

Nottingham North East Circuit presents...

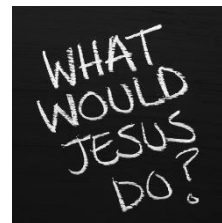


WDJA

What Did Jesus Ask?

**A series of reflections
for Lent**

We are probably familiar with the phrase WWJD, what would Jesus do?



Here we explore WDJA, what did Jesus ask?

Scholars suggest that Jesus is recorded as asking 307 questions in the Gospels. Whereas he directly answers only a handful of the 183 questions he is asked himself.

Often his response to a question posed was to ask another question rather than give an answer.

Jesus asked “how” and “why” questions. Now Jesus probably didn’t need to ask these questions, he already knew the answers, yet he did this to help us grow in our faith. Similarly, we should ask questions for our faith to mature. After all, growth and understanding often comes from a place of doubt, uncertainty or difficulty.

Jesus often asked open questions rather than closed questions that could be responded to by a simple yes, or no. Questions that required the person to think before responding. When we ask similar open-ended questions it suggests to people that we are making time for them and are genuinely interested in their answers.

Jesus didn’t ask “when” questions. Perhaps these sort of questions were not as important within an eternal framework. Likewise, we can have certainty, confidence and assurance in Jesus’ promises and then our “when” questions might not seem quite as critical.

Jesus asked challenging questions. Yet when we consider at the heart of the gospel is an invitation to be in a relationship with God and to live out our faith, then surely something of this significance and importance requires us to be challenged.

This booklet will take you through Lent with a daily reflection, based on a question that Jesus asked, written by a member of our staff team. You may like to use this for personal devotion, in a conversation or a house group or in one of the discussion groups held around the circuit.

February 14th

“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?” Matthew 6:27
(Read Matthew 6: 25-34)

Well, here we are, Ash Wednesday. Lent begins. Already! Jesus has a message for you: *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life.”* Here, Jesus is talking in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. So, what are we to make of this small snippet? Well, from my perspective I think that Jesus is teaching us that a knowledge of God is essential in the matter of peace and calm from worries and anxieties. As people of the Book, we profess that even though we may not understand it, the Bible is a revelation of God. It is God breathed. So, in this way, we might be able to agree that in knowing Scripture, we come to know something of God’s Divine essence. And in knowing God, we can come to trust in God. It’s hard to trust someone that you really don’t know. To know God and all that God has revealed about Godself through Christ is one of the highest pursuits of our life of faith. God desires that we know them.

Jesus goes on in verse 27 by saying: *“And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”* Basically, worry accomplishes nothing. And I’m sure deep down we would all agree with that. But what I personally find difficult, as someone who suffers from anxiety, is how to manage that well in flare ups and anxiety attacks which tend to do very well at blocking out all logic, common sense and with it, however momentarily, faith. In these moments I often struggle to find peace and rest – even though I know that I am not alone, and that Jesus tells me that worrying doesn’t help because God provides everything I could ever need. So, what do I do in that situation? What do we do if we ourselves suffer from anxiety, or there are people in our lives who do? I think we have to be very careful about how we interpret and preach this passage. It could very simply be put that Jesus says do not worry because God provides everything that we need. That may be all very well and true, but what harm do we do to people when we suggest that they have such little faith that their worry consumes them? I don’t think that is a spiritually or mentally healthy statement to make. I think that this demonstrates how important it is to consider how you interpret this passage. Of course, we shouldn’t worry about our future needs. However, we know that most of us do at some point in our lives, and there are many of us who can’t control those worries.

The familiar phrase “don’t worry, be happy” can sound shallow and unrealistic. Jesus tells us that the life of faith is not without its issues, concerns, and challenges. We know that there are setbacks, failures, frustrations as well as joys, triumphs, and accomplishments. The point is that God holds and cares for each of us. Jesus understands our worries. His words are for those who understand that God will not leave us without resources or support. The good news is that we can face life with all its uncertainties with the assurance that we are not alone – God hears, sees, and cares about us and our situations. **Amen.**

February 15th

“What are you searching for?” John 1:38

(Read John 1:35-42)



First words are often important. Many parents wait with bated breath for the word uttered by their child. So, what about Jesus, what are the first words that he says? Well, it differs in the four gospel accounts.

Mark, the earliest of the gospels to be written, records Jesus saying “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mk 1:15) This is echoed in Mathew where we hear “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near!” (Matt 4:17). In Luke’s account Jesus first words come as a child, not yet a teenager, when he asks.... “Why were you searching for me? ... Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?” (Luke 2:49)

Whereas in John’s gospel the first words of Jesus are, depending on the translation, “what do you want? “, “what are you looking for?” or “what are you searching for?” I much prefer this last translation...after all what we want is not always something we need whereas if we are searching for something, well it suggests we are looking for something of deeper more significant value. It sounds more intentional, more involved, more active.

In this passage, we are told that those who are searching, one of whom is identified as Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, are already disciples of John, suggesting that they have reacted, and responded to John’s message of repentance. They are, to quote Boris Johnson, ‘Oven Ready’. Ready for the next step on their spiritual journey. John’s ministry has taken them so far, but they are hungry for more.

They need a different kind of feeding, a different sort of daily bread and yet appear unable to articulate this and so simply reply ‘where are you staying?’

Sensing their need but at the same time hesitancy, it’s interesting to see what Jesus doesn’t offer. Jesus doesn’t deliver a lovely three-point sermon with each point beginning with the same letter. Jesus doesn’t give them a sales pitch. He doesn’t even attempt to confirm that what John the Baptist has said about him is true. Jesus simply offers an invitation...come and see.

Jesus simply invites these two disciples to be with Him. To spend time with him. To get to know him. To develop and deepen a relationship with him, with God, with each other and with their neighbour.

So, this Lent, what is it that you are searching for? A role? A purpose? An affirmation? An opportunity? A second chance? A sense of belonging? A feeling of being accepted and loved just as you are? If so then like those first disciples, why not ‘come and see’, come and see what a deeper relationship with Jesus has to offer. Who knows - it might just be life changing!!

February 16th

“Now which of them will love him more?” Luke 7:42

(Read Luke 7:36-50)

Let's begin by setting the scene. Jesus is dining at the home of Simon the Pharisee, reclining at the table, as was the custom in those days. A sinful woman has heard that he is there and enters the house carrying a large alabaster jar full of perfume. She washes Jesus' feet with her tears and anoints them with the perfume.

And then Simon begins to mumble **to himself** – “If Jesus is a prophet, he would know what kind of a woman she is – a sinner.” Imagine his surprise then when Jesus turns to him and begins to tell him a story of two men in debt, one owing 10 times more than the other. Both had their debts cancelled and it is then that Jesus asks this question ...

“Now which of them will love him more?”

I wonder why Jesus set Simon this conundrum.

- To make him feel bad – well I don't think it's in Jesus' nature to want us to feel **'bad'** about ourselves.
- To make him feel better about himself – you have 50 denarii of sins, she has 500. Well, I don't think that's right either. Jesus doesn't want us to make ourselves out to be better than anyone else.
- To point out where his thinking is wrong – I think we are getting there now.

Simon has made assumptions about this person and about her “right” to be close to Jesus. Although this passage doesn't specifically make reference to it, for a woman to be in a room where men were dining would not have been looked upon well. Added to that Simon, and presumably others in the room, knew that she was a sinner.

So maybe the conundrum might go along the lines of ...

- Just for a minute Simon, put yourself in her shoes. You say she is a sinner – can you say you are not?
- Simon, are you judging this woman? Have you also judged others by what you perceive them to be?

