

Lent 2013

Lent Day 1 – Ash Wednesday

Luke 1:46 – 55

And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.”

Reflection

Have you ever had to wait for a lengthy time for something you really wanted? Maybe you are waiting for a son or daughter to come home from a gap year or long trip, maybe you are waiting for a letter to say you have a job interview, or maybe for the results of a test to put your mind at rest.

I know I had to wait six years before our long desired and prayed for first baby arrived. I remember the pain in the waiting, the struggle to keep focus and to hang on to hope, even the fear of disappointment. Then it happened – the very week the letter came from the hospital to say medically it wouldn't happen - but it did! God had another plan and we were going to have a baby. Then there was much celebration!

My husband and I had to wait six years but imagine having to wait hundreds. That's what the children of Israel had to do. The prophets had promised a Messiah who would one day usher in a new world and would reign with justice and righteousness. They prophesied the government would be on His shoulders, and of the increase of that government there would be no end. Yet for hundreds of years from the time the prophecy was given they had known defeat, exile, foreign occupation of their land, slavery – things were pretty bad but they were waiting and then it happened!

Mary a young Jewish woman got a message from an angel – it is happening! The Messiah so longed for and waited for was arriving. It was happening and although it seemed impossible it was going to happen in and through this young woman – she was told she would have a son, God's son and he would put everything right, His kingdom would never end. Then a few weeks later when the signs of that life within her became evident we can hear her declaration of celebration 'My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour!'

Prayer

Father God as we begin our Lenten Journey we come with our hopes and longings, with the desires of our hearts and our dreams. Father with trust we place them into Your hands knowing that You are a faithful God and that You know the plans You have for us. Father it's Your plans we want, it's Your ways we long to walk in! Amen

Lent Day 2

Luke 1:57-79

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Reflection

Can you imagine what it must have been like for Elizabeth – childless for so long carrying the shame of barrenness - all those years waiting and longing and then maybe giving up hope!

But then God has a plan, God has a purpose, God has a time, God has a way and they are perfect! Into the world arrives John - that's correct John not Zechariah Junior as was the custom – an angel had said that's what he should be called and you don't argue with angels! But then Zechariah wasn't able to because he had been struck dumb nine months before his son's birth!

Picture the scene at the baby's circumcision: all the friends and relatives are gathered to witness this important part of the baby's journey. 'What's his name?' the priest performing the circumcision asks. The relatives response was what it had always been on these occasions – 'He will be called Zechariah after his Dad!' But God had a different plan!

His Mum breaks in and his Dad starts writing, 'No! We are going to call him John!' Zechariah had just finished writing the letter 'n' when all of a sudden he burst into a flow of praise. All that God promised and prophesied has come true – God had sent the Messiah who would rescue his people and the world. Somehow his son John would be in the middle of it; he would speak God's word and his message would be 'Get ready, the Messiah is here!' Now that sounds a perfect plan!

Prayer

Father God please help me to live out Your plans for my life, not just my own good ideas. I want to serve Your Kingdom and not just a life of mediocrity. Help me over this season of Lent to hear Your voice clearly and to recognize the things You have prepared for me to do. Amen

Lent Day 3

Luke 2:8 – 18

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Reflection

I often wonder why the angel of the Lord chose to appear to the shepherds – have you? Just think of all those other people gathered at that time in Bethlehem for the census! Some of them may have been quite important people that had travelled back to the place of their birth; some may have been local dignitaries or celebrities, or some just ordinary local residents. Yet the shepherds were in God's plan; they were his choice.

What about those shepherds, what about that rather crazy night they had, that night that must have changed their lives? Can you imagine the shock, the fear, the terror, the wonder they must have felt because of the mind-blowing experience they had that night? Can you imagine the questions in their minds – What’s going on? Is this for real? Yet (and I love and respect the shepherds for this) they decided to do what the angel suggested - no matter how unlikely, they would check it out. They would look for this Messiah, this Anointed One, this Shepherd-King, this baby boy who would be lying all wrapped up in a feeding trough... so they hurried and they found Him!

What I also love about the shepherds and maybe it’s one of the reasons they became wrapped up in God’s amazing plan and He chose them – they didn’t keep this good news to themselves, they didn’t analyse it or rationalise it or exaggerate it but they shared with everyone they met, they shared it just like it was and people were amazed!

So what’s our response when we think of the shepherd’s story? It might be good to remind ourselves that although our experience at first glance might not seem so spectacular it is amazing and it is comforting to know that each one of us can have a personal encounter with this Shepherd-King!

Prayer

Father God, help me to hear you, help me to respond quickly in simple obedience like the shepherds. Help me today to share the good news of what you have done for me. Amen

Lent Day 4

Luke 4: 1 – 13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered, “It says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Reflection

This must have been the hardest test in the history of the universe!

Usually when a student has their finals coming up, in order to get ready they hopefully prepare by studying for long hours, they eat healthily, cut back on their hectic social life and go to the library lots, and they also try to timetable in plenty of rest. When an athlete is preparing for trials for entry into championships they train long hours at the tracks both indoor and outdoor; in all types of weather. They keep a very healthy lifestyle, take supplements; get plenty of rest and they have personal coaches or trainers to help them not just with the physical preparation needed but also with the psychological challenges they face.

But what about this test of Jesus – I wonder for how long had he prepared for it, where had He carried out His preparation and how had he prepared for it. Think back to the time He was twelve and His parents couldn't find him and when they did where was He? – In the Temple of course or as He preferred to call it His Father's house, 'where everyone who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers.' As Jesus grew up the Temple would have been a central part of His lifestyle. This was where He went as part of His preparation, there He listened to and learned the Holy Scriptures and 'grew in wisdom and stature', this was where He felt at home. Jesus was also prepared through His baptism and His infilling of the Holy Spirit. Even then the test did not come! Unlike the student and the athlete He had to go without food for forty days so when the test came He was hungry and vulnerable. Yet He passed with flying colours!

In His hunger he had learned self- control over his appetite, He Knew who He was - the Messiah – yet He knew He wanted God's way of being that and He also knew that in being what God wanted Him to be and bringing others along with Him He would have to do that with humility, obedience and love not power or prestige. Jesus went all through the tests and didn't break!

As we reflect consider these questions: What tests are you facing today? Are you going to lift your bible and find help, strength, comfort and reassurance? Are you going to make the right choice and do the right thing?

Prayer

Jesus thank you that although You were tempted in every way you didn't give in but you won through. Thank you that you have promised that I will never be tested beyond what I can endure. Lord as I read your word may I find the strength and help today to remain faithful. Amen

Lent Day 5

Psalm 91: 1 - 2 & 9-11

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!" . . .For you have made the Lord, my refuge, {Even} the Most High, your dwelling place. No evil will befall you, nor will any plague come near your tent. For He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. They will bear you up in their hands, lest you strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you will trample down. "Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him securely on high, because he has known My name." He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him, and honor him. "With a long life I will satisfy him, and let him behold My salvation."

Reflection

If you are like me "of a certain age", you will remember the song "I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden"! Of course I only remember it from the second time around! The truth is that God never promised us that life would be easy, but He does promise us that He will be with us in the middle of it all and He is able to keep us through it all.

As we read the words of this Psalm, on the surface of it God seems to be saying to those who believe in Him that he will protect us from trouble and we will never have any harm come to us. The realities of life however are far from this! How then do we interpret these wonderful promises from the heart of God as written by the psalmist?

The psalm opens with the wonderful truth that when we make our dwelling place the shelter of the Most High - the Presence of God - even **IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLES** we will know the security of being covered and kept by God Almighty.

The following words "I will say to the Lord 'my refuge, my fortress' gives rise to the question, why would we need a refuge and fortress if it were not for the fact that life will bring us trouble and at times we will be surrounded by enemies at the door? We only need to be rescued if we are in trouble and what a wonderful promise that in such times we can run into God himself for there is no better place to find security than in the heart of Father God.

This psalm speaks to me of being in 'the eye of the storm' - the place where even though circumstances are challenging and life is hard, we can experience that 'peace that passes all understanding' (Phil 4:7). There is a place of spiritual and emotional security even in the midst of physical difficulty. The promise is that when we trust Him, when we call on him to help us, ultimately we will know deliverance from our circumstances, ultimately we will experience the victory bought for us in the Cross of Christ, and ultimately we will receive the fullness of His gift of salvation in both this world and the next. Even though it was written

many years before the birth of Jesus this psalm reminds me of the words of Jesus when he said “be of good courage, in this world you will have trouble but **I have overcome the world**” (John 16:33).

So, be encouraged today, God has your back!

Prayer

Father God, thank You for the amazing promises we find in the words of this psalm. Teach us to trust totally in You and in Your name. In this season of preparation as we journey towards meditation on the glory of the Cross of Christ may it not just be a mental journey but a journey that brings about transformation in our hearts and in our minds as we learn to become worshippers in Spirit and in Truth. With the psalmist may we journey to the place where Your presence becomes our constant dwelling place and Your name is lifted up in our lives, because You have said “when I am lifted up, I will draw all men unto me!” Amen.

