

DEVOTIONS FOR LENT 2013



LAMB OF GOD

A SERIES OF DAILY DEVOTIONS FOR LENT

BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

LAMB OF GOD

John 1: 36 - 37

When John saw Jesus walking by he said:

Here is the Lamb of God!

Two disciples heard him say this

and they went with Jesus.

(GNB)

This booklet was written and prepared in 2013 by the
St Stephens Lutheran Congregation
Wakefield Street
Adelaide SA

INTRODUCTION

I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.
John 17:26 NIV

There are many key or important words in John's Gospel account. Simple words such as 'be', 'come' and 'remain' are used to construct and communicate a complex and vital portrait of Jesus Christ. 'Know' is another one of those words.

For John, knowing is not restricted to an intellectual (disembodied) exercise or experience. That was the mistake being made by many of the intellectual and philosophical elite at John's time. For those people a spiritual connection with God came through detachment and disconnection from their physical being. To know was to escape the limitations of their own flesh. John, however, used the term relationally to convey the opposite by portraying an earthy, connected, physical intimacy between God and people through Jesus:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
John 1:14 NIV

Jesus' mission in John's Gospel account was to make God known by making himself known in ways that people can believe and therefore see. That's the point of Jesus' seven, "I am," sayings (John 6:35, 48; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). They were spoken so that Jesus, the way to the Father, would be known.

This year's series of Lenten devotions were written as responses to what people have seen and heard in the person of Jesus Christ through John's Gospel account. As you read them treasure both the writer and the writer's insights.

Thanks again to Yvonne and Colin for leading this community project and to all of the writers for their precious contributions. We are blessed and strengthened in our own relationships with each other through your efforts.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor James

I have a grandson who recently turned five. As with many young children, while fearless in many ways, he does have a fear of the dark. This past Christmas he received a special gift. He thought it was a toy car but then he discovered that it could be plugged into the wall as a night-light. Excited by this he watched as we plugged in his new light. He was delighted to see it light up but because it was still daytime he did not see its full effect. That night, when it was bedtime, we turned the light on in his room – he was so impressed by the soft light that glowed in his room and invaded the darkness. It is only when it is dark that the night-light can be seen to its full effect.

John's Gospel begins by describing Jesus as a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that will never go out. As with the night-light, so it is with Jesus. It is often in the darkest times when we see how wonderful and effective He is. Sadly, when darkness comes into people's lives, many blame God rather than embracing Him. The most powerful impact of Jesus, the Light, can be seen in the midst of darkness – this was certainly the case when Jesus was nailed to a Cross taking on board our sins.

During this Lenten season, consider Jesus the Light that shines and deals with the darkness of sin and shines with the brightest Light of all – God's Love through his Son.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we begin the Lenten season, help us embrace the Light of Jesus. We ask in His name. Amen.

The strangeness, the unpredictability of God's actions! How strange to us that Christ's ministry is heralded by the Baptist, with his call to repentance – a message apparently as strange to the Jews then as it is to our generation. Priests, Levites – those charged with, among other duties in the temple, teaching – and even the conservative Pharisees, all query John “Who are you?”

But John’s increasingly terse responses, point them away from himself and instead to Jesus as the long expected Messiah, *the Anointed One*, the Christ.

In verse 29 (and later in verse 36) the gospel writer has the Baptist pointing to Christ as the 'Lamb of God' – the sacrifice that would atone for the sins of the world. (This is the only time the expression “Lamb of God” is used in Scripture). Jesus *is* the Christ; believe in Him - is one of the main themes of John's gospel.

So John's gospel starts with a voice crying out of the wilderness: prepare yourselves through repentance for Christ's coming. He is the Son of God. He will sacrifice himself for the sin of the world.

We would do well to obey this call from the desert.

Prayer

Ready us, dear Lord, for your coming again. Grant us a repentant spirit. Remind us daily of your forgiveness. Maranatha. Amen.

Here is a lesson for us in passing on good news. These young men had no idea of what was to happen, all that we now take for granted. They simply accepted John's words and left him. Whether they were simply curious, or whether they accepted John's words as absolute truth, they immediately tailed along behind Jesus. Still more than that, one of them went to get his brother and bring him along also. Within 24 hours there were more young men as though Jesus was a magnet.

Place yourself in a similar position - young, active, out wandering around with the "star" activist of the moment. You're willing to try anything if it's good, accept any challenge. These men did, with the effects of their decision filtering down to us. But most of us aren't like these young men, nevertheless, we can still find ways to pass on news and information, and we have a book of instruction, which they didn't, namely the New Testament. Besides telling, we have access to sending messages by voice, text, picture, and sound. Some of your last Christmas greetings probably reached you like that.

Jesus' words left no doubt in these young men's minds, particularly Nathaniel, but only after he had shown his doubt and disbelief. Jesus offered no criticism, instead he emphasised Nathaniel's strengths. This holds another lesson for us - find something positive to say.

Jesus' last words apply to us today. You will see greater things in the future with surety because you believe His words!

Take your words from scripture, "Come and see!"

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we know that your Spirit works in us, through us and for us. During this Lenten time when we meditate on John's gospel, strengthen us with courage to listen, follow, and make use of the words "Come and see". Amen.

Thoughts:

- "They have no wine." An embarrassing moment. A mishap. Wine, a symbol of joy, has turned into a disappointment. They have no _____ (fill in words such as: love, money, health...etc). Imagine life without the _____ (the word that you just filled in). Life is a miracle, so are all its make-up occasions.

- The fine line between eating/drinking and righteousness/peace/joy is the presence of the Kingdom of God, or God Himself (cf. Romans 14:17).

- The use of the water jars in the Jewish household - they were for the Jewish purifications.

- Pouring water, turning it into wine -Jesus brought to completion and therefore in a sense displaced the religion of the Jews. Saving grace, joy, and tasteful meal has replaced moralistic and superficial regulation.

- We need Jesus to be our guest; we invite him and honour him. Culturally speaking, a guest is the main character at a meal.

- This is the first of his miraculous signs, and a hint is already there - saves the best for the last! The bests are yet to come -a good wine.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I have no _____ (your word). Please fill my empty cup with your overflowing salvation and make me taste the goodness/better-ness of your grace. For I trust in you. Amen.

Good grief, I'm getting old!! As I read today's passage, the image immediately came to mind of Ted Neely, the lead singer of the film "Jesus Christ, Superstar", almost screeching, "My Temple should be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves", then flailing around at all those within reach in a tempestuous anger.

Was it really that way? Jesus was angry, very angry. Within that anger though was complete control – a control that belies the portrayal of the film. Having seen the irreverent acts and attitudes of the people, the overriding desire to turn a profit in the most Holy place of Judaism, he braids a whip of cord to drive out the sacrificial animals, upends the tables of the moneychangers (how not to win friends and influence people!), then shoos away those selling pigeons, the sacrifice bought by those who were poor.

This is the anger of God. His was a controlled anger; an anger that noticed the circumstances of everyone. It's small wonder then that the Pharisees were subject to the brunt of it.

They didn't back him up as they ought, but pompously demanded a miracle to ascertain His right to do as He did.

Is our anger like that of Jesus? I know mine isn't, but seeing this example of righteous anger, there is really a lesson there.

Prayer

Lord, one of the fruits of your Spirit is self-control. When I get angry help me to see each situation as it is and not be overridden by my emotions. Amen.

Dogs give birth to dogs, and bees give birth to bees. We see this every day in the *earthly* nature of the world. But we also see this connection in our *spiritual* nature. A sinful *earthly* nature is common to all men and women; it's something we're born with. Sinners give birth to sinners.

And the problem with being a sinner by nature is that we cannot earn our salvation and enter the kingdom of God without help. God's help to be exact. In baptism the Holy Spirit grants us new birth, a new life, cleansed and purified from all sins. We are born again of water and the Spirit. In baptism we are given the Holy Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance as heirs of God's kingdom.