The questions which Jesus asked of Simon can equally be asked of us. But just pointing out where Simon's thinking is wrong is not really a helpful message is it? Maybe Jesus set the conundrum to encourage Simon, and us, to learn.

The Methodist Church believes that all are made in God's image and that all are equally precious to God. One way we can think about this is by educating ourselves about Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Why not come along to Bestwood Park Church on Saturday February 24th @ 10am to learn more about this, so that as individuals and churches we welcome **all** to sit at the feet of Jesus.



February 17th

'Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?' Luke 17:17

(Read Luke 17:11-19)



Do you remember when you were kids, being told by your parents to write thank you letters after Christmas and birthdays, to your aunts and grandparents? I remember always having to keep the gift tags and write on what the gift was, so that by the day after Boxing Day I could remember who had bought me what, so I could write 'Thank you for the toy / doll / game...'

I think if someone heals you from a grave illness it is only right that you would say thank you – don't you? When you leave the office of the dentist or the doctors, or the nurse has helped you – don't you say thank you? Its common curtesy, isn't it? So how much bigger should the thank you be when you have been cleansed completely of that dreadful disease – leprosy? In those days it wasn't simply a matter of being poorly, it was being completely unclean as well, you were ritually unable to be with other people. You lived away from normal society, you couldn't go to the temple to worship, and your family couldn't come near you for fear of catching the disease. So, a man comes along and heals you – you are completely clean and able to rejoin your family, the temple for worship and society as a whole. Why would you not thank God for that?

I imagine the nine people with leprosy who didn't return to Jesus bounded away in joy, ready to go to the temple and be confirmed as cleansed, and tell their family that they were fine now, and they forgot to come back with thanks. And I think that's easy to do – to forget to say thanks.

When we're going through tough times, we go to God don't we? We beg for intervention, we beg for guidance, we beg God to show us the way and give us help and strength. Then, we get through that tough time. We are joyful perhaps – and maybe we forget who helped us through it. Maybe we thank our friends who supported us, those who held our hands and carried us – but do we remember to go back and thank God?

I know I am guilty of forgetting to thank God. I might express relief and continue to pray and then move on to the next thing I need help with – but wouldn't it be wonderful to go back to God and say, 'thank you', in praise and adoration at God's merciful intervention? How do we give God the proverbial Thank You card? We get on our knees and simply say it. Thank You God. You are wonderful and you helped. Thank you.

February 18th

“Do you see anything?” Mark 8:23

(Read Mark 8:22–26)

In this account of Jesus healing a blind man, we do not know for certain whether the man was blind from birth. But if we assume that he was, can we even begin to imagine what it must have been like to see things for the first time. The other thing which I find fascinating is how he would know what things were. How did he know that what he saw were people and that they looked like trees? It just makes me realise how much we take our sense of sight for granted.

When I was little, my mum always said to me that our eyesight was really precious. As we grow older, I think we begin to appreciate that, whether it's because our arms aren't long enough to focus on a book, or because our eyes and the way that they work simply begins to deteriorate.

So, recognising that we do take our eyesight for granted, I thought we could do something a little bit different today. If you can, spend 5 minutes today looking out of your back window, and 5 minutes looking out of your front window, and then 5 minutes just looking around your kitchen or living room. Look, *really* look. What do you see?

- Do you see anything you have not seen before?
- How do the things you see make you feel?
- Do you see anything which makes you smile, or makes you sad?
- Does anything you see “take” you to a different place in your imagination?
- Do you see God in anything?

You may want to jot down what you see and your thoughts.

What do I see from
my back window?

What do I see from
my front window?

What do I see in my
kitchen / lounge?

And so, we pray, Loving God, we thank you for the gift of sight. When we take our eyesight for granted and don't notice the things we should forgive us. **Amen**

February 19th

“Why do you break the command of God for the sake of tradition?” Matthew 15:3
(Read Matthew 15:1-20)



This picture of a gorgeous glass of clean, clear drinking water, is my attempt to show something ‘pure’. I Googled the word, and this was the image I liked the best. Clean, pure, undiluted, unpolluted – pure. And in this reading from Matthew, the Pharisees are trying to trip Jesus up with comments about the fact that his Disciples don’t even wash their hands before they eat.

Jesus responds by telling them they are committing a more serious infraction, by breaking the commandment of God. The Pharisees cling so tightly to their rules on inner purity that they miss the point entirely. Jesus goes on to explain that it’s not what goes into the body that defiles at all. Jesus asks them why they are ignoring God for the sake of sticking to their tradition. I wonder if that’s something we do, as Methodists. I love Charles Wesley hymns, but maybe I cling to them a little too much, and thereby don’t embrace new music as readily as I should. Do we strictly adhere to something Methodist, and in doing so forget to embrace what might be Anglican, or Pentecostal, or Baptist – simply because of our ‘tradition’? The point Jesus is making here is that what matters most of all is the commands of God. That we obey God – through the teachings of Jesus – is the most important thing we can do, and we must not let our tradition get in the way of that. Being a Methodist is never more important than being a Christian.

The Pharisees were concerned with inner purity, but the way to inner purity is through God, not through washing hands. When we do something wrong, we can pray to God and ask for forgiveness, and on receiving that forgiveness through God’s grace, we are clean again – we are pure. Washing our hands may make our hands clean of muck, but it doesn’t wash away any sin.

Tradition is good, our heritage is important, and I love my Methodist roots, but nothing – absolutely nothing – is more important than following the commands of God. Jesus told us how to behave, how to act and how to live – it’s all there in the Gospels – that’s what we need to do to be pure. This doesn’t mean we can’t sing Love Divine ever again – but we must not put our tradition (or laws if we were Pharisees) ahead of God. That is not the way to inner purity – God is the only way.

February 20th

“You of little faith why are you so afraid?” Matthew 8:26

(Read Matthew 8:23-27)

Whilst I have been fortunate enough to visit Israel, I have not been to the Sea of Galilee - but several of my friends have. I've seen so many photos of their trips it was almost like I was there with them. One particular friend called the Sea of Galilee a “thin place” where heaven and earth seem closer - almost tangible.

The Sea of Galilee is not a sea in the sense we would expect. Compared to the oceans of the world and other great bodies of water on the planet it is a relatively small lake. But it is a significant body of water in Israel, which is primarily a desert environment. It is also known to be unpredictable and any change in wind direction can cause storms. One could start across the lake by boat with a glassy calmness but in a matter of minutes the waves can become treacherous.

In our reading for today Jesus has had a long day, he is clearly tired enough to fall asleep in the boat. The storm broke and the disciples are terrified, they wake him saying “Lord save us we are going to drown!” He replies with those famous words “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Jesus rebukes the storm – it becomes calm – the disciples are amazed and ask “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him?”

In view of what Jesus has just done the only answer can be He is the very Son of God! God's presence and God's power had been demonstrated. By the One who created the elements in the first place!

Because we are human beings who experience human emotions, fear and faith can never be mutually exclusive. However, fear can become progressively lessened as we grow in our faith. As we come to have a stronger faith it begins to exert a greater control over our fear.

I wonder if you can identify an area in your life in which your faith has helped you overcome a particular fear.

Reflect on this today; spend some time thanking God for your growth in faith. No matter how small the steps they are all massively important to God.



February 21st

“Dear woman, why do you involve me? “John 2:4

(Read John 2:1–12)



Jesus is with his mother and his disciples, at a wedding in Cana. And then the wine runs out, a potential embarrassment for the hosts. Mary, Jesus' mother, notices and points this out to Jesus, "They have no more wine." And Jesus' response is quite surprising, "Why do you involve me?" The Message version puts it even more harshly, "Is that any of our business, Mother – yours or mine?" Admittedly he does then give Mary a reason, "My time has not yet come," but it does seem that he wants to have nothing to do with the problem. But Mary persists and speaks directly to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Jesus really hadn't a choice then, had he?