Lent Day 6

Luke 2: 22-52

Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons”. And behold there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and the man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word: for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples. A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.” And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against “(yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity: and this woman was a widow of about eight-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord they returned to Galilee to their own city Nazareth and the Child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom,

and the grace of God was upon Him. His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover and when he was twelve years old they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast. When they had finished the days, as they returned the boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem and Joseph and his mother did not know it but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a days journey, and sought him among their relatives and acquaintances. So when they did not find Him they returned to Jerusalem seeking Him. Now so it was that after 3 days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers both listening to them and asking them questions and all who heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers. So when they saw him, they were amazed and His mother said to Him; Son why have you done this to us, look your Father and I have sought you anxiously and He said to them, why did you seek me? Did you not know that I must be about my Fathers business? But they did not understand the statement He spoke to them. Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth and was subject to them but His mother kept all these things in her heart and Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men”

Reflection

Reading through these verses of scripture it is striking to note the faithfulness or rather ‘fullness of faith’ of the many characters within each scene; the faithfulness of Joseph and Mary and their commitment to fulfilling all that the law required of them for their newborn Son, the faithfulness and certainty of Simeon that he would see the Lord’s Christ before his death, the faithfulness and commitment, of Anna the prophetess to prayer and fasting to see the fulfilment of this day. Again we witness the faith and commitment of Joseph and Mary as they journey with Jesus to Jerusalem for the Passover. Little did they know that on this occasion their world would be turned upside down and their faith tested with the discovery that their twelve year old Son had been missing for three whole days. We can only imagine their distress and when they eventually did find Him they and we are met with a Son who even though he was just, a boy was clearly aware of the calling on His life.

Prayer

Father God every day is a new opportunity to choose faith over doubt and unbelief. In this Lenten season may we choose to display in our lives that same fullness of faith and assurance that we witness in this story.

Father God we want to be a people who live with, and express, our gratitude and thankfulness that your word spoken to us in Jesus will be fulfilled in our lives as it was for Simeon and Anna. Amen

Lent Day 7

Luke 3: 3-6; 10-18

John the Baptist went all through the country around the Jordan River preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough places smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’ ”

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized. ‘Teacher,’ they asked, “What should we do?” “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.”

Reflection

John the Baptist had a very important ministry. He was like the Middle Eastern herald called to go ahead of the king, announcing his imminent arrival and forging a straight, smooth road for him to travel along. He was called to prepare the Jewish people for the arrival of their long-awaited Messiah, but in this case, the preparation was to take the form of a public baptism, marking a change of life direction towards God and a turning away from sin.

The ready response of many of his hearers was a realisation that this baptism needed to be accompanied by action, and they wanted to know what that action should be. John’s answers are very practical: there needed to be a readiness to share what each possessed with those who were more needy; an honest fulfilment of duty, without seeking personal profit; a scrupulous refusal to take advantage of position, and an attitude of gratitude for the salary offered.

Lent is a time to consider more deeply our own calling by God to be his heralds in our day & in our circumstances. In what way am I preparing a pathway for God to reveal himself to my family, my neighbours, and my workmates? How generous am I in sharing all the blessings that have been showered on me? How honest am I in fulfilling my duties in a disinterested fashion? How scrupulous am I in handling any advantages I may have over others, due to my position or role? Am I grateful for the salary or pension I receive?

A careful attention to these practical aspects of every day life speaks loudly to those around us, preparing a way for us to announce to them the wonderful news of God’s salvation that is freely offered to each one of us.

Prayer

Lord help us in all the details of our everyday lives to live in such a way that we may serve as your heralds, challenging yet also making it easier for others to turn their lives around in your direction.

Lent Day 8

Luke 4:14 – 30

And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free those who are oppressed, To proclaim the favourable year of the Lord.”

And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” And He said to them, “No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.’” And He said, “Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, He went His way.

Reflection

What an amazing moment in time it was! Jesus was ushering in the “*year of the Lord’s favour*” foretold by the prophet Isaiah! He announced it right after reading Is. 61:1-2a, in the synagogue at Nazareth. We can’t be sure if it was a set reading for the day, or if Jesus chose the passage Himself as He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, knew exactly what He had been called to do – and what not to do, for, in stopping short of Is. 62:2b, which refers to the “*day of vengeance of our God*”,

He implied that this was not to be fulfilled at that time - something that John the Baptist later had difficulty in understanding, when he lay in prison. As He said Himself of His ministry (John 12:47b) *"I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world"*; this was to be a time of healing, of bringing freedom from captivity, of undoing the works of the devil.

The initial reaction of the congregation was one of delight at the gracious words they had heard! But this reaction soon changed to one of disbelief as they considered the man before them – one whom they had known from a child. And, influenced by Satan himself, in their fury at hearing some words of rebuke, they drove Him out of the synagogue, intending to push Him over a cliff. Satan, after failing to tempt Jesus, had been forced to retreat for a time: now he sought to cut short Jesus' ministry and life – at the wrong time and in the wrong way! *"The Message"* says *"he gave them the slip and was on His way"*.

Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, that You are in total command of time, in our lives, too! Thank You that the Scriptures confirmed every step of Your own walk. You did not shrink from death, when Your ministry had been completed, but no man took Your life from You, rather You laid it down Yourself, for our salvation.

Lent Day 9

Luke 5:17 – 26

One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . ." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

Reflection

Jesus confidently went about healing the sick and raising the dead because he knew who his father was. Even though he had laid all his glory and mighty power to one side to be born as totally human, he knew he could rely on his Father's word and so acted in obedience to

what He asked him to do. As a result he was able to show us as his brothers, how we could also rely totally on the Father's word to accomplish what we see Him doing or saying. We just need to understand first who we are in Christ and live with an ear towards the Father.

Prayer

Father God help us to have a revelation of who You are and who we are and to hear and see what You are about in Heaven. May we begin to live our lives seated in a place of rest with no striving, confident in doing only what You do and say. Amen

Lent Day 10

Luke 6:27 – 36

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Reflection

“But I tell you who hear me: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you.”

Jesus commands us to do the above. As we look around us and even at ourselves in our daily walk, I think we would have to agree that this command of the Lord is much neglected.

First of all – Are we listening to the words – “you who hear me!”

Secondly, who do we say are our enemies? Are they just those far away who make headline news or are they in my own immediate family or neighbourhood, or Church? Why do I call them enemies? Is it just because they have different opinions or tastes from me? Then, of course, what does it mean to love these people in my life or far away?

I believe we must return to the basic meaning of love. Love is really not an action or emotion alone but a Person. There is only one Person who is LOVE. This puts us in a position to see how we are doing with this commandment of the Lord. Our God loves us as

we are, not as we would like to be or just when we are dressed in our Sunday best! Also His love is unconditional – no strings attached; no criteria. He just loves. Does this mean He leaves us as we are or pats us on the back for our wonderful good deeds? No indeed! His love calls us on. It is that of an artist who works away at the painting until it is just as it needs to be to portray what the artist wants or to fit the mosaic that needs that special little piece that is missing to make the mosaic complete. He is not worried about our failures. In fact he rejoices in our efforts as a mom or dad rejoices in their child's first attempt to walk or stand. We know the passage in Scripture where Jesus says there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who have no need of repentance (whoever they are!).

So loving my enemies cannot mean gloating over their crimes or our perception of their crimes but rather in asking the Lord who is Love to enter into their lives and bring them whatever they need. It means watching out for any opportunity to see something good or some good deed done by them and rejoicing in that. It must also mean even creating chances to encourage them if they are near or praying that someone may come alongside them to do so if they are far away. If we really want to honour the Lord's command we can ask for help in loving them. You can imagine how swiftly that prayer will be answered!

Prayer

Father, thank you for your love for me. In many ways I am your enemy as are all of us on this planet. But, "while we were yet sinners", you sent your Son to die for us. Such love! Father, please help me to see that I am an object of your mercy and to extend that same grace to others whom I claim are my enemies. May you be glorified by all your children who reach out with your heart to those we term as enemies. Help us see as you see. Heal our blindness as we look at others. Amen.

Lent Day 11

Luke 13: 31 – 35

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'

Reflection

There was tension in the air; the 'well meaning' Pharisees came to warn him. Herod the local king didn't want Jesus; who seemed to be some sort of threat to him; growing in popularity and he could see that Jesus was attracting huge crowds of followers. The message Jesus was putting out didn't sit easy with Herod either, it troubled and angered him – who was this upstart saying the rich, famous and powerful should be brought down and the poor, needy and humble should be raised up. Jesus was a threat and Herod wanted rid of him, Herod wanted Jesus killed. Jesus was not frightened off! He knew who He was and that Herod could not touch him. Even from this time Jesus purpose was firmly set in going to Jerusalem. He knew the Father's plan and walked in the assurance that He was going to fulfil that.

May we not be deflected by fears and threats of the enemy but let us take shelter in Father God. Let's take time also to discern what He wants us to do. Enjoy listening to this song 'Hide Me Lord Under Your Wings' by Hillsong

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpTZRnQyzSM>

Prayer

Father as we continue our journey through Lent and beyond please give us the strength each day to follow you. Lord shelter us under your wings and help us to know your power in quietness and trust. Amen

Lent Day 12

Psalm 27

The LORD is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life - of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident. One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD. Hear my voice when I call, O LORD? be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior. Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me. Teach me your way, O LORD? lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors. Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, breathing out violence. I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD? be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

Reflection

The one thing

Our songs and prayers are not truly honouring to God - 'true worship' as Jesus called it in John 4, the kind the Father is looking for - unless they have the twin markers of spirit and truth. We make use of many of David's psalms, as we do those of other more modern songwriters, because we identify with their personal experiences - though of course we should beware of unthinkingly singing words just because they are written down in front of us and the rest of the congregation around us is in full flow! They say that 'Christians don't tell lies, they sing them'... and God is surely listening carefully to our declarations and intent.