We are no longer enslaved by our *earthly* nature but are now guided by our *spiritual* nature. When we at last enter God's Kingdom our *earthly* nature will be left behind, but until that time comes we face a daily battle. While our new *spiritual* nature longs for the things of God, to serve and please him, and to share him with those around us, our *earthly* nature attempts to resist God, to keep us busy and distract us.

This struggle lasts our entire lives. We have the assurance though that, as baptised children of God, the Holy Spirit within us will prevail. It is God who has granted us new birth so that we can share eternally in the blessings of his Kingdom. Nothing can take this away from us.

So what are we to do in the meantime? In verse 21 Jesus gives us some advice for our new life as baptised children of God. We are to resist our *earthly* nature and the darkness it tries to lead us into, and instead live by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we live our lives in the light. We are to continually walk in the Spirit - turning to him for guidance, relying on him for the words to say and the strength to say them, calling on him for help when temptation is near, asking him to increase our desire for God and praying that he will enable us to understand and experience all God has for us.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, preserve in us the new life that is ours through our rebirth by water and the Holy Spirit. Send us your Holy Spirit to help us keep in step with you so that we can please and praise the Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

In this reading Jesus, the disciples and John have been baptizing a lot of people - including John himself. The people have come to receive a gift of water that connects them to God - a bath of forgiveness. We don't know how water does this. God choose to have the water do this. He spoke and he said that it does - therefore it does. And we have faith that it does. Jesus, God's word, covenants that "anyone who believes and has this bath of forgiveness will be saved".

But where is human importance in all this? The Jews had an answer. Perhaps the rules they had for ritual washing could be applied to baptism too. Perhaps they could continue to supervise the rules and not be left out. The disciples were having a similar problem. Someone that they had baptized was cutting in and was baptizing people as well. The disciples too noted that things were changing and that they too were no longer centre-stage.

John said, he / we / people are not the important ones here. This is a gift from God – not from us. The important one is the Messiah who brings us God's bath of forgiveness. Can we do that?

Instead of being key players at a high profile event, John sees that we should be acting more like visitors to a wedding. We stand, watch, enjoy and then have a good yack about the different ways that two people can come together under the covenant of marriage. Here John sees it is important for us to stand, watch, enjoy and yack about how people and God come together under God's covenant of baptism.

Prayer

Heavenly Father I thank you for my gift of baptism and also for the other amazing and undeserved gifts that you have given me in love. I pray that my attitudes will not get in the road of others receiving your amazing gifts, but that I will witness to the gifts that you bring to people's lives. Amen.

8TH DAY IN LENT

Wednesday, 20th February 2013

Read John 4:1-26

WATER THE SUSTAINER OF LIFE

Australian Lutheran World Service (ALWS) reports that the Horn of Africa is having the worst drought for over 60 years.

Girls in South Sudan (often starting as young as 5) are responsible for collecting water each day. They must walk many kilometres, and it is dangerous and exhausting work. Often it means the girls are too tired to cope with school. They fail, can't get a job, and remain trapped in poverty. (An ALWS Borehole Repair Kit: \$1,436)

In South Sudan, children usually have dirty water to drink. It is disease-ridden and can carry guinea worm larvae. A drinking straw has a filter built into the tube. Children carry it on a string around their neck so they can always have clean water. (An ALWS Drinking Straw: \$18)

Families in a country like Cambodia can be protected from diseases with a simple household water filter. (An ALWS Water Filter: \$11)

In Burundi community water tanks are needed to conserve water to sustain the community and protect the crops during the dry season. The tanks provide up to 40 litres of water per person per day, and are refilled overnight by gravity-feed. Each 5 cubic metre tank caters for 200 people. ALWS provides materials and training so that local people can construct water tanks. (ALWS Water tank \$6,000)

Through the work of ALWS many people associate Lutheran with being Christian. Many refugees coming to Australia affiliate their experience of ALWF with the Lutheran church here, because they were given a new life, not only physically but also spiritually. They experienced the life giving water of Christ.

The woman said to Jesus "Sir ... give me that water!" Jesus offers it freely. He offers a new life, fresh and clean and satisfying, for all. Jesus doesn't care about rules that separate people. He isn't particular about the type of person that He deals with. He doesn't worry about what people will think or what they will say. It doesn't matter! What matters is that everyone has a chance to receive the 'life-giving water' that he wants them to have.

To support ALWS go to alws.org.au/gifts-of-grace

Prayer

We thank you Lord Jesus that we are privileged to live such an abundant life, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Help us to not worry about what people think or say. Help us to support others in need. Amen.

Read John 4:27-42 A NEW LIFE WON BY THE HARVEST LORD

Thoughts:

- This is a long passage, it contains:

- A. The voice of new life - "Come, see...Could this be the Christ!"
Jesus Christ, our Saviour, is the winner of our souls.
- B. The true satisfying food.

- In A, a strange conversation occurs between Jesus, a Jew, and a Samaritan woman.

Who would bother to care about *this*? (Hint: you may use your pointing finger here, for dramatization purpose!) Samaritan woman!

The *Message Bible* version says, "They were shocked. They couldn't believe he was talking with *that kind of a woman*. No one said what they were all thinking, but their faces showed it." (v 27, italics added). That's how a Bible translator observed.

Jesus took the initiative to start the conversation. How irregular, and how extraordinary!! Jesus speaks to us every time when we listen to his word. At the divine service, or even this second - your devotion moment. Jesus cares enough to start a redemptive conversation. He starts it by asking for a drink, over the cuppa, so to speak.

- In B, when we are having the real food in our stomachs, the harvest time has arrived.

The divine service is God's harvest moment, and our satisfaction, for God's sake. Jesus said, "The food that keeps me going is that I do the will of the One who sent me, finishing the work he started." (v 34)

Prayer

Come Lord, Jesus, speak to me, and ask me to respond to whatever your request is, for I know what its purpose is - to win me over to your grace. Amen.

10TH DAY IN LENT

Friday, 22nd February 2013

Read John 4:43-54

HEALING POWER

The story of Jesus healing the son of a non-Jewish royal official in Cana, invites us to connect with the healing power of Christ wherever we are and regardless of who is ill.

We are not living in the days of Jesus, but the healing power of Christ is present for us especially through the Eucharist. Some of you may recall the healing prayer I would offer at the Lord's Table: "May the healing power of Christ reach deep into your heart, mind and body to ease your pain and restore your soul."

The Eucharist is more than a prayer; it is a rite through which Christ's healing power can be mediated. Come to the table to receive the body and blood of Christ and ask for his healing power to ease your pain of mind, body or spirit.

Prayer

Christ, come heal me when I come to your table.

11TH DAY IN LENT

Saturday, 23rd February 2013

Read John 5:1-18

JESUS HEALING AT THE POOL

Jesus went to Jerusalem. There was a pool called Bethzatha where a multitude of invalid people lay waiting for an Angel to come and stir the water. The first to be immersed into the water would be healed.

A man had been waiting lying on his mat for thirty-eight years. God sent his son Jesus to this man and asked him "Do you want to be healed?"
"Sir, I am unable to get into the water by myself. Nobody will help me".
Jesus said; "Pick up your mat and walk". Then he disappeared.

God knows all situations, hears the cry of aching hearts. In Gods mysterious way he comes at the correct time in our life on earth to heal us.

Later the man was in the temple where Jesus revealed himself and said, "See you are well, sin no more". The humble, grateful man was full of blessings, thanks and praise and he told the Jews it was Jesus who healed him.

The healing took place on the Sabbath. The Jews, who rest on the Sabbath, took offence at Jesus working on this sacred day. Jesus said, "My Father is still working and I am too". With God there is no countable time.

Seek and you shall find, ask and it shall be given to you.

Prayer

Thank you Heavenly Father, through your son Jesus for listening and answering our prayers. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. In Jesus name thank you. Amen.

12TH DAY IN LENT

Sunday, 24th February 2013

Read John 5:19-29

CERTAINTY

Of some things we can be certain, eg: we have to breathe to live, each day we grow older, the tax man is always going to want his money, but to me the most important and life changing certainty of all is written within this text.

