

ALL SAINTS
PECKHOM

Week 4 & 5



Daily Lent Readings

Journeying through Matthew's gospel with Tom Wright

Day 19: Sunday 12th March

Read: Psalm 95

A small boy I knew asked his grandfather, a retired priest, what 'worship' meant. The old man paused. He was over 80 years of age, he said; he had been a clergyman most of his life; and he still found it hard to say exactly what 'worship' meant. Like someone who takes ten thousand breaths every day but still couldn't explain to a medical student what breathing is or why it's important, the old man had worshipped all his life, and led others to do so, but found it more and more mysterious.

This Psalm is one that the old clergyman would have said day by day throughout his life, because in the prayer book he used it was prescribed for every day except Easter. I myself grew up in a church where we sang this Psalm almost every Sunday. And I believe we can learn a great deal about what worship is from seeing what's going on here.

The Psalm is not addressing God directly, but calling on other people to join the poet in doing so, in praising the God he here describes. When you really discover who God is, then it is natural to 'make a joyful noise' (verse 1), to come into God's presence with thanksgiving and make music (that most mysterious of all the arts, itself joining heaven and earth) to acclaim him and proclaim his greatness.

Worship, then, is about contemplating who God is and what he's done, standing in awe and expressing that awe in thanks and praise. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, this always begins with praise to God as creator. Every step of scientific advance should increase this chorus of praise (instead of what happens at the moment, that every new scientific discovery leads someone to claim that this has disproved God's existence!). God isn't part of the natural order, though his presence permeates it. Rather, he is other than and outside it, as different from it, and hence from us, as we are from microbes and atoms — only far more so, since they and we are, at one level, all part of the same stuff. God's power holds together the deepest and the highest places on earth, the unfathomable vastness of the sea and the wonderfully sculpted dry land in all its variety.

That would by itself be enough to call us to worship: perhaps, today, you might spend some time contemplating the astonishing range of God's creation. Out of a small window where I am sitting, I can see several different colours, several types of tree and plant, various different animals, and, not least, the sky itself, a source of endless wonder. A short walk, even in an apparently dull area, can lead to wonder and praise. And if you go out on the sea, or into the mountains, or pause in a richly stocked garden, there is no end of extraordinary and beautiful things for which to give thanks.

As always in scripture, contemplating God as creator leads to the astonishing claim that he is 'our God' (verse 7). God has chosen Israel as his people; and we who believe in Jesus believe him to be the

the fulfilment of this promise, so that all who belong to Jesus can make the same claim. 'We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.' City-dwellers often suppose that animals are basically stupid. Not so. Near where I live, the elderly cows in the field know precisely which noises will signal the arrival of fresh food. They recognize voices and react accordingly. In the Middle East, to this day, the relationship of sheep and shepherd is warm and intimate, a mutual bond of knowing. That's how it should be with God and his people. Here, in the middle of Lent, we should celebrate that and be encouraged.

That's important, because as the final verses of the Psalm remind us (sadly, some churches tend to miss them out), we can't take God for granted. The Israelites, whom God had rescued from Egypt, spent 40 years grumbling and questioning. We are warned against going the same way. The best antidote is to return to worship and praise. An older generation used to sing, 'Count your blessings, name them one by one; and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.' If you include the whole of creation, in its vast scope and tiny detail, among those blessings — as the Psalm encourages you to do — it will not only surprise you. It will take quite a long time.

PRAY

Sovereign God, we praise you for your wonderful world, and we pray that you will replace our grumbles with gratitude, and our questioning with adoration.

Day 20: Monday 13th March

Read: Matthew 14

Forty years ago I sat in my college room with a friend and we read this passage together. He had come to a living faith in Jesus just a week before. He was still wide-eyed with delight at the sense of Jesus' personal presence within him, and at the changes he could feel happening in his heart and head. But he was also anxious. Is this just a fad? Can I keep it up? Will this just be one of those things that is very exciting for a few weeks, and then will fade, leaving me a bit sad and cynical?

This passage might have been written for someone in that frame of mind. Peter is one of the few characters in the gospels, other than Jesus himself, whom we really get to know. This story is typical of the man we see all through — loyal, impetuous, wanting to do the right thing, then getting it embarrassingly wrong and having to be rescued once more. Many of us can identify with him only too easily.

But before we even get to Peter's bit, notice what has happened. Jesus has just fed five thousand people with what started out as next to nothing. As we know from the other gospels, the crowds were, not unnaturally, very excited at this. Jesus as always was anxious that things shouldn't get out of hand (John tells us that the crowd wanted to seize him and hail him as king then and there, which would have been disastrous). So he quickly sent the disciples away and disappeared up the mountain.

Then it happened. Some time after midnight, as they were still tugging at the oars and getting nowhere, he came to them. Walking on the water.

This is such a strange story that many have sneered at it, but Matthew and the other writers knew perfectly well how strange it was and told it anyway. We have been learning, bit by bit, to see that Jesus seems to have possessed a kind of sovereignty over creation itself. Though our minds boggle at the thought of what that might mean, the story fits this pattern. The disciples, not unnaturally, are scared out of their minds: it must be a ghost! But no; Jesus tells them it's all right. They are not to be afraid. ('Don't be afraid,' by the way, is the most frequently repeated command in the whole Bible — something we all need to remind ourselves in our worrying and frantic world.)

Then it's Peter's turn. Triumph, disaster and rescue. Peter the fisherman knows perfectly well you can't walk on water. But, as we saw in chapter 10, Jesus gave the Twelve power to do the things he'd been doing . . . so maybe with this as well? And, amazingly, it happens. Peter walks towards Jesus. That is the walk of faith which we all take when we hear Jesus' voice and begin to follow him. We know perfectly well the world isn't like this; that money, sex and power are what matters; that we can't possibly give up our bad habits or keep up a life of prayer and holiness . . . but perhaps we just might, if Jesus himself called us to do it? Yes, he says, I am calling you; and off we set.