However, surely Psalm 27 is up there in 'David's top 10' - a wonderful call to seek the presence of God and hide ourselves in the refuge He gives, the promise of the utter faithfulness of the Lord with a true worshipper's response of joyful praise. This passionate prayer came straight out of David's heart and experience: there is no doubt he meant it - his "one thing" his desire above all others, to be constantly and eternally hidden in His God, 'lost in wonder, love and praise'. The phrase brings the story of Mary and Martha to mind - "Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her..." Perhaps if we identify more with Martha that is not so easy to hear - or maybe we identify with David's son Solomon, a different man for a different time: the 'one thing' he asked for - and was commended for - was the wisdom to govern Israel.

Looking at this psalm from David's point of view it struck me that there is a lot of fear in it. He is speaking these words to his own soul to reassure himself of the salvation and strength of the Lord - His ability to rescue and protect him. He is declaring - as in many other of his psalms - that God is his refuge and hiding place, his source of victory, so that by verse 13-14 he's reached the place of peace, promise and certainty.

We have much to learn about encouraging ourselves from David - and it is precisely because he spent his whole life at war! He was hounded by Saul, oppressed by many enemies, constantly fighting the battles of Israel... a warrior whose hands were covered in blood. He knew his desperate need of God to preserve his life, perhaps more than we do... so no wonder he had his priorities right!

Prayer

Thank you Lord that there is no fear in love. Draw me to yourself and put your desires in me. Teach me your ways and lead me in your truth. Keep me safe in your presence. I offer myself to you in spirit and truth and wait for You. Amen

Lent Day 13

Luke 7:11 -17 *Jesus raises a widow's son.*

"Soon afterwards, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out - the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country."

Reflection

What an incredible scene this must have been for everyone there, as two large crowds converged - one as part of the funeral procession and the other, following Jesus. Never before had anyone ever seen someone being raised from the dead and one can but try and imagine the scene! What must it have been like when the young man sat up and talked? "God has come", "A great prophet is among us", awe, praise! It quite literally was mourning turned into dancing!

Yet when I read this passage what struck me most were the words "his heart went out to her." Other translations express it as "he had compassion on her"; "his heart broke"; "his heart was filled with pity for her". In the Greek, the word used for compassion in this verse is translated as "bowels". It appears that it was once thought that they were the seat of our emotions. It quite literally means to be moved deeply in one's inwards, to yearn with compassion for someone. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is quite often used to express Christ's response towards people's suffering and appears to be a trigger for Jesus to reach out and touch their lives in a profound way. This also can be our response to the world around us, because that same Spirit that was in Christ, is in us. Many a person has been deeply ministered to because of this work of the Spirit in us; many a mercy ministry has been started for the same reason.

Prayer

Thank you Father, that "you so loved the world" with a deep heart felt and 'hands on' love. You are not distant in our need or regarding the needs of others. You feel for us with an incredible depth of compassion and identification. Thank you, for the ultimate expression of that, by sending your Son to become one of us and with us. And thank you that through Christ's death and resurrection, we are able to have an intimate relationship with you and also can join with you, in not only feeling your heart but also to be an extension of it, as we reach out to others with Your healing love. Amen.

Lent Day 14

Luke 7: 36 - 50

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Reflection

Our reflection today is a poem – The Alabaster box.

The Alabaster Box

Ashamed, scorned, her every dream broken
The woman comes to Jesus' feet.
All that she can give Him are her tears,
Her hair gently caressing His worn feet.
She breaks her alabaster box.
The aroma ascends and fills the room.
It is the last possession that she has
And so she lays it on the feet of Jesus, her Redeemer.

What is in my alabaster box?
The one and only hidden away in my heart.
It holds the pain of broken dreams,
The longings for a husband and a family,
The desires to be accepted and free.
I would lay it at the feet of my King
But it is my last possession to which I cling.
The alabaster box held tightly in my heart.

Jesus reminds me gently to let go
For I will never be free until I do so,

To break the alabaster box
And lay it all at His feet.
I want to hold on to all that is dear
For it is a lot to forget.
So many dreams for myself
Can I let go and lay them broken at His feet?

It shouldn't be all that hard
For in His presence I abide
Yet still I am afraid.
What healing shall come from Him whom I love
If I would but lay the box at His feet?
For in that box is all that I hold dear
To let it go, I need to know my God is near.

What worship that would be?
To say to God – "It is all here -
My dreams, my hopes and my desires."
For Him to do as He pleases.
Like the prostitute woman who initiated this act
Forgiven, relieved and worshipful I would be. Poem by LM

Prayer

Father we have much to be thankful for but today I just want to thank you that you do forgive my sins and as I experience that forgiveness your peace invades my whole being and I am transformed. Lord as I reflect on this story of the woman with the alabaster jar may I be challenge to hold nothing back from you, I know I can trust you totally. Amen

Lent Day 15

Luke 8:1 – 15

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." His disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, "though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.' "This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that

fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

Reflection

In our age of large mechanised farms, where the land is ploughed and the seed sowed by machines, cast your mind back to that first century after Jesus' birth and picture a farmer with a bag of seed at his side, walking through his fields and casting seed anywhere and everywhere in the hope that some would find good ground and take root.

The image would have been a familiar one in an agricultural land like Israel and how the crowd must have nodded in recognition of the picture that Jesus presented to them.

The parable brings a challenging message to us. The sowing of the seed and receiving it does not of itself guarantee fruitfulness!

Maybe today is a good time to pause and ask ourselves, "What sort of soil has my heart provided for the precious seed of God's word?" We have an enemy who wants to steal it from the path, stop it taking root or choke the very life out of it "by life's worries, riches and pleasures."

At the story finished there how discouraged we would be but wait, for Jesus presents a glorious alternative. Some seed, perhaps only a tiny proportion of all that was in the bag, fell on good soil and it goes down deep and finds the moisture and nutrients that it needs for life yielding an abundant crop.

Jesus didn't tell this story to bring condemnation, but in among the warnings about the potential hazards to the seed a challenge is presented. To those of his followers with a "noble and good heart" who "hear the word, retain it and persevere" comes the promise of fruitfulness. Note the words "retain" and "persevere". It challenges much of the instant results culture of our modern world.

One final thought. The fruit does not appear as a result of our human efforts. In 1 Corinthians 3:7 we read about the God "who makes things grow." Our responsibility is to open up our hearts to the master gardener and then trust him to bring forth a fruitful crop in season.

Prayer

Thank you that you want to make my life fruitful in your kingdom. Holy Spirit, search my heart and do a work of preparation so that the seed may find good fertile soil that will bring forth abundant fruit. Amen

Lent Day 16

Luke 8: 40 – 56

Now when Jesus returned a crowd welcomed him, for they were all expecting him. Then a man named Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, came and fell at Jesus' feet pleading with him to come to his house because his only daughter, a girl of about twelve, was dying. As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no-one could heal her. She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped. Who touched me? Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you. But Jesus said, some-one touched me; I know that power has gone out from me. Then the woman seeing that she was not going to go unnoticed came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. Then he said to her, Daughter your faith has healed you. Go in peace.

While Jesus was speaking, some-one came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. Your daughter is dead, he said, don't bother the teacher any more. Hearing this Jesus said to Jairus, don't be afraid, just believe, and she will be healed. When he arrived at the house of Jairus he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother. Meanwhile all the people were wailing and mourning for her. Stop wailing, Jesus said, she is not dead but asleep. They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead but he took her by the hand and said, "My child, get up" Her spirit returned and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.

Reflection

This story begins in a community setting, a community of people in a specific place. It focuses on two of the people in that community but really they represent all of us. It is no accident that these two stories are narrated together. Jairus' daughter is twelve years old and the woman who has been bleeding has been done so for twelve years. Twelve is a significant scriptural number representing the church and God's authority. We are witnessing God's authority in the lives of each character. In the passage we also see the approach of two very different personalities in the crowd; Jairus the synagogue ruler, male, confident, forthright, open, and honest in his approach to Jesus with regard to his request. This would have come from both his personal self confidence as synagogue ruler and leader but also from the desperation he experienced at the thought of losing his daughter. His request was clear and direct evoking an active response from Jesus. At this point we do not know what the outcome will be, but imagine the hope rise up in Jairus' heart knowing that Jesus had heard and was responding positively to his request for help.

The scene is intercepted by our second personality, a quiet female who had lived with bleeding for twelve years. She too is desperate as she had sought help from many sources to no avail. Her approach to Jesus is the opposite of Jairus; she approaches quietly without interruption and touches the edge of his cloak. She was embarrassed, perhaps low in self esteem and confidence, and ashamed of her condition. As a woman in that culture she may have felt unworthy and that she did not have a right for her voice to be heard. But when Jesus feels the power go out from him and asks who has touched him imagine the woman's feeling of panic. Jesus however had no wish to embarrass her, his intention is to call her forth, to give the woman opportunity for her voice to be heard, and to tell her story.

