaper and writing paper!' - shows the person is 'not one of us' and therefore not to be invited back. The canons of political correctness may not be violated with impunity. The petty hypocrisies of the chattering classes mirror well that of the Pharisee in the story.

V.39: Jesus, observant and perceptive as always, did not fail to note the Pharisee's reaction. He was a formidable character, not always an easy person to have around. Invited by the Pharisee to a meal in his house, Jesus accepts, but then tells his host that Pharisees are full of greed and wickedness. The Gospel doesn't say in what atmosphere the meal progressed. Was it cordial or frosty?

V.40: His point is about focussing on essentials while not neglecting non-essentials. Other ways of looking at it are to say that he wanted to move the Pharisee away from a religion of observances to one of relationships, or from concern with the externals of religion to facing the challenge of the “internal” issues, those of the mind and the heart, or from being aggressively busy trying to change the rest of the world to starting to change himself. ‘Be the change you want to see in the world,’ Jesus might have said.

V.41: The translation here seems uncertain. The JB has, ‘Instead, give alms from what you have and then everything indeed will be clean for you.’ Jesus reiterates the importance of alms-giving in Luke 12.33-34, and it has been a constant part of Christian tradition.

The Pharisees, priests, lawyers and scribes saw themselves as the pillars and guardians of orthodoxy, and were the hardest to convert, probably because they felt no need for it. They were sure of themselves, could quote chapter and verse of scripture and commentary, and invoke precedents. Others were accountable to them, not vice versa. ‘Are you trying to teach us?’ (John 9.34) expressed their attitude. ‘Who do you think you are? We are the authorities.’ It is almost impossible to change such people; maybe nothing will open them up to a wider horizon but the collapse of their world. Saint Paul put it strongly, ‘You who want to be justified

by the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.’ (Galatians 5.4)

Week 28

Wednesday

Luke 11.42-46 Woe to Pharisees and lawyers

42. ‘But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.

43. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honour in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces.

44. Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it.’

45. One of the lawyers answered him, ‘Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too.’

46. And he said, ‘Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them.’

Like the previous passage, this has much in common with Matthew 23.

V.42: Preoccupation with trivia often leads to neglect of essentials; this seems to be Jesus’ point. He himself had said, ‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.’ (Luke 16.10) But being faithful to the little things is different from being picky, fussy or nit-picking while being blind to larger issues.

V.43: We all do, Jesus. Clergy, lawyers and the military are fond of dressing up in colourful finery, making display of rank, and letting people know on what step of the ladder they are. Even better is humbly declining the perks of status while making sure people see them first.

V.44: People would incur ritual defilement by walking on a grave, even inadvertently. But it is not easy to see what point is being made here.

V.45: The lawyer understood that the criticism was equally directed at them, as indeed it was. The scribes, too, came under almost identical criticism from Jesus in Luke 20.45-47 and Mark 12.38-39. Lawyers, scribes, Pharisees and priests formed a group, which, though sometimes in conflict with each other, came from the same milieu, with the same mindset and saw a common threat in Jesus. Professionals don't like it when an enthusiastic amateur invades their patch, beats them at their own game, and shows up so much of what passed among them for religion as self-serving and even oppressive, leaving the ordinary punter with the feeling of being an also ran, not really up to the mark. Who was it that said, 'Nothing so obscures the face of God as religion'? Jesus might have inspired the remark.

V.46: He issued a similar criticism of lawyers, 'because you load people with burdens hard to bear,

and you yourselves do not move a finger to ease them.’ Lawyers make the laws, interpret them, and pass judgment based on them. The law can become an incestuous, self-serving system – *Bleak House* is an example, and more recent Bleak Houses, too. Complexity, finnickiness, chasing after trivia, multiplying hearings etc. – these are all sauces to the main dish and they make money.

Week 28

Thursday

Luke 11.47-54 Woe to you!

47. Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed.

48. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs.

49. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,

50. so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world,

51. from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation.

52. Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.’

53. When he went outside, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things,
54. lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.

As with the previous two passages there are clear links to Matthew 23.

Vv.47-48: The reference to building and white-washing the tombs of the prophets their ancestors killed seems to say that they have learned nothing from the mistakes of the past but are about to repeat them on a larger scale, that is, by killing him.

Vv.49-51a: V.49 is phrased as if it might be a quotation, but it isn't. It is presented as Jesus' view of how things are. There was a long history of prophets being killed, and being recognized as prophets only after their death. This is a common feature of human history.

V.51b sounds like a threat of retribution on his generation. Luke's Gospel was probably written between 70 and 90 AD, so it is very likely that this text was written after Jerusalem was destroyed in 70, completing the re-capture of Israel by the Romans, with huge slaughter. Was this then read into it by way of explanation? Luke may be offering an explanation for the cataclysm by saying how he thinks Jesus might have seen it.

V.52: Jesus is hitting at religion and its official representatives, the Pharisees and the lawyers. According to the lawyers, none but they could properly explain the scriptures. Jesus says they don't understand them, but nonetheless use their authority to block others from trying to do so.

The use of the term "lawyer" may be misleading. In Jesus' time, the term meant a layman who expounded the Law, and was therefore probably a teacher more than a lawyer in our sense. Jews say that the word *Torah* is better translated as Teaching than as Law. Lawyers and scribes were virtually identical. An analogous confusion exists in the Catholic liturgy, where the title Doctor (of the Church) applies not to a healer, but to a teacher. (Latin: *docere*, to teach.)

Vv.53-54: The reaction of the scribes and the Pharisees was that they 'began to be very hostile towards him and to cross-examine him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.'

Luke describes the increasing hostility to Jesus: -

'They were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus' (6.11); 'The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him' (19.47);

‘When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people. So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor’ (20.19-20);

‘The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people.’ (22.2)

Jesus was not put to death by atheists or by people of another religion but by a coalition of his own religious leaders and a foreign colonial power. When religious and political leaders go to bed together, nasty things often follow, and justice and truth are among the first victims.

What Jesus says in this passage seems to go beyond a criticism of the errors and abuses of individuals; it goes further, too, than a condemnation of institutional wrongdoing. It seems to be for him a pointer to a departure from the system, leaving it behind, stranded, like something left on the shore when the tide ebbs. Sometimes individuals and institutions put themselves beyond reform; when that happens they can only be abolished or left to wither by themselves.

Was part of Jesus’ mission to free people from a religion that had bound them? Had the Jewish

religion become a control system rather than a means of liberating people, enabling them to live up to their best? This has happened to the Catholic faith in our own time and perhaps others'; if the church loves itself more than it loves Jesus or humanity then it has lost its authority and deserves no loyalty.

Week 28

Friday

Luke 12.1-7 A warning against hypocrisy

1. Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another, he began to speak first to his disciples, 'Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy.
2. Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.
3. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops.
4. I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more.
5. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!
6. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight.
7. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.'

What follows is a collection of sayings, probably from different contexts, stitched together. Matthew has several of them in 10.26-31, and Mark one in 8.15, though in different contexts.

V.1: People were attracted to Jesus in large numbers; this is common in Luke. (See 14.25; 18.36; 19.3; 20.45; 21.38) Was it because he spoke the truth unvarnished? Yet he appears to have been silent about the Roman occupation, and about slavery.

Hypocrisy: an easy word to throw around. Teenagers (of all ages) use it freely. If a person goes to a church, tries to follow the Christian life, and then sometimes falls short by doing wrong, it is not uncommon to hear them accused of hypocrisy. This seems unfair: they are ordinary people trying to be decent human beings, failing sometimes, as everyone does, and looking to their faith to help them on the way. They aren't waving a flag boasting that they are better than others. They go to a church because they need it, not because doing so is a badge of achievement.

Jesus uses yeast as an image of corruption. It ferments, working from within, changing what it is mixed with, such as dough, beer, etc. In the wrong setting, it can act as a catalyst for infection, making a bad situation worse.

Vv.2-3: Jesus said, ‘The truth will make you free.’ (John 8.32) We humans are often afraid of the truth; we want to keep things under wraps. Maybe some things are better kept that way. Is it always good for a wife to admit to her husband that she has been unfaithful to him? If we always knew what our friends said about us behind our backs, would it be better for us? The poet, T. S. Eliot, wrote, ‘... human kind cannot bear very much reality.’ (*Burnt Norton*, I, p.190; 1935)

But the truth will out, and all the better for that. ‘For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light. (Luke 8.17) In our own time, we have seen long-buried misdeeds brought to light, and accountability demanded. That is greatly preferable to concealment, lies and pretence. We have also seen situations improved, and abuses corrected, because hidden issues were made public and misdeeds shown up for what they were. It is a great pity that, in the church, we have developed and lived by a culture and code of secrecy – our own *omertà* – for the sake of protecting the reputation of the church: ‘Don’t say anything that could cause scandal...’ This code was held in place by denial, delaying tactics and dissembling, sometimes indeed by simple lying. This enabled injustice and wrongdoing not only to go unpunished but to be protected and to flourish, sometimes driving victims of criminality to cynicism or despair, and immensely damaging the church’s role as a witness to the Gospel. We were extremely

slow to learn, having to be dragged reluctantly, step by painful step, out into the light, by “the world” which saw how wrong some things were before we did. We offered society damage-limitation in place of confession and conversion. It was “the world,” and especially the much-maligned media, which, in regard to the issue of child abuse, that taught the church basic morality.

In some cases, wrongdoers themselves brought disclosure. They were unable to live with their hidden guilt; it was destroying them. But, while their open acknowledgement of wrongdoing may have brought them punishment, it also brought them healing. Confession is good for the soul.

V.4: Bodily death is not the thing most to be feared. Stalin’s *Gulag*, for all its malice, could do nothing to a person after death. There is the everlasting death of the soul in hell.

V.5: Is Jesus talking about God or the devil? It seems like the devil, but is open to being read as God. What is the devil? Is he a bogeyman, the projection of our fears, a handy cop-out that we can blame for wrongdoing when we want to evade responsibility for it? - like Africans blaming everything on witchcraft. If the devil is the personification of evil, might not God be the personification of good?

Vv.6-7: Every person is precious, of value in the sight of God. One of the really good things about the Christian faith is its high estimation of the value of the person, any person. If even a sparrow counts, how much more... The poet Patrick Kavanagh recognized this: 'Only God thinks of the dying sparrow in the middle of a war.' (From *Lough Derg*, written about 1942-3)

The reference to the hairs of our head is in Luke 21.18 also.

Week 28

Saturday

Luke 12.8-12 Fearless profession of faith

8. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God;

9. but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God.

10. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

11. When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say;

12. for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.

There are passages similar to these in Matthew 10.32-33, 12.32 and 10.17-20, and in Mark 8.38, 3.29 and 13.11.

In the passage are three separate ideas strung together.

Vv.8-9: Jesus insists that we cannot be neutral about him. This is because of who he is. If God comes among us in human form, that cannot be responded to by a shrug of the shoulders or by sitting on the fence. 'Jesus was either of supreme significance or of no significance.' (Rabbi Abraham Herschel)

Our relationship with Jesus is the barometer of our relationship with God. Jesus associates himself with God so closely that to deny him is to deny God. Jesus is the way to God; he points beyond himself. The point made here is so decisive that Luke repeats it elsewhere (in 9.26), and Paul insists on it, too: 'You are never to be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord.' (2 Timothy 1.8)

V.10: Yet the worst sin of all, the unforgivable one, is the sin against the Holy Spirit. What is it? Some say it is final impenitence, the last breath rejecting what it knows to be true. That seems a little like shooting an arrow, then painting a circle around where it falls, and announcing 'Bull's eye!' It is begging the question. Is the sin against the Holy

Spirit one of disrespect for truth, the frame of mind that uses it for scoring points but is indifferent to it *as truth*? Is it intellectual dishonesty, such as that which aligns itself with those in authority, regardless of what they say, but, if authority changes its view, is ready to flip and flop with it and call that loyalty? Is it placing expediency above honesty, running with the hare while hunting with the hounds? Is it being concerned to score points and win debates even at the expense of truth? Is it allowing political correctness to render dialogue impossible as everyone plays pretence? Is it refusing to re-consider a position, regardless of evidence, so as to save face?

The Letter to the Hebrews is particularly strong on this: -

It is impossible in the case of those who have once been enlightened and tasted the heavenly gift and shared in the Holy Spirit and tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to bring them to repentance again, since they are recrucifying the Son of God for themselves and holding him up to contempt. (6.4-6)

If we sin deliberately after receiving knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains sacrifice for sins but a fearful prospect of judgment and a flaming fire that is going to consume the adversaries.

Anyone who rejects the law of Moses is put to death without pity on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

Do you not think that a much worse punishment is due the one who has contempt for the Son of God, considers unclean the covenant-blood by which he was consecrated, and insults the spirit of grace?

We know the one who said: ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay,’ and again: ‘The Lord will judge his people.’

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (10.26-31)

In Mark 3.29-30, the attribution of good to evil is cited, probably as one example of many: ‘whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’ - for they had said, ‘He [Jesus] has an unclean spirit’ [in driving out an evil spirit.]

Sometimes one meets people whose idea of loyalty to the church is such that they are unwilling to see any fault in it. For them, the church is always right – even when it is wrong. They defend the indefensible in the name of fidelity. They see the church’s teaching as always and everywhere consistent – even when it has changed. When a yes becomes a no, that is a change; when a no becomes a yes, that is a change, and it is not honest to pretend that it is only a development. If an acorn becomes an oak, that is a development; if an acorn became an ash, that is a

change. Ironically, and sadly, such people may see themselves as champions of orthodoxy! What are they doing but leading people to contempt for the church as intellectually dishonest?

The church has changed, not simply developed, its teaching on topics such as slavery, usury, biblical authorship, democracy, human rights, ecumenism, evolution, colonialism, human freedom, the feminine and human sexuality among others.

When an individual, an institution, or a philosophy comes to believe that it has a monopoly of the truth, it sins against the Holy Spirit. Pope Gregory XVI wrote of 'the Catholic Church wherein truth is found without the slightest shadow of error.' (Encyclical letter, *Singulari Nos*, 25 June 1834, n.40) Ideologies of all kinds do this – whether political (such as communism, nazism, or apartheid), scientific (such as materialism or positivism), or religious (if a religion claims to have all truth). What they have in common is that they diminish and narrow the truth, using it to prop up their position. The adherent is asked to make an act of intellectual surrender, and to accept that the ideology, or its interpretation by a Great Leader, is the ultimate authority in matters of truth. It can happen to such people as those that they become *incapable* of honesty.

An anonymous writer offers a prayer in this context: -

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truths,
from the laziness that is content with half-truth,
from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
O God of truth, deliver us.

Vv.11-12: ‘Do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say.’ God will show you what to do. There is freedom in that; it implies being open to where God leads. Luke repeats this teaching in 21.12-15, and Mark adds a rider, ‘The one who endures to the end will be saved.’ (13.13)

This is not an assurance of an acquittal, or even of a chance to present a defence. Such was the experience of the Irish martyr, Oliver Plunket: -

At his second trial, in Westminster Hall, he was denied defence counsel or time to assemble his witnesses, and was frustrated in his attempts to obtain the criminal records of those who were to give evidence against him. Some of the prosecution evidence was perjured. Oliver disputed the court’s right to try him in England, and drew attention to the criminal past of the witnesses, but to no avail. Lord Chief Justice Sir Francis Pemberton, said to him, ‘Look you, Mr. Plunkett.... you have done as much as you could to dishonour God

in this case; for the bottom of your treason was your setting up your false religion, than which there is not any thing more displeasing to God, or more pernicious to mankind in the world.’ Within fifteen minutes the jury returned with a guilty verdict. On being sentenced to death, Oliver said, ‘Deo gratias.’ (Thanks be to God.)

‘The end’ that Mark speaks of in 13.13 may be in eternity. But the Holy Spirit will be with people in all such situations: ‘the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.’ (John 14.26) The willingness to be helpless in the face of persecution is like the willingness of Jesus to open his arms on the cross, naked, in self-surrender; that was the ultimate in defencelessness. It is like that of Jews being herded naked into gas chambers.

Week 29

Monday

Luke 12.13-21 The parable of the rich fool

13. Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’

14. But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’

15. And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’

16. Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly.

17. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?"

18. Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

19. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

20. But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’

21. So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.

There are no passages parallel to this, but the theme of not being possessed by possessiveness is common throughout the Gospels, and, to a considerable extent, in the Hebrew Bible also.

Wealth may make a person arrogant, self-sufficient, blind to the humanity of others, locked into the here and now, and heedless of the value of anything that cannot be measured in monetary terms.