But then it all goes wrong. The wind had been there all along, but now Peter noticed it as if for the first time: what am I doing? I must be mad! I can't possibly . . . and he starts to sink. That's how it is for us, too. But the crucial moment is the next one. 'Lord, rescue me!' The simplest of prayers, and one which Jesus loves to answer. That's what he's come for, he said on another occasion, to look for people in need and rescue them. He may then smilingly remind us that we shouldn't have doubted. That's the lesson we need to learn, and it will take time. But he comes into the boat with us; the wind stops; and the result, of course, is worship. I doubt if the disciples quite knew what they meant by 'Son of God' at this point. But there wasn't much else they could say.

I lost touch with my friend after we left college. But just the other day I met someone who attends the same church. He is still going on, trusting Jesus, walking with him, helping others in their own faith. No doubt there have been times when, like Peter, like you and me, he's been tempted to doubt, and has started to sink. But Jesus loves rescuing people. That's what he's come to do.

PRAY

Lord, give us the faith we need to attempt the impossible for you; and rescue us when our faith suddenly gives out.

Day 21: Tuesday 14th March

Read: Matthew 15 v 1-20

'Germs and Jesus!' shouted the seven-year-old son of a friend of mine. 'Germs and Jesus! You keep telling me they're important and I can't see either of them!'

A fascinating response to a pressing parental problem. We tell our children about Jesus. We also, at a different level, explain to them that they must wash their hands because there are things called 'germs' which we can't see but which do nasty things if we don't wash them off.

Jews in the ancient world didn't know what we know about germs (they didn't know what we know about Jesus, if it comes to that) but they knew how important it was to wash before meals. Physical purity, with its echoes of national purity (always important for a small and embattled nation), had been elevated to an art form, with careful rules precisely formulated and exactly observed, at least by those who chose to do so. There was a considerable spectrum in Judaism at the time of Jesus, from those who were eager to find and follow the ancient legal traditions more precisely to those who didn't bother too much, either because they weren't pious or, perhaps, because they weren't well off and couldn't afford the time for all the extra fuss.

The Pharisees were a popular pressure group devoted to keeping one another up to the mark of the strict rules, and doing their best, as far as they could, to apply them to other Jews as well. Physical purity made as much sense then as it does now, and without modern soap and other aids to cleanliness there was a lot of practical wisdom, as well as traditional religion, about the rules. But, as often happens in such systems, rules led to more rules, regulations to more regulations, and the original purpose was always in danger of being lost underneath.

So when the Pharisees challenged Jesus about the fact that his disciples weren't keeping the purity traditions in the proper way, Jesus reacted with a counter-charge of his own. What happens when traditions, however venerable, cut across what scripture itself said? He gave as his example a piece of special pleading. You could, in his day, make a formal declaration that the money that could have been used to support your parents was instead 'given to God' — thus neatly getting out of the open-ended, and often sad and messy, business of looking after the elderly. Scripture has been overthrown, as Isaiah said would happen, by human tradition.

This passage has been seized upon down the years by people eager to make a similar point in relation to the growth of various kinds of tradition within the church. And it has to be admitted that all segments of the church (including, paradoxically, the streams of Protestantism that have protested about other people's 'traditions') are quite capable of producing traditions which manage to get around what scripture actually says. Tradition matters because, so we believe,

God hasn't stopped working in the lives of his people by his Spirit. We have learned a lot over the last two thousand years which shouldn't just be thrown away. But there is always the chance, in every branch of the church, that the traditions will take on a life of their own and distort or deny some key bit of scripture. This passage should remind us of that danger. Lent is a good time for the church to examine itself on this question.

Jesus then took the occasion to develop his own vision of purity. He didn't say physical cleanness didn't matter. What he did say was that inner purity was far more important. Following deep strains of thought in scripture itself, he warned that the human heart is the source of the greatest pollution, and that nothing in human tradition can purify it. The implication is clear: Jesus is offering a cure for the polluted heart.

That was the real bone of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees. They were supporting a system which, at its best, was pointing forward to God's great desire to find a purified people for himself. Jesus was claiming that God was now doing this, through him.

They were setting up signposts; he claimed to offer the reality which made the signposts redundant. Here is the lesson for us: following Jesus, allowing him to cleanse us through and through, puts us in direct continuity with the ancient scriptures, and enables us to discern the good and the less good in human traditions.

PRAY

Gracious Lord, teach us so to love you that we may find ourselves transformed by your holiness; and save us from human traditions that would imprison us in our own inventions..

Day 22: Wednesday 15th March Read: Matthew 15 v 21-58

Let's listen in on this conversation. Stand in the crowd and see what you think.

We're up north now, away from Galilee. Jesus has already spoken of this region ('the district of Tyre and Sidon') in such a way as to make it clear that he and his Jewish hearers thought of it as non-Jewish, beyond the pale (11.21). Now he's come here, we're not sure why; perhaps to escape, for a while, the controversy hanging in the air after his previous exchange with the Pharisees (15.1–20).

As we watch from the sidelines, suddenly a local woman comes out of the crowd and starts shouting at Jesus. 'Take pity on me, son of David!' Her daughter, it seems, is in a terrible state, tormented by evil spirits. 'Take pity on me, son of David!'

A whisper goes through the crowd. 'Son of David?' That's serious talk. The Jews, down south, may be looking for a coming king, but what would that have to do with us non-Jews? Clearly the woman is

Mothers in the crowd know exactly how she feels. They'd do anything to get help if it was their daughter. Still the woman goes on, 'Take pity on me, son of David!'

We watch to see what's going to happen, but Jesus and his friends are moving on and he's not saying anything. Finally his friends have had enough. 'Tell her to go away! She's shouting after us!' This is a puzzle. We in the crowd thought Jesus was a healer. Why doesn't he heal the little girl? And why don't his followers want him to?

Then, at last, Jesus speaks, and what he says sends a chill through the crowd. 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' 'Well,' mutters someone close by, 'so what are you doing here, then? Why come to us if you don't want to help us too?'