If we are honest and own our story by relating it to another trusted, wise person we too will begin to experience healing. Having made the decision to tell our story to another person we often do so in fear and trembling because it is hard to be honest and authentic especially about things we feel ashamed of. However, demonstrating the faith to do so you can be sure you will experience healing and the words spoken by Jesus will also be your experience; "Go in peace" It is a process however so let your voice be heard and let the healing process unfold.

The scene then moves back to Jairus and his daughter and although it appears all reason to hope has gone this not so, Jesus still has something left to give. Like Jairus' daughter we too can often feel dead in our spirit and that life is hopeless, without hope. So often our spirits are asleep, passive, and without energy due to traumatic life experiences. Our spirit can be restored and the way to begin, like Jairus, his wife, and their daughter, and the woman with the haemorrhage, is to tell your story, beginning where you are, and see where it will lead you. Some of us will set out to do so with confidence as Jairus did; others of us will begin with fear and trembling feeling that we are not worthy to have our voice heard and that our situations are unredeemable. But there is no right formula, just start where you are at and don't give up easily as Jesus did not say that it would be easy. To Jairus and the woman Jesus uses two words; faith and believe. What does it really mean to have faith and to believe? I think they begin as a small seed but as we tell and own our story just as it is, a transformation takes place where faith and believe become qualities that sustain us and ultimately our communities.

Prayer

Father we want to live in healthy communities, however to reach this goal our work must begin with the community of self. Help us God to quietly get on with the business of doing our own work knowing that in doing so there will be positive benefits for the transformation of the wider community. Father God help us to really get into the story and characters of scripture in a way that helps to bring healing to our soul and empowers us to be more effective in our Christian witness. When we give out we too will feel power go out from us but help us to see that we need to come back to a quiet place to pray and be restored. This time of Lent is an opportunity to do just that so help us to use it well.

Lent Day 17

Luke 9:18 – 27

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "The Christ of God." Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the

glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

Reflection

Has someone ever asked you a question, which was more about getting you to think rather than about a 'specific' answer? Jesus asked His disciples a question - 'who do the crowds say I am?' They were able to say exactly what the crowds were saying because they had spent time with them and heard the talk. Jesus takes it a step closer and asks 'what about you, who do you think I am?' Peter had the answer - the Messiah, the Christ of God but it was by revelation (Matthew 16:17) Immediately Jesus warns them to keep this quiet. He then goes on to clearly say what was going to happen to Him (although He calls Himself 'The Son of Man'...) I wonder did this fit Peter's concept of what the Messiah would be (Matthew 16:22-23) What struck me when I read these verses was the last bit 'and on the third day be raised to life' This was Jesus' hope in the face of all He would go through. Jesus then is very straight about what following Him would entail....

In this season of Lent - a season of preparation, is there a question Jesus wants to ask you to get you thinking? Is there an area of your thinking (or area of your life) where He wants to bring fresh revelation of who He is, and in doing so challenge your thinking (or area of life) so that there is a change of perspective or lifestyle that lines up with Him?

Prayer

Father in the quietness of this season is there a question You would ask of us? Will You help us not only to hear it but to thoughtfully answer it - secure in the love You have for us, that continues to reveal more of who You are, to us and hence to others round us, through us. Amen

Lent Day 18

Luke 9: 28 - 36

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.) While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was

alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.

Reflection

This story relates what was undoubtedly a major experience for the disciples who were on the mountain with Jesus. After all, it found its way into two gospel accounts! I wonder why it happened?

It happened after Jesus had been speaking of His death. Perhaps the disciples were upset and confused, a bit fearful, needing reminded of who Jesus really was? But they weren't "ready" for the transfiguration in the way you or I might like to be "ready". Yes, they were up the mountain with Jesus, but they were sleepy. Also, immediately following the revelation, Peter managed still to say the wrong thing! – and they got a further reminder from God to listen to Jesus.

I think I'm encouraged in this story because, like the disciples, I don't deserve any mighty revelations. I'm not "holy and prepared" enough for such things. But God chooses the times and the places. He gives generously to us, often when we don't expect, and He brings encouragement, affirmation and direction.

Let's not miss these opportunities through (like Peter) being too quick to try to make up an appropriate response. Let's instead learn to listen and to grow in our knowledge and love of God. Let's expect that the God who loves us, and sent Jesus to die for us, cares enough to want to speak to us individual words that direct, help and build up. Let's be sensitive to these and believe that God will do it for me.

Prayer

Lord, help me to hear Your voice and to see Your glory. Increase my intimacy with You.
Amen

Lent Day 19

Psalm 63:1 – 8

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Reflection

A prayer in the desert

No-one can avoid passing through the desert experiences of life: if Jesus' example is to be followed the Spirit Himself will lead us there. All comforts and props are stripped away until we have to face the truth about our appetites and motives - who we really are underneath and what is in our hearts. The wilderness is a place where character is tested and faith tried - an essential preparation for entering into promise and breakthrough: winter always precedes spring.

In this psalm we see why David was called a man after God's heart. When he is in the dry and weary land his response is totally God-ward! He remembers past seasons of blessing when he experienced the presence and love of his God: it means more to him than life and is the only food and drink he desires. He is determined to praise and glorify the Lord and even willing to sing for joy in the time of famine, in anticipation of being completely satisfied: he waits, he prays, he expects, he clings - he is totally consumed by his inner longing for the Lord.

The desert will always show us - and God - what we really hunger for: that is it's primary purpose. The test for us in our own wilderness times - as for Jesus in His - is can we wholeheartedly join in with David's desert prayer?

Prayer

O God, you are my God - earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life my lips will glorify you! I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me. Amen

Lent Day 20

Luke 9: 51–62

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Reflection - He set His face

Jesus was born to die. Actually we are all born to die: 'life is a sexually-transmitted fatal disease' as black humour has it! But right from the start, as Mary was herself warned (Luke 2:35), Jesus' unavoidable path was always pre-determined to be a cruel execution at a young age at the hands of men: it had been fully prophesied in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. You can wonder at what point He fully knew that - maybe it was as early as the desert after his baptism, maybe even before - but knowing it He never shrunk back from His Father's call, despite being totally misunderstood by his friends, family and all those who were waiting for their version of the Messiah and even having to endure Peter's direct rebuke.

Here in Luke 9 (unlike in John 7 at a previous feast!) Jesus knows His time has now come: it is the 'kairos' moment for all to be fulfilled. He resolutely and determinedly takes the road to Jerusalem - He sets his face, as Isaiah 50:7 says, 'like flint'. Seeing His intentions, the Samaritans don't want anything to do with it - what do Samaritans have to do with Jews anyway? In fact, everyone around is affected by the sombre mood - in Mark's account 'the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid' (10:32). Each person has their own response - and it is no-one's place to judge anyone else, as the sons of thunder discover.

Luke goes on to underline that the cost of following such a Man is the same for all of us: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me' (v23 in this same passage) Jesus clearly tells His would-be disciples they have no rights to home or family - an ordinary, comfortable life, rather the cost of discipleship is everything you have (Luke 14:33). It's an all or nothing choice: everyone who is going with Jesus is called to set their face.

Prayer

I will follow You wherever You go, Jesus - You are worth it! Teach me to keep in step, with my eyes fixed on You. Thank You that you give more grace and new mercies every day. You gloriously redeem every situation I walk through and are no man's debtor: I trust You to know what is best for me. Help me to count everything else as rubbish and forgetting what is past press on toward the goal - the upward call of God in Christ and the joy that lies ahead as death gives way to life! Amen

Lent Day 21

Luke 10: 25-27

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered: "'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, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

Reflection

It is important that we remember that we have been created in the image of God. We have been created in the image of the One who is passionate, committed, and completely extravagant in His love; therefore we have been designed to be the same. When we find ourselves 'feeling alive' or 'living in fullness' it is most often when we have awakened passion, purpose and abandonment to God. This is how we were designed to live! Without this passionate abandonment to God we can easily fall into boredom, restlessness and frustration. We have been created to be fascinated with God forever. Every human being was designed to respond to God with all they are; heart, soul, strength and mind, regardless of our personality type. God responded to us with all of Him, therefore it is our joy to love Him with all that we are.

Prayer

Awaken our hearts, souls, strength and mind today to love you with everything that we are. Holy Spirit, come breathe afresh on me today, remove any familiarity or apathy in my heart, capture my heart with awe and wonder once again. Give me an undivided heart to worship and adore You. Amen

Lent Day 22

Luke 11:1-8

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: "'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.'" Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' "Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs. Jesus' model for prayer is rich with meaning however we will just focus on one phrase today and explore some of the depths of what this could look like for us.

Reflection - "Your Kingdom come"

Often when we pray this we are asking for the reign of God to come and be established on the earth. Your Kingdom come in our city, your Kingdom come in our government, your Kingdom come in our family. There is great power when we pray this way as we are partnering with God's plans and purposes. However let's think about this in a more personal way, as we journey through Lent we want to set aside time to let our hearts be transformed.

Let's think about praying 'Your Kingdom come... in my heart'. Paul writes in Romans 14:17 that the "Kingdom of God is....righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Are there areas in your heart today where righteousness, peace and joy aren't reigning? Then follow the example that Jesus gave us and pray 'Your Kingdom come'. His Kingdom "will never end" (Luke 1:33) - there is an eternal dimension to what you are asking to reign in your heart, therefore there is always more!

Take some time today to invite the Kingdom of God to invade your heart afresh.