But the *desire for* wealth may be as damaging: ‘the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and, in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.’ (1 Timothy 6.10) It is possible for a poor

person to be envious, or to be possessive of the simplest things.

There have been, and are, wealthy people who are generous in sharing their wealth with the needy, who see it as a trust they hold on behalf of humanity. But they are exceptions.

Wealth may also be the result of sharp dealing. Hosea is severe in judgment on this: -

‘Canaan holds fraudulent scales in his hands; to defraud is his delight. “How rich I have become!” says Ephraim, “I have amassed a fortune.” But he will keep nothing of all his profits, because of the guilt he has brought on himself.’ (12.7-9, JB)

And Sirach has a similar message, ‘Do not set your heart on ill-gotten gains; they will be of no use to you on the day of disaster.’ (5.8, 10 JB)

Amos, the prophet of social justice, speaks powerfully: -

Listen to this, you who trample on the needy and try to suppress the poor people of the country, you who say, ‘When will the new moon be over, so that we can sell our corn, and Sabbath, so that we can market our wheat? Then, by lowering the bushel, raising the shekel, by swindling and tampering with the scales, we can buy up the poor for money, and the needy

for a pair of sandals, and get a price even for the sweepings of the wheat.’ Yahweh swears it... ‘Never will I forget a single thing you have done.’ (8.4-7, JB)

Tampering with scales, in comparison with present-day stock market, currency, property, land and banking dealings seems almost childishly amateur. One need only think of the media tycoon who told his board, ‘There is no such thing as moral obligation, only legal obligation’ – and that while he was emptying his company’s pension fund!

Amos is especially unsparing in his denunciation of the exploitation of the poor by the rich: -

Thus says the Lord: for three transgressions of Israel... I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals – they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way. (2.6-7)

And also, ‘They know nothing of fair dealing... they cram their palaces full by harshness and extortion.’ (3.10) And he has harsh words for greedy women – calling them “cows” – ‘oppressing the needy, crushing the poor, saying to their husbands, “Bring us something to drink!” (4.1 JB)

The extravagant partying of the rich is a target of Amos’ anger: -

Woe to those ensconced so snugly.... Lying on ivory beds and sprawling on their divans, they dine on lambs from the flock, and stall-fattened veal; they bawl to the sound of the harp... they drink wine by the bowlful, and use the finest oils for anointing themselves, but about the ruin of Joseph [the people] they do not care at all. That is why they will be the first to be exiled. The sprawlers' revelry is over. (6.1, 4-7, JB)

Jeremiah speaks in the same spirit: -

Yes, there are wicked men among my people who spread their nets; like fowlers they set snares, but it is men they catch. Like a cage full of birds their houses are full of loot; they have grown rich and powerful because of it, fat and sleek. Yes, in wickedness they go to any lengths, they have no respect for rights, for orphans' rights, to support them; they do not uphold the cause of the poor. And must I not punish them for such things – it is Yahweh who speaks – or from such a nation exact my vengeance? (5.26-29, JB)

And Jeremiah speaks in language which Jesus may have drawn on in his parable: 'the man who wins his wealth unjustly, his days half done, he must leave it, proving a fool after all.' (17.11, JB) Or perhaps he

drew on Sirach 5.1: - ‘Do not rely on your wealth, or say, “I have enough.”’

Elsewhere Jesus spoke of how ‘the cares of the world and the lure of wealth can choke the word’ so that it yields nothing. (Matthew 13.22) Luke, in 18.18-30, the story of Jesus and the rich ruler, has Jesus say, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ (vv.24-25)

The theme of detachment from wealth is carried forward into the Letters, e.g. Colossians 3.5, ‘Put to death, therefore, whatever is earthly.... and greed (which is idolatry).’

In his telling of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16.19-31), Luke seems to draw particular attention to the fact that the rich man did not appear even to notice the poor man on his doorstep; for him, he was a non-person. For Jesus, the person is always primary.

Week 29

Tuesday

Luke 12.35-38 Watchful slaves

Jesus said to his disciples: -

35. Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;

36. be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.

37. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.

38. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

The message is: Be awake, be aware! The passage is similar in content and tone to Matthew's parable of the ten bridesmaids (25.1-13), and to Mark 13.33-37. In 19.12-28, Luke's parable of the ten pounds is broadly similar.

To what does the teaching refer? To the ordinary challenges and problems of day-to-day life? To an anticipated time of persecution? To the moment of our death? To the second coming of Christ in the Parousia? Or to all of the above, and more?

The whole of the Gospel may be considered a wake-up call. Jesus does not want us to daydream or sleepwalk our way through life. (Interestingly, mindfulness is a constant theme in Buddhism, too.) It is common for people, if called to account for their actions or inaction, to defend themselves by saying, 'I never thought....' And that may indeed be the

truth. Jesus said on the cross, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ (Luke 23.34)

There are different kinds of awareness – bodily, mental, and spiritual. The Gospels do not make such a distinction but call in many places for vigilance, for example, in being aware of temptation, and for being alert to read the signs of the times. (Luke 21.29-33)

The text is more promise than threat. When the Master comes, he does so to serve his faithful servants. In v.37, ‘the master... will come and serve them,’ and, in 22.27, the message is the same: ‘For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.’

Week 29

Wednesday

Luke 12.39-48 On being ready for the Master’s return

Jesus said to his disciples: -

39. But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into.

40. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

41. Peter said, ‘Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?’
42. And the Lord said, ‘Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time?’
43. Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives.
44. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions.
45. But if that slave says to himself, "My master is delayed in coming," and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk,
46. the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him off and put him with the unfaithful.
47. That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating.
48. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

There are Gospel passages parallel to this: v.39 in Mark 13.35; vv.39-40 in Matthew 24.43-44; and vv.42-46 in Matthew 24.45-51. Clearly Luke, Mark and Matthew are drawing on a common source,

perhaps the one scripture scholars call “Q” (German, Quelle, a source).

Vv.39-40: The message is like that in the preceding vv.35-37, one of readiness. In life, the thief who breaks in could be an enemy within as much as an external enemy. There is an atmosphere of tension about the message, as if it was intended to engender fear. But fear does not bring out the best in people. I prefer John: ‘There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.’ (1 John 4.18)

Vv.41-42: Peter’s question – did Jesus answer it? It seems not. Why? Jesus rarely gave a straight answer to a question – perhaps three times in the Gospels. Here he gives a teaching, introducing it by a question. He wants Peter to think the matter through for himself.

Jesus’ reference in v.42 to the steward may be his answer; he is speaking of the apostles as stewards. Support is sought for this in 1 Corinthians 4.1, ‘Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.’

Vv.42-44: Fidelity, readiness, responsibility – these seem to be what Jesus calls for, especially in those placed over others, as is the case here. Jesus wants people to be alive and alert, awake and aware, not sleep-walking or daydreaming their way through

life. 'The glory of God is the person fully alive,' said Saint Irenaeus. (*Adversus Haereses*, 4.20.7; PG 7/1.1037)

Vv.45-46: It seems to cast Jesus, the 'Son of Man', in the role of judge, and as one who likes to catch people napping. It is a reward-and-punishment scenario. But 'The true religious understanding of man is not found in terms of reward or punishment, but in terms of wholeness and division.' (John Main OSB, *Inner Christ*, DLT, London, 1994, p.26)

The parable speaks of judgment that is sudden and unexpected, and is a warning against being caught out. In a world where death could be sudden, where illnesses such as dysentery, which must have been relatively common given the abysmal standards of hygiene which prevailed, and which could take away the healthy in a short time, this must have been chilling. It seems intended to engender fear so as to get people to smarten themselves up and toe the line. The passage makes for uneasy reading not only its severity, but its presentation of the Son of Man in the role of a super snooper who likes to catch people out seems at variance with the rest of the Gospel.

Vv.47-48: The film *Twelve Years in Slavery* made powerful use of these verses in the mouth and hands of the slave-owner (played by Michael Fassbender) who relished having biblical justification for his giving 'very many strokes of the lash.' (JB translation of v.47) The Douai Bible uses the more

vivid expression, ‘shall be beaten with many stripes.’ Each stroke of a lash would leave a stripe of red or purple bruised flesh across the person’s body.

The master-and-slave image suggests, as do several other Gospel passages, e.g. Luke 19.11-27, that Jesus came, not from the poor, but from the relatively wealthy. He associates himself with the master.

V.48: Even the slave who did not know his master’s wishes and act in accordance with them is punished. Why? Was it because he should have known? Was it that he did not listen when they were made known? The parable does not suggest that. In terms of natural justice it is hard to make a case in support of this. How could anyone love someone who would lash them for not carrying out his unknown wishes?

The original meaning contrasted the scribes who should have known with the ordinary people whose ignorance was excusable, and adds that to whom more has been given, more will be expected, and all the more so when it has been given on trust.

Week 29

Thursday

Luke 12.49-53 Jesus the cause of division

Jesus said to his disciples: -

49. 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!
50. I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!
51. Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!
52. From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;
53. they will be divided:
father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'

There is a passage parallel to this in Matthew 10.34-36.

Vv.49-50: Jesus had a sense of being at the centre of history, that a new age had come with him. But he had to deal with the slowness of his disciples and the constant carping of his critics. He was trying to lead them into a new relationship with God, to open their horizons to a wider spiritual universe, but they seemed unwilling or unable to look beyond minor issues. For him, it must have been an experience of intense frustration. He had a sense of urgency, crisis, decision, and of a coming judgment while they rarely looked beyond the immediate and the local.

Vv.51-53: With Jesus, there's no room for neutrality; people had to be for him or against him. It is in the same frame of thought as, 'Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.' (Luke 11.23)

This sense of being at the centre of a powerful confrontation between good and evil was there at the start of his life, during it, and also at the end. When he was a child, Simeon in the Temple had said of him to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed.' (Luke 2.34) And just before his passion, Jesus said to his closest disciples, 'But now.... the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, "And he was counted among the lawless"; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.' (Luke 22.36-37)

He had a powerful sense of right and wrong, and of their mutual irreconcilability. He faced the challenge of evil, while most people would rather fudge it for the sake of a quiet life. 'Táimse im' chodhladh is ná dúistear mé' is our unspoken motto.

In his life, Jesus experienced the truth of what Micah had said: 'your enemies are members of your own household.' (7.6) His own relatives did not understand or support him. (See above under Luke 2.48-50; 4.24; 8.19-21 and 11.27-28.)

V.51: Jesus seems to go beyond saying that division would come as a result of him and affirm that it was his wish for it to come. He seems to declare an intention of creating division. One of the most powerful criticisms made of religions in our time is that they are divisive. There is no shortage of evidence to support such a charge; for many people, this is an obstacle to faith.

John Main OSB wrote,

Religious people have so often pretended to have all the answers. They have seen their mission as being to persuade, to enforce, to level differences and perhaps even to impose uniformity. There is really something of the Grand Inquisitor in most religious people. (*The Inner Christ*, DLT, London, 1994, p.38)

At a level which is more far-ranging but also more strongly critical, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said in a Christmas sermon in 2003: -

Religious faith has too often been the language of the powerful, the excuse for oppression, the alibi for atrocity. It has appeared as... intolerant of difference... as a campaigning, aggressive force for uniformity, as a self-defensive and often corrupt set of institutions indifferent to basic human welfare.

Religious people are mostly in denial about this.

Germany and France, despite three wars in seventy-five years (1870-71, 1914-18, 1939-45), have gone a long way towards reconciliation, while the Orthodox and Catholic churches, which split in 1054, have only begun to move towards each other. And the 9/11 attacks were carried out by people who believed that they were doing God's will. One could multiply such examples.

Religion has indeed, many times, past and present, been the occasion, the excuse, or the cause of war, and, in being so, one of the major obstacles to faith.

Is it too daring, is it even blasphemous to ask the question, 'Was Jesus at this point unbalanced, overwrought, even insane?' He seemed impatient for a crisis to come to a head. Did he point too much to himself and not enough to God?

Week 29

Friday

Luke 12.54-59 Interpreting the time

54. He also said to the crowds, 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens.

55. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat"; and it happens.

56. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?’

Settling with Your Opponent

57. And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?

58. Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison.

59. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.

There are passages parallel to vv.54-56 in Matthew 16.2-3, and to vv.57-59 in Matthew 5.25-26. We have two separate and quite distinct themes in these passages.

Vv.54-56: Jesus seems severe in calling people hypocrites because they are unable to move from recognizing signs that relate to the weather to recognizing those that relate to the times they live in. (Matthew omits it.) The word “hypocrite” is a powerful one, full of condemnation. It calls people’s sincerity into question, implying that they are dishonest. That seems unduly harsh when applied to people who are simply not perceptive enough to be able to discern the processes at work in the society and culture around them. In such circumstances,

would we not all deserve to be called hypocrites from time to time? Maybe the implication is, 'Well, yes, you *are*.' What was said by Ernest Gowers comes to mind, 'Unfair criticism arouses reasonable resentment, and increases the difficulty of creating an atmosphere receptive of the new ideas.' (*The Plain Words*, HMSO, London, 1954, p.198)

Isn't it a different, and deeper, perceptiveness that is required in regard to movements of thought in society, and not everyone has it? Is Jesus saying that we would have such perceptiveness if we used our heads and acted in good faith? Is this like the Buddhist idea that what Christians call "sin" is in fact ignorance? - as in, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do'? (Luke 23.24)

Xavier-Léon Dufour says about the word 'hypocrite' that it applies to those whose actions do not correspond to the thoughts of their heart; hypocrites deceive themselves and become blind, unable to see the light; they have bad intentions; they strain out a gnat but swallow a camel (Matthew 23.24); they become deaf to every call to conversion; they take God's place when they substitute human traditions for God's law; in John, (e.g. 9.40), the word means 'blind,' when Jews claimed to see, although they were blind.

Vv.57-59: The hard and seemingly ideological line of vv.54-56 is followed in v.58 by a common sense, pragmatic appeal to settle cases out of court if

possible, because the court might give a verdict against you and you will be worse off. Is this a hint that Jews must settle with God before judgment unless they wish to receive a severe sentence? But the Gospel was written for all; if it applies to Jews, it applies to us, too.

V.57 may be a clue to something further. Jesus is here giving a wake-up call, a call to conscience. He is telling people to switch on their head and think. We often prefer not to. But, if thinking is hard work, which it is, it is better than letting someone else do our thinking for us, or, even more, allowing clichés and half-baked slogans substitute for thinking.

Conscience is an unremitting search for the truth with a commitment to following it when found. It is the servant of truth, and truth is of God. We need to have an active, well-developed conscience, not going with the flow. Every person has the right and the responsibility to form and to follow their conscience.

The development of conscience is a matter more of will than of intellect, more of choice than of understanding. Sinfulness and self-deception, ever-present realities, may mean that conscience in great matters has been dulled and rendered insensitive by repeated infidelities in small matters. Jesus said, 'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.' (Luke 16.10) We cannot stifle conscience

one moment and expect it to shine like a light the next.

Language has changed, and, in consequence, so have ideas and actions. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said,

The gradual transformation by which sin becomes immorality, immorality becomes deviance, deviance becomes choice and all choice becomes legitimate, is a profound redrawing of our moral landscape and alters the way we see the alternatives available to us. (*The Persistence of Faith* [The Reith Lectures], Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1991, p.50)

It is as if we claim that we ought to be - or are - free to commit sin, and have a right to do so, whereas the truth is that we have a right and a duty to do good and avoid evil.

There is a superficial, Coca-Cola psychology which suggests that guilt feelings are neurotic, though they are to conscience what pain is to the nervous system - an alarm-call for self-examination. We are influenced by the notion that equates following your conscience with “doing your own thing” in the name of personal freedom, although subject to every fancy, fashion or fad. That is arbitrary, selective, and individualistic; it undermines common values and a sense of community. It substitutes the autonomous self for God. Sometimes,

what we seek as freedom we come to experience as loss. A follower of Jesus once wrote,

Conscience is a stern monitor, but it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it if they had. It is the right of self-will. (Blessed John Henry Newman)

Conscience makes us mature human beings, responsible and accountable, without self-deception. It is a demand of our humanity. It makes for good relationships, good health of soul, mind and body. It is God's voice in us. If we seek it, we will find it; finding it, may we follow it. 'Happiness is joy in the truth.' (Saint Augustine)

V.59: We are back to a hard line. The Gospels contain hard sayings and gentle ones. Make a selection and you may "prove" whatever you wish. How does a person find an overall picture which is faithful to both? That is difficult.