We, remembering the previous conversation, may have an answer to that; it was wise to lie low for a bit. And, having followed Jesus for some time now, we realize that what he just said fits with what he had said to the Twelve in 10.5—6: don't go to the Gentiles, only to Israel. Jesus was strongly aware of a commission, a solemn charge he'd received from his Father. His job was to announce God's rule to his own people, the Jews. If he began to preach and teach more widely, the Jews would write him off as a traitor. They would never then discover that he had come to fulfil their deepest hopes.

But then the woman comes right up to Jesus and kneels down before him. We hold our breath as the crowd quietens down to listen. 'Lord, help me!'

Then a gasp of horror at Jesus' response. 'It isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' Dogs! That's what some Jews called non-Jews. Surely Jesus doesn't think in those terms? It's as though he's struggling within himself; he knows what his commission had been and doesn't want to be disloyal, disobedient. What he has to give, he must give to God's ancient people; they must never be able to say that their own coming king ignored them and went elsewhere. And yet . . . he had already said that many would come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Could it be that this future promise was already starting to come true, even before he'd finished his mission to Israel?

Normally, when we listen in to conversations Jesus is having, it's other people who set the thing up with comments or questions and Jesus who gives the brilliant punchline. This time it's the other way round. The woman accepts Jesus' point of view and turns it to her own advantage. 'Yes,' she says, 'but the dogs under the table eat what the children drop!'

We feel the buzz in the crowd. Great line! Well said! Nice job! And Jesus seems to agree. 'You have great faith! As you wish, so let it be done.' And the girl is healed.

And we are left thinking: is that what we mean by faith? Faith to see how God's strange plan works, even though it isn't exactly flattering for us? Faith to cling on to everything Jesus says even when it's unexpected, and to pray in those terms rather than assume he's going to do what we want in the way we want it?

Jesus makes to leave. His eyes swing slowly round the crowd, and they pause for a moment on you. 'What is it you want from me, then?' he seems to be saying. 'Have you got enough faith to see God's strange plan working its way out and find what you need within it?'

PRAY

Sovereign Lord, give us the faith to ask for your help, and the humility to receive it on your terms.

Day 23: Thursday 16th March

Read: Matthew 16

The unique city of Venice is now mainly a tourist destination. People come from all over the world to be amazed at its canals, its tiny side-streets, and the wonderful churches, mansions and art galleries. But in the days before air travel Venice was much, much more. It was where the trade routes met, a city which looked east and west, north and south. There you could see Europe and Asia coming by and doing business. Many different strands of culture met and mingled on those canals, in those streets and churches. Venice was one of the most powerful and wealthy cities in the world.

This passage in Matthew is a bit like that. We may come to it in search of a quick lesson, a theme to ponder, a direction for today's prayers. But this is one of the places where the trade routes of Matthew's gospel meet, looking all the way back to Jesus' birth and baptism and all the way on to his death and resurrection. This is where the story of the disciples, who had followed Jesus and believed that he was indeed the Messiah, washes up against the story of Jesus' deeper vocation, that he had to achieve his mission by going to the cross. This is one of the most powerful passages in the gospel. Get this straight, and you'll see how much of the rest works out.

Begin at the end — and let's be clear, from the outset, how much Jesus' words here have been misunderstood. 'There are some standing here who won't taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.' Many have imagined that Jesus meant by this that the whole space—time universe would disappear and leave him and his followers in a new heavenly existence. Since that didn't happen — certainly within a generation! — they have concluded that Jesus was mistaken. That point of view has been extremely common.

But it completely misunderstands what the whole gospel story is about. From start to finish, Matthew's story is about the strange way in which Jesus became king. The first two chapters make it clear that he is the king from the line of David, at whose birth Gentile sages come to worship. The closing scene of the gospel makes it clear that with his resurrection and ascension Jesus has now 'come in his kingdom': 'all authority in heaven and on earth', he says, 'has been given to me.' Our problem in the modern world has been that we have taken it for granted that Jesus is not, in any sense, currently 'king of

the world'. (It certainly doesn't look like it, we tell ourselves.) So we have assumed that he must have been talking about something else. Something that didn't happen.

But the whole point of this story is that Jesus — to the horror of his close friends — was now beginning to tell them that the way he had to become king was through suffering and death. They had just declared that they believed he was God's Messiah (verse 16). Peter had been congratulated on recognizing this despite the fact that Jesus wasn't doing lots of things a Messiah might have been supposed to do (raising an army to defeat the Romans, for instance). But now he was saying something as shocking to them as his words to the Canaanite woman in chapter 15 were shocking to the foreign crowds. The way to the Messianic kingdom is through suffering and death. Why this is so he doesn't yet explain. That it is so he makes quite clear. And if Peter can't see that, then he is being a 'Satan', an accuser, thinking in mere human categories rather than in God's categories.

The challenge to the disciples, then, turns into the challenge to all of us. Following Jesus means losing your life in order to find it. We squirm and struggle against this, like a fish on a hook. Anything rather than this. But it's the only way. Following Jesus means denying yourself, saying 'no' to the things that you imagine make up your 'self', and finding to your astonishment that the 'self' you get back is more glorious, more joyful than you could have imagined. That's how the kingdom arrived through Jesus' achievement. That's how it spreads today. All the trade routes of Christian theology and discipleship pass through this point.

PRAY

Teach us, gracious Lord, to follow you all the way where you lead, whatever it costs.

Day 24: Friday 17th March

Read: Matthew 17

Once more we come close to Jesus in the crowd; and this time let's bring with us someone we know, perhaps someone very close to us, who is in serious need of Jesus' help. Take a moment and think who you want to bring.

Let's recall what has just happened. The disciples have told Jesus he is the Messiah, the one to fulfil Israel's hopes and dreams. He has told them, to their horror, that the way that fulfilment will come is through his own suffering and death. Then, amazingly, he has taken three of them up a mountain and has been transfigured before them, shining like the sun. They have heard God's voice declaring that Jesus is indeed his son, his beloved one.