Prayer

Father, we invite your Kingdom to come reign in our hearts today. Search our hearts and restore any areas of brokenness. We invite the unending resource of your Kingdom to find its home in our heart today. Amen

Lent Day 23

Luke 11:9 – 10 - Ask, Seek, Knock

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Reflection

The nature of this life is that we don't always get what we want when we want it. We could probably think of lots of different areas of our lives and situations we have been praying for were we wished God had answered yesterday! In our expectation and desire for the 'suddenlies' of God we can lose sight of the value of perseverance. Jesus in his teaching on prayer encourages us to keep asking, keep seeking and to keep knocking. What does that look like in the context of prayer? Sometimes we can think that we should try and pray a little differently because obviously the way we are isn't working. However Jesus exhortation is simply to keep doing what you're doing. We never know when we are just one prayer away from breakthrough. A man was asked once what the secret was to chopping firewood, and his reply was "Just keep hitting it until it splits, it doesn't split because you do it differently, it splits because you hit it consistently in the same spot" - this is true of what Jesus was saying about prayer. There may be situations and circumstances in our life that

we need to not lose heart about today; because we are may be only one prayer away from breakthrough. Do not give up!

Prayer

Father, let fresh faith arise in my heart today so I can be one who knows the value of perseverance. Give me the grace to keep asking, keep seeking and keep knocking, knowing that You are faithful and breakthrough may only be one 'hit' away. Amen

Lent Day 24

Luke 12: 22-32 - Do Not Worry

Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? "Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

Reflection

I love sparrow and swallows, snowdrops, ox-eyed daisies and the exhilaration of watching a wave build and crash on the shore. I'm overwhelmed at times by the immediate beauty of nature and yet they have not been especially 'primed' or prepped for my viewing. They are organic and stunning and they fly, flower and flow as God made them to, without much use in the form of grey matter.

As my eyes move away from the flower, bird or wave it is my grey matter, my mind which causes a problem as it becomes concerned with my world. My mind questions my standard of living, whether I 'make the mark', whether I need this policy or that type of particular exam or experience and off my mind wanders into avenues of worry and anxiety. If not about me, then about my children or friends. Dwelling on these negative mindsets sets me up for misery and robs me of joy and gives me mileage to worry. So what do we do when our mind wanders down 'worry street'? We grab our helmet of salvation and slide it back on our head using it to consider the kingdom which God has given us, the kingdom we are to seek and the kingdom we are to pray in for future generations. Let worry street give way to the wide open spaces of God's Kingdom.

Prayer

Father when I am distracted by beauty which helps me to consider Your kingdom please reveal Yourself to me in an even deeper way. Father when I am distracted by those things which distract me from seeking Your kingdom and its work please reveal Yourself to me in an even deeper way. Amen

Lent Day 25

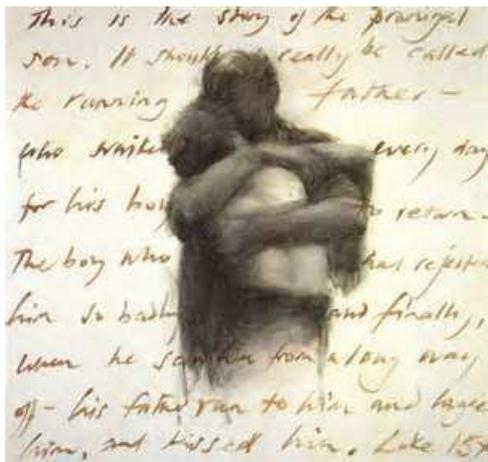
Luke 15: 11 – 32 - The Parable of the Lost Son

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father." But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'" The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Reflection



Rembrandt 'Return of the Prodigal Son'



Charlie Mackesy 'The Return of the Prodigal Son'

Both these images use this scripture as inspiration. I would love to say that the Mackesy piece (where the artist focuses only on the return and embrace of the lost son) is how I react to this passage but it isn't. Instead, I admit that my ugliness is reflected by the jealous onlooking brother in the Rembrandt piece. I struggle with the focus being on ... someone else, not me. I've lost the wonder of my salvation and the wonder at another's salvation. I've forgotten that this beautiful story is of a God with arms wide open and heart exposed, of a welcome embrace and a moving toward the returning son. This once was me ... and continues to be me. Let my heart and movement become like my Father Gods – open and moving towards others.

Prayer

Father let me die to self, self-focus, self-importance, lack of focus on You, lack of focus on others, folded arms, hard heart. Holy Spirit overwhelm me – let my identity be in You and Your open-arm approach. Let my heart become urgently occupied with loving others into Your arms and understanding Your heart of love. Amen

Lent Day 26

Psalm 32 – Forgiveness a Powerful Thing!

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"— and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD'S unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Reflection



I love this Psalm! You can almost not just sense but see the joy, freedom, release, healing and happiness it's author has experienced in being forgiven. We have all been there too, we have each one of us experienced forgiveness and like a bird from our restrictive cage of sin and shame we have been set free!

Forgiveness is a very powerful thing! Yet it is sad that for many people and in many cultures forgiveness is seen as a weakness. But when you are forgiven and when you can forgive you will experience a life-changing freedom and with that change there is always a sense of a new beginning, a fresh start with fresh possibilities – that is powerful!

Unforgiveness is also a powerful thing – trapping ‘all parties’ involved so the same cage can be full of people needing set free, needing healing and the chance of a fresh start!

Lent is a great time to look into our hearts, to allow the Lord to search us and bring to light any areas where we need to forgive or seek forgiveness. God is in the business of forgiving, and the Holy Spirit is an expert in helping us to forgive, the Godhead rejoices when we are set free - after all isn't that why Jesus came to earth; suffered and died and rose again! Why not take sometime today to be quiet before Him and receive the healing and freedom He so desires you to have as you seek to forgive and be forgiven! Then you will like the Psalmist declare, *‘Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!’*

Prayer

Holy Spirit search me and know me. Father forgive me my sin. Father I forgive those who have hurt me, rejected me or betrayed me. Thank you Father God I rejoice and I'm glad!
Amen

Lent Day 27

Luke 12: 35 – 39

Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.

Reflection

I've recently had a friend come to stay for a few days and in run up to her arrival, as with any guest you have come to your home, I needed to get the place ready for her. Making up a bed, cleaning and tidying the house, planning what I would cook, how to entertain her, making sure I had enough food in etc. Once all these preparations were done, I could breathe a sigh of relief and sit content knowing that I was are ready and waiting for her to arrive.

Today's reading reminds me of this time of preparation we go through when expecting invited guests in your home. However there is one main difference with that and this parable, the servants in this story don't know when the master would arrive, unlike I did with my guest. This is a warning to us all to be ready at any time for the return of Jesus Christ, we too know he is coming back, but we don't know when.

So we have a choice, either to prepare in advance and then sit and wait or to get consumed with other things, telling ourselves that when he returns, of course we will hear the knock on the door, we will be there and we will make him welcome. The idea of preparing, of being ready for something we don't know the time or date of, seems a little stupid to our human way of thinking. What if we have to wait for days, weeks, months, years? The food would go off, the house becomes unkempt, we give up waiting and 'get on with our lives'. Which are you? Are you prepared and waiting or are you so busy with your day to day life that you think, you will deal with Jesus return as and when it happens?

Let us chose today to be the ones who are prepared and waiting, not so distracted by life that we switch the lights out, go to bed, leaving the door unattended. There are great blessings to be had in being ready, this parable promises that on Jesus return he will be the one to wipe out his apron and prepare and serve for us a wedding feast like we have never had before!

Prayer

Lord, I want to be ready for your return, so I surrender my heart, my life, my home into your hands. Show me any areas in my life that remain untouched, dirty, dark and asleep. Shine your light of illumination into my heart and help me to daily keep my heart ready, prepared for your return. Oh what a glorious day that will be to dine with the King of Kings, I don't want to miss out or be found sleeping. I want to be found ready. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Lent Day 28

Luke 13:10-21 - Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman on the Sabbath

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches."

Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Reflection

For 18 long years, this woman had been oppressed, physically hunched over, face forced towards the ground. As she shuffled to synagogue that day, all she saw was the dust at her feet. Her world was small. All those years she had suffered, no-one had been able to help her. Had anybody in the synagogue offered a kind touch or sympathetic word? As she entered the place of worship that Sabbath, I doubt she expected things to be different.

But Jesus noticed her in a crowd. With one touch, her back was un-bent. She lifted her face to the Son. And she stretched her arms to the sky in worship to God. Jesus not only healed her physical ailment, but brought her to wholeness. Her back became straight; she was loosed from the spirit of infirmity which had oppressed her many years. Jesus healed her broken emotions of isolation and loneliness by choosing her in a crowd, and touching her. And in doing all this, Jesus offended the religious people who could not see him for who he was. Jesus' stinging rebuke of this hypocrisy brought a two-fold response. The people who rejoiced with the woman loved it, rejoicing over all that Jesus was saying and doing. The opponents, however, were humiliated. They were not sorry. They were not corrected. They were just put to shame. It is the difference between Jesus' perspective and that of His opponents which is spelled out in the final two parables of our passage.