Week 29

Saturday

Luke 13.1-9 Suffering, punishment, repentance

1. At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

2. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?'
3. No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.
4. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them - do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?
5. No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

The parable of the barren fig tree

6. Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.
7. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"
8. He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.
9. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

A highly contrasting story of a barren fig tree is to be found in Matthew 21.18-21.

Vv.1-4: Here are two questions pertaining to the relationship between sin and suffering, and indirectly to the manner of God's intervention in the

world. They are each a call to repentance while there is time.

It seems that Pilate, the Roman procurator, had killed some Galileans while they were offering sacrifice in the Temple. The Romans were cruel; killing did not cost them a thought, and Pilate has the reputation of being more cruel than most. Were those Galileans greater sinners than any others, was the question. Jesus answered, 'No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did'. (v.3)

Jesus then referred to an incident, otherwise unknown, where a tower had collapsed at Siloam, in the south-east of Jerusalem, killing eighteen people. 'Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?' he asked, and answered his own question, saying, 'No. I tell you; but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did.' (v.5) Were the people who died in the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre on 9/11 greater sinners than the New Yorkers who escaped unharmed? It would be unthinkable to suggest that they were.

These people suffered; therefore they must have sinned and been punished for it - that seems to have been the understanding of at least some of the questioners. Sometimes the same may be heard today of AIDS sufferers. Jesus dismisses the

simplistic explanation that suffering is caused by sin or is the punishment for it. In John 9.1-3, we read: -

As he [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.’

But sometimes suffering may be a consequence of sin. For example, if a person lies habitually, it will not be long before they find that no one trusts them, and that will make life difficult for them. That is a problem they have created for themselves, and the solution also rests with them – to be truthful, and thereby recover trust. If a person smokes and develops lung cancer, it makes no sense to say that their cancer is a punishment inflicted on them by God for smoking; it is likely simply the result of smoking – actions have consequences. The Greeks had a point when they said that virtue is its own reward. The converse is also true: vice is its own punishment.

V.5: The two incidents, as reminders of the uncertainty and impermanence of life, may be a stimulus to repentance.

Vv.6-9: The parable of the fig tree is in a similar vein. Deliver the goods or be rejected, is the message. The tree is given a final chance: one more

year in which to produce fruit; or, after that, the chop – literally! It seems very likely that Jesus had his own people in mind as he spoke. His time with them was drawing to a close and they had still not accepted his message.

These teachings are addressed to communities as much as to individuals, in this instance to the Jewish people, but indirectly to all humanity. There may also be a foreshadowing of the destruction of the Temple, the city of Jerusalem and much of the countryside by the Romans in A.D. 70.

Jesus was not “laid back”, or easy-going. He was led, or driven, by a sense of urgency, of a decisive moment for humanity having come, there and then, with and through him. He did not want postponement or excuses but for people to turn to God decisively. He was challenging and uncompromising. If people did not change, they would perish, he said, not once but twice (vv.3, 5).

Was Jesus a fanatic? A lazy, permissive or self-indulgent generation would most likely answer yes. His absorbing passion was for God. For him, God was everything, and could never be anything less than everything. The idea of life as an easy-going jaunt, lived with an attitude of ‘I’m OK as I am; just go away and leave me alone’ was unthinkable.

No less unthinkable was the deist idea of God as a kind of absentee landlord, or as a clockmaker who, so to speak, constructs the clock, winds it up and

then lets it run its course. For Jesus, God was in this world, with it, passionately caring for it down to the smallest and seemingly least significant matter. For him, everything mattered; everything was inter-related; nobody and nothing was insignificant. A shrug of the shoulders expressing an ‘I don’t care....’ was no part of his world-view or of his image of God.

It is people like Jesus who make the world a better place.

Week 30

Monday

Luke 13.10-17 Jesus heals a crippled woman

10. Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

11. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

12. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’

13. When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

14. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.’

15. But the Lord answered him and said, ‘You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?’

16. And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?’

17. When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

This story, which is not found in the other Gospels, is like Luke’s account of the man with a withered hand whom Jesus healed in the synagogue on the Sabbath (6.6-11) and also his healing on the Sabbath of a man suffering from dropsy (14.1-6). It is broadly similar to the story in John 9.1-41 of Jesus curing the man born blind.

V.10: Jesus was known as a teacher. According to the custom of the time, any visiting man might be invited to address the synagogue.

V.12: ‘Woman’ – the normal mode of address by a man to a woman he did not know. ‘You are free from your ailment.’ Not a wish but a statement. And, surprisingly, Jesus healed without a request from her. Maybe she had given up hope and had come to accept her illness as permanent; eighteen years is a long time.

V.13: The laying on of hands may be a sign of healing, as here and in 4.40. It may also indicate a mission given, as in Acts 6.6, 13.3, 14.23; 2 Corinthians 8.19; 1 Timothy 4.14 and 5.22. The latter is often followed by a sending out.

And she straightened up and glorified God. If God did not exist, who would there be – ultimately - to thank for anything?

V.14: The voice of institutional religion spoke authoritatively: work is forbidden on the Sabbath; there are six days of the week when it may be done; come on those days and be healed; the law must be upheld. The synagogue leader might have quoted Exodus 20.8-11: -

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
Six days you shall labour and do all your work.
But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.
For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth the sea, and all this is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

With the synagogue leader and what he represents, means have become ends and ends means. The Sabbath has become an end in itself instead of a

means to an end, namely, the glorification of God and the good of the person and society. The official voice says they are to be subordinated to the institution and the law.

I remember, in the 1960's, reading a notice in the porch of a college chapel, placed there on the instruction of the bishop and bearing his signature, informing the public that attendance at Mass there on Sunday did not fulfil their Sunday Mass obligation, because it was not a public, but only a semi-public, oratory.

Vv.15-16: In response, Jesus points to a fact: on the Sabbath, people are permitted to release animals for watering, although it was work. An exception was allowed for the good of an animal, but not for the good of a person. Could this be what God wants? It is not surprising that he used the word *hypocrites*.

V.17: Jesus' adversaries had the decency to be embarrassed; they did not try to brazen it out, or to reply with the "slippery slope" argument – if you start with this, where will it all end? Perhaps they spoke among themselves of prudence, equating it with caution. Their concern for observances blinded them to the significance of who Jesus was and to the new pattern of relationships he sought to create. But 'the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing,' as they had done in 4.15 at the start of his Galilean ministry.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus' greatest opposition came from his religion's guardians of orthodoxy, for whom the institution had primacy.

Week 30

Tuesday

Luke 13.18-21 The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast

18. He said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it?

19. It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.'

20. And again he said, 'To what should I compare the kingdom of God?

21. It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

There are passages parallel to vv.18-19 in Matthew 13.31-32 and Mark 4.30-32, and to vv.20-21 in Matthew 13.33.

The two parables - the mustard seed and the yeast in the dough - are alike, two ways of conveying the same idea. One is from a man's experience, the other from a woman's. Both are dynamic, about life and growth. A tiny seed becomes a large tree and the birds find shelter in it. A small bit of yeast permeates

the dough, transforming it from within, making it edible. In each case, it is the interaction that counts: seed in soil, yeast in dough. The relationship, the process, is at the heart of the matter.

The image of the tree evokes the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel (4.10-12): -

Upon my bed this is what I saw; there was a tree at the centre of the earth, and its height was great.

The tree grew great and strong and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the ends of the whole earth.

Its foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant and it provided food for all. The animals of the field found shade under it, the birds of the air nested in its branches, and from it all living beings were fed.

Ominously, the king was told that the tree represented him, and that it would be cut down, leaving only the stump. (4.20-24) To make reference to this story in the context of the parable may be to allegorize it unhelpfully. But Ezekiel's use of the image is closer to that of Jesus: -

On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. (17.23)

Maybe yeast was a surprising choice as an image since it was popularly seen as an agent of corruption. Only a little earlier, Luke had used it as such, ‘Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy.’ (12.1)

They are both parables of the kingdom of God. It may have beginnings that seem insignificant, but they grow. The Christian community of faith began with twelve and today numbers twelve hundred million. Sirach said, ‘The bee is small among flying creatures but what it produces is the best of sweet things.’ (11.3) Saint Paul seems to combine the two parables to make a point: ‘If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.’ (Romans 11.16)

In his encyclical letter on the environment, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis wrote, ‘All it takes is one person to restore hope!’ (n.71) Another person said, ‘Many things seem impossible, until someone does them - and then they seem obvious.’ (Attributed to Nelson Mandela)

Small things can make a big difference for the better: a word of greeting, a smile, a simple act of kindness, a gesture of forgiveness or reconciliation, a moment spent listening, making rather than avoiding eye-contact, etc. Anyone can do them, and at almost any time.

The most effective people are those who embody the values they seek to promote. It has been said, 'Be the change you wish to see in the world!' Actions truly speak louder than words; without argument, they persuade gently, dissolving tensions, creating a shift of perspective so that a new quality of relationship become possible and the intractable may become open to solution. The grace of God is at work in such situations, ever creative, as in the prayer,

Let the whole world feel and see that things which were cast down are being raised up, that those which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are returning to completion, through him from whom they began, Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen. (Gelasian Sacramentary)

Week 30

Wednesday

Luke 13.22-30 The narrow door

22. Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.

23. Someone asked him, 'Lord, will only a few be saved?' He said to them,

24. 'Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.'

25. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us," then in reply he will say to you, "I do not know where you come from."
26. Then you will begin to say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets."
27. But he will say, "I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!"
28. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out.
29. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.
30. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.'

Matthew has a passage in 7.13 which parallels v.24, in 7.22-23 one which is very similar to vv.26-27, in 8.11-12 one which parallels vv.28-29, and, in 19.30 and 20.16, verses which parallel v.30. Luke has brought together into one parable these several thoughts of Matthew.

V.22: The passage opens with a current familiar in Luke's writings, that of Jesus being on a journey to Jerusalem, and the city being the high point of God's activity in humanity: 9.31, 51, 53; 13.22, 33; 17.11; 18.31; 19.11, 28, 41; 24.47-49, 52 and Acts 1.8.

V.23: What does ‘being saved’ mean? Saved by whom, and from what? (The word processor I used in working on this text, which I provisionally entitled ‘Jesus’, told me, when I press Ctrl and S, that ‘Word is fast saving Jesus’!) One view would answer the question by saying that it means being saved from sin through the death of Jesus, and from unending death by his resurrection, the result being our going to heaven.

Now, without denying the above, there is another, more “earthly”, “this-worldly” view of the matter. Jesus brought God down to earth; he did not so “spiritualize” matters as to take them out of this world. Incarnation means getting into this world and becoming part of it, not reducing it to a dress rehearsal for the next. The purpose of our being in this world is not to get out of it with as little sin as possible so as to get to heaven. That reduces salvation to an evacuation plan. It trivializes the world, which is God’s creation, and reduces our presence in it to the level of a performance. If a person does not experience salvation here, they may not experience it hereafter either.

Another view is to think of salvation as liberation from anything that diminishes people’s humanity. That includes hunger, thirst, unemployment, injustice, fear, lack of respect, indeed anything that degrades people or militates against their human wholeness and integrity. That includes what has traditionally been called sin.

V.24: Jesus answered, ‘Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter, and will not be able.’ Salvation isn’t a DIY job. We humans need each other. Relationships are at the heart of everything. Trying to become perfect through our own efforts leads to a loveless fanaticism; it makes Pharisees of us, cold, judgmental, self-righteous.

Pursuing the project of my own holiness in an individualistic way quietly removes others from the scene, except insofar as they are a means to that end, as objects of my condescension or forgiveness, for example. It is difficult not to see that as essentially selfish. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux was right: ‘pious conversations - there's always a touch of self-approval about them.’ (*Autobiography of a Saint: the Story of a Soul*, translated by Ronald Knox from *L'Histoire d'une Âme*, Fontana Religious, London, 1958, p.94) It recalls Pope Francis saying, ‘We must not become “starched Christians” talking theology over tea.’

But salvation involves choices and decisions, commitment and effort.

V.25: Jesus is the owner of the house. The image is like that in Matthew 25.10-12 where the unprepared bridesmaids are not allowed entry: -

the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'

Vv.26-27: Merely knowing Jesus counts for nothing. Elsewhere in Luke, Jesus says, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.' (8.21)

Vv.28-29: Jesus challenges his contemporaries, and us also, to move from self-assurance to humility, from the notion of being "insiders" to an acknowledgement of our weakness, and a recognition that God is for all, and that the dividing line between saint and sinner runs through every human heart.

V.29: His reference to eating is suggestive of the messianic banquet, an image of heaven as a banquet with God as the host. Isaiah conjures it up, 'On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.' (25.6) The feast is 'for all peoples.'

Luke uses the same image in 14.15-24 and 22.16, 18, 29-30, and the Last Supper pre-figures it.

V.30: In Northern Ireland, a Protestant minister once shocked his congregation by saying, 'There

will be no Roman Catholics in heaven.’ After a pause, he then added, ‘or Protestants either.’ In heaven, there will be no Catholic or Protestant, Jew or Gentile, etc. God is above all such distinctions and classifications. The God of surprises may well open our eyes in amazement.

Throughout this story, Jesus is challenging his Jewish hearers, but the challenge applies to us equally well.

Week 30

Thursday

Luke 13.31-35 The lament over Jerusalem

31. At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’

32. He said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.

33. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

34. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

35. See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

There is a passage parallel to vv.34-35 in Matthew 23.37-39.

V.31: The Pharisees gave Jesus a tip-off: Herod is out to get you. It was good of them to do that, and unexpected, too, in view of their attitudes elsewhere. Had Jesus come from their school of thought? Had he been one himself? Probably there were Pharisees and Pharisees; don't tar them all with the same brush.

Or were they being used by Herod Antipas? He was nominally Jewish, in reality superstitious. Religion and superstition are opposites: the first is about surrender to God, the second about trying to manipulate the supernatural. Herod was a puppet, the strings pulled by Rome. Why would he want to kill Jesus? He may have seen him as a rival authority, and therefore a potential source of friction with the Romans. There's room for only one bull in the kraal.

V.32: The fox wasn't the rascally rogue of our childhood story-books. European foxes will kill all the hens in a coop, even though they can take only one; they seem to enjoy killing. (The Herods were champions in intra-familial killing.) But the "fox"

may have been a wild dog or a jackal. In Africa, wild dogs hunt in packs; they are feared for their relentless determination in pursuit. Jackals are seen as sneaky thieves, opportunists who dart in to grab what other animals have hunted down. It may have been similar in Palestine. Jesus called Herod a fox, a wild dog or a jackal - take your pick. Jesus was not “nice”, and didn’t try to be.

The message to Herod was, in effect, ‘I will achieve my goal in my own way, and will die only when my time comes.’ Jesus’ use of the phrase ‘on the third day’ indicates that he did not consider that time to be far off. Jesus was self-possessed in all circumstances. He said, ‘I lay down my life of my own free will, and by my own power I take it up again.’ (John 10.17-18) When people had tried to kill him before, he had evaded them, saying, ‘My time has not yet come’ (e.g., John 8.20). He was the master of his own destiny, doing only what his Father asked of him.

V.33: In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is often shown as being on his way to Jerusalem. It was the centre, where things happened. His movement there is shown as leading to a climax in his death. (See under 13.22 above.)

V.34: There’s a powerful emotional side to Jesus, here as elsewhere. He was not a dispassionate philosopher, offering teaching in a take-it-or-leave-it manner. Detached objectivity was not his way. God is not accessible to the aloof observer who, so to

speaking, puts him in the dock, demanding to examine his credentials - show me your papers! - prepared to accept him only when he meets the enquirer's terms and conditions.

Jesus was a lover. He could not anticipate the destruction of Jerusalem without sorrow. The image he used of the hen gathering her chickens under her wings was one of affection, of family connection and protectiveness. His anguish over Jerusalem is clear from Luke 19.41-44, 21.5-24 and 23.27-32. Jews were his own flesh and blood. To see them – yet again – reject God's messenger was something he could not view with detachment. The cold disengagement of, 'You do your thing and I'll do mine' was foreign to him. In the Gospels, he never began a sentence with, 'I don't care...' That might sound like liberating a person to make their own choice, but maybe it means just what it says. Jesus cared.

V.35: What did Jesus mean by saying, 'Your house is left to you'? In this context "house" sounds like a metaphor. But for what? It sounds like, 'Alright, keep what you have, your closed minds, your equating of certainty with truth, your unwillingness to question your position – it's all yours.' That is what it sounds like, but Jesus did not wash his hands of people; that was not his way.