I just wonder how often we fail to get involved in situations where we really should.

A couple of weeks ago we watched the ITV drama, 'Mr Bates v The Post Office' – all 4 episodes in one evening, we were so drawn into it. It tells the story of a Post Office scandal going back 2 decades where hundreds of sub postmasters and mistresses were wrongly accused of stealing money from the Post Office, when in fact it was the Post office's own computer system which was the problem. They lost their livelihoods. Some were imprisoned. Some suffered mental ill health. Families were torn apart and reputations left in tatters. That may have been the end of the story, were it not for people who were prepared to get involved. There is Mr Bates himself, who very early on had his suspicions that the computer system was at fault. There were the many Post Office employees who joined Mr Bates as he tried to find out what had happened. There was a young journalist who heard about the problem, began to investigate and published an article telling some of the stories. There was a lawyer who was prepared to take on the case and a member of parliament who spoke out for them as questions were asked in government. And finally, there was an employee of the software company, who admitted that it was possible for the company to gain access to individual sub postmasters and mistresses accounts, despite the Post Office strongly denying that this was possible. All of these people were prepared to get involved, when those who could have done something about the situation seemed to ask, "Why do you involve us?"

Everyday across the world, people get involved in all sorts of situations to tackle injustice, to alleviate suffering of all sorts, to just try and make things better for today and the future. Many (many!) years ago, one of the hymns we often sang in assembly begins, Would you walk by on the other side when someone called for aid? (See Singing the Faith 257). The chorus says "Cross over the road my friend..." So, the challenge here is, are we prepared to get involved? Are we prepared to cross over the road?

February 22nd

“Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed?” Mark 4:21

(Read Mark 4:10-25)

Well? Do you? It's a “common sense” sort of question. Where do you put a light when you turn it on? I guess it depends on why you've lit the light. If it's a bit of mood-lighting then some sort of bushel-esque cover is appropriate, or if it's a night-light then leaving it safely under the bed is a good idea (ready to be a lamp for the feet in the night - enough to dispel total darkness and guide the way), but if it's for the purposes of getting stuff done and being able to see properly, then it needs to be on a stand and not hidden...

... But then you know what they say about common sense: It isn't that common!

Anyway, this question comes after one of the few times that we're told Jesus explained the meaning of his parable because his disciples are asking for clarification because they appear not to get it: “Ok... I'm explaining this to you, and fully revealing the light, putting it on the stand in the middle of the room so that you have absolutely no excuse for not seeing the whole thing and everything it points to!”

Does that mean the other parables that don't get explained are like lamps under bushels or beds, still casting shadows in the recesses rather than illuminating the whole room? I don't think so. In fact, I think it's probably the complete opposite!

As I understand it Jesus is going over the top in his explanation because in verse 13 he says “Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable!?” What if Jesus is trying to suggest that the parable already does everything it needs to, it is light enough to expel the darkness, and yet the disciples are the ones guilty of hiding things by taking something clear and simple and bright and trying to over-complicate it by covering it in other things?

And so, the challenge for me becomes this: What is Jesus actually saying without me making it too complicated? (Which ironically, I may have done with this reflection!) What were the things that the first-hand hearers of Jesus' illustrations heard and understood from the ordinariness and “common sense” in his stories?

Of this passage, McLaren's Expositions suggests “If our eyes were opened to the suggestions of common life, we should find in them many parables and reminders of high matters.”

Light is offered by the revelation of God through the parables of Jesus, and through the simple things in life that inherently point to the simple yet profound things of God.

How are we going to let the simple be simply profound? How do we sometimes over-complicate things and therefore end up preventing the light shining all around? What are we going to do with the light we've been shown?

February 23rd

“Why were you searching for me, didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” Luke 2:49

(Read Luke 2:41-52)

The passage recounts an incident from the childhood of Jesus, often referred to as "The Boy Jesus in the Temple." Jesus' age is specifically noted. It is important to the community that first heard the stories of Jesus that they knew he was on the brink of adulthood in the Jewish traditions of his day. As good Jews, faithful to the tenets of their faith Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem every year for the Passover festival. This was a common practice for Jewish families. Little did they know that in the ordinariness of an annual event, Jesus would bring surprise to his parents and to many others who were there. The tale draws us in with a moment of drama after the Passover festival ends. Jesus remained in Jerusalem while his parents began their journey back home, assuming he was with the group. Having realised Jesus is missing, his parents began to search for him among their relatives and friends. When they couldn't find him, they returned to Jerusalem. It is likely that all parents, and others who care for children, know the experience of misplacing their offspring. The worry that stirs the pit of the stomach. After three days, they find Jesus in the temple, engaged in discussion with the teachers. He was listening to them and asking questions. His understanding and answers astonished those present. His parents move through feelings of anxiety, then relief then enquiry. They ask why he had caused them such worry. Jesus responds by saying that he must be in his Father's house. A very specific response indicating a sense of divine purpose. In his growing maturity Jesus begins to realise the depth and import of his relationship with God. Like most parents they are moved by the appreciation of their son by the teachers of the law and others who heard him. Whilst at the same time not having a clue what was going on. They return home with questions on their minds. His mother especially. Rather than try and answer them all, she “treasures them in her heart”. An example to us. Often our faith calls on us to be patient and wait. A challenge and antidote to our ‘wanting it now’ world. Jesus returns with his parents to Nazareth and is obedient to them. Jesus waits for his own Kairos moment, which comes some 18 years later. The passage concludes by stating that Jesus increased in wisdom, years, and in divine and human favour. The tale provides a rare glimpse into Jesus' early life, emphasising his wisdom and a sense of divine purpose. It also highlights the tension between his divine calling and his earthly family responsibilities.

Prayer

We love to hear something of your life, Lord. Especially when it rings true in our own experience. Give us the gift of patience. Help us to embrace the waiting times. Give us wisdom and courage. Wisdom to know that waiting is important in knowing when to act, and courage to act when the time is right. To your glory. AMEN.

February 24th

“Who touched my clothes?” Mark 5:30

(Read Mark 5:21-43)

According to the commentary on Mark by Tom Wright, we should take this passage with the next one, which is about the healing of Jairus’s daughter. What Mark has done is to place one story inside another, creating what is called a ‘Markan sandwich’. In Wright’s words, ‘the flavour of the outer story adds zest to the inner one; the taste of the inner one is meant in turn to permeate the outer one’.

The outer story is about the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus, and the inner story is about a much older woman who for the same 12 years has suffered internal bleeding.

Both stories are about fear and faith and the power of Jesus to take people from one to the other. Sometimes Jesus’ healing is obvious, sometimes it’s much more understated. Maybe sometimes it’s up to us to recognise miracles when they happen?

The story we are focussing on, about the older woman, is worth spending some time inside, in other words, meditating upon it – imagining that you are part of the crowd and then, if you have sufficient courage, identifying with the character at the centre of the drama.



The story of the older woman falls at a time of suspense, as we wait to find out what is going to happen to Jairus’ daughter. Chronic internal bleeding was a cause of impurity, as was touching a dead body, and the woman’s perpetual uncleanness would have affected her family and her social life. This explains why the woman would have been frightened to ask for help and of being discovered if she received it. What is amazing is that Jesus actually knew that someone had touched the hem of his gown, even amidst the crowds of people who were surrounding him.

Life can crowd in around us, with all its problems and pressures, but there is still room for us to creep up behind Jesus and reach out and touch him with that mixture of fear and faith that is often a part of our Christian discipleship.