Meanwhile the other disciples, left behind at the foot of the mountain, have faced a challenge they couldn't deal with. That's perhaps where we are ourselves right now, either with sickness in the family or with an impossible situation at work, or something more sad and secret that it's hard even to mention. So we stand there with them as Jesus shakes his head.

Surely his followers have learned the lesson by now? Surely they know that God's power is able to do whatever is needed? Actually, it isn't that easy. They've seen Jesus at work; they have known his power in their lives; but when Jesus goes away for a short while they revert, as we all do, to 'normal' mode. Wonderful things don't happen. Life is tough, and there's nothing that can be done.

But they are wrong. Jesus heals the boy. It's not even clear (to us, and perhaps to them) what the problem was. Epilepsy and demon-possession are two very different things, and it's likely that the loose terminology people used at the time wasn't meant to be medically precise. Anyway, Jesus deals with it. We pause there and hold before Jesus the person we've brought, about whom we seem able to do nothing. We watch as Jesus heals the boy, and we pray for healing for whoever it is on our hearts.

And then he deals with the disciples. You couldn't do it, he says, because of your little faith. He's said it four times already (6.30; 8.26; 14.31; 16.8) and they still don't get it. All it takes in fact, he says, is faith like a grain of mustard seed — an image he's already used for the kingdom itself (13.31). Faith is like a small window through which you can see a vast landscape, and the landscape in question is the sovereign power of the creator God and the overwhelming glory of Jesus himself. We stand at that window, doing our best to wipe it clean from the condensation of our own unbelieving breath, and holding on, as we do so, to those for whom we want to pray.

Jesus spoke of moving mountains — a regular type of exaggeration, no doubt, though they may have heard echoes of the challenge which awaited them on the holy mountain, Jerusalem itself. But sometimes it seems easier to move a mountain, shovelling it with spoons, than to shift the sorrow or sickness from a human heart and life. When you read the stories of remarkable Christians down the years, and in our own time too, again and again you find tales of people who have stood at that window, gazing out on the landscape of God's power and love, and gradually bringing the rest of the world, and the people for whom they were praying, into healing focus in relation to it. We need more people like that. The most important Christians are not the ones who preach great sermons and write great books, but the ones who pray, and pray, and pray some more, sharing the quiet but effective victory of Jesus over all that defaces God's creation.

PRAY

(Fill in the blank in the prayer with whoever you want to pray for)

Lord Jesus, you have the power to heal and rescue. Today I pray for _____ who need you so badly. Bring them your healing love, and transform their lives with your grace.

Day 25: Saturday 18th March

Read: Matthew 18

There are at least three levels at which we should read this sharp and startling story. And at least three levels at which we should apply it to our lives, not least our lives in church.

Start, though, with Peter's question. It seems practical, almost common sense, but also a bit naive. Jesus has told us to forgive; very well, but supposing someone does the same bad thing again and again. Isn't there a limit? Wouldn't seven times be enough?

Some translations make out that Jesus said 'seventy-seven times'; but actually the word more likely means 'seventy times seven'. Four hundred and ninety! What's that about?

Jesus, of course, didn't mean that you should be counting up, through clenched teeth, so that on the four hundred and ninety-first time you could finally take revenge. If that was how you were thinking about it, it would show you'd never really forgiven once, let alone seven times or seventy times seven. So what was he meaning?

The story he tells takes us straight to the first level of meaning. If you yourself have been forgiven, then your gratitude for that ought to make you ready to forgive others. It's that straightforward. When someone annoys you — drives across in front of you when it was your right of way, takes your seat on the bus, or even, in church, sings loudly out of tune right behind you — then it's easy to allow it to fester. You may still be thinking about it a day or a week later. With larger annoyances it can go on for months or years. Your entire life can be blighted by these angry memories, by the sense of frustration and self-righteousness. How could they behave like that to me?

Jesus' first and best answer would be this. Just imagine what God and his angels think about what you did yesterday to the person you bumped into on the street when you weren't looking. Just think how many people may quite rightly be angry with you for your carelessness, your arrogance, your selfishness. And just think how the angels think about the way you sometimes sing in church. And yet you have been forgiven. When you say your prayers today, God isn't sitting there thinking crossly 'How dare you! I'm still angry with you after what you did last week!' He has forgiven you. Is it then too much to ask that you do the same?

Underneath that, there is a second level. My wife and I once had long conversations with a student who found herself incapable of feeling God's love. She believed in Jesus; she had prayed and read the Bible; but she couldn't feel a thing. She wanted to know God's love the way her friends said they did. But it wasn't happening. Eventually, as we talked about her life, it all came out. She hated her parents. She resented the sort of people they were, the way they'd treated her. So she had closed up her heart. Where there should have been an open readiness for God's love, there was a steel wall. It was as though you

line to stop certain people ringing you up and then grumbled because you couldn't phone your best friend. Forgiveness and love are a two-way street. The same part of you, spiritually, both gives and receives. If you shut down the part labelled 'forgiveness', you shut down the part labelled 'forgiveness' — in both directions. The ending of the story seems harsh. But at the level of psychological reality, it rings true.

The third level of meaning is altogether bigger, and goes back to the 'seventy times seven'. In the book of Daniel (9.24) the prophet is told, after praying that Jerusalem will be forgiven, that it will take 'seventy weeks of years' — in other words, seventy times seven years — before transgression, sin and iniquity are finally dealt with. This takes us back even further, to the ancient law of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25), which lays down that every forty-nine years (seven times seven) all debts must be remitted, with land returning to its original owners. Daniel is speaking of a Great Jubilee, a cosmic version of the Jubilee law. There will come a time when God will deal, once and for all, with all debts of every kind.