To whom was he speaking when he said, 'you will not see me until the time comes when you say,

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”? (Psalm 118.26) The Pharisees? The crowd in general? His disciples? In any event, it was not long before what he said happened: -

As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’ (Luke 19.37-38)

Week 30

Friday

Luke 14.1-6 Jesus heals the man with dropsy

1. On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.
2. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy.
3. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, ‘Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?’
4. But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away.
5. Then he said to them, ‘If one of you has a donkey [or a child] or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?’
6. And they could not reply to this.

V.1: Jesus was a gregarious, sociable type of person. He is often depicted in Luke's Gospel at meals, and this is the first of three in a sequence in this chapter. This conviviality is part of Jesus' Jewish tradition. Meals are occasions on which we relax, let our guard down and simply be ourselves. Conversation flows more easily there than elsewhere. But this meal was different: the Pharisees.... 'were watching him closely.' No room for relaxation there; he was being scrutinized for possible lapses.

V.2: Dropsy is an oedema, or swelling, in which watery fluid collects in body tissue, commonly in the legs.

V.3: But Jesus took the initiative, or was it the offensive? Usually, in such situations, the Pharisees got in first and went on the attack with questions intended to trap. Now he turns the tables on them and poses a question, 'Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?'

V.4: It wasn't a catch question, and an honest person could have answered it simply: 'Of course it is.' 'But they were silent.' Jesus answered his own question with action. He 'took him and healed him and sent him away.' He didn't define what was meant by the Sabbath, or what constituted work, or rest, or curing, or what degrees of curing there were, or what terms and conditions applied to it. He simply

met the need of the person before him, and then sent him away, not waiting either for thanks or the applause of onlookers.

V.5: Jesus here points to something they all knew well. He makes the same point that he had previously made in Luke 13.15-16.

V.6: This story, so like that of the healing of the woman in the synagogue in Luke 13.10-17, raises the question of why the Pharisees, the religious elite, were unable – or was it unwilling? – to answer a simple question. They tied themselves in knots, complicating the simple. They looked at issues, not on their merits, but in terms of law and precedent. For them, truth was not to be sought for its own sake, and followed where found - I'm reminded of a lawyer I heard say, 'The law is not about justice; the law is about the law' - but was to be subjected to considerations of religious politics such as what religious authorities had said on the subject in the past. If they now gave an answer different from their predecessors, would that not undermine the authority of all of them? Where would that leave them? If they answered 'No, we would not pull them out,' they would leave themselves open to the charge of being cruel and inhuman. If they answered 'Yes, we would,' he might then retort, 'If it's all right to rescue an animal on the Sabbath, what is wrong with healing a person on it?' So they were silent; they chose not to reply.

An ordinary, “non-religious” (!) person would have had no difficulty in answering Jesus’ question. It was their religious mind-set that had made simple things difficult for the Pharisees. For Jesus, ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath.’ (Mark 2.27)

The story is like one told by the late Anthony de Mello SJ about the temple cat: an Indian holy man was sitting in the temple one day when he had a deep spiritual experience. Although he remained silent about it, people noticed that he had changed. When they questioned him, all he could say was a word of grateful, humble thanks to God. Wanting to know more, some of his disciples went into the temple to see where the event had taken place. One of them noticed a cat that just happened to be there.

In the years which followed, a cult grew up around the holy man and his experience. The great event was commemorated, care being taken always to ensure that there was a cat present, for had there not been one on the original day? But a dispute arose among the holy man’s disciples. Some said the cat had been black with white patches, while others argued passionately that it had been white with black patches. Books were written on the subject, factions formed, and cat-breeding institutes set up to ensure that only a theologically correct cat was present for the occasion. Rival ceremonies were held in the temple on the anniversary, and sometimes the disciples came to blows, one group protesting at

what they called the hocus-pocus of the other, each adhering to their group's view with unquestioning fidelity. And so it went. Meanwhile, the holy man's vision of God was forgotten.

On 11 March 2002, a fire broke out at a girls' school in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Religious police prevented the girls from leaving the building because they were not wearing headscarves and had no male relatives to receive them. They also prevented firemen from entering the building since it was forbidden to a man to enter a girls' school. So the fire raged unchecked. Fifteen schoolgirls died in the fire and dozens of others were injured. (From *Stop Violence Against Women*, Amnesty International, undated, London, p.8.) Something not dissimilar happened in a fire in an orphanage in Cavan in 1943 with a loss of thirty-five lives.

There are other instances of (often) similar Sabbath controversies in Luke 6.6-11, 13.10-17; Matthew 12.9-14; Mark 2.23-28; 3.1-6; and John 7.22-24; 9.1-41.

Week 30

Saturday

Luke 14. 1, 7-11 Humility and hospitality (1)

1. On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

7. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable.
8. ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host;
9. and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place," and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.
10. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.
11. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

The parable (in vv.8-11) Jesus presents to his hearers seems calculating, a tactic designed to win honour. It appears to commend a course of action which is devious and manipulative, something at odds with Jesus’ character and actions.

The point Jesus sought to make is expressed at the start and end of the story: ‘When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour...’ (v.7); his conclusion is that ‘all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’ (v.11) But the action he suggests seems like

a pretended humility, a mere pose, something done for effect, in order to attract attention and win praise.

I don't understand the parable. Every parable, like every analogy, limps; none of them is perfect. But this parable seems, if anything, to work against the thrust of its conclusion. Of what use to anyone is pretended humility? Charles Dickens' character, Uriah Heep, in his novel *David Copperfield*, is an example of such pretence; it alienates people.

Jesus' concern, of course, is for issues more significant than seating arrangements at banquets. His point, made to the religiously self-approving, seems to be that they thought themselves among the most faithful followers of God while he saw them as the least, whereas those who had no such illusions about themselves, who knew they were sinners, were the first and would be honoured by God.

Humility, as its etymology implies, (Latin, *humus*, soil) is about being down-to-earth, grounded, realistic. Humble people do not hide behind masks; what you see is what you get. They know, accept and love the truth about themselves, and that enables them to do the same for others. You know them when you meet them; they are real. A humble person is able to recognize the truth in the question, 'What have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (1 Corinthians 4.7)

The former United Nations Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, wrote, ‘Humility is just as much the opposite of self-abasement as it is of self-exaltation. To be humble is *not to make comparisons.*’ ‘To have humility is to experience reality, not *in relation to ourselves*, but in its sacred independence.’ (*Markings*, translation by Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden, Faber and Faber, London, 1964, pp.147, 148)

Week 31

Monday

Luke 14.12-14 Humility and hospitality (2)

12. He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.

13. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

14. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

This passage seems even more calculating than the previous. Jesus says you should invite to a meal in your house those who cannot repay you with a return invitation. In that way, you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous, that is, in heaven.

It sounds like using people as a way of building up a credit balance in a heavenly ledger. It means the invitation is not motivated by friendship, or compassion for 'the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind' (v.13), but by self-interest.

In Luke 6.27-36, Jesus advocates a different attitude, one of disinterested love which does not look for a return: -

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies,
do good to those who hate you,
bless those who curse you, pray for those who
abuse you.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the
other also; and from anyone who takes away
your coat do not withhold even your shirt.

Give to everyone who begs from you; and if
anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for
them again.

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is
that to you? For even sinners love those who
love them.

If you do good to those who do good to you,
what credit is that to you? For even sinners do
the same.

If you lend to those from whom you hope to
receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners
lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

But love your enemies, do good, and lend,
expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be

great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

There is an anomaly here. Maybe it arises from a different Old Testament tradition, one among several: -

If you do good, know to whom you do it, and you will be thanked for your good deeds.

Do good to the devout and you will be repaid – if not by them, then certainly by the Most High.

No good comes to one who persists in evil or to one who does not give alms.

Give to the devout, but do not help the sinner.

Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly; hold back their bread, and do not give it to them, for by means of it they might subdue you; then you will receive twice as much evil for all the good you have done them. (Sirach 12.1-5)

That comes as a shock, and we may be grateful that there are alternative Old Testament traditions, such as Proverbs 22.9, ‘Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor,’ and also that of caring for the widow, the orphan and the stranger in the land. (Exodus 22.21-22)

The New Testament offers much that is better. Matthew’s ‘When you give alms, do not let your left

hand know what your right hand is doing' (6.3) is preferable to Sirach 12.1 above. And Saint Paul's saying, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him' (Romans 12.20) also offers a better way.

Week 31

Tuesday

Luke 14.15-24 The parable of the great dinner

15. One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!'

16. Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many.

17. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now."

18. But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets."

19. Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets."

20. Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come."

21. So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame."

22. And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room."

23. Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.

24. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner."

There is a passage in Matthew 22.2-10 which is broadly similar to this.

V.15 is a cue for Jesus to create a parable to make his point. The guest made a remark which would have been readily understood by those present as a reference to the messianic banquet. Luke has Jesus refer to this in 12.37: 'Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.'

V.16: Jesus had the ability to pick up on a remark and build a story around it. He was quick-witted and accustomed to repartee, able to join in the give-and-take of banter and debate.

Vv.17-20: The man sends his slave (NRSV; servant in JB) to notify the invitees that all was ready. But they make their excuses and decline. Land, oxen and a wife are the explanations offered. (Are they symbolic of possessions and sex?) They have other interests.

Vv.21-23: So the host sends his slave out again to bring in ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ (v.21) They come – naturally, a free feed is on offer. But there are still empty places, so the servant is sent out again to ‘compel people to come in.’ (v.23) Saint Augustine sought justification for his attitude to Donatists in this phrase, ‘compelle intrare.’ It is unusual for Jesus to use the language of compulsion.

V.24: In this parable, as is generally the case in others, the punch-line is at the end: ‘For, I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’ It’s a story more against the rich than for the poor, a “turning the tables” story, of which there are many in the Gospels, usually directed against the religious elite such as the lawyers, scribes and Pharisees, but also, as here, against the economic and social elite. Insiders and outsiders exchange places, as in Luke 13.28-30: -

There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out.

Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.

Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.

Those who are full of themselves have no room for God, while those who are empty, and know it, are ready to receive what is on offer.

Week 31

Wednesday

Luke 14.25-33 The cost of discipleship

25. Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them,

26. ‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

27. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

28. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?

29. Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him,

30. saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.”

31. Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?

32. If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

33. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.’

There are passages similar to this in Matthew 10.35-39; 16.24; 19.29 and Mark 8.34.

There are hard sayings in the Gospel. Jesus did not come to offer people soother religion, to create a comfort zone, or to offer religion-as-therapy. This text may be the hardest. It seems to set an impossible standard.

V.25: There are more mentions of large crowds travelling with Jesus. He had become popular – a dangerous situation. Public moods can change quickly, ‘Hosanna!’ on Sunday becoming ‘Crucify’ on Friday.

Vv.26-33: What Jesus said was intended to challenge the crowd, to make them question themselves about their commitment to him. Perhaps he actually wanted to thin out the ranks, to separate the committed from those who were just going along with a new popular movement. He always looked for commitment, and demanded a huge level of it.

V.26: Both JB and NRSV use the word ‘hate.’ JB calls it a ‘Hebraism’, a Jewish manner of speaking, perhaps like, ‘I thank you, God, for not making me a woman/man.’ NCCHS says it represents a strong call to detachment. That detachment was evident in

the attitude of Jesus to his mother. Luke adds 'wife' to Matthew's list. JB suggest that this is a sign of asceticism. Hopefully, it is not evidence of incipient misogynism on Luke's part; he, alone of the Synoptics, has it again (in 18.29). The detachment from family that this calls for finds an echo in Luke 9.57-62, especially 60, where Jesus tells a would-be follower who wished first to bury his father, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' A demand for such a level of commitment could only be made by one who was either insanely egotistical or who was entitled to make it, namely, one only, God.

V.27: Would Jesus have used the expression "carry the cross", in view of its associations with a particularly cruel and humiliating death? Some scholars consider it an anachronism here, a later insertion, unthinkable at this stage. For believers today, "carrying the cross" may be no more than a conventional pious phrase, but for Jesus' contemporaries, it was a terrifying prospect. However, in this context, Jesus might have used it when he appears to be challenging his followers as intensely as he can. Luke has it also in 9.23 which is no less challenging than this passage.

Vv.28-32: The parables about the builder and the king have the same point: count the cost of discipleship; think beforehand of what you are doing. 'War is won by sound thinking,' said Proverbs 24.6. They, like others, have the flavour of

wealth rather than poverty about them. Maybe Jesus came from a relatively wealthy background. In a country denuded of trees, as Palestine then was, carpentry involved wood importation, which suggests relative wealth. The parables seem to say: ‘If you haven’t got what it takes to finish a job, don’t make a fool of yourself. Use your head. If you are not able to complete it, don’t start it.’ Is that meant to apply to the Christian life itself? Who could guarantee in advance that s/he would be able to complete it?

V.33: This is a real stopper. Did Jesus truly mean it? Or was it a rhetorical flourish, like the “hate” in v.26? If we take it at face value, Jesus would have few, if any, disciples. We usually explain it by explaining it away, a camel too large to swallow. Arabs are great for exaggeration – ‘Drive the Zionists into the sea;’ ‘We will shed our blood for you, Saddam,’ etc. Like Jews, they are Semites. Are Jews the same? (Irish people also like to exaggerate: ‘It’s an absolute disgrace’; ‘Shocking weather altogether, I’ve never seen anything like it!’; ‘They’re all at it!’; ‘I’ve told you a thousand times to stop doing that!’)

Was Jesus deliberately exaggerating in order to scare the ‘large crowds,’ to chase them away so as to be left with the committed? It sounds like it. How well does this ride with Matthew’s quotation from Isaiah about the gentleness of the Suffering Servant of the Lord? - ‘He will not break a bruised reed or

quench a smouldering wick'? (42.3) Where does it leave the weak and struggling – which is most of us, most of the time?

Dietrich Bonhöffer, author of *The Cost of Discipleship*, wrote: -

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church. We are fighting today for costly grace. Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like hucksters' wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it people will gladly go and sell all that they have. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake people will pluck out the eyes which cause them to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which disciples leave their nets and follow him.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs

people their lives, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life.

What would Jesus make of children being baptized even where there isn't a well-founded hope that the baptism will bear fruit?

Week 31

Thursday

Luke 15.1-10 The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin

1. Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.
2. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'
3. So he told them this parable:
4. 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?
5. When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.
6. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."
7. Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.'

8. Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?
9. When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'
10. Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

There are three parables in succession in chapter 15 of Luke, all on the same theme of forgiveness of sinners by God. There is a passage parallel to vv.3-7 in Matthew 18.12-14, and it has echoes in Ezekiel 34.4, 6 and 16. Matthew 9.10-13 is close in spirit to these parables, as is Luke in 19.10: 'the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

Vv.1-3: This is an introduction, setting the scene for what follows. The tax collectors and sinners – outcasts - associated with Jesus, and he with them, and at meals also, indicating a deeper level of friendship. Tax collectors were seen as traitors, among the worst of sinners, collaborators with the occupying Roman Empire. They did its dirty work for it, exploiting their own people while enriching themselves. The "sinners" were those who either did not know or had not fulfilled the many detailed prescriptions of Jewish law and tradition, such as rules about fasting and washing, and using different pots and pans for different kinds of cooking. The sinners know their need of God, while their critics

feel that they have, so to speak, measured up to standard by fulfilling prescribed laws and rituals. The pious shunned sinners; contact with them incurred defilement. So they call Jesus to account.

Vv.4-7: This parable would appeal to men, and the next one to women. Would a shepherd risk leaving ninety-nine sheep alone while he went looking for one? In practical terms, it seems doubtful; it might well result in a greater loss. And if a shepherd found a lost sheep, would his happiness really be so great that he would call together his friends and neighbours to celebrate with him? Maybe, though it sounds over the top.

But practicality is not the issue: Jesus is not teaching animal husbandry. He offers a homely, colourful and heart-warming story with a message which is made clear at the end of the parable in v.7.

Vv.8-10: Something similar may be said of the parable of the lost coin. If someone lost their car- or house-keys, or a wallet with money and cards, they would certainly feel the loss keenly, and be very relieved and happy if they found them again intact. The find would, at the least, spare them much hassle. But how likely is it that they would call together friends and neighbours to rejoice with them? Not likely, at least in our individualistic and atomized society.

But, as above, the point is about the generosity of God's forgiveness. The punch line in v.10 is identical in meaning to that in v.7.