John 5:24 reads, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life."(English Standard Version) It doesn't say, "will have" when we die, it says we already have eternal life here and now.

By truly believing, we have passed from death to life. What an exciting and precious gift this is. No one can take it away.

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for your precious gift of eternal life. Help me to live my life to your honour and glory, in service to you and to all people. Amen.

13TH DAY IN LENT

Monday, 25th February 2013

Read John 5:30-47

TESTIMONY AND ACCEPTANCE

Even Jesus cannot do anything by his own authority. He is doing what God the Father wants him to do. He can testify to that. But his testimony is not accepted by the Jews.

John the Baptist had borne witness to the truth. But Jesus wouldn't accept the witness of men. Jesus' witness was God. God speaks on his behalf.

The Jews were using the testimony of Moses in the scriptures, and they did not accept Jesus as the one of whom Moses spoke. The evidence was there but they could not see it or believe it. They kept looking for God's answer for them, while he was right there doing his miracles and speaking words of love and comfort and hope.

Jesus is concerned for their salvation but if they can't accept or believe the testimonies, it shows that they have no love for God in their hearts. The Jews had become hearers but not doers. They were getting the head knowledge, but it wasn't changing their hearts and lives.

We can be like the Jews who searched the Scriptures and didn't find Jesus there. In our search for answers in life, the answers are often right there, waiting for us to recognise them. Jesus is God's answer for our world. We've heard his words, we've seen the way he can change people's lives.

We have the testimony of the new-testament writers and of all the saints that followed. We have the testimony of our church community. And we have the testimony of Jesus in our own lives. We believe in and know Jesus, and through Jesus, we believe in and know God our Father.

At times when you can't recognise Jesus, stop and rest and ask him to find you. Ask him to open your heart and to show you where he is. He is not so far away from you after all!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you that through our baptism you have made yourself known to us. Help us to share our testimony of our belief in you to others.
Amen.

14TH DAY IN LENT

Tuesday, 26th February 2013

Read John 6:1-15

SUPER ABUNDANT GRACE

Jesus miraculous feeding of the great multitude has demonstrated his great compassion for those who came to him, an act of wonderful grace, of super abundance.

When Philip was tested with where to buy bread for the great multitude by Jesus, his answer was "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" Obviously, Philip's thoughts were too earth bound, he had failed to see the grace and power of the Almighty God.

Like Philip, when in difficult situations, we tend to see money as the solution to problems and often fail to look beyond the physical surroundings. We also often feel that the problem is too big for us and conclude that the situation is hopeless. Although Philip had walked closely with Jesus all the while, when facing the difficult situation, he also failed the test.

Likewise, we often make the very same mistake due to our weakness and lack in faith. In the passage, we saw that Jesus did not rebuke Philip for his failure; instead Jesus had invited Philip to join him in this miraculous act of ministry by asking him to have the people sit down.

Our God is a compassionate god, the supplier and sustainer of true life. Let's remember that God is the Creator of the Universe. Let's be drawn to him and determine to walk with him all of our days.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, please strengthen our faith, give us wisdom and help us to walk by faith, not by sight. Amen.

15TH DAY IN LENT

Wednesday, 27th February 2013

Read John 6:16-24

AFRAID OF WATER?

Some years ago Lola and I were invited by friends to spend a week on a yacht in the Greek Islands. One night we were anchored in an inlet on a deserted island. During the middle of the night a sudden huge storm blew. The anchor lifted and we were being blown sideways towards a sheer cliff, which would have pushed a hole in the side of the yacht. We were forced to head out to the open sea into enormous waves crashing over the front of the vessel.

We were terrified. Like the disciples in the storm we were also not convinced of our safety.

We understand how the disciples felt.

Then they saw what they thought was a ghost when Jesus walked towards them.

“Don’t be afraid” Jesus said.

How many times in our life we would have liked Jesus to be near us and to hear these comforting words. Yet he tells us this every day. Don’t be afraid, I am with you always in your suffering or your distress. “Call on me in the time of trouble and I will give you rest.”

What an assurance we have when we trust in him.

Prayer

O God, give us the faith to know that you are always with us when we face some of the challenges in the journey of life. Amen.

In this passage, Jesus was initially seen as a means to filling the stomachs of the crowd (v. 26). Jesus did not come to fill stomachs with food, but to fill lives with the very presence of God.

This crowd is focusing on the physical realm. In John the physical and the spiritual are interconnected, for the physical is spirit bearing: the Word became flesh.

Jesus reveals himself to them as the bread of life. Jesus speaks of bread superior to the bread that was provided for Israel in the desert, and the crowd says it wants to receive this bread (vv. 30-34). Jesus then grants their request by revealing that he himself is that bread (vv. 35-40). Consuming Jesus' bread is the path to eternal life.

Prayer

Thank you God for the gift of Jesus' life in us, symbolized here as bread for our soul. Help us to have faith and to see and hear God's presence in our everyday life. Amen.

17TH DAY IN LENT

Friday, 1st March 2013

Read John 6:60-71

TOO HARD TO ACCEPT

In the Noah story God repented that he had made man (and woman) as they had turned out to be “evil only”. God decided they would pay for their own sins and he wiped them out with a flood.

At a Shout For Joy church service for people with disabilities we had a service based on this story. We moved pews into the shape of a boat and had “Noah and his family” seated in it. The rest of the 70+ congregation were the doomed people who were flushed out the back of the church. Suddenly the church was almost empty.

This also is the result that God got. Clearly, not a result that God liked or could accept. He sent the rainbow and promised that it would not happen like that again and the rest of the Bible tells us that God strives to have the people he created to come to him and not be forced from him.

From then on God took full responsibility for the situation that was partly of his making. He decided his son would die for the sins and not the people themselves. One person would die - not everyone. (For Shout for Joy services this means that the church can stay full.)

Many people think Jesus’ death is absurd, offensive, obnoxious and unacceptable. Furthermore, it is not needed - they are not that bad. This reading goes to the heart of the matter. We eat the body and we drink the blood of the one who dies in our place and so we become part of and we partly experience the death Jesus died for us. (This is hard?)

I have a granite cross paperweight on my desk with “Jesus is Lord” type inscriptions all over it. I had someone come to fix my computer and he saw the cross. He turns his back on what it represents. He asks “How can such cruelty come from a loving God?” and “How can having your obedient son killed to satisfy your need for punishment be seen as love?” He looks for and wants a world where death, blood and sacrifice is not common place.

And yet millions of people have sacrificed their lives for him, me and others on a battlefield. Is that not love? Should God be incapable of that love? On the farm, death was always around – it was part of life. We shot dying animals (in droughts especially) and many a sheep and chook was killed and I ate them.

How can I refuse to be a follower of a Father who understands, relates to and loves the world as it is? Like Simon Peter says, there is nowhere else to go.

Prayer

Lord, give us acceptance of the love you give and we do not deserve. Amen.

18TH DAY IN LENT

Saturday, 2nd March 2013

Read John 7:1-24

RIGHT INTENTION? RIGHT TIMING?
RIGHT DIRECTION? RIGHT METHOD?
RIGHT JUDGMENT?

In this passage, we can see Jesus did the right thing regarding the above questions though his own brothers queried his motivation (v.3, 4), gave him some 'logical' suggestions (v3) and the people misjudged him (v20, 24).

In our life journey, we have big and small ordeals. Although we may have a clear conscience and know why and what we are doing, we still get upset and even angry when people around us have concerns about our motivation and intention. We hesitate when we are planning for something new. We ask ourselves 'Is it God's will? How am I sure that it is the right decision? Is it the right way to do it?'

Although some people say 'When you know what, you know how', it is not that easy to know how though we know what. Sometimes the wrong timing and the inappropriate presentation make us feel more miserable. We have a hurt feeling when we are misjudged by people and we wonder if we should fight or take flight.

To keep our sanity, integrity and faith, we humbly need God's protection and guidance.

Prayer

Dear Lord, please lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight. Amen.