February 25th

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” Matthew 7:3

(Read Matthew 7:1-6)

This is part of Jesus' teachings commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus gives an extended period of teaching in chapters 5, 6 & 7 of Matthew's gospel. In these verses from chapter 7 there is an encouragement to avoid a judgmental attitude to your life. It suggests that the way you judge others will be the way you, in turn, will be judged. Jesus encourages his hearers to adopt a spirit of understanding and forgiveness. As in other parts of the gospels, Jesus uses metaphorical language to emphasise the need for self-awareness. When I was twenty-one I was given a book to read by my uncle. I'd just started work and he felt it might help. The book was very famous in its day. It is considered rather old fashioned these days, but many of the things I found in it still influence my thinking and acting. The book is called "How to win friends and influence people" written by Dale Carnegie in 1936. Although he shared the surname, he was not one of the more famous Carnegie family of philanthropists who gave their name to many charitable works, including the concert hall in New York City. One of the core ideas in the book is that it is possible to change other people's behaviour by changing one's behaviour towards them. Jesus offers people the thought that before pointing out the faults or shortcomings in others, one should reflect on our own flaws. There is a clear call to humility as a way of life. Jesus goes on to reinforce the idea of addressing one's own issues before attempting to help others with theirs. He encourages humility and introspection. Jesus values, but is not bound by, the holy. He is clear that valuable or sacred things should be treated with respect and discernment. Not everyone may appreciate or understand the value of certain teachings or wisdom, but that does not make such things worthless. He seems to be offering a warning of the potential consequences of sharing sacred or valuable things with those who may not appreciate or understand their worth. It's a cautionary statement about being discerning in sharing spiritual truths. We might consider it a question of timing. Knowing the right moment to share what we have been given. Learning when the Kairos moments are is part of Christian maturity. Jesus would have known some of the disciples for many years, perhaps from childhood, but he waited for the Kairos moment to call them to "Follow me". Jesus' teachings are often interpreted as a call for humility, self-awareness, and discernment. Qualities that seem hard to find in our political, commercial, celebrity and even religious leaders. Maybe these are the qualities that Jesus saw in ordinary folk? They are ordinary people's gift and challenge to those with power and influence. Jesus is about what we would call 'building community'. Cultivating a compassionate and understanding approach to others, avoiding a judgmental attitude, and recognizing the value of sacred teachings.

Prayer

Help us in our prayers and in our lives dear Jesus, to hear your words for us. Help us to pay attention to our own shortcomings, before pointing out the shortcomings in others. Though your words and ways seem out of place in our topsy-turvy world, may we learn to live out the words of your teachings in our own lives. AMEN.

February 26th

“What is your name?” Luke 8:30

(Read Luke 8:26-39)

One day, Jesus said to his disciples lets go over to the other side of the lake. As they sailed, and night fell, there was a huge storm. Jesus rebukes the strong winds and the raging water; the storm subsides and all is calm again.

Now they have arrived on shore in a region called Gerasenes across the lake from Galilee and they are met by a man possessed by demons.

Jesus asks the demon-possessed man his name. To which he replies “Legion” for many demons had entered him. Jesus drives out this army of demons.

This is a man who is not wearing any clothes, he does not live in a house rather he has been living in the tombs, he has been chained hand and foot and put under guard but has broken these chains and has been driven out to solitary places. This man was distressed and tormented, separated no doubt from his family, his community and society as a whole.

Here we see a mixed reaction of many who saw this miracle with their own eyes yet out of fear drove Jesus away. Would they rather have had this tormented demon possessed man living in the region than Jesus? The locals insist Jesus returns to the boat and back to “his” side of the lake.

In contrast, the previously possessed man we read about is sitting at Jesus’ feet, fully dressed and in his right mind. He begs Jesus to let him go with them. Yet Jesus is clear, he must return home and tell how much God has done for him. He became a follower and a proclaimer. He was commissioned. He was healed, saved and made whole again.

I’m reminded that Jesus effectively sailed across the lake, overcame a mighty storm, drove out an army of demons and then sailed back. And He did all this to save one man. Such is His care for each and every one of us. Jesus died on the cross and rose again so that we too can be saved.



February 27th

“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” Luke 6:46

(Read Luke 6:46-49)

The word ‘Lord’ suggests some kind of hierarchy, doesn’t it? When you hear it, you make a subconscious judgment about the Lord – that they may be posh, that they may be in some way higher up the social scale than you, that they may be rich. There are many connotations with the word Lord. In British politics we have a House of Lords, people who may have inherited the title from father to son or have been awarded it for services to the country, and they get to make laws for the rest of us to follow.

Jesus was not that kind of Lord. Jesus was Lord of all. In Biblical terms, Lord refers to God and Jesus Christ as his son. And so, when Jesus refers to people calling him Lord, they were making a highly controversial judgement. In those times, it was blasphemy – referring to someone other than God as Lord. How could Jesus possibly be Lord? Only God was Lord. But Jesus knew that people were calling him Lord because they believed in him. They believed he was the Messiah, and in saying so, they were potentially putting themselves in danger. And Jesus also knew that there were some people calling him ‘Lord, Lord’ and yet they were then walking away and doing nothing about it. They were not taking on board what he was saying. Almost like they enjoyed the idea of Jesus being Lord, but not the practice of it.

Jesus tells them about the wise and foolish builders, those who built wisely, on good foundations, which meant the house could last. And those who did not build on good foundations, and as soon as trouble came along, the house was destroyed. I wonder if they understood the meaning of all of this – did they connect their own faith in him as Messiah to the foundations of the house being built?

And so, to us – do we recognise the comparison that Jesus has made here – with faith and foundations? Is our faith built on good foundations and so will stand firm in the storm? And what of our conversations with Jesus, do we call him ‘Lord Lord’, but forget his teaching? We have to actually *do* the things he tells us – we have to actually *follow* him – we can’t just say we’re Christians and followers of Christ – we have to actually *be* it.

How’s your faith – is it on a strong foundation, or does it need a bit of shoring up? Do you call Jesus ‘Lord’ and mean it, or is it simply a title? Do you call Jesus Lord and do what he says you should do?

February 28th

“You are Israel’s teacher, and do you not understand these things?” John 3:10

(Read John 3:1-21)

What is the role of Nicodemus? He does not appear in the synoptic gospels so is he a literary creation to allow John to address lack of faith? Although he does appear multiple times in the Gospel of John which might go against this line of thought.

Nicodemus first appears at night time. Is this in reference to the ambiguity of his character or is it just background detail? Is it because Nicodemus is possibly sympathetic to Jesus but is unwilling to make this public? Was this to allow a lengthy uninterrupted conversation, after all the Pharisees often studied at night? Or, was this part of the light/dark motif John uses within his Gospel?

Who is the “we”? Was Nicodemus accompanied, was he the spokesperson, or was he sent as a representative of a group of Pharisees?

Nicodemus understood Jesus to be a teacher from God, but did he appreciate that he was the Son of God?

Jesus expected Nicodemus, as a teacher of Israel, to have the intellectual knowledge of the new birth. To understand that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above or born again.

Nicodemus took this literally and thought he was talking about a second physical birth rather than a new spiritual birth. To be born of water and the Spirit in contrast to the flesh which speaks of the weakness and mortality of man.

This passage speaks of the heavenly origin and incarnation of Jesus. There is a strong correlation with the Prologue. Jesus came into this world as a light. We see a separation of those who choose to come into the light and those who stay in the darkness so that their deeds are not exposed by the light.