There is more perhaps to the stories than just two lively illustrations of a simple idea. They indirectly make the point that the individual matters; it is not only the mass, the lumpen proletariat, that counts. Furthermore, they point to a social character of sin and repentance. Sin is a loss to society as well as to individuals. For example, if I slice up someone's character in the privacy of my mind, I become a less loving person by doing so, and therefore less able to make a loving contribution to society. In each of the two cases, and in the one that follows, about the prodigal son, there is incompleteness as a result of the loss in each case. Something is missing and, until it is recovered, there will always be an emptiness. Just as a parent can never write off the loss of a child who has died, neither can God write off a sinner who has separated her/himself from the group. Love can't write off a loved one as a loss and leave it at that. There is a void which calls out for completion and will continue to search for it.

Perhaps the parables also teach us something about sin. Instead of seeing it as violating the law of God, which is probably how the Pharisees saw it, they suggest that it might be better, more complete, to see it as something missing, a lack of wholeness, of integrity. It is a situation which calls for healing more than for righting upset scales.

The Pharisees had it all worked out. They had studied the teaching and had analysed and classified sin in detail: ‘If you do X or Y, it’s a sin.’ Today, although the Pharisees are dead, pharisaism is alive and well: ‘This is a venial sin, that’s a mortal sin;’ ‘You can’t do this; you mustn’t do that.’ There are adults who want it like that, wanting simple cut-and-dried answers that do their thinking for them. But see Luke 12.57 above, where Jesus asked, ‘Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?’ Sometimes the concept of sin is removed from the context of relationships, attitudes and motivation, reduced from the personal to the mechanical or the legal. That harms those who look at it that way, and diminishes the credibility of the notion of sin for those who do not. Jesus saw sin in terms of relationships, while the Pharisees saw it in functional terms. But being has priority over doing, and attitudes over actions. Relationships are at the heart of everything.

Week 31

Friday

Luke 16.1-8 The parable of the dishonest manager

1. Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.

2. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer."

3. Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.

4. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes."

5. So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?"

6. He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty."

7. Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty."

8. And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

This parable, which is unique to Luke, is an example of how important it is to see just what is the point that is being made, so that we do not inject into it a meaning which is either irrelevant, alien or misleading. It is a difficult parable to interpret.

The manager is called ‘squandering’ (v.1) and ‘dishonest’ (v.8). He is commended for his shrewdness, not for his dishonesty. He used his head – dishonestly – to get out of a tight corner. He dealt with the debtors ‘one by one’ (v.5), probably the better to ensure secrecy. He reduced the clients’ debts, at his master’s expense, so that, when he lost his job, they would be well disposed towards him.

As is usually the case with parables, the moral is in the last sentence: ‘the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light’ (v.8). The devil’s brass band has the best tunes.

Jesus seems to say, ‘Use your head. Think. Don’t let “the children of this age” have all the bright ideas. Being good doesn’t mean you have to be slow or stupid.’ Are ‘the children of this age’ - presumably contemporaries - children of darkness in contrast to ‘the children of light’? Who are the ‘children of light’? Believers in Jesus? Probably.

Jesus commends shrewdness, not dishonesty. He does so elsewhere also. In Matthew 10.16, he says, ‘be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.’ Be intelligent, but not tricky. Saint Paul has a similar message, ‘Brothers and sisters, do not be children in thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.’ (1 Corinthians 14.20)

In the context of this parable, it may be that Jesus was addressing the Pharisees, inviting them to think ‘outside the box’, and to act outside it too, to take the step of letting go of their securities and to trust him. Maybe he was saying that, with his arrival, there was a radically new situation which called for new thinking.

The parable is about the use of money, a tricky subject at the best of times. Jesus’ advice reminds me of “Dwyer’s Fire Escape”, the church built in Blackpool, Cork City, by a local businessman of that name. The joke was that he built it in order to escape the fire (of hell); he was building up a credit balance for himself in heaven.

One interpretation is that the master not only turned a blind eye to the manager’s dishonesty but even commended him for it, because doing so helped conceal from his (the master’s) peers the fact that he had been swindled, and thereby spare him from becoming a laughing-stock among them. The master lost out in the matter, but, by the time of the manager’s actions, the loss was already sustained anyway and probably not recoverable, so the master was just trying to make the best of a bad situation by not denouncing the manager publicly. That view does not sound likely, as he dismissed him in v.2 and that would have drawn public attention anyway.

V.8: Problematic is the use of the word *Kurios* in reference to the master in v.8. Meaning *Lord*, it is a

title Luke normally applies only to God, and to Jesus usually after the Resurrection. If Jesus is the master, how does that fit into the story?

Where does the parable end? Is it at v.8 or 10, or should it continue until 13?

A little later, in v.14, it seems that the parable was addressed to the Pharisees, ‘who were lovers of money.’

Week 31

Saturday

Luke 16.9-15 More about the use of money

9. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

10. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.

11. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?

12. And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?

13. No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Should v.9 be included in the previous parable? Maybe, or maybe not. In it, Jesus seems to say that, in accumulating money, it is almost impossible to avoid dishonesty. He also urges the use of money in the service of others, not simply for oneself. Luke has him say, 'Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.' (12.33) This echoes Sirach, 'Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from every disaster.' (29.12)

V.10: This verse seems to disrupt the train of thought between vv. 9 and 11 and might be better standing on its own. Luke has a similar thought later, 'He said to him, "Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities."' (19.17)

Vv.11 and 12 are difficult. One explanation is that if people have not been faithful regarding what is external to them, such as the property of another, how can they be trusted in what is internal to them, such as their integrity? For example, if a person does not return what he has borrowed, can his promises be trusted? Seen in that context, the manager's conduct is a warning.

V.13 is identical to Matthew 6.24. The first half seems a conclusion to be drawn from the second. The contrast between the hating and loving, being

devoted and despising, seems exaggerated. Perhaps, as in the use of ‘hate’ in 14.26 above, it is simply an exaggerated form of speech, a type of emphasis.

V.14: Wealth was seen as a sign of God’s blessing, so what Jesus was saying went against the current of popular wisdom. But, in the context of ordinary life, it is indeed difficult to be devoted both to God and to money.

V.15: A frequent theme of the Gospels is Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees’ parading themselves as virtuous while, in reality, being very different. It is in Luke 18.9 and Matthew 23.28 among others.

Week 32

Monday

Luke 17.1-6 Some sayings of Jesus

1. Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come!’
2. It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.
3. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.

4. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent," you must forgive.'
5. The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'
6. The Lord replied, 'If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey you.'

There are passages parallel to vv.1-3 in Matthew 18.6-7 and Mark 9.42; to vv.3-4 in Matthew 18.15, 21-22; and to vv.5-5 in Matthew 17.20; 21.21 and Mark 11.23. Verses 1-10 is a collection of sayings without a single unifying thread, sometimes set in different contexts in the other Synoptics.

Vv.1-2: A stumbling or scandal is literally an obstacle, such as a stone on a path that trips a person; it is not a tabloid SHOCK HORROR story. To scandalize meant to trip, or to cause to stumble or fall.

Jesus himself was a scandal to many, 'a sign of contradiction.' (Luke 2.34) Some of his teachings, and also his suffering and death, were scandals to his disciples. (John 6.66; Matthew 16.21-23) Who Jesus was, what he taught, and what he claimed to be, was a scandal, but 'blessed is anyone who is not scandalized in me.' (Matthew 11.6) Jesus prepared his disciples to expect opposition, and even

persecution, ‘I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling.’ (John 16.1)

In this extract, Jesus acknowledges that scandals will come. He was realistic, and didn’t accept the foolish idea that steps of any kind could be taken to ensure that this or that scandal would never ever happen again. They have happened before, and they will happen again; that much is a certainty; human nature doesn’t change. But he spoke terrifying words to anyone responsible for bringing them about: the image of a millstone hung around the neck is powerful.

The ‘little ones’ refers not so much to children as to people whose faith is weak. That meaning is clearer in Matthew’s and Mark’s identical wording, ‘one of these little ones who believe in me.’ (Matthew 18.6; Mark 9.42) And it may apply to any person, at just about any time. To do something to damage a person’s faith in God is in truth very wrong. It may rob a person of what gives their life meaning, direction, and purpose. Could anyone take such a matter lightly?

Vv.3-4: The phrase, ‘Be on your guard’ could be a fitting conclusion to vv.1-2 as much as an opening to vv.3-4. Jesus goes on to say that we are responsible for each other. If people sin, we should rebuke them. In the context, it appears to mean sins *against us*. But in either case, it goes against the grain of Western individualism which expects us to mind our

own business, keep ourselves to ourselves, and let others be responsible for themselves. ‘I don’t care what you do...’ ‘You do your thing and I’ll do mine,’ as long as we don’t interfere with each other’s rights, is often how it is put. This sometimes provides cover for moral cowardice, for copping out of the responsibility of challenging wrongdoing and thereby facilitating not only its repetition but its acceptance as alright – ‘Everyone does it...’ It is hard to see how this provides a basis for community, for shared values needed to underpin society. There is a Nigerian proverb which says, ‘The neighbour who does not correct my child is a traitor.’ If a neighbour dared to do that in the Western world today, they might find themselves in court facing charges.

Jesus goes on to add that, with the rebuke should come forgiveness, if the offence is against us, and also, that there should never come a point where we think we have forgiven enough and have earned a right to retaliate.

Vv.5-6: The apostles asked the Lord to increase their faith. The word faith has a meaning which is close to trust.

The image of the mulberry tree throwing itself into the sea is surely a rhetorical flourish, one of several Jesus used. Was it Jesus? Or was it Luke? Or was it those who recounted the matter to Luke?

But faith, or commitment, is both a rock-like anchor and a powerful driving force. What do we believe in? What really matters to us? What enthuses us? That is what counts. Much of our life is taken up with things of little significance, but, with everyone, there is a bottom line. There is a point at which we touch solid ground and say, 'This I believe....' That foundation, that core conviction, perhaps more than anything else, is what defines us for what we are.

Week 32

Tuesday

Luke 17.7-10 On slaves

7. Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'?
8. Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'?
9. Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?
10. So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'

This sounds like a story told from the master's point of view. It could, with little difficulty, be represented as aimed at keeping the lower orders in

their place, working them hard, and reminding them that they are ‘merely servants’ (JB), or ‘worthless slaves.’ (NRSV) It would not be the first time that scripture was used for that purpose, interpreted by the powerful for their own ends.

Is it intended instead as a parable of relationships, not between master and slave, but between God and the person? That seems likely. It seems to say that we do not have a claim on God. We cannot demand rights from him, other than those he gave us through Jesus. What kind of relationship with God does it speak of? It suggests work, duty, obedience, and service, without the expectation of reward. It is similar to, ‘Blessed are those servants whom the master finds ready when he comes’, (Luke 12.37) and also, ‘Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table?’ (Luke 22.27)

But then Jesus added to the latter, ‘I am among you as one who serves.’ (Luke 22.27) And elsewhere he said, ‘I do not call you servants [= slaves] any longer... I have called you friends.’ (John 15.15) The action of Jesus in washing the feet of his disciples in John 13.3-15 strongly suggests a different relationship from Luke 17.7-10, although John 13.16 seems to be a correction or amendment to the preceding, perhaps by another hand. There seem to be inconsistencies, but there is surely a place for both. Perhaps one answer to the problem is to

apply the demanding line to oneself and the gentle one to others.

Did Jesus change his mind? Did his thinking develop? Surely it must have; he was human. ‘Jesus increased in wisdom.’ (Luke 2.52, JB) Is it a mistake to look for consistency between one part of the Gospel and another? If nothing else, these texts suggest the need for caution before giving normative or prescriptive interpretations to the Gospel. They suggest that it was written in a different frame of mind, like a series of short stories, or even, in some instances, a matter of remarks made in passing, where a person seeks to make just one point, usually a simple one, and is not trying to produce a definitive corpus with all the loose ends tidied up. (Mahatma Gandhi, on one occasion, when he was criticized for not being consistent, answered, ‘Don’t expect me to be consistent; but do insist that I be honest.’ And Saint Thomas Aquinas is quoted as saying, ‘Only the devil is truly consistent.’)

The NRSV uses the word ‘slave’ throughout where JB uses ‘servant.’ Scripture scholars suggest that the former is more accurate. In our world, ‘servant’ implies that the person’s work is paid for, while ‘slave’ does not. It is difficult to avoid the uneasy feeling that Jesus, by using the word slave (Greek, *doulos*, Latin, *servus*) so matter-of-factly in many parts of the Gospel, without any hint of disapproval, is giving at least tacit recognition, or even approval, to the institution of slavery. To say

that all he did was recognize that slavery was a fact of life is hardly an adequate explanation; he came to inaugurate a new pattern of relationships. Divorce was a fact of life, too, but he challenged it strongly and directly. John L. McKenzie, in his *Dictionary of the Bible*, writes, ‘There is no protest against the institution [of slavery] as such in all ancient literature of the Near East except Job 31.15, which appeals to common humanity.’ It reads, ‘Did he who made me in the womb not make them [slaves]? And did not one fashion us in the womb?’

Maybe the punch-line is in v.10 and is simply a warning against our having a sense of entitlement vis-à-vis God. We can’t claim any rights, since all we have is from God. Saint Paul wrote, ‘What have you that was not given to you? And if it was given, how can you boast as though it were not?’ (1 Corinthians 4.7) It is probably true to say that the only thing we can really claim as exclusively our own are our sins. It is better to do what we can, have the humility to recognize that it is not very much, and let God give us whatever he sees fit – and in that we may be confident that God will be generous.

Week 32

Wednesday

Luke 17.11-19 Ten lepers are made clean

11. On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

12. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance,
13. they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’
14. When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean.
15. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.
16. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.
17. Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?’
18. Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’
19. Then he said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’

V.11: ‘On the way to Jerusalem...’ This regular feature of Luke’s Gospel is a reminder that Jesus is drawing closer to his goal. (See note under 13.22 above.)

V.12: Scripture scholars (e.g. NRSV, note x) say that the term *leprosy* was used in reference to several different skin diseases.

Literally as well as metaphorically, the lepers, outcasts, were ‘keeping their distance.’ (v.12) They knew they weren’t wanted. Through ignorance, people were afraid of them, holding the mistaken

belief that leprosy could be contracted, as some diseases are, through inhaling their exhaled breath. 'The person who has the leprous disease... shall cover his upper lip.' (Leviticus 13.45)

V.13: The lepers address Jesus by name, a rare occurrence. Usually people addressed him as Rabbi, Master, or (after the resurrection) Lord. (The title of Rabbi was probably informal; it is unlikely that Jesus was ever ordained.) It may be only in Luke's Gospel that Jesus is called by name: the ten lepers (17.13); the blind beggar (18.35-43); and the good thief (23.42). In each case, their appeal was heard, their request granted. Getting on first name terms with Jesus is a good place to be.

V.14: By sending the lepers to the priests, Jesus was implicitly granting their request. He gave a similar instruction to a single leper whose healing is described in 5.14; Matthew has a similar account in 8.4 and Mark in 1.44.

The priests' role was to verify that a person no longer had the disease and could therefore safely be re-incorporated into society. Perhaps also it was Jesus' hope that the priests might be converted. Often the professional practitioners of religion are the slowest, the most resistant, the most stubborn and the most fractious in matters of faith.

When the lepers did what Jesus told them, they were healed. It is part of a pattern: when people do as Jesus says, good things happen.

Vv.15-16: One of the ten was a Samaritan; we are left to assume that the others were Jews. The Samaritans were people of mixed race. 'To the Jews, the Samaritans were a heretical and schismatic group... who were detested even more than pagans.' (John L. McKenzie, p.765) 'There was no deeper breach of human relations in the contemporary world than the feud of Jews and Samaritans.' (Same, p.766) When the ten shared a common suffering they forgot those differences, but, as soon as they were healed, they reverted to type, responding differently and going separate ways, the social barriers established by convention back in place.

The story seems to have such an obviously didactic character that one has to wonder if perhaps it might not refer to an actual event but was constructed for a teaching purpose. It makes the same point as that made repeatedly elsewhere: Jews, who should have accepted Jesus, rejected or disregarded him, in this instance not affording him even the elementary courtesy of a word of thanks. The outsiders – in this instance the ultimate outsider, a Samaritan – accepted him. As in another parable, the Samaritan is the hero (10.29-37), just as the Roman centurion was in 8.10. The message is: accept Jesus.

Vv.17-18: The issue of gratitude seems subsidiary to this point but illustrative of it.

V.19: ‘Your faith has made you well.’ This is a key feature of all Jesus’ works of power. They are not magic worked on passive people. Human co-operation, in this instance, faith (trust) is a *sine qua non*. Jesus used the same phrase to the sinful woman in Luke 7.50, the woman with the haemorrhage in 8.48, and the blind man in Jericho (18.42).

Start here

Week 32

Thursday

Luke 17.20-25 The coming of the Kingdom

20. Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed;

21. nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.’