19TH DAY IN LENT

Sunday, 3rd March 2013

Read John 7:25-36

TRUST AND MISTRUST

Thoughts:

- Human beings are not believing creatures, they opt for doubt and examination in the first place.
- Even Jesus is under the people's hardest scrutiny.
- However, God is doing His work to make things, attitudes, and opinions change.
- Even the evil, unnecessary action - To Seize Him - is in God's timing. Eventually this will happen, but in God's way and timing.
- Sadly, it is the leading priests and the Pharisees that eventually did the bid.
- They cannot know and go to the place where Christ is, because they are too obsessed by their religious agenda.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to know you and go to the place where you want me to. Keep me from a self-obsessed agenda. Grant me strength to cope with all the twists and turns in my life journey. Help me in your bidding, as you did your Father's bidding. Amen.

When I was a boarding student in the sixties I was sometimes embarrassed about coming from a small, 3 house, 1 shop country town, somewhere in the South East. Many other students came from well-known towns such as Cummins or Balaklava.

In today's society it can sometimes be uncomfortable to identify as a Christian because of the ignorance and misconceptions of many about who Jesus is, and what Christians believe about him. At times we are also not exactly sure what we believe about him.

In the reading today some of Jesus listeners were excited by his teachings and were prepared to consider that maybe he really was God's promised rescuer, the Messiah. Some were convinced by the signs he had performed, such as feeding the 5000 or walking on the water. Even the temple guards, sent to arrest him were impressed by his teaching.

But to the Jewish leaders he was a puzzling nobody, from a nowhere town in Gentile Galilee, representing someone whom he claimed, they the leaders in Jewish society, neither knew nor understood. Surely they alone had the right to sit in judgment over religious truth and the correct interpretation of scripture, in order to show people the way to God.

From their positions of wisdom and power the Jewish authorities had missed the gentle nudging of God's spirit breathing through the scriptures. Eternal life is found only in his son, the earthly and very human stranger from Galilee. But to the lost and powerless nobodies, who were drawn to Jesus by their thirst, Jesus offers the life giving and eternally refreshing water of the spirit and a place to call home with God the father.

Prayer

Lord God, thank you that you continue to gather the nobodies of this world through your word and spirit. Give us the love and courage to witness to the truth of your transforming love through our actions and our words in ways that do not quench the thirst of those around us for you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Read John 8:1-20 GRACE, COMPASSION AND FORGIVENESS

It's not the first time Jesus has been tested by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jesus knew what they were trying to do. But he disarmed them by turning their own accusation of this law-breaker back onto their own consciences.

In the first part of this passage, Jesus' response was more indirect: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." In the second section he was explicit: 'I pass judgement on no one'.

Now I don't think for a second that Jesus is saying that it's ok to sin. Rather, that in judging individuals, we start treading onto very tricky ground. "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matt 7:3). The Pharisees, recognising none of them is without sin, left one by one.

Just Jesus and the woman were left. She awaited her fate; Jesus, the only one who could legitimately administer her punishment, didn't do it. By telling her to leave her life of sin Jesus offers her grace. In saving her from being stoned to death Jesus gives her life. Jesus didn't do this just for her; he's done it for each of us.

Prayer

Help me to walk in your light, to look with eyes of the heart and to use your love as a way of showing grace, compassion and forgiveness to others. Amen.

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

In this, one of the longest passages of conversation Jesus has with the Pharisees (which really begins at vs. 12), what repeatedly comes across to the reader is the narrowness of the Pharisees earthbound understanding.

Despite having the best minds of their generation and familiar with abstract thinking and terminology, their challenges to and accusations of Jesus show 'they did not understand that he was telling them about his father' (vs 29).

Having closed their minds to Jesus' claims of divinity, they seem stuck in the prosaic – 'who are you? They cling to the orthodox traditions for their legitimacy – we are Abraham's descendants' (vs. 33) and attempt to demonise Jesus (vs. 48). Where Jesus expresses the eternity of his being – 'I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am' (vs 58), they refuse to countenance such audacious blasphemy and attempt to stone him.

But a part of me says – 'I understand where they are coming from. Would I have acted differently in the face of such claims?'

And this is the problem: I am a child of reason; like the Pharisees my world is bounded by traditional certitudes. These claims by Christ challenge me too. However, "reason's last step," Pascal said, "is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it." Christ upsets our old certainties and forces us to question our orthodoxies.

Prayer

Unsettle my certainties, dear Lord, that I may cling to you for guidance, faith and comfort. Amen.

Numerous accounts of miraculous healings are recorded in the gospels. John records this one (the healing of a blind man) “so that the works of God might be displayed” (vs 3).

So what does this healing display about God? It demonstrates:

- His power – He can heal, not just someone who is losing his sight but someone who has never had it.
- His compassion – He is concerned enough to reach out and help.
- He can use ordinary things (dirt and spit to make mud and water to wash the man’s eyes) to achieve greatness.
- He is more concerned about the person than about man’s rules. Jesus performed this act on the Sabbath, a day of rest, yet he undertook ‘work’.

I find the response to this miracle interesting. You would think that people would be amazed and delighted for the gentleman whose fortune had taken such a positive turn, that they would want to celebrate with him. But this is not what he experiences. It’s almost like he feels guilty, rather than blessed. I can understand curiosity about what had occurred and the desire to ask questions, but it reads like an accusation, “How then were your eyes opened?”

Even though they asked what had happened, they didn’t believe the man when he spoke, making him repeat himself several times. They even called on his parents to prove who he was and what happened. They wanted the man to denounce Jesus and his actions. Those questioning the situation were more concerned about the fact that this healing had occurred on the Sabbath and was really a reflection of sin and therefore Jesus’ immorality (if the act was unlawful, then the person acting must also be unlawful). They did not appreciate that this action was Jesus demonstrating who he really was and that he was displaying God’s power and kindness.

Prayer

Lord, may we recognise you for who you are, the Son of God! May we see what is important and not be so bound by rules and regulations that we are unable to see your concern and kindness for us or demonstrate your concern and kindness to others. Amen.

24TH DAY IN LENT

Friday, 8th March 2013

Read John 10:1-21

LEADING FROM BEHIND

Sheep are vulnerable creatures. Their environment needs to be managed so that they are fed and protected from predators.

In many ways we are as vulnerable as sheep, and just as oblivious to the dangers surrounding us. We can wander through life as though we are indestructible. Maybe it is because Jesus is a shepherd that doesn't shout directions at us. Jesus knows what we can do and he encourages us to go ahead and act in good judgement.

Sometimes we wish that Jesus would be out in front giving us explicit signals. But most of the time Jesus leads us from behind, picking us up when we get into trouble, encouraging us to go ahead. Jesus may be behind us, but he is always there with us. We may not see Jesus' face, but we know His voice of comfort and encouragement.

Jesus leads us from behind and invites us to do the same for others. We are the beloved, for whom Jesus laid down his life. Jesus invites those who have been so loved to shepherd others, to love as we have been loved.

We are called to be with the stragglers, those who are vulnerable, who hurt. We are called to stay with them, to encourage them on their way. We are called to be their shepherd and not to be in their face shouting directions to them. In doing so, we honour the One who is our Good Shepherd.

Prayer

Caring God, help us not to wander from you but to follow wherever you lead us, listening for your voice and staying near you until we are all safely in your fold to live with you, the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Yet again, Jesus is dealing with people who want clear answers. 'Tell us the plain truth. Are you the Messiah?'

Why can't they see who he is? Why don't they believe? They have the scriptures. They have his wonderful works of healing. They have his word.

Jesus likens them to sheep without a shepherd. Sheep know their shepherd. They listen to him and they follow him.

But no, the people do not know Jesus, they do not listen to him and they do not follow him.

They see him as someone who contradicts all their concepts of who the Messiah is. Their hearts are not opened to the plain truth.

They will not stone him for his good works. They will stone him for his blasphemy.

Jesus says that He is the Son of God. The father is in him and he is in the father. He has given his followers eternal life. They will never die or be snatched away.

The people do not believe.

Many other people did believe.