Nicodemus next appears in Chapter 7 when he stands up for Jesus whilst his fellow Pharisees were conspiring against him, reminding them that the law requires a person be heard before being judged. (John 7:50-51)

In Chapter 19 Nicodemus appears after the crucifixion of Jesus to provide the embalming spices and assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial. (John 19:39-42). Is this a more public act of devotion, of a genuine disciple? Or an attentiveness to ritual piety consistent with his earlier observance of the law? The amount of spice he brings is befitting for the burial of a King. Is this Nicodemus’ acknowledgement of Jesus as King or a refusal to believe in resurrection?

February 29th

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?” Luke 6:32

(Read Luke 6:27-36)

According to Tony Campolo’s book ‘The Power Delusion’, he says that it is common practice for couples who are seriously dating to try and avoid the commitment of love. The pair are trying to ‘under love’ each other because love has its obligations and the one who loves most owes most. So, to be free of the debt of love you must love less so that the other person is more in debt to you than you are to them.

If love does have a debt, the very heart of this message is (obviously) all about love. Jesus is telling the listeners that they must love the unlovely as well as the people that they find appealing, because even those who don’t know God will love people who love them.

There were several words for love in Greek and Jesus isn’t asking for *storge* (natural affection), nor for *eros* (romantic love), nor for *philia* (the love of friendship). What Jesus is speaking of is *agape*, which means love even of the unlovely.

So, loving your enemies is uncompromising and unlike Matthew’s version, the Lucan message refers to those who suffer from real poverty and hunger and not to those who are poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3) or who hunger after righteousness (Matthew 5:6).



The Lucan message reflects Lukes’ concern with poverty and wealth and Jesus gives the proper response to those who hate, reject and insult his people. The disciples are to love their enemies and do good to those who hate them.

‘Marching to the beat of a different drum’ refers to someone who stands out from the crowd, so that whilst most will march along to the beat of one drummer, they are prepared to march to a completely different rhythm. As people of faith this is what we are called to do as we march to the beat

of agape love; a beat which certainly doesn’t always resonate with that of others in society but has a sound which will echo loudly in the streets as people turn to listen to that different sound.

March 1st

“Does this offend you?” John 6:61

(Read John 6:60-71)

In this passage we eavesdrop on a conversation which captures a moment when some of Jesus' disciples found his teaching challenging, prompting Jesus to address their concerns and leading to a significant decision by many of those who had been following him up to that moment.

In the previous verses Jesus tells them ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ He then goes on to expound what that means. He upsets them by words, in particular his claims to be the bread of life, who has come from heaven. Not only do his words lead some to leave, but they also confound the twelve too. It is a reminder that although Jesus had the twelve close, there were many others who followed him. At least for some of the time.

Aware of the complaints of his listeners, Jesus questions whether his teachings offend them. He goes on to emphasise the spiritual nature of his words, stating that the spirit gives life, and the flesh is of little use. Jesus acknowledges that not everyone among his followers believes, and he knows who will betray him. He mentions that coming to him is possible only if granted by the Father. We cannot be assured but by the gift of God.

Faced with the departure of many followers, Jesus asks the twelve disciples if they also want to leave. Peter, one of the Twelve, perhaps the one to whom the other eleven look, responds, affirming their commitment to Jesus. He acknowledges that Jesus has the words of eternal life and confesses belief in him as the Holy One of God.

Jesus, in response, acknowledges that he chose the twelve, yet one of them is a devil. He is referring to Judas Iscariot, who, despite being one of the twelve disciples, will betray Jesus. Added to this moment of commitment and expression of faith and confidence, Jesus ups the ante, as it were.

This passage captures a pivotal moment where Jesus' teachings separate those who continue to follow him from those who turn away. It also foreshadows the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, illustrating the complexities and challenges faced by Jesus and his followers.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for your faithfulness and your endless grace. Help me to follow you with all my heart and to live out your teachings in my daily life. I pray all these things in Jesus' name. AMEN.

March 2nd

“Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?” Matthew 9:4

(Read Matthew 9:1-8)

Admit it, we've all done it... We've all wondered what would happen if we just did that thing - that thing we know is wrong; the rule we know we shouldn't break, or that action we know we would probably regret... a 'hold my drink' kind of escapade, or a shenanigan that would be fine if we were 13 again... Now of course most of us haven't actually followed through and done it, but I reckon we've thought about it.

I know that's not the same thing, and I know that's not what Jesus is rebuking the pharisees for, but I wonder if we can really sit in judgement of them as we read/hear the story again and go; “they're being naughty” like we've never done anything wrong...?

In the world of Jesus and the Pharisees a disability is attached to the condition of the heart in the person's relationship with God - healing therefore is about cleansing from sin, something that the Temple officials were responsible for overseeing and 'adjudicating'. Jesus sees past the sin of the man to his faithfulness and heals him - effectively making him clean - in full sight and view of the Pharisees... but more than that, doing their job!

And so, we can suddenly appreciate that the 'evil thoughts' being entertained by the Pharisees are not about the man, but about their fear and reaction to the authority of Jesus. It is the insecurity and anxiety they are expressing that he sees and which is causing them to lash out. It is this he rebukes.

In the passage sin is forgiven - the paralysed man is healed and freed and sent home. And the reaction of the pharisees is to judge and condemn - not the miracle they have seen - but the one who has made them ineffectual and powerless. I suspect that's a reaction we can understand or maybe even have some empathy for...?

But we would want, we would prefer, to be able to respond like the crowd. For this is the reaction of the people to God's activity amongst them. Joy filled them - not criticism or anger or fear. Awe filled them - not schemes to detract and diminish. Praise filled them - for their hearts felt and eyes saw the glory of God in their midst.

What are the things and feelings that we 'entertain' (that fill our hearts) when we hear or see good (or bad) news? How do we respond and react? How might we celebrate the good that others do without being threatened by it?

March 3rd

“Will you give me a drink?” John 4:7

(Read John 4:1-26)

Jesus has come to this town in Samaria, he's tired from the journey, and his disciples have gone to find food. Jesus came in need; he was sitting by a well without a bucket and he was thirsty, he made himself appear vulnerable. Jesus asked the woman for a drink, but she questions him, he is a Jew she a Samaritan woman, Jews didn't associate with Samaritans, she knew that.

The dialogue starts off fairly light but soon becomes deep, now they're talking about the stuff of life. Jesus speaks of living water, he tells her that everyone who drinks this water from the well will be thirsty again but that whoever drinks the water he gives them will never thirst, that the water he gives them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Well, she replies, give me this water so I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming to the well to draw water.

Perhaps she initially thinks of literal living water, the fresh sweet flowing waters which in ancient times was considered safe water. And then she begins to realise who she is talking to and what she is hearing, and now she wants to claim the promise of life. She knows that Christ is coming who will explain everything. Then Jesus declared – I am he. The woman, leaving her water jar behind went back to the town and tells people about Jesus.

To be human is to be thirsty – for water, for meaning, for security, relationship, belonging, life. Water is after all the origin of life. In the beginning the spirit hovered above the waters, in the desert the prophets foretold of a time when God would cause springs to come into existence where there was now only dry earth. Water is the literal and spiritual source of life. So, when Jesus has this encounter with the woman at the well we are hearing about the access to clean plentiful water and the living waters.

Grace comes to where it is needed most, regardless of who we are. To the woman at the well, comes the love of God, in the form of divine made flesh, Jesus Christ, in a way and at a time when she might least expect hope or grace. She might have been considered the wrong gender, the wrong ethnicity, the wrong religious group, the wrong morality. Yet it is to her, in the midst of her daily life that Jesus comes.

Sometimes grace comes to us as it did the woman of Samaria, whilst we go about our daily lives. Other times it comes from the heart of the struggle.