22. Then he said to the disciples, ‘The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.

23. They will say to you, "Look there!" or "Look here!" Do not go, do not set off in pursuit.

24. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.

25. But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation.’

Vv.20-21: There is a problem about the use of the word *kingdom*. It is hard not to think of it as a political institution of some kind, which is not what it is about. In order to move away from that misleading association, some scholars and translators prefer to use the word *rule* or *reign* instead.

What did the Pharisees mean by their question? Did they expect God to found a political kingdom in Israel? Were they looking forward to a future when Israel would be free of foreign rule, and become a theocratic society based on fidelity to the covenant, one in which the king would execute God's will as a constitutional monarch, with the Law of God as the constitution. It seems likely that some at least entertained that hope – the Zealots did - while Jesus was constantly at pains to say that such was not his role – for example: ‘My kingdom is not from this world.’ (John 18.36; see also John 6.15)

The proclamation of the kingdom of God was the central theme of the preaching of Jesus. Replying to the Pharisees, he said that the kingdom is not something located in a particular place. It is not that kind of reality. He said, ‘The kingdom of God is among you’ (or within you). By *among you*, is he saying that the kingdom is in relationships, that their character and quality are what it is about? He implies that the kingdom is already there. And there

is only one kingdom of God, not two, a heavenly and an earthly. The kingdom is the world as God would like it to be, the world as it would be if God's will were done on earth as it is in heaven.

Was Jesus also implying that one should seek the kingdom mainly in the here and now, rather than in a supposed Golden Age in the past, or a Promised Land in the future? There have been ideologies in the course of human history which have built on a mythological past, and proposed an ideal future, which proves to be always just beyond reach, but still within view, so as to motivate the sacrifice of the present, and, perhaps, to justify the slaughter of perceived enemies. They have said, 'Don't look for fulfilment now. Sacrifice the present for the sake of the future. Be true to the valiant traditions of the heroes of our past. Do the unpleasant but necessary work of dealing with our enemies, and, in time, you'll see that it was all worthwhile.' That has led to sweat, sorrow, suffering and death.

Another view is that Jesus was referring to himself, saying that the kingdom, or rule, of God was present *in him*, that he was there among them as the king of the kingdom of God. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus claimed a unique relationship with God. He said and implied many times that the rule of God was a present reality – through him. He made acceptance or rejection of him the touchstone of acceptance or rejection of a person by God. To make

such a claim was either breath-taking fraud, an insane delusion, or the truth.

The Christian faith is about a relationship with God through and in Jesus. This is its core, more than about church, doctrine, morals or ‘the Christian message.’ To borrow from Peter Kreeft, ‘The Word of God is not a “message”; it is a Person. Let us not sell our birth right for a pot of message.’ (*Ecumenical Jihad: Ecumenism and the Culture War*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1996, p.39)

Vv.22-24: The second part of the reading is addressed to a different audience, perhaps on a different occasion. Jesus looks to the kingdom as a future reality as well as a present one. There is no need to go chasing after it, or following everyone who comes up with a new idea for how to find it. It will be instantly recognizable everywhere. ‘The days of the Son of Man’ suggests something apocalyptic, a day of judgment, perhaps the end of time, or something closer, such as personal death.

V.25: The kingdom will come about not through inflicting suffering, but through Jesus’ acceptance of his suffering on the cross, a point he had already made in 9.22 and would make again in 18.31-34.

Week 32
Friday

Luke 17.26-37 The end

26. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man.

27. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them.

28. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building,

29. but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulphur from heaven and destroyed all of them

30. - it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.

31. On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back.

32. Remember Lot's wife.

33. Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.

34. I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left.

35. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left.

36. Two will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left.

37. Then they asked him, 'Where, Lord?' He said to them, 'Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.'

There are passages in other Gospels that parallel parts of this text: vv.26-27 have a parallel in Matthew 24.37-39; v.31 in Matthew 24.17-18 and Mark 13.15-16; vv.34-35 in Matthew 24.40-41; and v.37 in Matthew 24.28.

Jesus is speaking about his second coming, the time for a verdict. Judgment is one of the most commonly recurring themes in the Gospel; it is inescapable. In the Hebrew Bible, especially in the Psalms, writers looked forward to judgment as a time of vindication; they seemed confident that God would find in their favour and against their enemies. With Jesus, the matter is different. The Day of Judgment is a day of dread, to be feared. 'One will be taken and the other left.' It suggests that judgment will be unexpected, and that many will be unprepared for it, absorbed by the ordinary activities of life (vv.27-28). For the person, judgment is as sure as vultures gathering around a corpse. And people's actions are their judge.

There is a sense of urgency about Jesus' language, not only here, but throughout the Gospel. He was a man with a mission, a man in a hurry, eager to get people to take up a stance for or against him. He was anything but easy-going, content with fence-sitting, postponement or wanting to have the best of all worlds. He looked for decision and commitment. He wanted people to take risks. Faith as a comfort zone, there to make people feel good, faith as a security blanket – all that was foreign to him. 'Those who try

to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life for his sake and for the Gospel will keep it.' (v.33, also 9.23-24; Matthew 16.24-25; Mark 8.34-35; John 12.25) Jesus taught in parables, and in paradoxes, those seeming contradictions that invite the discovery of truth.

Week 32

Saturday

Luke 18.1-8 The parable of the widow and the unjust judge

1. Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.
2. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.
3. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent."
4. For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone,
5. yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."
6. And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says.
7. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?

8. I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’

In summary, the message of the parable, which is unique to Luke, is to pray with confidence and perseverance. His point is that if even an unjust judge will eventually do what is right, then, *a fortiori*, will not God, a just judge, ‘grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?’ (v.7) Polite persecution, the Inquisition with manners, keeping after them until they learn that the line of least resistance for them is to deal with you rather than fob you off, because you’re going to keep coming back, no matter what - that is sometimes a necessary approach with bureaucracies, and it works! It is recommended elsewhere by Luke, as in the story of the man who goes to his friend in the middle of the night looking for bread: ‘I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.’ (11.8)

V.4: Fear of God and respect for people - they often go together, and absence of the first is often expressed in absence of the second. What does *fear* mean in the Gospel? Dufour says that ‘fear... is the heart of any genuinely religious disposition.’ (p.149) He adds that it is more than simply awe or reverence, because God is angry, judges and

punishes. It is accompanied by faith and confidence in God, and is associated with observance of the commandments and service to God. It was seen as the beginning of wisdom and often equated with religion itself: ‘Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ (Psalm 111.10)

But is fear a worthy basis for a relationship with a loving Father? John wrote, ‘perfect love casts out fear’, and ‘whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.’ (1 John 4.18) In the Bible, ‘Fear not’ is the most commonly used phrase.

The Greek philosopher, Democritus, said that fear is mother of the gods. An Irish atheist declared his “credo”: Ignorance leads to fear; fear leads to religion; remove ignorance, and religion becomes irrelevant.

V.5: NCHS (784d) translates RSV’s ‘keeps bothering me,’ and JB’s ‘pestering me’ more graphically as ‘hitting me over the head’!

V.8a: The claim, ‘I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them’ is a large one, but there is massive evidence against it. The poor of the world, the widows and orphans, have cried for justice from century to century, often seemingly unheard by God or man. To say ‘Pray always and not lose heart’ (v.1) may be cruel if addressed to people who experience great and prolonged suffering through no fault of their own; it may leave them with the feeling that that are not praying properly, for example with

sufficient confidence, or that they are being punished for their sins, or that they are not God's 'chosen ones.' (v.7) But, 'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of,' said the poet, Alfred Tennyson.

V.8b: The concluding phrase is probably an addition from another context. The implication seems to be that he will not. Matthew appears to have a similar view in 24.12: 'because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold.' But he adds, 'the one who endures to the end will be saved. (v.13)

Week 33

Monday

Luke 18.35-43 Jesus heals a blind beggar

35. As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.

36. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening.

37. They told him, 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.'

38. Then he shouted, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'

39. Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'

40. Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him,

41. 'What do you want me to do for you?' He said, 'Lord, let me see again.'
42. Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.'
43. Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 20.29-34 and in Mark 10.46-52.

V.35: In Matthew and Mark, this incident is described as happening when Jesus was leaving Jericho, here in Luke as he was approaching it. Mark gives him the name Bartimaeus, while Luke leaves him un-named, and Matthew has not one, but two, blind beggars. That may not be important, but it shows the evangelists exercising freedom in recounting events. Perhaps, for them, what mattered was not so much to describe events factually as to interpret their significance. Their interpretation is built into the story. Gospel stories, parables and teachings are conditioned by many factors such as time, place, culture, the evangelist's personality, and the audience to which they were addressed. They were written that way and need to be read that way. To attempt to give them a more generalized application may be to place on them a burden of significance more than they can bear, and they may break down under it. It cannot be done without the risk of distortion.

V.38: As with the ten lepers in 17.13 and the good thief in 23.42, the blind beggar addresses Jesus by name, one of the very few in the Gospels to do so. ‘Son of David’ was a title of honour, which not only recognized physical descent from King David, but also implied that the person so honoured was in the messianic tradition. ‘Messiah’ was not a divine title, but meant that the one so called was uniquely chosen by God.

V.39: The blind man annoyed people by his shouting. Jesus was by now a VIP, and this guy can’t behave himself but spoils the big occasion by yelling and screaming. He could not see anything, but he could hear the commotion of the crowd, so, in v.36, he asked them what it was about. They try to shut him up; the proprieties must be observed. But he is desperate; he is not going to be silenced by anyone. He keeps at it; for him, this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

Vv.40-41: Jesus ordered the man to be brought to him. He often gave orders; he was a strong personality. His question was direct and to the point, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The man knew exactly what he wanted; he did not need to stop and think. He said, ‘Lord, let me see again.’ I think Jesus must have been pleased to get a straight answer to a straight question; he did not often get one. (But he did not often give one either!) Jesus seemed to like people who knew what they wanted.

He liked it when they asked for help in basic needs, when their need was real and urgent, as in, ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’

V.42: Jesus said to the man, ‘Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.’ As in 7.50, 8.48 and 17.19, faith is indispensable. Miracles, works of power, signs or wonders take place in a context of faith. They are never gimmicks, done to create an impression. They are done for others, to meet human needs. They are done *with* people more than *for* them. The person has to cooperate by asking, by showing some trust in Jesus’ ability and willingness to help them.

The use of the word “sign” to describe miracles is significant. A sign points to something beyond itself. It means that a miracle has a purpose beyond the immediate act, e.g. of healing. It says, in effect, ‘Look, and see. What do you think is going on here? Whose work is this?’ The sign says that God is here, intervening in human affairs. God’s power is always at work, in the ordinary more than in the extraordinary. God is at work in Jesus. And God’s power is inseparable from the reality of God.

In the Gospels, works of power are principally healings rather than interventions in nature.

V.43: As soon as the man regained his sight, he followed Jesus. Both he and the people glorify and praise God, not Jesus. (The phrase ‘glorifying and

praising God' is used in 2.20 of the shepherds, after the birth of Jesus.) Jesus directed people to God, not to himself. He is the mediator rather than the destination.

Week 33

Tuesday

Luke 19.1-10 Jesus and Zacchaeus

1. He entered Jericho and was passing through it.
2. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.
3. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.
4. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.
5. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.'
6. So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.
7. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'
8. Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.'
9. Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.'

10. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

Vv.1-4: There is something ridiculous about the figure of Zacchaeus, a VIP in the town, and rich to boot, running around trying to get a look at Jesus. He was short, and the crowd made it impossible for him. But he was both resourceful and uninhibited, unworried about loss of dignity; he scuttled up a tree like a squirrel. He was determined, not put off by a difficulty. He may have been small in stature, but he had largeness of mind.

Vv.5-6: Jesus looked up and saw him, and promptly invited himself to Zacchaeus' house. Doing so was an act of trust, as if to say, 'I know you won't refuse.' By staying at Zacchaeus' house, Jesus was putting himself under a compliment to him. He looked to what was good in him. Trust was Jesus' gift to Zacchaeus; Zacchaeus' response was joyful conversion.

Hospitality is a great ice-breaker. When people meet over the table and have a meal, washed down with wine, tensions are eased, conversation begins, understanding has an opening, and new possibilities emerge.

V.7: Almost inevitably, the moaners and groaners stand apart, ready with buckets of cold water; they were out in full force and negativity that day. There

are other examples of this in Luke, e.g., 5.30 and 15.2. Why their grumbling? Maybe they felt that moral uprightness was a precondition for serving God, rather than its consequence. Perhaps they thought, ‘You can’t serve God without keeping his law.’ And Zacchaeus was not doing that.

Tax collectors exploited their own people by squeezing as much as possible from them, remitting part of it to the Roman authorities and pocketing the rest as their fee. The system was privatized and tailor-made for exploitation. Corruption was inbuilt in the system. (People in Turkey at the time of Jesus erected a monument to an honest tax collector, they were so rare.) If the people saw Zacchaeus as a collaborator with the Roman occupation, someone who did their dirty work for them, serving their policy of divide and conquer, who could blame them? It was true. The cynics looked at Zacchaeus, saw only a collaborating tax-collector, condemned him, and that was all they had to say. Jesus looked at the same man, saw the good that was in him, and looked to the good that could be in him. ‘Love is an active hope for what the other can become – with the help of my human solidarity... it has an understanding cordiality that nourishes hope.’ (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, 29 June 1971, n.39)

V.8: Zacchaeus had the guts to face them down. Had Jesus condemned him, he might well have felt humiliated, and withdrawn into defensive self-justification. But Jesus’ acceptance of him changed

that. So he made an offer to compensate anyone he had exploited, one that went beyond the requirements of the law. (In Exodus 21.37 and 2 Samuel 12.6, four-fold restitution was required, but not giving half of one's possessions to the poor. Zacchaeus did what the rich ruler in 18.18-27 had failed to do.) Indeed, he went a little bit crazy, crazy with joy. Love is crazy and does not count the cost. The desire for money is seen by Luke as an obstacle to God, so he presents Zacchaeus' turning away from it as a joyful liberation, all the more praiseworthy when the money is given to the poor. 'Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.' (Luke 12.34)

Vv.9-10: Jesus was interested in seeing justice done. It was one of his principal concerns. He was overjoyed by Zacchaeus' response. And then, in a remark likely intended for a wider audience, he said, 'the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.'

The story of Zacchaeus evokes Matthew 21.31 where Jesus said, 'Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of you,' and also Luke 15.7: 'I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.' (Likewise, 15.10, 24 and 32.) It is a story which summarizes the Gospel.

Week 33

Wednesday

Luke 19.11-28 The parable of the ten pounds

11. As they were listening to this, he went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.

12. So he said, 'A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return.

13. He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, "Do business with these until I come back."

14. But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, "We do not want this man to rule over us."

15. When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading.

16. The first came forward and said, "Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds."

17. He said to him, "Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities."

18. Then the second came, saying, "Lord, your pound has made five pounds."

19. He said to him, "And you, rule over five cities."

20. Then the other came, saying, "Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth,

21. for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.”
22. He said to him, "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow?
23. Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest.”
24. He said to the bystanders, "Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds.”
25. And they said to him, "Lord, he has ten pounds!”
26. "I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.
27. But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them - bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.”
28. After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.’

There is a passage in Matthew 25.14-30 which parallels vv.13, 15-26 of this parable.

At the beginning and end of this extract (vv.11, 28), Jesus is shown as going to Jerusalem, or ‘up’ to it. Once again, the capital, the site of the temple, is the focus.

V.11: The text reads, ‘As they were listening.’ It doesn’t explain to whom ‘they’ refers. One might suppose it means the people who were present at the incident which immediately precedes this. But that was at Jericho, while this was near Jerusalem, which is about thirty-seven kilometres from Jericho.

‘They supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.’ They – whoever they were – understood the kingdom principally in political terms, and that was something Jesus was always anxious to avoid. It was a mistake his disciples often made, so perhaps it refers to them.

V.12: The story is not easy to understand. Not very happily, it combines two parables. In one, a nobleman goes to claim a kingship, and then, on his return, kills those who opposed his claim. In the other, inserted into the first, he calls servants to account for money he gave them during his absence. (The “pounds” were each the equivalent of about three months wages for a labourer, but the amounts are surely symbolic.)