We believe. Jesus is our shepherd. We know him, we listen to him and we follow him. He promises us certainty, safety and assurance that we will not be snatched away. We have eternal life now, and forever.

Prayer

Thank you Jesus that you know us. Thank you for being our shepherd who we know and who we listen to and who we follow. Amen.

In amongst these verses is written one of Jesus' great I AM statements – *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”* Jesus was saying this to Martha when He came to raise Lazarus from the dead.

All through this interaction with Jesus, Martha is experiencing grief because her brother had just died. She would have been physically, mentally and emotionally drained. Although Jesus offered her words of promise and assurance, he then asks the question, *“Do you believe this?”* Martha demonstrates her ultimate trust in Jesus by responding, *“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”*

What belief amongst her grief! In our own lives, would we be as confident to express our trust in Jesus when extreme situations occur, like the death of someone close to us, or being diagnosed with a terminal illness? Would we still say with certainty, “I believe?”

As Martha trusts Jesus at the worst possible time in her life, we can also trust on Jesus' promise to be with us always. Even death cannot take that promise away. He has overcome eternal death by His own death on the cross, so that we can have eternal life. Let us celebrate His resurrection daily, regardless of whatever challenges we find ourselves facing.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, help me to rejoice in your resurrection, for it assures me of my own resurrection on the last day. Amen.

Mary weeps, bent over on the cold floor, the sound of shrill wailing echoing off the hard stone walls. Her black robes and the cries of the women who surround her serve only to reinforce the finality of the moment and her own helplessness in the face of the death of her brother. Martha is gone now, but for what reason Mary does not know, and with that brief interruption now gone the grief settles back in. Time passes slowly as the women weep, the sound of despair crushing as an eternity passes.

But Mary feels something changing, something subtle, suddenly there are hurried footsteps outside, Martha is back and with her comes the news of Jesus' return. He is calling for you Mary, and without a word you are gone, running to Jesus.

Why do you run Mary? Do you run for love, to simply to be with Jesus, a comforting figure, someone on whose shoulder you can cry? Or do you run in anger and grief, to yell at Jesus and his untimely absence? Or is it for hope that you run, the hope of Jesus' power manifest in mighty miracles and salvation? Regardless of the emotions that played out in your head and heart, when you came into Jesus' presence you simply sat at his feet still weeping and between sobs you said to him 'Lord, if you had been here, everything would have been ok'.

And it's often the same for us. When we are confronted with suffering, our own or that of someone else close to us, or when we come face to face with the finality of death, we experience many deep emotions, grief, anger, fear and perhaps even hope. Like Mary we often come to Jesus and fall before him as broken people saying 'Lord, if you had been here, everything would have been ok.' In situations of loss and tragedy the question is often asked 'Where is God?'

Mary kneels before Jesus gently sobbing, and Jesus, seeing Mary's sorrow and the sorrow of those around her, is overcome with his own grief for Lazarus' death. Jesus weeps. He grieves with Mary as both man and God. Jesus also feels the loss of one who was close to him. Jesus suffers with Mary. But whereas the people around Jesus cry as those who have no hope, Jesus' weeping is different. Jesus still feels the sting of loss and separation, but he knows what is coming next. Lazarus will live again.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, help us to have faith like Mary who, when confronted with the finality of death and overwhelmed by the grief she experienced, still came to you even though her heart was full of fears and doubts. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We know that Jesus raised not only Lazarus from the dead but others as well and healed many people during His ministry on earth.

What did they do with their lives after these encounters?

Did they change?

Did they all thank and praise Him for what He had done for them?

Many people of the time believed in Jesus but others were afraid that if they allowed Him to continue teaching, preaching and performing miracles, the Romans would rise up against them and destroy their nation. So they plotted to kill Him.

God used Caiaphas to prophesy that by the death of one man, Jesus, all God's children would be given the gift of a second chance.

We too have been given a second chance.

Do we make good use of it or do we put our heads in the sand and think that we can do everything without any help from Him. It is important that we acknowledge God as the owner of our lives and recognise the sacrifice that Jesus made for us.

Don't be afraid to speak out boldly. God wants to bless us so we need to ask Him for help.

"Ask," promised Jesus, "and it will be given to you." (Matt 7:7) "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2)

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I ask that you would bless me indeed and expand my opportunities in such a way that I touch many lives for your glory. Let me do more for you. Amen.

The previous time that Jesus visited the home of his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the village of Bethany, Martha was worried about the odour that would be coming from Lazarus's body after four days in the tomb (11:39). But Jesus raised Lazarus from death, so at his next visit Lazarus is present with his sisters alive and well and free of the odour of death. This time the hospitable home on the outskirts of Jerusalem is bathed in a totally different aroma, the wonderful fragrance of nard, a costly perfume that Mary is using in liberal quantities to anoint Jesus' feet (12:3).

Judas Iscariot complains that the money spent on the ointment, roughly a labourer's annual salary, should have been spent on the poor. You can't love both Jesus and the poor, he seems to suggest. But by her action Mary was showing that our love for the poor is shown by our love for Jesus, and our love for Jesus flows into love for the poor. The two should not be played off against each other.

Mary shows her love for Jesus for the world to see (12:9), in stark contrast to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who will later take Jesus' lifeless body under cover of darkness, for fear of the religious authorities, and anoint his body for burial (19:38-42).

By anointing Jesus' feet, she not only ministers to Jesus in his hour of need with the shadow of crucifixion looming closer and closer; but she also foreshadows his washing of the disciples' feet. She serves him in a way that reflects the way he will soon serve the whole wide world. If I have washed your feet, Jesus tells a protesting Peter, that is, if I have incorporated you into my body through baptism, you are clean all over, forgiven before God and at peace (13:10).

This is already Mary's experience. Now, overcome by love and surprised by joy, her fragrant offering beautifully anticipates the new commandment that Jesus gives his disciples—you and me—to love one another as an expression of his over-the-top love for the world (John 3:16; 13:34, 35).

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, we thank you for the breathtaking height and the radical depth of your self-giving love towards us, your brothers and sisters. We thank you for the model of love that Mary of Bethany has given us. By your Spirit, imprint the same kind of love in us so that we throw caution to the wind in lives of loving service. In your dear name we pray. Amen.

30TH DAY IN LENT

Thursday, 14th March 2013

Read John 12:27-50

JESUS' ULTIMATE TEST

Recommended reading also 2 Cor 5:21, Isa 6:10

Jesus begins in verse 27 showing intense anxiety of his impending death, the suffering he must endure and the burden of the whole world's sin.

Jesus calls his people to walk in the light and to not be taken over by darkness and the evil in the world. He calls people to be "sons of light" and to put their trust in him.

Even though Jesus had done many miraculous signs and wonders, many still did not believe - as was foretold by the prophet Isaiah (see Isaiah 6:10).

Some who did believe were afraid to speak up because they were afraid of being ridiculed.

At this point (v44) Jesus cries out in desperation for others to believe in him who still did not believe despite of all the miracles that they had seen. Notice how Jesus never gives up on his people. Even when we ignore him, he is patiently waiting for us to come back to him.

Reflection:

List the times that you have forsaken God and turned away from him with the distractions of the world (e.g. study, family, friends, work, facebook, youtube, sports, romance, and computer games). Pray that God gives you the strength to resist these temptations.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, Help us to recognise your many miraculous signs and wonders in our lives. Help us to trust in you only. Amen.

In 2 Corinthians Paul writes on love. Here we have John on love, Jesus on love and his disciples on love.

John said Jesus 'had always loved those in the world who were his followers, and he loved them to the end.' A love rooted in service, patience and acceptance.

John also describes how Jesus' close followers often did not connect with Jesus expressions and ideas of his Father's love. They just did not get it. Even the experience of Jesus washing their feet turned something normal and comfortable into something neither normal nor comfortable.