And Jesus? Well, Jesus announced that the moment had come. He was the Great Jubilee in person. His entire mission was about implementing God's age-old plan to deal with the evil that had infected the whole world. Forgiveness wasn't an incidental feature of his kingdom-movement. It was the name of the game. Those of us who find ourselves drawn into that movement must learn how to play that game, all the time. It's what we're about. It's what God is about.

PRAY

Loving Lord, teach us to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Day 26: Sunday 19th March

Read: Psalm 23

As I suggested earlier, farm animals are not as stupid as town-dwellers often imagine. They recognize individual faces — faces of other animals, faces of humans too. They know individual voices. They pick up signals and react accordingly. If it's some-one they know or trust, they will be happy; if not, they may well be afraid. In this, perhaps the most famous Psalm in the book, the poet has managed, in the first four verses, to get right inside what we might call the mind of an animal — in this case, the sheep.

Sheep are very vulnerable. By themselves, they can't find the way to good pasture and drinking water. In the Middle East, these things are hard to find, and it's the shepherd's job to know where they are. That's quite a challenge in a region where, for much of the year, there is little rain. And there are dangers all around: dark crevasses where one could get lost, or stuck, or be at the mercy of robbers, wolves or lions.

From the sheep's-eye point of view, therefore, the shepherd brings a huge sigh of relief. I know this shepherd. I trust him. I'll be all right. When I follow him closely we always end up with good grass to eat and water to drink. We'll have to go on some odd paths from time to time but they always get us to the right place. And when danger approaches — well, the shepherd will look after us. He has a big stick and he knows how to use it. We'll be all right.

Many generations of devout Jews, from long before the time of Jesus to this day, have prayed that Psalm, putting themselves into the picture. Yahweh, Israel's God, was like that with them! They could trust him for everything, even when everything went dark. And now, many generations of Christians have prayed the Psalm in the same way, in the light of the many passages where Jesus picks up the shepherd-promise and applies it to himself. In fact, the gospel story is not unlike the picture of the shepherd and the sheep: Jesus leading his disciples around Galilee, teaching them, healing people as he goes. And as the story moves us forwards towards the valley of the shadow of death, we look on in awe and wonder as the Good Shepherd goes ahead of us into the darkness. His rod and his staff, two poles of wood, come together in a new pattern, a shape which will etch itself on the heart of the world. We look at the cross and we are comforted.

The poem then shifts, in the last two verses, away from the sheep and the shepherd. Once we come out of the dark shadow, we become human in a new way. A table is spread before us, despite the people who still mock us and try to attack us for our faith and our hope. God provides us with good things of all sorts. Instead of the sheep who are led to food and drink, we become people who, strengthened by God's food, discover that he is gently following them in the new ventures to which they are called. 'Goodness and mercy', or in another translation 'kindness and faithful love', will follow us. That is to say, God himself will follow us — and God, as we constantly need to remind ourselves, is himself overflowing with goodness, kindness, mercy and faithful love.

Again the poem shifts. For the original poet, 'dwelling in the Lord's house for ever' would mean, literally, making one's home in the Temple in Jerusalem. But already within ancient Judaism 'the Lord's house' had come to mean, by extension, the places where his people met to pray, and the holy book they studied wherever they went. The first Christians believed that the Temple itself had been transformed from being made of stone, timber, bricks and mortar to being made of flesh, blood and bones: Jesus' flesh and blood, where the living God truly and utterly dwelt, and then, astonishingly, the human bodies of his followers, as God's Spirit came to live within them. We make this poem our own, then, confident that Jesus, the good shepherd, will do all that the first four verses claim. Confident, too, that his dwelling in us and ours in him, rooted as they are in his kindness and mercy, will never come to an end.

PRAY: Lord, we thank you for your faithful love and mercy. Look after us each moment, we pray, and lead us where we need to go.

Day 27: Monday 20th March

Read: Matthew 19

At the time I am writing this, a politician has just received loud and long applause for saying rude words about the very rich, especially people in the banks who pay themselves vast sums of money. Everybody likes to hate the rich. That's the popular mood right now.

That's why the most surprising thing about this story is — how surprised the disciples were when Jesus declared it would be hard for the rich to enter God's kingdom (verse 24). You might have thought that would be obvious, not least to some- one who had been listening to Jesus and following him for some time. But it seems as though the disciples still looked at the world through the lens which said that the more rich you were, the more God was pleased with you. Some passages in scripture do seem to point that way. But mostly this was an assumption people made, a way of coming to terms with the obvious inequalities in society.

(Let's be clear, by the way. When the rich man speaks of 'having eternal life', and when Jesus speaks of 'entering the kingdom of heaven', or 'having treasure in heaven', they are not talking about 'life after death' in the popular, modern sense. They are talking about the whole new world that they believed God was going to make, 'the renewal of all things' (verse 28). The point is that they believed that 'heaven' was going to rule on earth, so that the question was about who would inherit and share in that new heaven-and-earth world.)

Jesus had seen, in this case and no doubt many others, that earthly riches form a lining of lead around the heart. They insulate you from God and from other people. They drag you down to be less and less the person you might have become. Here was this man, all eager and willing — except for the one thing that mattered.

Jesus' initial reply is also quite surprising. He lists the commandments, but not all of them: murder, adultery, theft, lying, honouring father and mother, and (an ancient summary of the whole law which Jesus had made his own) loving your neighbour as yourself. What about the earlier commandments, the ones about not having or making any other gods but Israel's God, the one about honouring his name, and the command about the Sabbath? Wouldn't we have expected Jesus to include those too?

Well, there is a sense in which he does. When the man tells him he has observed all those commandments, Jesus gives him two more: sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and come and follow me. In the place where we might have expected Jesus to speak about putting God first, getting rid of idols, and honouring God's name, we have the command to get rid of money and to follow Jesus. This makes us realize that when Jesus challenged the man at the beginning ('Why ask me about what's good? There is only one who is good') there may have been more to the quip than meets the eye. Putting Jesus first and putting God first seem to be coming close to the same thing.