I think that it is often at points in our lives, when we, our community or our world are suffering and there is brokenness that grace, God's love can most intimately enter in. Where love grows most surprisingly.

Wherever we are in life's journey, God desires for us new life, living water that will quench our deepest thirst. This Lent let us acknowledge our thirst, allow our brokenness to be what it is, ourselves broken open so that love may find us and fill us up with a hope that will not disappoint.

March 4th

“Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand?” Mark 8:17

(Read Mark 8:14-21)

Another warning from Jesus to his disciples. Jesus takes a simile in his words "beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod." We begin with forgetful disciples. In the previous verses in the chapter, they have witnessed a miraculous feeding. 4,000 fed. Bread and fish feature, leading us to see this as the same as the feeding of the 5,000, but with different numbers. This could be a simple matter of miscounting or a guesstimate. Or it could be another miracle moment. Jesus and the disciples are in a boat heading for Dalmanutha, one of the ports around the Sea of Galilee. They realise they have forgotten to bring enough bread. They have only one loaf with them. Out of the blue Jesus warns the disciples, cautioning them to "beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." Understandably, the disciples misunderstand Jesus' warning, thinking he is talking about their shortage of bread. Jesus, aware of their misunderstanding, questions them, highlighting their lack of understanding and perception. He asks if their hearts are hardened and if they can see and hear. He reminds them of the miraculous feeding miracles and of all the surplus baskets of broken pieces. It falls to us to recall those times when we experience God's blessing in our lives and share the stories of our life of faith with others. After the disciples confirm the numbers of baskets collected, Jesus asks them if they still do not understand the deeper meaning of his warning. This passage emphasises the symbolic use of bread and yeast as metaphors for teachings and influences. The "yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod" is likely a reference to the corrupting influences of religious hypocrisy (Pharisees) and political power (Herod). Jesus is cautioning his disciples to be wary of these negative influences. The disciples, however, misunderstand his warning initially, focusing on the literal lack of physical bread. Jesus, in response, challenges them to think beyond the material and remember the spiritual lessons conveyed through the miracles of the multiplied loaves. It serves as a teaching moment of the importance of understanding the deeper spiritual truths and being vigilant against negative influences.

Prayer

Blessing God. Help us to see through the mists of our own lack of understanding. Bless us with minds open to your word. Bless us with the strength to humbly serve you in the world. Bless us with hearts that seek Jesus and are full of your love. May we know and echo your overflowing generosity. May we hear your quiet whisper calling us to follow Jesus. May we rejoice in the work of your Holy Spirit. AMEN.

March 5th

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Luke 10:36

(Read Luke 10:25-37)

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most familiar of Bible stories and its great fun to act this out with children. I remember one time when the man who got beaten up was wrapped from head to foot in toilet paper as the children bandaged him up and helped him to his feet!

It's also a great story to make modern day parallels to – with the Priest becoming an Archdeacon on his way to an important meeting with the Bishop. The Levite becoming a university professor late for lectures and the Samaritan could be well... someone we might think of as a terrorist perhaps?

It's a story of justice and it asks us, the listener, to make a moral assessment.

The scene is set along the treacherous route from Jerusalem to Jericho, a 17 mile stretch with a sharp descent of 2,500 feet above sea level to about 800 below sea level!

The precarious road winds its way through rocky desert terrain, providing an ideal hide out for robbers to pounce on defenceless travellers.

In Jesus' account the priest and the Levite both saw this fellow Jew lying beaten and bloody, left for dead, they both decide it would be unwise to get involved. After all, touching a dead body would make them unclean, a situation that would have been inconvenient to say the least!

But the traveller from Samaria, despised because of his race, stopped without concern for his own safety to help, even going as far as making financial arrangements at the inn for the man to fully recover.

The word neighbour in this passage has connotations far beyond that individual who lives in our vicinity or “neighbourhood”. Jesus was referring to the person who was willing – regardless of whether his action might be convenient, wise or even safe – to reach out unconditionally to a fellow human being in need.

For reflection:

Our willingness to be “bothered” has a great deal to say about our love for Jesus and the integrity of our Christian walk. It's not always easy, but every little act of kindness goes a long way in God's economy.



March 6th

“If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?” Matthew 12:11

(Read Matthew 12:9-13)

Observing the Sabbath is rooted in the commandments; “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work.” (Exodus 20:8-10)



And observing meant not just putting your feet up and ‘resting from sunset on Friday night until sunset on Saturday’ but it involves avoiding up to thirty-nine, that’s 39, different types of work. Examples would include sowing, ploughing, reaping, binding, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing sheep, bleaching, carding, dyeing, spinning,

stretching material, sewing, threading needles, weaving, tying or untying a knot, writing, erasing, kindling a flame, carrying (from private to public domain, and vice versa), and putting the finishing touches to a piece of work already begun before the Sabbath.

And of course, in the eyes of the religious leaders of the day, healing was also declared as work, which anyone who has been involved in trying to bring about healing (physical, mental, spiritual) will know just how hard that work can be. So here on the Sabbath, in the synagogue, the local focal point of scriptural and legal knowledge, Jesus finds himself in yet another (this is becoming a repeating pattern) confrontation with the religious authorities who ask whether it is ‘lawful’ to heal a man with a withered hand. It is of course not life threatening and Jesus could have waited until the following day. But he didn’t because God’s love was a priority over God’s law.

Instead, and I know you are all ready for this, Jesus asks a question in reply. Would they consider it ‘lawful’ to rescue a sheep that has fallen into a pit on the Sabbath, even if that was not a life-threatening condition? The answer, even though they don’t actually say it, is yes, they would come to the sheep’s rescue. Here they expose their own hypocrisy; they would ‘break’ their own law to come to the aid of something that has commercial value to them but are unable to show compassion to something/one who is of far greater value to God. Jesus’ reply and subsequent action infers that if the law fails to see that it is permissible to do good on the Sabbath, then the interpretation of the law by the Pharisees is as dead as the hand that Jesus has just healed. The law has to be a living thing, one that leads people to freedom rather than binds them in legalistic chains. It has to be a vehicle for God’s grace irrespective of what day of the week it is.

March 7th

“What were you arguing about on the road?” Mark 9:33
(Read Mark 9:33-37)

Some quick observations on this verse and the surrounding passages:

1. Sometimes Jesus pulls his disciples aside to teach things to them in private rather than in the public eye (v. 30-31) ... What things might Jesus want to share with us as disciples that the world isn't ready for yet?
2. Sometimes even those closest to Jesus, and with him right there to talk to, just don't understand (v. 32) ... That's a relief, right? We don't have to understand everything Jesus is saying straight away!
3. This is where we get the best summary of God's topsy-turvy Kingdom that Jesus is all about revealing and releasing (v. 35).
4. Kids are valid sermon illustrations (v. 36-37).

But looking more directly at this question I noticed afresh that there are discussions, deliberations, and even arguments between disciples on the road that don't include Jesus' input (v.33-34) ... And when Jesus asks them what the argument is about the disciples go quiet because they know that they've missed something or that they are going to have Jesus reveal something beyond their own interests that will make them all realise they're in the wrong.

I'm sure this will be familiar to some of you, but it's like those times my kids are arguing, and I walk in and ask them what the fuss is about... They go in one of two directions: Either they start spouting "Well they said X..." and "Yeah, but that's only because they said Y...", or they do what the disciples do and keep shtum.

We don't know who, if anyone, cracked first and told of the argument. Jesus may well have been listening in the whole time and therefore didn't need them to say anything. Either way, he appears to jump straight into a spiel about what greatness looks like from his perspective and what it means to live and love in God's Kingdom. I can imagine the disciples drawing on the floor with their toe whilst avoiding eye contact with Jesus or with each other as he talks.