Peter, a close follower of Jesus, felt so uncomfortable about Jesus expressing his love to him by washing his feet that, in embarrassment, he 'grandstanded' in front of the other disciples, loudly rejecting the expression of love that Jesus so wanted to give him. After Jesus' patient comment, Peter instantly flips from rejecting what Jesus was offering, to again loudly 'grandstanding' but this time demanding more from Jesus than he was offering. Jesus' comment "you will understand later" shows Peter was not getting the idea of loving by serving people. To Peter, loving by serving seemed academic and trivial.

Judas, another close follower of Jesus, was way passed being academic and trivial about Jesus' teachings. For Judas things were personal – very personal. He had been caught with his hand in the till, and was probably humiliated, embarrassed and guilty at getting caught. Judas seemed attracted to the things that are important to human beings generally – including authority over money. He did not get the idea of loving by serving either. Why spend your time serving people when you could give them money instead?

Judas seemed to connect well with the idea that money is a currency of life – and of death – including Jesus death.

In love, Jesus said to Judas 'Hurry and do what you must'.

In love, Jesus leaves Peter (and I) saying "You getting 'the loving servant' idea can wait until another day."

Prayer

Father, I pray that you also love us to the end. Amen.

Cosmic history - a strong theme in John's gospel - is reaching the central turning point. Judas has left the group to make arrangements for Jesus' arrest; Jesus, who knows the horrendous path he must tread alone, leaves his followers final instructions: 'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another'. And how has he loved us? To an ignominious death.

But his cross is also his throne of glory. 'Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him.' And, although his disciples, with all the frailty of mere humans loathe to farewell their friend and want to go with him, he comforts them with the assurance that although they cannot tread his path, they will follow later. Is Jesus referring to the cruel martyr's death that many of them face or rather to the glory that will follow?

The light/shade elements of this passage, the shifting back and forwards between the cosmic or divine of Jesus' words and the earthly level of the followers with their human and temporal perspective, so much a part of this gospel, is emphasised by Peter's blind affirmation of loyalty being met with Jesus' rebuke that 'before the rooster crows you will disown me three times'.

Prayer

He serves that I a lord may be -
A great exchange indeed!
Could Jesus' love do more for me?
To help me in my need?

Nikolaus Herman

This text is about Jesus offering reassurance and comfort to His followers. The text is set in the context of His coming death, so Jesus speaks to His disciples to reassure them, (and all followers), that there is no need to be worried or upset, for by believing in God and also in Him a place will be set aside for us to be with Him in our Father's Kingdom.

Jesus tells his disciples that he will be leaving them to prepare a place for them in His Father's Home, then return to them, ultimately to lead them ".to the place where I am going."

In the text Thomas expresses apprehension about not knowing where Jesus is going and how to follow Him. "Lord, we do not know where you are going; so how can we know the way to get there?" Jesus replies; "I am the way, the truth and the life: no one goes to the Father except by me." In His reply to Thomas, Jesus reiterates that it is only through Him that we may find our way to our Father's Kingdom.

Philip also seeks reassurance; "Lord, show us the Father: that is all we need." Jesus reassures Philip by responding; "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father" and "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." In this way Jesus tells us that the words He speaks to us come directly from the Father.

Finally, Jesus reassures His disciples that whatever they ask for in Jesus' name will be done, remembering that to ask in Jesus' name is to ask for something that is in keeping with His Way and what He and the Father would want done. In other words our wishes should always be in keeping with the teachings Jesus and the Father have provided us.

As Christians this text not only offers us reassurance and comfort but also reminds us that it is only through our belief in Jesus Christ that we may ultimately find our way Home.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, we also seek reassurance to know that what we are doing in our lives is for your glory. We ask this in your name. Amen.

34TH DAY IN LENT

Monday, 18th March 2013

Read John 14:15-31

THE HOLY SPIRIT:
MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

What can we know about the Holy Spirit? The author calls the Spirit the Paraclete, which means variously advocate, intercessor, counsellor, protector, support. We don't meet it directly in the Bible as we meet Father and Son; it comes afterwards, to the disciples, to the early Church, to us.

How do we know it? Is it the voice of conscience, the voice of inspiration? It seems unlikely that no one was troubled by conscience before the events of the Gospel, but how could we possibly know the difference between then and now? The mind is a tempest of thought and impulse – who can say how or why each voice arises?

At times, the incomprehension of the disciples can seem baffling and aggravating. How can they be so consistently blind and confused? In John 16, Jesus speaks of the Spirit of truth, who will reveal the meaning of Jesus' words and actions. Without the Spirit, would these still be as opaque to us as they were to his disciples? If we feel that we understand anything of Jesus, does that mean the Spirit is already present for us, already speaking to us?

Prayer

Let me be attentive. Let me be willing to ask questions, to receive answers, and to be moved. Amen.

Everyone loves to eat sweet fruit, especially when it is freshly picked from a tree. Great fruit always requires a healthy branch and so on down through the trunk into the main plant. Without nutrition flowing up into the branch, there is no good fruit and the branch is useless, to be cut off and burnt. The tree must be well pruned to produce good fruit, year after year.

So what is the “fruit” referred to here in the passage? The ultimate sweetest fruit of all, that of pure Joy and Love. Our connection to Jesus, as His branches, allows the Joy and Love of God to flow out, through us into the world. This might appear as great works, or it might be nearly invisible. Love working in private miracles.

In this passage we perceive that Christians are considered to be the “branches” of this true Vine. So what is the task before us? Verse 10 asks us to keep the commands of the Father, a reference to the 10 commandments of the Old Testament. But this is not enough, as in Verse 12, “My command is this, love each other as I have loved you”. This is not a passive request, not a list of things not to do. We must act positively, as in Verse 17, “Love each other”. But Jesus offers His friendship, in full measure to help us to be the fruitful branches, so that our joy is complete and whole.

Prayer

Dear God, please give us the strength and determination to produce fruit in great abundance, filled with the Joy of living in the Love of God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

This passage concludes with Jesus' challenge to His disciples to testify to Him in their daily lives.

I spent the 45 years of my working life as a secondary school teacher and administrator. All but the first 7 of these years were spent in Lutheran Colleges, a working environment where I never felt uncomfortable in bearing witness openly to the faith that had been given to me in my baptism as an infant and nurtured by my church-going parents.

Prior to joining the Lutheran school system I was employed by the South Australian Education Department in three boys' technical high schools. On arriving at my third school in 1966 I was somewhat taken aback when a teacher greeted me with the very direct question: "Are you a Christian?" I remember hesitating to gather my thoughts before answering in the affirmative, the slight delay prompted by the unexpectedness of the query.

Having spent my high school years at a Lutheran boarding school, then being active in Lutheran Student Fellowship during my university and teacher training years, I had been shielded from such questions. I later learned that the teacher, Bill, had been born in India, left as a baby on the doorsteps of an Anglican convent, and subsequently raised by the nuns. No wonder he was such a committed and forthright Christian. What a witness he was to his faith.

These Bible verses remind us that Christians living in this world also belong to another, different world - God's world. With this privilege comes the responsibility to bear witness to the faith within us, a responsibility that may bring criticism or rejection or, in extreme cases, persecution.

Jesus reminded his disciples that they had a very special responsibility to testify about Him, as they had been personally selected by Him "from the beginning". If Jesus were with us in person today He might remind us that He selected each of us in our baptism "from the beginning", and so we, like the disciples, have a very special responsibility to testify about Him.

Prayer

I give thanks to Father God for sending His Holy Spirit to create the faith that is mine. During this Lenten season, may His Spirit help me to use the opportunities that come my way to testify to the saving faith that is mine through His resurrected Son, Jesus.

When stegosaurus roamed the earth and I was a young man, I used to skydive. We had old ex-military parachutes – huge, cumbersome things - a far cry from the tiny, multicoloured, airfoil shaped rags used today.

On one of my jumps I used a thirty foot diameter ex-cargo ‘chute. It was massive and as different from today’s rigs as an old decrepit truck is from a brand new Jaguar. I often heard non-skydivers say they’d want big, safe looking equipment designed to get you down, preferably alive! Big (more) is better – or is it?