That's why we can never remain content with shallow discussions about the goodies and baddies in today's culture. Yes, some people play fast and loose with other people's money and get fat on the proceeds. But plenty in the same profession work tirelessly for their customers and give away much of their own income. Yes, many people in the western world today have made greed a way of life. But many work responsibly within the system and do their best to make it more humane, more honouring to God. All Christians should ask themselves, on a regular basis, if there is anything holding them back from following Jesus completely and utterly, any lead weights around part of their character or lifestyle. Who knows what the answer will be? All we know is that, when the answer comes, it will be fully in line with the scriptures upon which Jesus was drawing, and even more fully in line with Jesus himself.

In the last analysis, it's all down to God's power. In the previous chapter, we were taught to forgive because God had forgiven us. Here we are taught that the way to follow the God of all power and possibility may well be to give away our own power and possibilities. When God finally transforms all things, then and only then will we discover who his true disciples have been.

PRAY

Lord, make us grateful for all you give us, and ready to give it all back to you.

Day 28: Tuesday 21st March

Read: Matthew 20

The game was nearly over, and neither side had scored a goal. The spectators were getting angry, and the players were exhausted. One player on the home team, in particular, had worked tirelessly the whole game, running from end to end, always in the right place, wearing himself out to stop the opposition getting through, then launching counter-attacks. Again and again he gave of his best, but the rest of the team couldn't translate his efforts into an actual score.

With five minutes to go, the manager decided to try something desperate. He took the key player off, and brought on as a substitute a fresh, bright young man who had only played one or two games at the top level. Almost at once the ball came his way. With devil-may-care youthful energy he weaved his way through the defence and scored a great goal. The crowd went wild. The opposition caved in. The game was soon over.

The young man was cheered to the echo, carried around the stadium by happy fans. Eventually the older player, who had worked so hard throughout almost all the game, came out to join the party. A mixture of emotions. He had done all the hard work, and the other man, who had done none of it, had got all the glory.

That's the story Jesus told, only in a different setting. We don't so often have day-labourers lining up, waiting all day to be hired, and then paid at the boss's whim. But what is the story about?

It illustrates what Jesus had just said, which he was to repeat at the end: many who are first will be last, and the last first. As so often, this has at least three levels of meaning which we should explore.

To begin with, Jesus was facing his followers with the fact that God remains sovereign over his whole kingdom-project. Nobody can claim a special place either because they've worked hard, or because they've given up so much, or because they were in it from the beginning.

This is a warning to the disciples themselves, who, as Jesus' closest friends and associates, might well have supposed that they were going to retain the top jobs in whatever future God had in store. Jesus does indeed indicate that they will have special places (19.28) — though since he mentions the twelve of them, and since we know that Judas then defected, we should be careful not to build too much on that either. Later on in the chapter the disciples show how much they need this lesson, as James and John try to make sure they are the first in line.

But, second, the message goes wider, right across Matthew's gospel, in relation to the place of the Jewish people within God's larger purposes. Jesus has made it clear, two or three times, that ancient Israel has a priority. He has honoured that. As St Paul says, the gospel is 'to the Jew first'. But the gospel is not only for Jews. As Paul goes on, '— and for Gentiles also'. That was bad enough for the pious Jew to contemplate. But now there was a sense, following some of Jesus' earlier sayings, that the 'obvious' people had had to go to the back of the queue. This was not only humiliating. It might have looked as though God had changed his mind.

Jesus was quite clear. God hasn't changed his mind. It was always his plan to humble the exalted and exalt the humbled.

The third level, then, reaches out to us in our life of faith today. Our western 'celebrity' culture favours those who manage to push themselves to the front, whether it's the people with the most obvious talents or the stars with the sharpest agents. Sadly, that can spill over into the life of the church: famous preachers and leaders get attention and the 'ordinary' Christian becomes a passive spectator. We need, again and again, to learn that there are no such people as 'ordinary' Christians. In the 'renewal of all things' which Jesus spoke about (19.28), all sorts of people will stand out as the real heroes and heroines of faith, though nobody has ever heard of them before. They will be the ones who, whether for five minutes or fifty years, served God with total and glad obedience, giving themselves completely to holiness, prayer, and works of love and mercy. Such people are the pure gold of the church. But, as so often, gold remains hidden and takes some finding.

PRAY

Gracious Lord, help us to be humble enough to take whatever place we are given, and zealous enough to work wholeheartedly for your glory where and when you call us.

Day 29: Wednesday 22nd March

Read: Matthew 21 v 1-22

We reach Palm Sunday in Matthew's story ten days before we get there in our own Lenten journey. It's just as well. There is so much packed between Palm Sunday and Good Friday that it's important to get advance notice of what's in store.

It is one of the great scenes in all scripture. Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey: it could be the climax of an opera, or a Shakespeare play. For Matthew, though, it's the climax of a much longer and more complicated story: the whole story of God and Israel. And it turns out that the play, at the moment, anyway, is more of a tragedy than a comedy.

St John put it like this: he came to his own, and his own didn't receive him. All along Jesus had made it clear that his particular vocation was to present the arrival of heaven's kingdom to the people of Israel. Having prepared the way by his work up in the north, he has now arrived, with a great throng of Passover pilgrims, at the holy city itself.

Only it wasn't as holy as it should have been. Jerusalem, the city chosen by God as his own resting-place, had also been chosen by many as their place of profit. The first time I went into the Old City of Jerusalem, the first sign I saw was a money-changer's shop. I suspect it's always been like that, with people from all over the world needing now to use the local currency. In the case of the Temple, of course, pilgrims needed to buy animals for sacrifice.

Much safer that way than bring- ing a lamb or a goat from far off, to risk it being savaged by predators on the way. Come with cash, change it locally, buy a pure animal on site ready for sacrifice. Simple. And the local traders did well out of it.