And so, the questions I'm left asking (because when I wrestle with Jesus, I'm always left asking myself more questions than I started with!) are these:

What discussions, deliberations and even arguments go on between us as disciples, even in our churches, that don't include Jesus?

If we were brave enough to ask Jesus for the divine perspective and the "right" answer, what would he say?

How often would I find myself drawing on the floor with my feet and avoiding eye contact because I've been more concerned with myself than with others?

What would it look like for me to learn from that experience and to include Jesus in the conversation earlier?

March 8th

“Do you believe this?” John 11:25-26

(Read John 11:17-36)

25 Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’



This passage is part of the raising of Lazarus, a familiar story to many of us, which brings up several questions. Why did Jesus not go when he knew that his friend was dying? Why did others who he knew who died not get raised from the dead? We don't know names of other friends or relatives, but Jesus must have known people – friends and family

members – who died. Why did he not raise them also?

Martha, Lazarus' sister, speaks out to Jesus – she tells him straight that if he had been there, her brother would have lived. She dared to accuse Jesus – or was she simply stating a fact? Jesus confirms that Lazarus will rise again, and she agrees, on the last day, she says, he will rise. And then Jesus tells her that anyone who believes in him will never die – and he asks the big question – ‘do you believe this?’ Martha then had the gift of a miracle before her very eyes – one that made her belief easier – she actually witnessed her brother being raised, but we don't get that, we can only act on faith.

How is your faith in times of trouble?

Are you able to truly say, as Martha did ‘yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah’ (v 27), especially when things are difficult for you?

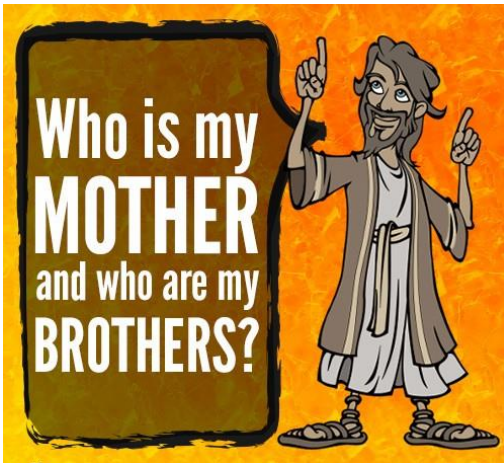
Jesus could have gone to see Lazarus sooner and healed him, do you sometimes wonder why Christ doesn't act in your life as quickly as you would like? Do you sometimes wonder why he seems to be silent, and what do you do in those circumstances – how do you help yourself to wait for his time?

Jesus said to Martha, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ – How would you answer that question?

March 9th

“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Matthew 12:48

(Read Matthew 12:46-50)



For some people the realisation that Jesus was not an only child might come of a surprise but he did in fact have siblings, four brothers whose names we know, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas, as well as several unnamed sisters.

In Jesus' day families would have been close knit extended communities often living within just a few miles of each other. These would be linked by blood, linked by marriage and almost certainly linked by faith. And it seems that in this passage, one that seems to widen the concept of family, Jesus says it

is those who allow God's will to become their will, those who are open to allowing God to work on them, in them and through them to bring about God's new kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven (think Lord's prayer) that are his extended / true family.

Whilst this was certainly aimed at the religious leaders of the day, who seemed deaf to hearing the 'good news', is it also suggesting that Jesus' blood family were struggling to get on board with what he was proclaiming (in Mark 3:21 they physically try to restrain him)

Today our families are geographically distanced due to studies, jobs, relationships or better opportunities elsewhere, with family members perhaps only coming together for certain events of the year.... Christmas, birthdays, special anniversaries and of course deaths.

Today, as well as family linked by blood or marriage, we might have other groups that we might think of as our family; a church family for example, a very close group of friends, work colleagues or simply an allegiance formed through a common bond i.e. football supporters. On her Radio 2 show, the DJ Jo Whiley often asks people to send in messages of love, support and encouragement to 'their tribe', a contemporary was of referring to those closest, nearest and dearest to you.

So, my question is this...which people form your 'family' and what are the values, principles, beliefs and indeed faith that you share? Who have acted as your mother, father, brothers and sisters during the past year? Who are those who have been there to support you, comfort you and occasionally cajole you out of your inertia? Who are they, and have you thanked them for being 'present' alongside your actual blood family and / or perhaps when they were not able / allowed to be? (think back to the Covid pandemic and the use of support bubbles)

Prayer: Please pray for all those within your family, group, tribe, or cohort who are there when you need them and also when you think you don't.

March 10th

“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness how can it be made salty again?”

Luke 14:34

(Read Luke 14:25-35)



Salt is essential for life and is one of our basic human tastes. It has been used since ancient times, within many cultures, for a variety of uses. As a preservative and for seasoning food.

Salt was a component of a ceremonial offering. Grain offerings were to be seasoned with salt, as the salt of our covenant with God.

Mixed with animal dung it provided fuel for clay ovens. After a time, the salt slab would lose its catalytic properties and become useless, thus “thrown out and trampled underfoot”.

Roman Soldiers received their wages in salt. Therefore, a soldier who did not carry out his duties “was not worth his salt”.

Salt, as sodium chloride, is essential to our health it regulates our fluid balance, plays a part in our nervous system and is involved in many other cellular and organ functions. Salt is said to have anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory properties and can promote healing (Disclaimer - high consumption of salt increases the risk of several diseases)

- Just as salt can make us thirsty, let us have a thirst for justice.
- Just as salt seasons food and can make it more appetising, Jesus’ teaching bring flavour and zest to our lives. Let’s bring the distinctive flavour of God’s values to all our lives, making life more palatable for all.
- Just as salt preserves, let us preserve the good in the world and keep it from spoiling. For salt to be an effective preservative it must come into contact with the food stuff. For us to be effective we must come into contact with our communities.

Yet salt can lose its flavour. When it gets wet and then dries we are left with a tasteless residue. As disciples we are called to be “salt of the earth” people, but we can lose our distinctive saltiness. Of course, being salty isn’t always easy it requires sacrifice and commitment as we represent Christ in our world.

Let us desire to salt the earth with the love and message of God. Let’s go against the medical advice by sprinkling this salt, the gospel, liberally.

And let us constantly ask ourselves the question “How salty are we?”

March 11th

“You of little faith, why do you doubt?” Matthew 14:31

(Read Matthew 14:22–33)

I have preached on this passage several times and usually focus on stepping out of the boat – something which I don’t find easy. I find it much safer to remain safely in the boat! For this series of reflections though, I was asked to focus on the question Jesus asks Peter who, unlike me, has stepped out of the boat, but then subsequently finds himself sinking. And the tone of the question certainly seems to be chastising Peter.



According to the Oxford Concise dictionary faith is – “complete trust or confidence” And so in a sense I can see what Jesus means – Peter, do you not have complete trust, complete confidence in me? But then I thought, actually Peter **did** show a great deal of faith in Jesus. In the midst of the storm, when Jesus walks on the water, it is Peter who says “Lord, if it’s you...” everyone else thought that it was a ghost! Peter doesn’t just say “**if** it’s you...” he says “**Lord**...” These are two incredible words of faith.

But Peter takes it still further. Peter has already seen Jesus do some pretty amazing things. Only that very same day Jesus had fed five thousand men, plus women and children, with just five loaves and two fish. Peter has such faith in this man that he says, ‘If you tell me to come, I have faith that I can walk on water too.’ And he acts on that faith and steps out of the boat. Now admittedly, when he realised what he was doing, and that the storm was still raging, as the Message puts it “he lost his nerve...” But even in that moment we still see Peter’s faith because, again he calls out to Jesus, “Lord, save me...” He knew that, even though he was sinking fast, this man walking on water, could save him.