Prayer

Lord, we don't want to be like the hypocrites whom Jesus rebuked. Give us an undivided heart, full of grace and compassion. We turn away from living life crippled by back-breaking rule-keeping and judgement. Heal us by your mercy. And where there are parts of our lives which are broken, crippled and wounded, bring your healing and wholeness to our minds, bodies, spirits. Bring us into greater freedom and wholeness today as we walk with you. And like the lady in the story, we lift our face towards to Son, and rejoice! In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lent Day 29

Reading Luke 16:1-12 - The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' "Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it

four hundred.’ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’ “A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. “He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’ “The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?”

Reflection

It would be easy to skip over today’s reading for a number of reasons. Firstly most of us get uncomfortable when the subject of money comes up in Christian circles. Also this is not an easy passage to dissect. Indeed one commentary on this passage begins by stating that this story is probably the most difficult parable in Luke! So what are we to make of it?

Jesus attitude to wealth was neither to commend it nor condemn it. Wealth can be a blessing or a curse, depending on whether it is used as a means to exercise power, a tool of self-indulgence or a resource to serve others. With the blessing of wealth comes a responsibility to be a faithful steward of it and to understand that there is a challenge to use it generously and wisely in the service of the king.

The story starts with the rich man calling in his manager to give him his P45 because he had wasted the manager’s possessions. The implication is that this was more than just incompetence. Verse 8 calls him ‘the dishonest manager’. The manager realising that he is about to lose his job, comes up with a plan. He approaches each of his master’s debtors and cuts a deal with them to pay a proportion of what they owe.

How does his master react to his actions now? He commends him for his shrewdness! Jesus says “For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.”

Is there a danger for us that we view money in itself as a corrupting influence and become scared at the responsibility that it brings. We become like the man in the Parable of The Talents in Luke 19 who just buries it in a hole rather than prayerfully and wisely investing it. Verse 10 states “Whoever can be trusted with very little can be trusted with much.” Today, let us ask the Father to search our hearts (and our wallets) and teach us to be wise stewards of the resources that he has given us.

Prayer

Father, help us in this Lenten Season to allow the searchlight of your Holy Spirit to illuminate the attitude of our hearts to the finances you have entrusted to us. We recognise that all that we possess comes from you and we are called to be trustworthy stewards of them. May we learn to be wise and generous in our stewardship. Amen.

Lent Day 30

Luke 15:4-10 - The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Reflection

I remember as a boy in the Co. Down countryside the excitement in showing my friend our newly built house which we were soon to move into. My dad gave me the full bunch of keys and yes you’ve guessed it when I arrived home I had lost the keys. Like a good Father he made me retrace my footsteps and scour the fields where I’d been playing with a grass rake!...but to no avail...All the locks in the house had to be changed...Ouch!

In these parables we are reminded that the Lord searches for those who are lost, except we have confidence, unlike my experience, that he will find the lost sheep/coin/sinner ...Its notable that he is the one doing the searching. ‘You did not chose me, but I chose you’ (John 15:16)

Notice that the celebration is for those who don’t know God changing direction and turning towards God instead of away from him....If we turn toward him no matter how lost a sheep , no matter how grubby a coin he will find us and bring us safely home.

Lets thank God today that he searched for us and found us. Lets stay within earshot of the shepherd at all times and determine during this season of reflection to step closer to him if in any way we have wandered off or distanced ourselves from him because he has said” Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5)

Prayer

Lord we thank you today that you came to find us when all of us like lost sheep had wandered of. Thank you that you chose us and that you call us to listen to your voice and to follow you. Help us wherever we have distanced ourselves from you to come back to you and to stay close to you through your Holy Spirit. Help us to be those who also keep our eyes and ears open for those who are lost or who have wandered away from you. We pray especially for those we love in our own families. Lord please bring them back to your safe and loving presence that we might rejoice with the angels at their change of heart. Amen

Lent Day 31

Luke 14:25-35

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Reflection

He who has ears to hear... Jesus wants us to go away and think about what he is asking us to learn from this story. Clearly hatred towards our parents and family is not the Lord's intentions as God had given instructions to honour our parents. So what does this passage mean? Perhaps one clue is the intended meaning of the word "hate". In this context it means to love our families less than we love God. Well that is not that difficult is it? So is there something else? In Jewish families, there was security, status and even mistaken salvation. Jesus doesn't want us to come with our own capabilities and resources, but having counted the cost and realizing we don't have enough resources or determination to follow him, we need to fully depend on Him for all we need. What then does the salt have to do with all of this? Perhaps it is simply this; we don't need a crowd to make a difference but one distinctive person who will cause there to be change. Very little salt is needed to bring flavour to a meal because of the distinctive taste of salt. So it is when we truly depend on Jesus to pour his life and power into us that we are distinctive and cause things to change around us.

Prayer

Lord Jesus I come having thought of all it may cost me to follow you and if I am honest, I know without your enabling I could never be a true follower of you. I count you to be the Pearl of greatest price and want nothing more than to run after you. Thank you that you take me and pour the Holy Spirit into me. All that I need and want are found in you. May your unique love and distinctive life be displayed in me as a testament of your mercy and grace. Amen.

Lent Day 32

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "[It was intended] that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Reflection

I see several people in this passage that interest me. First of all, I see Mary who loved her Lord extravagantly and then there's Judas who transcended his life as a thief to become a traitor. Then there is the graciousness of Jesus who was on His way to the cross. But, the one I want to focus on at this time is Mary - The woman who loved Jesus with an unbridled love.

There are so many silent messages in these passages. First of all, Mary's hair - In Palestine, when a woman reached adulthood her hair was tied up, generally in a bun or a braid and then covered. It was never seen by anyone outside of her family. Her hair was a symbol of the glory of the Lord as a covering (1 Cor. 11:15) and was let down at home and around her family only. Secondly, the oil - When an honored guest would enter the home, their head was anointed with oil which was a way for the host to pronounce a blessing of joy on his guest (Ps. 23:5, Heb. 1:9). Most of the time a host would anoint the honored guest's head with oil (Luke 7:46) but, Mary anointed Jesus' feet.

In these scriptures, I see a humble woman overcome with love for Jesus, whom I believe she knew was on His way to Calvary. She had noticed that He had not been honored by having His head anointed when He entered the home. But, as a woman, she was not about to presume to pronounce a "blessing" on Him by anointing His head. She chose, in her humility, to honor Him by anointing His feet. The very symbol of humility and servanthood!

Mary, along with Martha and Lazarus were part of Jesus' inner circle. She had to feel comfortable letting her hair down in His presence through that closeness. When this took place, she was holding a pint of expensive perfume (nard) for the community for use at His burial. What must have been going through her mind at that instant? Whatever it was, she chose to use this expensive perfume on His body right then. Something within her said you cannot wait. Not only did she anoint Him as their honored guest but also, she needed to

express her love and devotion to Him then, while He was still alive. There is no way that she would presume to speak a blessing on Him by looking up to touch His head. Instead, she stooped to His feet and to honor Him in a very humble way. She poured the nard on His feet and she used the most valuable possession she personally owned, her hair, to carry out the task of caressing it into His skin. Mary symbolically anointed Jesus with the glory of the Lord.

The scriptures tell us that the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Can you just imagine what it smelled like? It had to have served as a continual reminder of His presence for weeks and months to come. Nard is an oil that seeped into the wood and lingered waiting to be touched somehow by someone and passed on to a new place.

What a difference I see between the person who is willing to rush into the Lord's presence simply out of curiosity just to catch a glimpse of Him verses the humble, gracious approach by the person that dares to step into His presence and reach out to drink in His being and then touch and caress Him out of an unbridled love with appreciation and adoration. One leaves His presence having had an experience. The other leaves forever changed.

Prayer

Lord, help us, first of all to express our love to the living and not wait until it's too late. Lord, help us to be willing to set aside all of the things that distract us and to make it a priority to step into Your presence. Father, we need Your encouragement to help us take the time to come into Your presence and to not settle for a fleeting moment out of curiosity to come "see" You. Beckon us to Your side often and encourage us to come close and to linger. Out of Your presence, may our heart overflow with love and appreciation for You and all that You have done for us. Show us how to worship You in Spirit and truth. Mold us into humble appreciative human beings that are forever changed by being in Your presence. May Your love, grace, forgiving heart and joy spill out of us and into the lost and dying world all around us. Transform us while we are with You, giving us the ability to openly pour our love over You extravagantly. May we return to this world forever changed; finally able to see those most close to us along with those You cause to cross our path, through Your eyes while we speak Your words of love and grace. Even the most difficult! Amen

Lent Day 33

Psalm 126

When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed.

Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations "The Lord has done great things for them."

The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev.

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.

*He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.*

Reflection

There's a tremendous sense of relief in this psalm. The suffering of exile has come to an end and the relief is so great it's almost impossible to believe. Tragedy and suffering can come in many different forms and whilst the pain endures we can feel exiled from normal life. But God, as revealed through the Lord Jesus Christ, can always bring good out of tragedy and suffering. Pain, whether physical, emotional or spiritual does come to an end and sometimes it can seem too good to be true. It's right and proper to pray for relief from pain or from a painful situation and for our fortunes to be restored, just as the waters flow again in the streams of the Negev, which are completely dry in summer. In his first epistle the apostle Peter has this to say: *And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong and set you on a firm foundation. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen (1 Pt 5:10).* After suffering, relief will come, but in God's way and in God's timing - to Him be the glory! Any parent, teacher or pastor knows what it is to "sow in tears". Those are tears of love and they are known to God (cf Psalm 56:8) and they will bear fruit. St Patrick knew all about sowing in tears and we are continuing to enjoy the fruit of his loving labours, offered for the glory of God.