But Jesus' protest against the Temple wasn't just about it being, in that sense, 'a den of robbers'. He was quoting the prophet Jeremiah at that point, and Jeremiah wasn't just worried about economic exploitation. Something deeper and darker was afoot. Behind all the outward trappings of the Temple, Jesus could see that the whole place, and the whole city, had come to symbolize the determination of Israel to do things their own way; in particular, to embrace a vision of God and God's kingdom which was fundamentally different from the vision which he was announcing and living out. Their vision would have climaxed in a Messiah coming on a war-horse. Jesus' vision led him to act out the prophecy of Zechariah: your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey. This simple yet profound symbolic action continues to resonate out into the world where, even among people who profess to follow Jesus, the war-horse is still preferred to the donkey.

The third level concerns what Matthew is saying about Jesus himself. The local crowds, seeing all the commotion as Jesus came into the city, were told by the pilgrims that 'this is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee' (verse 11). But Matthew makes it clear that, though Jesus is indeed a prophet, he is much more. To begin with, he is the 'Son of David' — the royal title which so annoyed the chief priests and scribes (verse 15). They were perhaps frightened of what the Roman authorities might do to the city if it welcomed a would-be king. They may also have been frightened of what a would-be king and his followers might say about them.

Things don't stop there. The Temple was, after all, the place where the one true God was supposed to live on earth with his people. For Matthew (1.23; 28.20), Jesus himself has become that place. In this scene, we discover the great truth that the early Christians embraced and developed: that the old Temple on Mount Zion was simply a signpost, pointing forwards to the new reality of God's presence with his people.

Jerusalem, then, wasn't big enough for Jesus and the Temple together. They were bound to clash. That clash begins the sequence of events which will lead, soon enough, to Jesus' death. But, as we watch, we also see the signs of what that death might mean. If Jesus is the true Temple, we might expect that it is in him, rather than in the Temple, that healing and forgiveness are to be found. Matthew draws our attention to the odd fact that 'the blind and the lame came to him in the Temple, and he cured them'. In 2 Samuel 5.8, the blind and the lame had been excluded from the Temple, following the orders of David himself. Now the Son of David likewise keeps the Temple free from the blind and the lame — by healing them.

It would be hard to sum up any better the difference between what Jesus was offering and what his contemporaries were wanting.

PRAY

Gracious Lord, challenge us when we distort your will and your promise, and come to dwell with us and in us now and for ever.

Day 30: Thursday 23rd March

Read: Matthew 21 v 23-46

I was taking a service in a local church when this passage was the second reading. Over at the side of the church was a family with a three-year-old boy who appeared to be playing with his toys, taking no notice of the service. But when the reader finished this parable, about the wicked tenants who beat up the owner's messengers and finally kill his son, there was a momentary pause; and, in the silence, the boy's voice stood out loud and clear: 'That's not a very nice story!'

Well, no, it isn't, and that's part of the point. We come to the gospels hoping and imagining that they are going to be 'nice'; that we will find a Jesus who tells us it's all right, we don't have to worry, nobody's going to get hurt, no one will even be cross. But with the world the way it is, if God doesn't get cross about it he is not a good God. If he doesn't do something about it, sooner or later, he's quite simply not God.

The whole New Testament is based on the belief that in Jesus of Nazareth the living God took the world into his hands at last in judgment and mercy. When I say 'took it into his hands', there are various different meanings there, which have to be explored in due course. Tragically, it was God's own people, Jesus' own people, Israel itself that stood in the way of what God was wanting to do.

In the Bible, the 'vineyard' is often used as an image for the people of Israel. In the old prophets, the vineyard has often gone wrong, gone wild, rebelled against its planter. In this story, though, it's the tenants who are at fault. The 'vineyard' itself seems to be God's inner purpose, Israel as the bearer of his saving plan for the world. As in the Old Testament, God sent prophets to his people, but his people refused to listen. Now at last he is sending his son — and his people, instead of listening, think that if they kill the son they can have the vineyard for themselves.

This is at the heart of it. Jesus' challenge to Israel — that it was time at last for God to become king, and that this was happening through him and his work — was too much. As with the young man two chapters earlier, his contemporaries couldn't match the total demand of God's kingdom. And, to explain the result, Jesus called on other biblical images: the stone that won't fit the wall but will go nicely at the very top (Psalm 118.22—23), and the stone that will crush all opposition (Daniel 2.34). The English words 'son' and 'stone' are very similar; in the same way the Hebrew words ben (son) and eben (stone) are very much alike. The rejected son, like the rejected stone, will become the Lord of all and judge of all.

This parable is Jesus' own explanation for what was happening. Once again, telling cryptic stories is the only way you can say the really important things. As we watch, we find ourselves drawn into the action. Are we part of the group that don't want the Owner to take control of his own vineyard? Would we rather keep it for ourselves?

PRAY

Almighty God, give us grace to produce the fruits of your kingdom, that we may celebrate your Son, the chief cornerstone of your new Temple.

Day 31: Friday 24th March

Read: Matthew 22

'Get me to the church on time!' It's a famous song from a famous musical. I suspect it's a favourite because we've all been to weddings, we all remember the sense of occasion, of dressing up, of this being the bride's and the groom's big day and everyone wanting to be there on time in proper order to give them an occasion to remember. Even in our own day in the western world, where marriage has been knocked about so much by careless pseudo-morality, and the divorce rate has risen alarmingly, almost everybody knows in their bones that this is some- thing to celebrate, something to do properly.

In the ancient world, especially in the ancient Jewish world where the sense of family had remained very strong, this was even more so. And if the king himself had invited you to the wedding of his son . . . well, then you would be planning for months what to wear, what gift to bring, how to make sure everything was right on the day.

All this only heightens the sense of shock, disappointment and anger at the story Jesus now tells. He exaggerates the detail to make it lurid, almost surreal. The guests, finally summoned, beat up and kill the slaves sent with the invitation, and the king sends troops to burn their city. But then comes the second shock. The king sends out some more slaves, and invites all and sundry to come to the party. In they come, 'good and bad' alike (there are echoes here of the 'good and bad' fish found in the Great Net of 13.48). Clearly the larger implications of the parable are influencing quite dramatically the way the original story is being told.