The first parable (vv.12, 14, and 27) may have derived from an actual incident. About thirty-five years earlier, in 4 B.C., Archelaus, the eldest son of Herod, known as the Great, having first suppressed a revolt in Jerusalem, went to Rome seeking confirmation of his father’s will, which declared him his successor. Though ruling in Israel, Archelaus was half Samaritan, half Idumaeon, and was hated

by the Jewish population. A deputation of Jews followed, asking Emperor Augustus not to allow him to become king. Augustus split the difference, giving him only part of the kingdom, and two other parts to his brothers, Philip and Antipas. Divide and conquer: much better to have the three of them fighting each other than one of them possibly fighting Rome. They gave him the title of ethnarch, a lesser one than that of king, and which expressed his dependence on Rome. On his return, Archelaus slaughtered his opponents.

Vv.12, 14, 27: The story of the nobleman and his enemies was, perhaps, intended to reinforce for the disciples the point that Jesus did not want a political kingship. If so, it was a lesson often forgotten in later centuries. Much of the history of the Christian community is one of political intrigue within and without the church, and of empire-building at the expense of the Gospel.

Vv.13, 15-26: The meaning of the parable of the pounds echoes that of an earlier message: ‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.’ (Luke 16.10)

The fate of the “wicked” slave is also a challenge to leave timidity behind and to take risks, to have the courage and the imagination to dare. Prudence is not a synonym for caution; it is a guide for action, not a substitute for it or an excuse or cover for inaction. It

is a reminder that not to make a decision is itself a decision, with consequences as real as any other. It includes the element of *carpe diem* – seize the day – recognizing and using the moment of opportunity: ‘See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!’ (2 Corinthians 6.2) That is prudence.

It is noticeable that the “wicked” slave (v.22) was unwilling to take responsibility for his action, but sought to blame the nobleman for it. (v.21) The latter was angry with him for this but also for stupidity in not depositing the money with bankers so that he might at least have earned interest. (Buddhism ranks stupidity as equivalent to sin.)

Vv.25-26: When the slaves see the nobleman’s action, they protest at what appears to be injustice on his part. His reply, in v.26, seems to add to it, while also, incidentally, re-echoing 8.18: ‘to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away.’ (See Matthew 13.12 and Mark 4.25 for the same.) But to see that he did in fact act justly, one need only ask the question, ‘To whom would you rather give a gift, someone who would use and enjoy it, or someone who wrapped it up, put it away “safely” and allowed it to lie unused?’ The answer is self-evident.

The parable seems to say that disciples are servants, stewards, and therefore accountable. In the master’s absence, they are expected to use

intelligently on his behalf the gifts received. This image is used elsewhere, in Mark 13.34, for example: ‘It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his own work...’

V.27: In an action which would probably have evoked no surprise or shock in the minds of Jesus’ contemporaries, the nobleman, on his return, has his enemies slaughtered in his presence. It may be taken as a parable of judgment on those who reject Jesus. In John 19.15, 21, the Jews say that they do not recognize Jesus as their king. Is it possible that John sees their slaughter in the war that ended in 70 AD as retribution for their rejection of Jesus?

As with 14.28-32 on building and going to war, 16.1-13 on the parable of the rich man and his manager, and 17.7-10 on slaves, there is, to use a somewhat anachronistic term in this context, a “class” element to the parables which jars with Luke’s “preferential option” for the poor. Jesus appears to speak from the perspective of the wealthy, both here and elsewhere. (E.g., Luke 12.42-48 and 17.7-10, on slavery)

Week 33

Thursday

Luke 19.41-44 Jesus weeps over Jerusalem

41. As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it,
42. saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.
43. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side.
44. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'

Vv.41-42: Jerusalem, at last. A strange emphasis, perhaps, for Luke, a Gentile writing for Gentiles, all the more so as he is the only Gospel writer to have it. Like the other evangelists, Luke was not concerned to write a journalistic, eye-witness account of events as they happened, but to write religious history where the principal concern was to interpret and teach. The significance of what happened was more important than the event itself. (In Communist China, much ideology has been built up around Chairman Mao Zedong's Long March in a way that is perhaps not too different.)

There is in Jesus a sense of disappointment close to despair that Jerusalem had failed to recognize him for who he was, and thereby lost its opportunity. See John 1.11: 'He came to his own and his own received him not.' His own people had waited and

prayed for the Messiah for so long, and then missed him when he came. He shed tears for Jerusalem's loss. This sense of his grief at being rejected by his own people, and the consequence of that rejection recur in Luke 13.34-35, 21.5-24 and 23.28-31.

Luke is the scribe of the gentleness of Christ. Like the other evangelists, for him it is a great mystery why the majority of Jews rejected Jesus. Why did they?

The late Anthony de Mello SJ was always talking about awareness as the key to human development and spiritual growth. Other spiritual writers echo the same idea, saying that self-knowledge is the starting-point of the spiritual life. The people of Jerusalem failed to see what was happening before their eyes. They were unaware, unthinking. Jesus had already taken people to task for their inability to open their eyes to what was happening, saying, 'You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?' (See Luke 12.54-56) Later, on the cross, he was to say, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23.34)

Luke is the most universalist of the evangelists, perhaps because of his Gentile background and readership. For him, perhaps more than the others, Jesus was a man for all peoples, and his teaching had universal application. Could it be that the Jewish leaders saw this, too, and recognized that it implied

an inescapable challenge to the covenant as they understood it, between God and Jews as his chosen people? Jesus' covenant was for all people – 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.' (Luke 22.20) If Jesus brought into being a new covenant for all people, where did that leave Jews as God's chosen people, where did it leave the covenant – which was foundational to their faith? Was it that there was too much at stake for them in such a change of outlook, too many vested interests which would be undermined, too many institutions made redundant, so they saw Jesus as a threat and felt obliged to be rid of him? Did Jesus ask for too large a leap of imagination for them – as if they thought: 'the Gentiles included in the covenant? - he can't possibly mean that; it's too much.'

Vv.43-44: Did Jesus actually foresee, as suggested here and in Luke 21.20-24, the encirclement of Jerusalem by Roman forces in 70 AD, and the capture and burning of the temple on 29 August of that year? Did he foresee the destruction of the city, and the dispersal of its population? 'They will not leave within you one stone upon another,' (a phrase used again in 21.6.)

The latter is not literally true. The Western Wall of King Herod's temple still stands today, large blocks of stone set solidly one upon another. It is a place of pilgrimage for Jews, a place of memories, a place to re-establish links with their past. The "prophecy" of no stone being left upon a stone illustrates the

difference between history as we understand it, and history as the Gospel writers saw it. With our contemporaries, factual accuracy is regarded as the indispensable foundation and precondition of history as interpretation. In the case of the writers of the Gospels, what mattered most was the significance, in terms of their own perspective, of the events they described. They gave it their “spin”, and factual accuracy took second place to that. For example, none of the evangelists shows great concern for chronological order, and they move the same incident from one place or context to another, making it impossible to develop an accurate, sequential *Life of Jesus*. An example is the cleansing of the temple by Jesus: John places it at the beginning of Jesus’ public life (2.14-16), the Synoptics near the end. (Matthew 21.12-13; Mark 11.11, 15-17; Luke 19.45-46)

According to Luke, Jerusalem would be crushed to the ground, with its children within it. As he understood it, the destruction of the city was because it failed to accept Jesus. Certainly, the besieging Roman general, Titus, and his father and emperor, Vespasian, had no such ideas. Most likely, they had not heard of Jesus. The passage also illustrates a different view of prophecy, seeing it, not as a foretelling of future events, but a forth-telling, or spelling out, of the significance of past or present ones. It is possible, even likely, that the words attributed to Jesus were put into his mouth by Luke after the capture of Jerusalem in August 70 AD.

Most scholars date the writing of Luke from after the year 70. But it is also possible that the imagery is a flashback to the earlier siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in July-August 587 BC.

What were the actual words of Jesus on this or other occasions? It is impossible to know.

Week 33

Friday

Luke 19.45-48 Jesus cleanses the Temple

45. Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there;

46. and he said, 'It is written,
"My house shall be a house of prayer;
but you have made it a den of robbers."'

47. Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him;

48. but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 21.12-13, Mark 11.15-17 and John 2.14-16.

This passage suggests that, on his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus went straight to the temple. It would have been natural for him to do that. There he

saw that worship had become associated with trafficking in money matters – the law and the profits. Religion had become embroiled in dodgy money matters and shady wheeling and dealing – all given sham legitimacy by being done in its name - dirty doings for the love of God! Clearly, Jesus wanted none of that, so he began to drive out those who were buying and selling there. The other evangelists tell the same story, but at greater length and even more strongly.

In v.46, Jesus quotes from Isaiah, ‘my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples’ (56.7), and from Jeremiah 7.11. The latter is worth citing in its full and powerful context, 7.1-11: -

The following message came to Jeremiah from the Lord:

Stand at the gate of the house of the Lord, and there proclaim this message: ‘Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord!

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Reform your ways and your deeds, so that I may remain with you in this place.

Put not your trust in the deceitful words: "This is the temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord!"

Only if you thoroughly reform your ways and your deeds; if each of you deals justly with his neighbour;

if you no longer oppress the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow; if you no longer shed innocent blood in this place, or follow strange gods to your own harm,
will I remain with you in this place, in the land which I gave your fathers long ago and forever. But here you are, putting your trust in deceitful words to your own loss!
Are you to steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal, go after strange gods that you know not, and yet come to stand before me in this house which bears my name, and say: "We are safe; we can commit all these abominations again"?
Has this house which bears my name become in your eyes a den of thieves? I, too, see what is being done,' says the Lord.

Those quotations may be seen as re-iterating what Jesus had said in the Temple as a child of twelve when he spoke of it as 'my Father's house.' (Luke 2.49)

The incident shows a different side of Jesus' character. In his life, he was to suffer violence, but he did not inflict it, except here, and in the enigmatic incident of cursing the barren fig tree, which, in Matthew 21.18-20 and Mark 11.13-14, are associated with it. In this incident, there is passionate anger in him at this abuse of religion. Did he see it as an example of what he had earlier condemned so strongly, saying, 'It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were

thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.’? (Luke 17.2) Trucking and trading in matters of religion were a scandal which likely were an obstacle to people’s faith.

How is this incident reconcilable with the gentleness of Christ which is one of the hallmarks of Luke’s Gospel? I do not know. Maybe they are simply not reconcilable. Is anyone totally consistent? Does it explain anything to say that Jesus may have felt frustrated, disappointed and hurt that, here, at the heart of his people’s life, religion had been belittled, becoming a commodity to be bought and sold, while those entrusted with its stewardship were skimming off profits for themselves?

In the temple were money exchanges for foreign pilgrims, animals were sold for sacrifice, and religious goods were on sale to the pious. According to Jewish historians, the high priestly family of Annas and Caiaphas had become a cartel managing a racket. Clearly, Jesus felt a sense of outrage at this. It was reducing religion to something functional, a series of ritual actions to be performed, when it should have been a warm and personal relationship with a loving Father. It was keeping up appearances, while the heart, the inner core, was missing. The house of prayer had been made a den of robbers. There was, perhaps, a sense that this was the last straw, a final victory for blindness and obduracy. That might explain his anger, but hardly his violence.

Maybe we need to look at how the Gospels were written. Three stages are generally recognized. First, there were the words and actions of Jesus as he spoke and did them. These he did in the language and culture of his time and place, explaining and teaching in accordance with traditional Jewish methods, such as parables. Then, there was the preaching by the apostles and early disciples about Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Finally, there was the compilation of the Gospels as we have them today in written form. (This outline of stages is synopsized from the 1964 Instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Historical Truth of the Gospels*, Rome, 1964) These were influenced by factors such as the sources available, the audience for whom a Gospel was intended – non-Jews in Luke's case, Jews in Matthew's – and the personality, experience, skill and purpose of the individual writer.

Jewish scholars recommend a willingness to see a multitude of different possible meanings, in contrast to a single "authentic" meaning backed by clerical and scholarly authority. (Saint Ephraim of Syria concurred, saying that interpretation should result in a breadth and plurality of viewpoint.) The difficulty of having one precise and reliable understanding is illustrated by the following: -

In the RSV of the Bible, Job 13.15 reads, 'See, he [God] will kill me; I have no hope.'

The Authorised Version of the same text reads, 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.'

The JB reads, 'Let him kill me if he will; I have no other hope.'

Biblia-Catholic.net has, 'Slay me though he might, I will wait for him.'

Jews are powerfully influenced in their reading of scripture by their experience of the Holocaust, asking what authority the Bible retains after it. The Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, asked, 'Dare we recommend to the survivors of Auschwitz, to the Job of the gas chambers, 'Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his love endures for ever'?' Especially since the Holocaust, for rabbinic scholars, humanity should live by the commandments and not die by their observance. They refer to the sacred duty to preserve life, which has precedence over the commandments.

Vv.47-48: Luke omits the episode of the cursing of the fig tree, which in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, takes place near or at Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Maybe he felt it was sufficient to make the point once (or perhaps he felt he had already made it in the parable of the barren fig tree in 13.6-9): Israel, God's chosen people, the people of the covenant, had been found barren when the Messiah came. Not only were they found wanting, but their leaders 'kept looking for a way to kill him.' There is almost no length to which an institution will not go in self-protection when it perceives itself to be under

threat, and the bigger and more dominant it is the less scruples it tends to have; it has too many vested interests at stake. The first instinct of institutions as of individuals is self-preservation. But the leaders were unable to kill Jesus because all the people were spellbound by him – for the moment.

Did Luke simply invent the story as a parable in action to illustrate Israel's defection? If he did, Matthew, Mark and John did so as well, or else they drew on a common source which did so. That seems unlikely. Simple explanations are more likely to be true than complicated ones. Maybe Jesus simply lost his temper: the abuse of religion was one thing which seemed particularly to anger him.

Week 33

Saturday

Luke 20.27-40 A question about resurrection

27. Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him
28. and asked him a question, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.
29. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless;
30. then the second
31. and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless.
32. Finally the woman also died.

33. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.’
34. Jesus said to them, ‘Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage;
35. but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.
36. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.
37. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.
38. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.’
39. Then some of the scribes answered, ‘Teacher, you have spoken well.’
40. For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

There are passages parallel to vv.27-38 in Matthew 22.23-33, and Mark 12.18-27. V.40 has parallels in Matthew 22.46 and Mark 12.34.

Vv.28-33: It is hard not to laugh at this far-fetched and obviously pre-fabricated story. The Sadducees present a picture of confusion at the resurrection as to whose wife the seven-times married woman will be. Their story was likely meant to evoke laughter,

to reduce the idea of resurrection to absurdity so that people would dismiss it.

The reference in v.28 to Moses relates to a text in Deuteronomy: -

When brothers live together and one of them dies without a son, the widow of the deceased shall not marry anyone outside the family; but her husband's brother shall go to her and perform the duty of a brother-in-law by marrying her.

The first-born son she bears shall continue the line of the deceased brother, that his name may not be blotted out from Israel. (25.5-6)

Vv.34-36: In reply, Jesus says we should not assume that a resurrected life will be a continuation of the present one, with marriages taking place as usual. The 'children of God, children of the resurrection', that is, those who are raised up, belong to God and live a life qualitatively different from the earthly. Our yesterday, today and tomorrow are a single instant in the eyes of God, who stands outside of time, which is his creation.

Vv.37-38: Jesus goes on to assert that there will be a resurrection: the Lord is God, not of the dead, but of the living, for, to him, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (the long-dead prophets of the past), are alive.

V.39: The scribes, who were mostly Pharisees, and believed in the resurrection, were, for once, on Jesus' side, delighted with his answer. It discomfited their opponents, the Sadducees, who had posed the question.

For the most part, the Pharisees were serious, devout, intense, narrow, nationalistic, legalistic, traditionally-minded laymen, close to the scribes. The scribes were the literate intelligentsia, in contrast to manual labourers. Secretaries, letter-writers, archivists, and guardians of tradition, they were conscious of their status. The Sadducees were landowners and merchants, conservative people of property; they included priests and aristocrats.

Some scholars suggest that Jesus had himself once been a Pharisee but outgrew that background. He came from a particular culture, time and place, but was not limited by them.

V.40: Jesus was not someone to take on lightly. Many who sought to catch him out, to trick or trap him, found it a bruising encounter and went away licking their wounds.

Week 34

Monday

Luke 21.1-4 The widow's offering

1. He [Jesus] looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury;
2. he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.
3. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them;
4. for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'

There is a passage parallel to this in Mark 12.41-44. A minor difference is that Mark describes the money she gave and its value.

V.1: Why does it say, 'He looked up'? Is it just a remembered detail, or does it have symbolic meaning?

Vv.2-4: Jesus praises the generosity of the widow in her gift to the temple, because she gave of her need, whereas others, though they gave more money, made less of a sacrifice in doing so.