Prayer

By your help, we pray you, Lord our God, may we walk eagerly in that same charity with which, out of love for the world, your Son handed himself over to death, for it is in His Name we pray. Amen.

Lent Day 34

Luke 17:11-19

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" When he saw them he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him - and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Reflection

Jesus was walking through the interface between two hostile communities. In modern day Belfast, Jesus could have been walking down the Newtownards Road past the Short Strand. Usually Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with each other and their mutual hostility was

based on both religious and political differences, again a familiar image to people in Northern Ireland. It's noteworthy that a common misfortune, leprosy, had broken down the usual barriers, as the ten lepers were a mixed bunch of Jews and Samaritans, though all ten were social outcasts, expressed by the fact that they "stood at a distance". The story is a wonderful illustration of faith and grace. God's grace, or totally undeserved love, is available to all, regardless of religious or political allegiance. All ten responded in faith to Jesus' command. Anyone healed of leprosy had to show themselves to the priest for the healing to be confirmed. That was the Law (Leviticus 14). But, as we see, all ten lepers set off to show themselves to the priest before they knew they had been healed. They could have looked very foolish and maybe incurred the anger of the priest, but they trusted Jesus and His word and their faith were rewarded. Only one of them, and one of the most unlikely, returned to give thanks. We can often pray for temporal goods such as physical healing or release from a painful situation, and then forget to give thanks to the Source of all good, our loving heavenly Father. It's only in thanksgiving that we come to appreciate faith as our God-given means of access to the Father. In some church traditions the central act of worship is known as the Eucharist, the Thanksgiving, a ritual in which memorial is made of the death, resurrection, ascension and glorification of the Lord Jesus Christ and communion enjoyed through faith with the fruits of that sacrifice in which He reconciled heaven and earth, man and God.

Prayer

O God, by whose wondrous grace we are enriched with every blessing, grant us so to pass from former ways to newness of life, that we may be made ready for the glory of the heavenly Kingdom, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lent Day 35

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said, "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea 'Grant me justice against my adversary'. For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Reflection

In biblical times widows were amongst the most vulnerable people in society and in days before social security, pensions and benefits both the law and the prophets called on the

People of God to care for widows and orphans (Exodus 22:22-24, Isaiah 1:17). In our parable, we see how a widow forces action from an unjust judge through sheer persistence. This contrasts with our loving heavenly Father who is boundless in generosity and wants to give us everything we need. Of course, what we want and what we need don't always coincide! It's perfectly in order to pray for material needs and temporal goods because Jesus Himself taught us to pray for our "daily bread", that is our material or bodily needs. Persistence in prayer often purifies our desires and certainly forms our character. What we need more than anything in the world is justice, the justice that God alone can give. Often when human beings ask for justice they really mean vengeance or revenge, a desire which can harden our hearts and drive us away from God. Divine justice is the Son of God coming to be our substitute, to take on himself the punishment due to our sin and so to offer us forgiveness and freedom from the power of sin. That's the justice we need, but to receive it we have to recognise that we are every bit as poor and vulnerable as the widow and until adopted by our heavenly Father through faith we remain orphans.

Prayer

Grant us we pray, O Lord, perseverance in obeying your will, that in our days the people dedicated to your service may grow in depth and number, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lent Day 36

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner'." But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost."

Reflection

The Romans levied heavy taxes on all the nations under their control. The Jews greatly resented this support of a secular, occupying nation with their pagan gods, but they had to pay. Tax collectors were the most despised group in society because they were Jews, yet chose to work for the Romans and so were seen as traitors. It was also common knowledge that tax collectors got rich by 'milking' their fellow Jews. So Zacchaeus, as a chief tax collector, was a hated figure. In his book "Second Chance", R.T.Kendall points out that if you mess things up in any way which involves sex or money "God will forgive you, but the

people won't". Probably the most hated figures in our current society are sex offenders. Even in prison they are regarded as the lowest of the low. Recent refurbishment of a church-run hostel for ex-offenders in north Belfast caused an uproar amongst many local people on the grounds that some of those ex-offenders could be sex-offenders. Yet it seems to me that such a hostel is an eminently suitable work for the church, trying to mirror the love of God in Christ. Zacchaeus' conversion comes about because Jesus treats him with dignity and respect. No criminal will change his or her ways under the finger of condemnation, but genuine conversion is possible if they are treated with love and respect for their human dignity. And we need to remember that we are all "sinners saved by grace" and we need constantly to ask ourselves what changes in our behaviour should come about as a result of Jesus' gracious entry into our lives.

Prayer

Be near, O Lord, to those who plead before you, and look kindly on those who place their hope in your mercy, that, cleansed from the stain of their sins, they may persevere in holy living and be made full heirs of our promise, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lent Day 37

Luke 20:9-19

He went on to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they could give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love, perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours. So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When the people heard this, they said, "May this never be!" Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written: The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.

Reflection

The characters in this story are easily identified. Even the religious leaders understood it. The owner of the vineyard is God, the vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the religious leaders, the servants are the prophets, the son is the Messiah, Jesus, and the others are the Gentiles. Quoting Psalm 118:22 Jesus showed the unbelieving leaders that even the

rejection of the Messiah had been prophesied in scripture. Ignoring the capstone or cornerstone was dangerous. A person could be tripped or crushed, that is judged and punished. Jesus' comments are veiled, but the religious leaders had no trouble interpreting them and they were filled with anger against Jesus. When the then Cardinal Ratzinger was elected Pope in 2005, he acknowledged the honour describing himself as "a humble worker in the Lord's vineyard". I thought that was a beautiful turn of phrase and have prayed daily since then for the grace to be a humble worker in the Lord's vineyard. In our use of material things, it's easy to forget that *the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it*. Even in the Church we can be possessive and manipulative and forget that it is the Church of Jesus Christ. Our privilege is to serve our fellow human beings in the spirit of Jesus Christ both in the household of faith and beyond. May it please the Lord to make us humble workers in His vineyard.

Prayer

Pardon the offences of your people, we pray, O Lord, and in your goodness set us free from the bonds of the sins we have committed in our weakness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lent Day 38

Luke 21:7-19

"Teacher," they asked, "when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?" He replied, "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming 'I am he,' and 'the time is near.' Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life.

Reflection

The persecutions and natural disasters referred to by Jesus have been part of life throughout the whole history of Christianity down to the present day. In many parts of the world today, followers of Jesus are being betrayed by family and friends. Jesus does not promise that his followers will be spared suffering and death, on the contrary these things will be inevitable, but He does promise that He will be with His followers in all their trials

and that He will enable them to use their trials as a means of witnessing to Him. He also promises that those who remain faithful to Him will ultimately share in the triumph of His resurrection. We are to put our faith in Him and not in any temporal structure whether material, political or religious nor even in our biological family. We can bear witness to Christ not only in times of overt persecution or betrayal, but also through our reaction to the more subtle pressures of family and friends and of course we can bear witness to Christ through the way we deal with physical illness. The followers of Christ are called to give glory to God both by the way they live and by the way they die.

Prayer

O God, who have made all those reborn in Christ a chosen race and a royal priesthood, grant us, we pray, the grace to will and to do what you command, that the people called to eternal life may be one in the faith of their hearts and the homage of their deeds, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lent Day 39

Luke 22:1-23

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered Judas called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present. Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover." "Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked. He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there." They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover. When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him." They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.

Reflection

We can't know exactly what it was that prompted Judas to betray Jesus. Some think it was an attempt by Judas to force Jesus to show his power over his enemies and overthrow the Roman occupation, whilst others think it was simply for financial gain. Whatever the reason, clearly Judas was disappointed in Jesus who had not shown himself to be the kind of Messiah, he, Judas, was expecting. We know from other parts of the Gospel that Judas was interested in money and that he was dishonest. We also know that Judas had regrets about what he had done and tried to reverse the situation by returning the money to the chief priests. But in God's sovereign rule, Judas in fact played a key role because Jesus' primary purpose in coming into our world was to offer himself as a sacrifice on our behalf and so bring about the salvation of the world. Judas' act of betrayal was evil, but ultimately it served God's loving purpose. That Jesus offered Himself completely freely as a sacrifice is made clear by his words and gestures with the bread and wine at the supper. Offering His disciples the bread and wine with the words "This is my body", "This is my blood" would have been meaningless had Jesus not actually died on the cross the next day and had He not done what He did at the supper His death on Calvary could have simply been seen as just another execution of a criminal. Whereas Jesus' death on the cross was a completely free act, prompted by divine love. A few years ago I was betrayed by someone I trusted completely and thought was a friend. I have cried with the psalmist "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread has lifted up his heel against me" (Psalm 41:9). But the hurt and humiliation were followed immediately by a tsunami of love and support and I have been so richly blessed over recent years and have been drawn so much closer to God that I am convinced the betrayal was part of God's loving, sovereign will for me and I pray daily for my betrayer.

Prayer

Almighty ever-living God, grant us so to celebrate the mysteries of the Lord's Passion that we may taste the reality of our salvation in the depths of our being, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lent Day 40 - Palm Sunday

Psalm 31:9-16

Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief. My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak. Because of all my enemies, I am the utter contempt of my neighbours and an object of dread to my closest friends—those who see me on the street flee from me. I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery. For I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side!" They conspire against me and plot to take my life. But I trust in you, Lord; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me. Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.