In the text, Jesus’ disciples are grief stricken, knowing their Master, Lord and friend was about to leave them and be put to death. They would now bear the attacks of the world – without Him. Their world would be massively diminished. Grief is loss. Loss is less.

Jesus then says, “It is for your good that I am going away.”

What! – How can you say that? We’re losing you. Without you we’ll lose everything we had. All our hopes will come to nothing and you say this is “good”. Ridiculous!

Yet, it is good. In dying, being resurrected and ascending, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Himself, comes and actually lives within the disciples and by extension, within us. He empowers our faith, guides our lives, gives us hope and perseverance, and produces love within us for each other. The Holy Spirit convinces us we are continuously loved both before and after death. It really is a case of “less is more”.

So why the parachute diatribe? Well, as they became more sophisticated, they became far smaller, far more manoeuvrable; landings are accurate, much softer. New aspects of the sport can be pursued. It’s simply more fun.

It really is a case of “less is more”.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, empower our faith, guide our lives, give us hope and perseverance. Produce love within us for each other. Amen.

38TH DAY IN LENT

Friday, 22nd March 2013

Read John 16:16-33

DISAPPEARANCE AND RETURN
SORROW AND JOY

Jesus is with his disciples in the upper room. The conversation is wide ranging. Now Jesus announces he's going to disappear, but he'll be back—each 'in a little while'.

The disciples are interested but puzzled. Jesus knows they're struggling and answers as only he can—not by clarifying the timeframes involved or explaining how he's going to disappear or return, but by describing the impact on his disciples.

His disappearance will mean sorrow, personal loss and, seemingly, Jesus being defeated by his enemies. By contrast, the return will mean unlosable joy, joy, joy! And there's a bonus. The return will mean a different, more direct and open relationship between his disciples and the Father—*you don't have to ask me for things, go straight to the Father in my name.*

Amazingly the disciples announce they now understand it all. Jesus knows they don't and reminds them that he'll end up alone and they'll be scattered. But that's followed by a final reassurance of peace that will be theirs as they live through the events about to unfold with the knowledge he's just given them.

For us, 'a little while' has a different timeframe, and we are observers of the drama the disciples had to live through. The core message remains unaltered though. We experience sorrow and loss, but when we call on the Father through Jesus we are safe, at peace and happy—life in the Kingdom of God.

Prayer

Thank you for returning and for being the access to the Father that gives us our true joy. Amen.

39TH DAY IN LENT

Saturday, 23rd March 2013

Read John 17:1-26

INCESSANT INTERCESSORY

John 17 is known as the 'High Priestly Prayer' or as the 'Great Intercessory Prayer'. The prayer that Jesus prayed on the night before He died. This prayer is known by many as the most profound prayer recorded in the Bible.

Firstly Jesus prays for himself.
His work is complete. His message is received. God's glory is made known.
And Jesus asks to be glorified.

Then Jesus prays for his disciples
They are in the world. Jesus prays that with the power of God's name, the disciples are kept safe from the power of Satan. Jesus prays for those who would come to faith by the testimony of the disciples.

Jesus then prays for us – the saints.
We are also in the world. Jesus prays that with the power of God's name, all the saints are also kept from the power of Satan.
He prays we will all be one - just as he and the Father are one.
Jesus has made us known to God and He will continue to make us known to God, so that God's love remains in us.

So Jesus, throughout eternity with God, is incessantly praying for and interceding for us.

I am often overwhelmed by the thought of Jesus interceding for me, pleading to God for mercy; for all that I am not. I am 100% sinner, but God sees me as 100% saint because of the continuous intercession of Jesus. God loves me and he uses me just the way that I am with all my faults, all for his glory.

Jesus intercedes for us - His saints. And we can respond with our praise, our thanksgiving and our efforts at service. Through our often-feeble attempts at witnessing, people are able to know God's glory through His work in us.

Prayer

We thank and praise you Lord Jesus for your gracious gift of mercy. Amen.

In today's reading we see how two of Jesus' proactive disciples try to solve the 'problem' of Jesus in their own ways. Judas, at the head of a group of armed Roman soldiers and temple guards guides the way to Jesus' regular place of prayer, so that the religious authorities can have Jesus arrested.

Simon Peter, when he sees how Jesus volunteers to hand himself up in order to guarantee his disciples' freedom, lashes out with his sword. He believes that in this way he can get Jesus' mission back on track. Both show initiative and daring.

Peter also shows courage, when with help of another well-connected disciple he manages to get inside the courtyard of the house of Caiaphas, closer to the action. It would appear however that when Peter is confronted by the vision of his shackled and interrogated leader in the place of high priestly power, he loses his spirit and denies any connection with Jesus. Can you empathise with the terror Peter felt when Jesus suggested to the high priest that his hearers (such as Peter and us) could witness to the truth of what he had been teaching?

Prayer

Lord God, we thank you that Jesus stood and identified himself as "I AM he" when the authorities came to arrest him. We thank you that when we your people deny you in our actions or words you stand beside us. You cover us with your forgiving love and fill us again with the life-giving hope that you won for all through cross and opened grave. When we are confronted by the pressures of life, by the accusations of others, by self-doubts or a guilty conscience, help us to remember that because we are your family, the accuser's power over us crumbles in your presence. Lord, refreshed by your love, and drawing our strength from you alone, empower us to live as your community in ways that bring hope and life to others. Amen.

MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK

Monday, 25th March 2013

Read John 18:28-40

TITLE: BARABBAS
(MEANING: SON OF A FATHER.)

A DEVOTIONAL SKIT:

Location and mood: inside the darkened jail...with Barabbas waiting in his cell...in fear. Hearing the crowd shouting from a distance, however vaguely, "Crucify him...crucify him...crucify him...". Finally, soldiers stepping towards the cell where Barabbas is.

Barabbas (self-talk): Oh, they are coming...the steps are coming towards this way...I'm done. They are going to crucify me.

Soldier A: Barabbas, COME OUT!! (loud and clear.)

Barabbas:....(absolutely silence...shivering...speechless...with fear.)

Soldier B: Barabbas, the people and the court have decided, you are free to go!! Jesus the Nazarene has taken your place to be crucified. Lucky you!

Barabbas: What!? What did you say? Is this...are you(meanwhile, the soldiers released his handcuffs, foot-chains...etc, and pushed him out of the cell, and brought him to the sunlight).

Soldier A: GO. (Again, loud and clear.)

Barabbas: (again...absolutely silence...shivering...speechless...but only a different one this time, with a touched heart. The story to be continued...)

Prayer

Lord Jesus, it's me, Barabbas. I am also a son/daughter of a father. Thank you, for saving me. Help me to lead and continue a life that pleases you. Amen.

TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

Tuesday, 26th March 2013

Read John 19:1-30

IT IS FINISHED

O what peace and comfort it has been to Barry and I to focus on the finished work of Jesus on the cross, as Jesus declared, 'It is finished.'

Not only has Jesus suffered and died for our sins, our forgiveness, our salvation and freedom from sin and the devil, Jesus became a curse for us, freeing us from the curse. Gal 3:13

Jesus, the Son of God, King of the Jews, suffered God's full wrath for us. His sinless body was crushed and his innocent blood shed. He became sin for us. He died and went to hell for us. He rose again and ascended to the Father in heaven and he intercedes for us. He took upon himself all our sickness and diseases and by his wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24.

It's all part of the New Covenant. O what joy and hope it brings.

Jesus has won the victory! He has paid the price. He has defeated sin, death and the devil.

In and through Jesus we claim that victory, with the authority Jesus has given us through faith in His finished work on the cross and in His Name, to come against all evil, sickness and disease.

God's Word is trustworthy and true and we are encouraged to stand on it and in the Name of Jesus be an overcomer.

This is our constant confession and joyous hope.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for the faith to believe and receive your most precious gift, Jesus our Lord and Saviour, our Healer, High Priest and King. Keep us steadfast in that faith so that we may receive all that Jesus has won for us. Amen.

Jesus is dead.

From this point in the story, we see people touching and handling that lifeless body of Jesus.