At another level, perhaps he is contrasting the awareness of their need for God of the poor with the self-sufficiency of the rich. A recurring theme of Luke's Gospel is his understanding that the poor and the outcasts of society are nearer to God than the rich and the social elite.

Week 34

Tuesday

Luke 21.5-11 The destruction of the Temple and signs and persecution

5. When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said,

6. 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'

7. They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?'

8. And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them.

9. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.'

10. Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom;

11. there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 24.1-8 and Mark 13.1-9.

Vv.5-6: This sounds like a repeat of Luke 19.43-44. Did Jesus say it twice, or did Luke report one incident twice? If the latter, was the repetition intentional? If so, why? (Luke's Gospel sometimes

gives the impression that it needed the services of a good copy editor.)

Vv.7-8: Asked when this would happen, and what sign would precede it, Jesus' answer evokes memories of what he said in 17.23 about the coming of the kingdom: 'They will say to you, "Look there!", or "Look here." Do not go, do not set off in pursuit.' Does it contain a hint of a larger end, the end of the world?

Vv.9-11: The frightening picture Jesus paints of wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues, dreadful portents and great signs from heaven, is one which might apply to almost any period in history. History is a chronicle and catalogue of such events. And, understandably, people caught up in them might well feel that the end of the world has come. Perhaps it had come – for them. But there is something more general and universal here.

There is a type of religiosity which loves threats of dire punishment, usually related to sexual sin. Think of Fátima, Palma de Troia, Garabandal, Achill Island, etc. etc. When one of these fades from the scene, another comes along to take its place. Is it just a love of novelty, or is it that some people like being scared?

When Jesus was asked, where, when, or with what sign these future events would take place, his answers were uninformative. Was it that he did not

know? Would it be true to say that Jesus, apart from ordinary general knowledge, knew those things, and only those things, that were necessary for him to achieve his mission? (In Mark 13.32, he says, ‘about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.’)

Theologians, more so perhaps than scripture scholars, sometimes adopt an amphibian approach to questions such as these. In my African days, I remember people saying of themselves that they were like frogs. When there is trouble on land, the frog hops into water; and when there is trouble in water, it hops onto land. The amphibian is at home in both environments. Sometimes theologians, presented with a difficulty about the knowledge of Jesus, say, ‘That was his human knowledge,’ while, in another situation, they say, ‘That was his divine knowledge.’ It reminds me of the frog. But the difficulty remains.

Luke’s Gospel is generally agreed to have been written after Matthew’s and Mark’s, probably after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. If that was the case, then it was clearly evident to him that the end of Jerusalem and of Israel was not the end of the world, too. So he separated the two strands, the historical one about Jerusalem’s destruction, and the apocalyptic or eschatological one about the end of the world and the second coming of Jesus.

Week 34

Wednesday

Luke 21.12-19 Signs and persecutions

Jesus said to his disciples:

12. 'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.

13. This will give you an opportunity to testify.

14. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance;

15. for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

16. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death.

17. You will be hated by all because of my name.

18. But not a hair of your head will perish.

19. By your endurance you will gain your souls.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 10.17-22 and John 16.1-2.

Vv.12-13: Before what occurs? Before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, or before the end of time?

Jesus tells his disciples to expect persecution. Since that was what he had himself encountered, it was not unreasonable to expect that it would also

happen to his followers. He tells them they should see opposition as an opportunity. Centuries later, in Irish tradition, Saint Patrick lit a fire on the hill of Slane, knowing that he would be called to account for it, and he was. He welcomed that as an opportunity to testify about Jesus.

Vv.14-15: Jesus had already said to his disciples,

When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say. (Luke 12.11-12)

Luke, recalling the trial of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, said,

Now when they [the members of the Sanhedrin] saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.’ (Acts 4.13)

Similarly, when Stephen was called to account for his preaching, his accusers ‘could not understand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. (Acts 6.10)

This inspirational role was assigned by Matthew (10.20) and Luke (12.12) to the Spirit. Here Luke assigns it to Jesus. (21.15) It is surprising, perhaps,

that Luke, the author of Acts, ‘the Gospel of the Holy Spirit’, should here assign this to Jesus instead of the Spirit.

Jesus wanted the disciples to trust in God, not in themselves, their intelligence, their persuasive power, or their speaking ability. In a sermon on Saint Peter, Saint Augustine said: -

If Christ has first chosen a man skilled in public speaking, such a man might well have said: "I have been chosen on account of my eloquence." If he had chosen a senator, the senator might have said, "I have been chosen because of my rank." If his first choice had been an emperor, the emperor surely might have said: "I have been chosen for the sake of the power I have at my disposal." Let these worthies keep quiet and defer to others; let them hold their peace for a while. I am not saying that they should be passed over or despised; I am simply asking all those who can find any grounds for pride in what they are to give way to others just a little. Christ says: Give me this fisherman, this man without education or experience, this man to whom no senator would deign to speak, not even if he were buying fish. Yes, give me him; once I have taken possession of him, it will be obvious that it is I who am at work in him. Although I meant to include senators, orators and emperors among my recruits, even when I

have won over the senator I shall still be surer of the fisherman. The senator can always take pride in what he is; so can the orator and the emperor, but the fisherman can glory in nothing except Christ alone. (Sermon 43.5-6)

Vv.16-18: Jesus warned them they would be betrayed by family and friends, and some of them would be killed. Jesus himself had had a hard time from his family and relatives, who did not understand him. (See under Luke 11.27-28 above.) He did not promise his disciples success; rather, he said they would be hated because of him, ‘but not a hair of your head will perish.’ (v.18, and 12.7: ‘even the hairs of your head are all counted.’) That was surprising, since he had just told them, virtually in the same breath, to expect arrest, persecution, betrayal, death and hatred.

In the course of history, have Christians suffered more, or inflicted more, persecution? It is an impossible question to answer, but it might be a close run thing. It seems senseless to persecute someone for their ideas or opinions. Anti-Semitism by Christians is perhaps one of the worst examples of this since it involved hating people or a religion which the persecutors often did not even know. The late David Irvine of the Progressive Unionist Party in Northern Ireland used to ask, ‘Is there anything more stupid than hating something you don’t know?’

There’s a large contrast between the suffering and death of Jesus, and the serenity of the Buddha

(Siddhartha Gautama). Buddhism is a philosophy which claims no divine authority, since it makes no profession of faith in God. The most a Buddhist can say is, 'This is my opinion; I believe it to be true.' Christianity claims divine origin and authority, so a believer may say, 'This is God's revelation; it has God's authority, and therefore it must be followed.' That lends itself readily to infliction persecution. Inflicting persecution and suffering it seem like two sides of one coin. If you inflict it, you are likely to suffer it at some time. And if you suffer it, you may feel legitimized in inflicting it.

Did Jesus have a fixation with suffering, even to the extent of a death wish?

V.19: In the Bible, the word "soul" has a different sense from that found in Greek philosophy or Christian scholasticism, that is to say, an immortal principle, the subject of thought, distinct from the body. In the Bible, "soul" means the conscious subject, the ego, the self, the person in his/her totality, including the body, and manifested through life.

The verse can hardly mean they will save their lives, much less 'gain' them, since Jesus had just said, 'they will put some of you to death.' What then does 'you will gain your souls' mean? Does it mean, 'You will preserve your integrity'? Or does it refer to a bodily resurrection?

Terence MacSwiney, the mayor of Cork, who died in 1920 on hunger strike in protest at British rule in Ireland, said, 'It is not those who inflict the most suffering, but those who can endure the most, who will win through.'

Week 34

Thursday

Luke 21.20-28 The destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man

Jesus said to his disciples:

20. 'When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.

21. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it;

22. for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfilment of all that is written.

23. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people;

24. they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

25. There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

26. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

27. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.

28. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

There are passages parallel to vv.20-24 in Matthew 24.15-28 and Mark 13.14-23, and to vv.25-28 in Matthew 24.29-31 and Mark 13.24-27.

This text needs to be read in conjunction with other Lucan texts with a similar theme, such as, 13.34-35; 17.23-27; 19.41-44 and 21.5-6.

Vv.20-24: This is more of the apocalyptic imagery that Jesus has used earlier, e.g. in 19.43-44 and 21.5-6. It is borrowed from sources such as Daniel, and may not necessarily intend a description of actual events, whether written before or after them. It paints a powerful picture of the suffering of the people of a besieged city, especially women and children, with some people killed, and the rest sent into slavery when it is captured.

The Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire led, in the war of 66-70 AD, to the destruction of Jerusalem and the virtual end of the Jewish nation in its homeland of Israel. Jewish historians estimate

that one-third of the population died in the war, another third was sold into slavery, while the remaining third, except for a remnant, was scattered. The victorious Roman general Titus, in an extraordinary act of vindictiveness, not only destroyed the city, but levelled the temple and buried it under a mound of earth, then spread salt on the ground so that nothing would grow there, stationed his tenth legion on the site, and, to add a final insult, built a pagan shrine on temple site, which many saw as foretold in Daniel 9.27, 'On the temple wing shall be the horrible abomination.' By doing so, Titus may have forgotten that he was marking the spot for posterity so that it was not lost.

One effect of this was that the Jewish population, some of whom were Christian, was dispersed throughout the Middle East. Earlier, during their persecution in the first century BC by Antiochus Epiphanes, Jews had already suffered dispersal. They had settled in the Greek-speaking cities of the eastern Mediterranean, had learned Greek, and translated the scriptures into Greek - the *Septuagint*.

When the new wave of refugees arrived, they brought the faith with them, and introduced it into these settled communities. These events had two important practical consequences: the Christian faith began to spread throughout the heart of the Roman Empire, and an opening was provided for contact with the Greeks, the cultural leaders of the day. The tiny Christian community was facing the intellectual

power of Greek culture, the political power of the Roman Empire and the religious power of Judaism. But, in the community's difficult early years, it was the "Jewishness" of Christians which saved them from the wrath of the empire which was later to hit them with full force. The empire, for political reasons, took an open attitude to local religions, but the Jewish faith was different from others. The God of the Jews was not a national God; he made universal claims and would not co-exist with the many other gods of the empire. For its part, the empire, faced by the refusal of Jews to compromise on this point, made provision for them in its laws. This provision did not threaten the unity of the empire because Jews were small in number; they were law-abiding and paid their taxes. However, the position of Jewish Christians was not without ambiguity, as one of the concerns of leading Christians - Luke among them - was that the Romans, who likely saw Christians simply as a Jewish sect, should not identify them with Jews who had revolted against Rome.

The text communicates a sense of the end of an age, that an era has concluded. That was indeed the case, with the Jewish people scattered in the Diaspora, able only to pray, 'Next year in Jerusalem.'

It is likely that Luke wrote after the year 70, so, this text, which has the tone of a foretelling, is, more

likely, a *vaticinium ex eventu*, that is, a “prophecy” after the event.

Vv.25-26: Luke re-visits the theme of vv.10-11, seeing Jerusalem’s destruction as fore-shadowing a worldwide cataclysm at the end of time. It is impossible to know if the end of the world will be as he describes it, and it does not matter: we do not have to accept Jesus’ cosmology to accept him.

Vv.27-28 begins by drawing on Daniel 7.13-14: -

As the visions during the night continued, I saw One like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven; when he reached the Ancient One and was presented before him, he received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, and his kingship shall not be destroyed.

The images of fear and dread which fill vv.20-26 turn in vv.27-28 to a joyful, hope-filled expectation of redemption. The Christian religion is pre-eminently a religion of hope. With Christ: -

- we can overcome our fears, and live up to our potential;
- we can throw away the masks we hide behind, knowing that he accepts us as we are, sinners;

- we need not be burdened by guilt, (not because we aren't guilty - we are, but) because Christ forgives, heals, reconciles;
- we can stand erect, hold our heads high and live up to our best;
- we can see ourselves in truth and not be afraid;
- we can recognize that we are children of God.

Week 34

Friday

Luke 21.29-33 The lesson of the fig tree

29. Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees;

30. as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.

31. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

32. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.

33. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.'

There are passages parallel to this in Matthew 24.32-35 and Mark 13.28-31.

Vv.29-30: Luke uses a fig tree as an example of visible signs pointing to something. Why a *fig* tree? Was it a way of "sanitizing" the story in Mark, his

source, about Jesus cursing the barren fig tree?
(Mark 11.12-14, 20-21)

Vv.31-32: Read the signs that are there to be read, Jesus seems to say. But the signs are ambiguous. Some, as in 21.9-11, are a regular feature of life in every age. In 21.20-24, another sign is the destruction of Jerusalem which was in the near future, less than forty years after the time of Jesus. Others, as in 21.25-27, suggest events in an unknown, perhaps distant, future. But the kingdom of God is already among us (17.21); it is both a present and a future reality.

V.32 suggests that the end would be within the lifetime of the generation then living. This is reinforced by Jesus saying in 9.27: 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.' Matthew has Jesus say, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom' (16.28), and Mark has an almost identical phrase in 9.1. James, in his letter, states, 'the coming of the Lord is near.' (5.8) Obviously that has not been the case.

Was Jesus mistaken?

We have admired his goodness in that, for love of us, he [Jesus] has not refused to descend to such a low position as to bear all that belongs to our race, included in which is ignorance. (Saint

Cyril of Alexandria, PG 75.369, cited by Raymond E. Brown SS, *Jesus, God and Man: Modern Biblical Reflections*, Chapman, London, 1968, p.102)

And perhaps error, too, where data are concerned? The *Jerusalem Bible* states, helpfully, ‘Christ, as man, received from the Father the knowledge of everything that had to do with his mission, but... he could be ignorant of certain elements in the divine plan.’ (Commentary on Matthew 24.36, note u)

V.33: This is perhaps intended to be an “anchor” phrase, but, in view of what has gone before, maybe an anchor not firmly embedded. Where the text says ‘heaven’ perhaps it means “the heavens,” i.e., the stars and planets, rather than the place or state of union with God. Mark adds the statement that, ‘about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.’ (13.32) Matthew has an almost identical statement in 24.36.

‘My words will not pass away.’ Elsewhere, it is written, ‘The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.’ (Isaiah 40.8)

Luke 21.5-33, taken together, suggests that Jesus did not present, and probably did not intend to present, a coherent body of teaching, a consistent exposé that would, for example, make clear what refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, what refers to

the death of an individual, and what refers to the end of all things.

But Jesus was Jewish, not Greek. Does that apply elsewhere also? There are lots of loose ends, and apparent, or real, contradictions and errors. Was it the case that he had a flash of insight into a particular matter and articulated it, without relating one insight to another, or reconciling one statement with another one on the same topic? To attempt to use the Gospel in either a probative or a prescriptive manner, is probably to do it, and the truth, a disservice. ‘Everything is conditioned, relative and interdependent. This is the Buddhist theory of relativity.’ (Venerable Dr. Walpola Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Haw Trai Foundation, Bangkok, 2002, revised edition, foreword by Prof. Paul Demiéville, p.53) Could the same be said of this part of Luke’s Gospel? Perhaps the most that may be inferred from Luke is that the future is uncertain – but, as always, with encouragement not to be afraid.

Are difficulties with this teaching perhaps a failure of imagination, like reading poetry as if it were prose, or a parable as a legal text?

Week 34

Saturday

Luke 21.34-36 Exhortation to watch

34. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly,

35. like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

36. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

There are passages similar to this in Matthew 24.36-44, Mark 13.32-37 and earlier in Luke at 12.35-40 and 17.26-30.

V.34: The Gospel is ever and always a wake-up call, (though sometimes used as a soporific.) The passage is a warning, not a threat: Jesus warns against a heedless mentality that lives only for today. That is a thought re-echoed in 1 Thessalonians, ‘Since we are of the day, let us be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet that is hope for salvation.’ (5.8) ‘That day,’ probably here means the day of a person’s death, which may indeed come unexpectedly. Life affords many examples of it.

V.35: Death is inevitable; no one escapes it.

V.36: Jesus urges alertness, awareness, having the eyes of the soul open. And he calls on us to pray that we may be strong enough when the time comes.

Surprisingly, the verse ends with the phrase ‘to escape all these things’, having said in the previous verse that ‘it will come upon all who live on the face of the earth.’ A slip of the pen? A copyist’s error? Or, since death and judgment are inescapable, is it something else that is in mind?

‘To stand before the Son of Man.’ What does it mean? Does it refer to judgment, personal or final? Probably.

**Ku yemekera kuikare ku koe, Fumu Yesu Kristu.
Litoko li be ku wena, Mulena Jesu Kriste.
Moladh duit, a Chríost.
Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**