The new guests may have made it on time, but they are not all properly dressed. Here again the story has taken a lurid turn. One guest has not put on the wedding robe, and is thrown into the outer darkness. By this stage it's clear that, as with Psalm 23 which we looked at last Sunday, the original picture has more or less disappeared, and we are left with a more direct statement. The king has now invited the whole world to the wedding party originally planned for Israel. But those who attend as part of this suddenly enlarged guest-list must take care to turn up in the proper outfit.

We should not be surprised that some people have tried to suggest that Jesus never told this parable, or that this last bit was added later on. You can go to extraordinary lengths to protect your image of the gentle Jesus who wouldn't hurt a fly. But what he is saying, as he does in one way or another throughout, is that just because God's wedding party has been thrown open to all and sundry — to Gentiles as well as Jews, as Paul never tired of insisting — that doesn't mean that once they've accepted the invitation they can carry on as though it wasn't God's wedding party. All are welcome; but all must dress appropriately.

PRAY

Almighty Father, give us the joy of accepting your invitation, and the wisdom to dress in the right way for the party.

Day 32: Saturday 25th March

Read: Matthew 23

We stood in the autumn light beside the huge waterfall, mesmerized by the sheer volume of water pouring over and crashing down on the rocks beneath, unable to hear ourselves speak because of the rush and roar of the turbulent river. Then, as we walked back up the path to where we'd parked the car, we thought of all the tiny streams we'd seen earlier in the day, tinkling along gently high in the hills, and how each one had contributed to the massive flood we had just witnessed. Down they come into the valley, each making its way and lending its weight to the wide, powerful river.

Something of that same sense, of thousands of different streams each contributing to an eventual waterfall, is contained here, as Jesus concludes his solemn denunciation of both the official and the self-appointed guardians of Israel's ancestral traditions. Jesus looked back, up into the far hills of Israel's history, and saw a long line of prophets and righteous people who had been rejected by the leaders and opinion-formers of their day. Again and again it had happened. Little by little the streams have grown into a flood; and now Jesus sees the present leaders, his own contemporaries, flowing along in the same tradition. Right back as far as Abel, the first murdered man, right on to the more recent prophet Zechariah son of Barachiah, Israel's leaders have rejected and killed those who were sent to them; and now they are doing the same one more time.

What Jesus can see as well, though, is that there is a great waterfall just ahead. All this weight of water will not simply stop when it comes to the cliff: it will crash over it, thundering down to the depths. A mighty disaster is on the way. Many others had warned of similar things; Jesus, like the prophet he was, can see it only too clearly. And when it happens it won't be arbitrary. It won't be an accident. It will be the direct result of all these small streams of rebellion coming together into the greatest rebellion of them all.

But that isn't the end of the story. In the middle of the warning, Jesus speaks of his own longing to do something about it. God has indeed abandoned the Temple to its fate (verse 38). But, like a mother hen gathering the chickens under her wing to protect them against a fire, or a fox, Jesus has longed to gather Jerusalem and its people to himself so that he could take upon himself the full force of the coming disaster. Somehow, as we go through the next four chapters of Matthew's gospel, we need to remember that we are watching two different scenes: God's judgment on his rebellious people, and Jesus standing in the way, offering to take that judgment upon himself.

PRAY

Lord Jesus, Messiah and King, help us to stand in awe at your solemn words, and in gratitude at your offer of rescue.

Day 33: Sunday 26th March

Read: Psalm 130

The deep distress we sense as we read this Psalm has, paradoxically perhaps, given great hope to millions down the years. No matter how deep we have sunk, no matter what sorrows or tragedies we may encounter, the Psalms have been there before us. Not only do they encourage us to believe that we have not, after all, fallen off the map. They give us words so that, when our own words fail to do justice to our misery, they will do instead.

The Psalm doesn't hide. There's no point pretending, putting a brave face on it before God. (By the way, if you're reading this Psalm today in a bright, cheerful mood, pray it on behalf of the many for whom today is dark and sorrowful.) 'Out of the depths!' That's how it is, for all of us some of the time, for some of us most of the time. Let's tell it like it is.

Worse: the poet has a sense that somehow it's his own fault. When disaster strikes and it's someone else's fault, we can gain some relief by blaming them, perhaps hoping for justice. But when it's my own fault, even in part, the blame turns back on me. That is the road to the deepest depths of all, where we are not only miserable but feel guilty. Depression often takes the form, as a medical friend once said to me, of putting ourselves on trial and acting as judge, jury and chief prosecution witness all rolled into one. We then lock ourselves in the dungeon of our own misery and throw away the key.

It is out of that sense of helpless and hopeless sadness that the poem cries out: Lord, hear my voice! Listen! If you keep a record of wrongdoing, we'd all be in deep trouble; but what you offer is forgiveness! That's why we worship you! The news of forgiveness, of a free pardon, is the best news of all. The lock is broken; the prison door stands open; we are free to go.

It hasn't happened yet. The Psalm ends with redemption, forgiveness, still in the future. Yet the strong affirmation of God's forgiving kindness in verse 4 is the anchor which then, despite all, holds us upright. Then it's a matter of hope and patience: 'waiting', three times repeated in verses 5 and 6, is where it's at. 'Lord, give me patience,' says the T-shirt, 'and I want it right now!' But what matters here is the waiting, the settled concentration on God's word which alone assures us that there is hope because God is gracious.

As we journey through Lent, all sorts of things may have come up to test us, to make us despair. There is some way still to go, but we know who it is we're following. By the end of the Psalm, the poet is strong enough to commend to the whole nation the path of patience he himself is treading. 'O Israel, hope in the Lord; with the Lord there is steadfast love; he has great power to redeem.' He doesn't say what form the rescue will take. He only knows who it is that will provide it.

PRAY: Gracious Lord, when we are in the depths, come to us with your mercy and assure us of your power to rescue. And give us the patience to wait for you to do it.