Everything that happens to Jesus is now done by others. Surprisingly, not by his family or the disciples he lived and worked with over the years, but an unlikely lot - a Roman soldier, a 'secret' disciple and a Jewish leader. Jesus' body has no life of its own. It's as if he has handed his body over to others – to us. What will we do with the body of Christ?

And so we watch as a soldier decides against breaking his legs, but spears his side. We see blood and water pour from that body. We watch Joseph approach the palace to ask Pilate's permission to take possession of it. We see him remove the nails and gently take that body from the cross. We see Nicodemus preparing spices, and the two of them wrapping the body with the spices in a linen cloth and placing it in a tomb.

But underneath what's happening on the surface, in the very process of tenderly caring for the corpse of Jesus, we get a glimpse of that body already coming to life, days before the resurrection. The body of believers is already active in love.

Jesus' body is dead. Or is it?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, as members of your body may all our actions evidence life, especially at times and in places that seem particularly hopeless and dead. Amen.

John 20 is at the heart of the gospel. Jesus who had died has been raised. He tells us of the way in which these early Christians Mary, Peter and an unnamed disciple discover that Jesus' tomb is empty, the tangible visible sign that Jesus had conquered death and how it was that they began to rejoice in that fact.

It tells of Mary who mistakenly thought she was talking to the gardener when he asked her 'whom are you seeking'? (20:15). Maybe her grief was so great that she could not raise her head. Perhaps it was dark that morning (20:1). Or maybe she had seen him die and did not expect to see him walking around only days later.

We are witnesses to when her grief turns to joy as Jesus calls her by name and she responds Rabboni (teacher). Is Jesus asking the same question of us? Who are we looking for? Is Jesus calling our name? If you believe what it is that John is writing here, you will never be the same again.

Prayer

"Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you." 1 Peter 1:3-4

Lord, thank you for sending your Son Jesus to be my Saviour and Redeemer. Thank you for giving me new birth into a life of hope because of your Resurrection. Risen Lord, help me to recognise you everywhere I turn. And help me reflect on your Easter message in everything I do. Amen.

GOOD FRIDAY

Friday, 29th March 2013

John chapter 20:24-31

DOUBTING THOMAS

This passage tells us how Thomas gained this title, one I think that is a little unfair. I'm sure he's not the only one who struggled to believe what he was hearing about Jesus being alive and who found it easier to believe once they had seen Jesus for themselves. Thomas obviously needed more concrete confirmation of Jesus' resurrection and wanted to see and touch and experience Jesus for himself, rather than just trusting the word of others.

Jesus understood Thomas. He was willing to meet him where he was, as he does with us. Jesus knew people throughout time would seek confirmation of his resurrection and he wanted to provide evidence for such times: including his Word, recording his exploits and helping people understand God's plan for our salvation "...these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name..." and providing the Holy Spirit who guides and protects us: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (verse 22).

When we doubt we know we're not alone, we're not the first and won't be the last. We need to use our questions to explore and strengthen our faith, knowing Jesus understands and has prepared for such occasions giving his word, providing witnesses and the Holy Spirit.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, strengthen our faith so that we might trust the Word and the witness it provides. Amen.

There is a strong parallel between this reading and our everyday lives. At the time of this reading the disciples knew about Jesus death and resurrection first hand. We have the same knowledge now because it is reported in the gospels the disciples wrote.

Life goes on. With Jesus' death and resurrection now sitting as a backdrop to Peter's life, he says, "I'm going to go back to work. I'm going fishing". The other disciples followed him. Like Peter, we too head off on our life tasks with our aims and aspirations.

During our long night shift we too struggle to achieve what we want to achieve, and, more often than not, we too don't achieve it. But then, we do something or something happens that is outside the struggle and direction we set for ourselves and we are given a blessing. Our lives are again "on track" - but likely not the track we set out on.

We might sense, or someone might say, "It's the Lord" that gave the blessing. And, if we don't sense it or someone doesn't say it, Jesus still beckons and blesses us with "Come - Eat". However, there are times we sense that "it is the Lord", we know he is there with us, but like the disciples, we don't "dare" talk about it.

It should be no surprise then that in the next part of the reading Jesus asks the question "Do you love me?". The surprised and "off the cuff" answer from Peter is "Lord, you know I love you". Jesus answers "Be active in my kingdom". Then, Jesus (just checking and making a point) asks again "Do you love me?" and the answer (with a touch of hurt and guilt) is "Lord, you know that I love you". Jesus answers "Get active in my kingdom". An even more hurtful third time Jesus asks "Do you love me?" and the really hurting and really guilty answer comes "Yes, Lord, you know I love you".

And Jesus says "OK, then follow me".

Prayer

Lord, thank you for those blessings you keep giving me that take me away from the dead-end directions I set for myself and bring me back to you. I pray that I be active in your kingdom and witness to the love that you undoubtedly have for me. Lord, help me follow on your path – not mine. Amen.

Our lives are busy and complex. As a consequence, we can't get involved in every little thing that comes along. We need to keep moving.

If you saw a road accident, for example, would you automatically stop and offer yourself as a witness or would you weigh things up and consider the inconvenience being a witness might cause:

- The severity of the accident;
- The presence of other helpers and witnesses;
- The likelihood that you were spotted and would ever be recognized again;

Sometimes looking away seems okay in our own 'bigger pictures'.

Today's reading records Jesus' final encounter with his apostles, Peter and John, after his Easter resurrection. Why them? Because they saw what happened. They were witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection. What would that mean for them?

It meant testifying. They didn't have the option of looking away. Jesus knew that they saw. They were witnesses.

Peter had tried to squirm out of this role prior to Jesus' crucifixion with his three-fold denial (John 18:15-27). But not this time. Jesus knew that Peter had seen. Peter's witness would be the loving care of Jesus' 'sheep'. Peter's witness would repeat the very actions of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep so that they might enjoy life to the full (John 10). Peter's own death would be the culmination of his witness. Peter would be a martyr. For the 'Disciple whom Jesus loved' it would mean other things.

We are also witnesses of Jesus' death and resurrection. We see it enacted and hear it proclaimed every Sunday as well as throughout our daily lives and Jesus' followers. We have seen. There is nothing more sure.

Witnesses are called to testify to what they have heard and seen. What might that mean for us in practical terms? To struggle for a fullness of life for all people, to demonstrate the love we have witnessed by our own loving actions, to risk everything so that Jesus, the good shepherd, might be fully known. To be a witness in any context will always be risky. People may not like our testimony. It might, on the other hand, mean liberation for other people. We can't control that. Our challenge is simply to speak truthfully. After all, it's the truthful testimony that brings freedom to people (John 8:31- 32).

Prayer

Jesus, please send the Holy Spirit to us to give us the confidence and courage to speak up. Amen.

ITS WORTHWHILE - TRY IT!

This is the fourth of these devotional booklets produced by St Stephens

- now we have one for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

There are around 300 copies taken up per year. They go mainly to St Stephens members but some are requested by others including interstaters.

To produce a Devotional booklet

- Each Gospel is divided into 47 fairly equal parts
 - One part for each day of Lent and Easter
 - Starting Ash Wednesday and going through to Easter Sunday
- The 47 parts are distributed to members of the congregation
 - Each is invited to write some devotional thoughts and a prayer
- The results are collated into a booklet.

Producing a booklet is an uplifting spiritual adventure.

- It has people who normally don't have much contact working together,
 - Not only the coordinators but also the writers who discuss the texts often deeply with friends, neighbours and others they don't normally talk to.
- The writings give the readers a refreshing new perspective on the writer
 - especially people who live in the congregational background and people who attend church infrequently.
- It gives writers a new perspective on themselves
 - especially those who have done nothing like this before, those who take a deep breath, take up the challenge and give their witness.
- The output is a wonderful, refreshing, new, multi-styled set of devotions and personal witnesses to our God's amazing love that carries all the way through that incredible season of Lent and Easter.
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It's worthwhile – Try it as a ministry for your congregation.



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Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Heb 13:8