Reflection

I don't imagine a colt donkey was particularly easy to ride. It all sounds so orderly doesn't it, when we think of Jesus clip-clopping down the hillside into Jerusalem, coats nicely arranged ahead of him to keep the donkey's little hooves safe, and palm branches being fanned around his head. But of course it wasn't really like that. It was probably more of a down-hill slalom ... keeping the donkey from bolting, whilst trying to avoid getting poked in the eye by an over-enthusiastic palm-waver.

But perhaps the madness was better ... better anyway than having to think too hard about what was coming; better than having to imagine what the next few days in and around that hot-bed of a city was going to be like. The donkey-ride was a triumphal entry, but was it also something of a headlong plunge into all that was to come?

There comes a moment for all of us when we have no choice but to lose control. Like the psalmist, everything around us has splintered into unknowns, and we just have to take the plunge. Clinging to our God-given vehicle (unideal though it may seem), we tip ourselves over the top of the hill, fix our eyes dead ahead, and say: "This is it! For what it's worth, Lord, here I go! My times are in your hands!"

... and then we let go ... and then we let God be God.

Lent Day 41

Luke 22:54-65

Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said. A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." "Man, I am not!" Peter replied. About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophecy! Who hit you?" And they said many other insulting things to him.

Reflection

What was behind Peter's denial?

We don't deny things for no good reason. We don't suddenly change our opinion without good cause. We especially don't do that if we are the strong-minded type, like Peter. Sure,

he was impetuous, but he also knew his own mind. That was half the problem! He thought he knew exactly who Jesus was, and he didn't mind telling everyone so. Remember that incident where he even told Jesus he was wrong about himself? 'No, you can't possibly die! It's not going to happen!' (My paraphrase of Matthew 16:22).

Peter knew who he thought Jesus was ... who he thought Jesus should be. Perhaps this vision of his hero, betrayed, defeated, bound and captive, was just too wrong. Perhaps it was just too far from what he'd ever thought or imagined. Perhaps he'd started wondering if he'd got it wrong all along, and this man wasn't really the Jesus he'd been looking for. Notice his words in verse 57: "I don't know him."

We deny God because he disappoints us. We deny God because things don't turn out the way we thought they should. We deny God because he doesn't do the 'being God' thing in the way we think he ought to.

Prayer

Today, Lord, I ask your forgiveness for the times when I have refused to let you be who you really are. Help me have the courage to call you my Lord, even when you are doing things in a different way to how I would like them done. Amen.

Day 42

Luke 22:66-23:1

At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and the teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. "If you are the Messiah," they said, "tell us." Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied, "You say that I am." Then they said, "Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips." Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate.

Reflection

As one who can never resist defending myself, I always find these parts of Jesus' story so unsatisfying and infuriating. Why didn't he do a better job of defending himself? He could have pulled out some devastatingly accurate Scriptures to prove his identity; he could have called on public opinion – all those he'd healed – to speak up for him. There's so much he could have done, and he did precisely none of it.

Sometimes, the basic and uncomfortable truth is that God doesn't need our permission or approval to do what he's gotta do. He has a plan and a purpose, and he's made some promises which he's committed to keeping, because he can't deny himself. Our prayers and our agreement certainly make a difference, but he doesn't seem to spend much time trying to win us over in a public image contest. He invites us to join in, or to stand back if we prefer, but he is going to get the job done.

I hope this doesn't sound too fatalistic ... I don't mean it to. It's not that we have no role at all. I say it to reassure you. If it looks like God isn't doing much to explain himself or sell his strategies, that isn't because he doesn't have it in hand. It just means that he doesn't need to. He is God, and he will do what he has promised, no matter how well-thought-of he is or how successful his progress is looking.

You can put your trust in him... he's going to see it through for you, and in the end his way, his Word and his work will succeed.

Lent Day 43

Luke 23:1-25

Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king." So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "You have said so," Jesus replied. Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man." But they insisted, "He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here." On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies.

Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him." But the whole crowd shouted, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.) Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him." But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

Reflection

The last phrase of today's reading is chilling: "He surrendered Jesus to their will."

So this is where Jesus' silence got him? He didn't speak up for himself or defend himself; he didn't call down lightning and blast his way out of there. Instead he let himself be surrendered to their will. In the end, the human race got to do exactly what we liked with Jesus. That must surely be the ultimate form of defeat, mustn't it ... to come to save a people, and in the end to be destroyed by them.

We've read so many goodie-baddie books, and seen so many Hollywood movies in our time, that we have certain preset views of how the good versus evil battle should be. It is OK for it to look like bad is winning ... well just for a tiny moment anyway ... but we must all always know that good has a nifty plan up its sleeve. We must all secretly be utterly confident that there will be a trapdoor we haven't seen, or a weapon we never knew about.

There were no trapdoors and no escape plans. Jesus actually got completely defeated and destroyed by the very people he had come to save.

Prayer

Jesus, there are no words to express my soul-deep gratitude that you would be prepared to lose the battle so completely on my behalf. These human choices of ours should have destroyed us, but instead you allowed them to destroy you. I can never say thank you enough, but I can ask you to help me never to forget how much it cost. Teach me afresh, this Easter. Amen.

Day 44

Luke 22:14-38

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, He gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But woe to that man who betrays him!" They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at

the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” But he replied, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” Jesus answered, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.” Then Jesus asked them, “When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?” “Nothing,” they answered. He said to them, “But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one.”³⁷ It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment.” The disciples said, “See, Lord, here are two swords.”

Reflection

Right at the heart of this turbulent week in Jesus’ life, there was a meal. It wasn’t a public occasion or anything like that; it was just supper with his friends. Of course, now that we look back, we see the significant bits: the inauguration of Holy Communion, the betrayal of Judas etc., but at the time it was just dinner with friends. They arrived in the town, hired out the room and tucked themselves away from the world for just one precious evening together.

It’s a reminder that, above anything else, Jesus simply longs to spend time with us. The significant moments will come and go, and life will take us through its ups and downs, and Jesus will be with us all the way, but he isn’t there to analyse us or grade us on our progress. He is there to be with us. It’s our company he longs for. The central image of the Christian faith is not an exam or a battle, it’s a dinner together.

Have you been performing too much to sit down for dinner lately? Have you been trying to impress him, instead of just resting with him and shutting out the world? You mean more to him than anything you do or anything you are involved in. The priority for him is time with you.

Before the Easter weekend gets underway, why not make some space to have dinner with him!

Lent Day 45

Luke 23:36-46

As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your

children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then "they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Reflection

In these last moments of his life, Jesus is still bringing people into the Kingdom. To all intents and purposes he is beaten. His ministry is over, his teaching has been declared null and void and his renowned healing hands are nailed to a tree. Jesus' ability to change anyone's life should have been well and truly over, but it wasn't. For Jesus' power didn't come from what he could do or say; it didn't come from his ability to preach impressive sermons, do miracles or accomplish feats of heroism. It came from who he was. And whether alive and well, or dying on a cross, who he was didn't change.

It is something of a human disease to believe that we have an impact in this world because of what we do. We have a tendency to measure ourselves by the tasks we complete or the results we achieve. But the truth is that we were made to be shaped by a Creator, not by what we ourselves create. We were made to derive our value from the one who gave us life, not from what we do with the life he gave us.

If you feel utterly weakened at the moment – defeated by life and ground down by circumstances beyond your control – then take heart. Your ability to impact the world and bring people to the Kingdom hasn't diminished one iota. You are a co-heir with Christ, and so your ability to bless others comes from the same place as his. It comes from who you are, not what you do. As you rest and refuge in him, then he will shine through you, so that even

in your weakest moments ... perhaps especially in your weakest moments ... others will see the Kingdom shining through you.

Prayer

Help me Lord to remember that Your measures of success and fruitfulness are not necessarily mine. It's me that needs to change. Please help me to be truly who I am in Jesus and to rest in the identity You have given me.

Lent Day 46

Luke 23:50-56

Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

Reflection

Joseph was a man with a dream. It's a rather common characteristic of Josephs in the Bible: Joseph son of Jacob was a dreamer; Joseph spouse of Mary had dreams to show him what to do about his son Jesus; and Joseph of Arimathea was waiting and dreaming for the Kingdom of God. Yet, in the midst of his dream, Joseph buries a man. We know that he didn't agree with Jesus' crucifixion, and we assume that he may have seen Jesus as the best hope of the Kingdom that had yet come to God's people, so this terrible, tortured death must have seemed rather confusing and discouraging.

Dreamers can be quick to give up on people, plans or projects when they no longer look like they will fulfil the dream. Joseph could so easily have written Jesus off as no longer relevant to the dream of the Kingdom, now that he had died, but instead God nudges him to hang on in there. And so he takes the body – that starkest sign of hopelessness – and gives it pride of place in his own unused grave.

Sometimes it's time to move on, and sometimes it's time to hold in. Sometimes what looks like a dead dream is really just an Easter Saturday corpse. Sometimes we need to keep believing, keep trusting, and keep praying; even when it feels like all the life has gone out of it – and us.

This Easter, may you find the strength to hold on, even when it seems hopeless. Sunday is coming!

Prayer

Father help me to know when to hold on and when to let go, when to wait and when to move on. Lord help my unbelief and give me grace to pray and trust in You. Amen