Let’s think about the second part of the question – doubt. Doubting is usually a characteristic we assign to another disciple, Thomas, and I find it interesting that Jesus never specifically used the word doubt in his conversations with Thomas and yet he asks Peter why he doubts.

I think at times we all experience periods of doubt. We look at what is going on in the world and see war, famine, disease, injustice and destruction of the wonderful creation. We hear about the dreadful way people have been treated and let down by people in authority and by people who were supposed to be looking after them. We learn about the past, look at the present, and think “is it really any different? What have we learnt?” But when we are in the middle of doubt let’s have the faith of Peter and cry out “Lord, save me.” And let’s accept Jesus’ outstretched hand and be taken back to the safety of the boat. Doubt and faith often go hand in hand! “God of my faith, I offer you my doubt...in all my shadows you will walk with me...” *Colin Ferguson, Singing the Faith 629*
(images public domain)

March 12th

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost?” Luke 15:4

(Read Luke 15:1-7)

Chapter 15 is the heart of Luke's Gospel in which there are three parables about Lost and Found: the Sheep, the Coin, and the Sons.

In verses 1 - 7, Jesus is appealing to the custom of the time as he tells the parable of the lost sheep. And in the telling of the story Jesus asks the question ‘if one of the sheep is lost, what will the man do?’ If one sheep strays any shepherd would leave the ninety-nine who were safe and look for the missing one. This is a natural human response when something of value is lost.

The ninety-nine sheep are in (relatively) no danger because they are already found, though it's always possible that by leaving them, they risk them roaming off, being stolen, or being killed and eaten by a wolf. But the safe possession of ninety-nine sheep is no substitute for the one that is missing, and the shepherd keeps on looking until he finds it. I often wonder if I would be prepared to go looking for one sheep when I had already got ninety-nine in the field! I assume that there were other shepherds around who could care for the sheep.



Finding that one sheep is a joyful experience, and the shepherd celebrates as he brings it home on his shoulders. He doesn't worry about the weight of the sheep but simply rejoices in having found what was previously lost.

The search for one sheep rather than holding on to the ninety-nine might seem a bit mad to us but it reminds us that this is why the Gospel is such good news because when a soul is lost it is worth sending out the search party for and then celebrating upon its return.

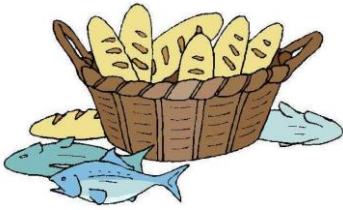
If we place ourselves in this story as the lost sheep, I don't know about you, but I'm really grateful that our God is a God of the lost and rejoices when the lost return to the fold.

I wonder if we thought sufficiently about this story, instead of dismissing it as one that we are overfamiliar with and think that we understood the meaning of, maybe this would result in us waiting with bated breath to see if the one who is lost will once again be returned into the arms of a loving God.

March 13th

“How many loaves have you?” Matthew 15:34

(Read Matthew 15:32-39)



This is the story of the feeding of the 4,000 which appears only in Mark and Matthew, unlike the very similar feeding of the 5,000 which is the only miracle story (excluding the resurrection) to be featured in all 4 gospels. (Matthew 14:17; Mark 6:38; Luke 9:16; John 6:9) Reading this passage I am struck by two things. The first is the choice of word used.

We read that Jesus has “compassion” for the crowd, because they have been with him for three days. And I think this is a word that sums up Jesus’ ministry and mission. A year or so ago Helen, Nikki and I ran a course all about wellbeing and in the session on ‘Social Wellbeing’ we explored the possible subtle differences between sympathy, empathy and compassion. At the end of running the session we came up with this

- **Sympathy** feeling sorry for someone’s misfortune.
- **Empathy** is our feeling of awareness toward other people's emotions and an attempt to understand how they feel. It is an understanding of our shared humanity. It’s the ability to see yourself in another person’s shoes.
- **Compassion** is an emotional response to empathy or sympathy which creates an actual desire to help.

What do you think...did we get it right?

We live in a world where we can all suffer from what is called ‘compassion fatigue’ due to almost constant deluge of bad news. In the end we might still feel sympathy or empathy with those suffering but the struggle to find concrete ways to try to bring about a change results in our compassion, our actual doing something about it, drying up.

The second thing that strikes me is that seven loaves and a few fish are never going to be enough to feed 4,000 people. And yet Jesus doesn’t ask the disciples ‘do you have enough to feed this lot? He simply asks them (and us) what do you have? Irrespective of how little it might appear, Jesus seems to be saying bring it, offer it, share it...and leave the rest to me!

Often we can think that we are not good enough, don’t have much to offer, can’t commit, don’t possess all the gifts and skills. And yet Jesus is only ever asking us to come as we are, bring what we can, join together as individuals and as a community. After all, when you add 0+0+0+0 together we will end up with...wait for it...0.

But when we add 1+1+1+1 together well who knows, when offered to Jesus in service and witness to him, then together we might possibly just change the world we live in for the better.

March 14th

“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?” Luke 15:8

(Luke 15:8-10)

In the society of the time people lived in household communities - there were rules about it! Various extended family members would all dwell together with shared responsibilities for one another. Lose something precious in that context and it's not one person whose job or responsibility it is to look for but the whole household... it's not one person scrabbling around, but a team making a sweep and seeking the precious and lost thing!

For unknown reasons that appears to not be the case in this story. Indeed, the way it is described in the passage has a hint of the 'little red hen' about it (look the story up if you can't remember it well)!

Ultimately the coin is found, and then they all rejoice (not just the hen)! The community gathers and celebrates the finding. The community gathers and celebrates joy. The community gathers and rejoices with the one who feels glad.

And the illustration serves to tell us that there is something missing in our lives but when we search hard for what is missing and find it, then wholeness is restored, when sin is dealt with, then there is the same rejoicing in heaven.

—

Playing devil's advocate though:

I wonder how many in the community knew there was something missing? Did they know and choose not to help, or was there a sense of pride for the woman that she didn't actually tell anyone that it was missing and chose to do the searching alone? What would people think if she'd lost something so important!?

I wonder if I ever present to the world that everything is ok, but inside I'm scrabbling round on my hands and knees searching for that thing that will restore wholeness? I wonder what it would look like for me to ask for help in searching so that we can get to the celebration quicker!?

I wonder if I'm not yet celebrating properly with my neighbour because, in the words of Bono, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for"?

March 15th

“Then what is the meaning of that which is written the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone?” Luke 20:17

(Read Luke 20:9-19)

In this parable Jesus is making a last appeal to the religious leaders of the day who have continually rejected God’s message.

Jesus is describing what apparently was a common action on the part of a property owner as he plants a vineyard and lets it out whilst he goes abroad. The tenants were probably farmers.

A slave was sent to collect the rent but instead of being given what was due they were faced with violence from the farmers and each slave who was sent was treated worse than the previous one.

The farmers seemed to have behaved unreasonably to us but it’s possible that there were reasons for their bad behaviour. Apparently a vineyard would make very little revenue in the first few years whilst the vines were establishing themselves. During this time, it was even possible that the owner might owe the farmers some money because he would be responsible for certain expenses, for example the purchase of stakes, which could possibly exceed the income.

If the farmers in this story rejected the owners account, saying that he owed them some money, their ill treatment of the messengers would be their way of registering their dissatisfaction.



In real life the owner would have probably taken strong action because he had the law on his side so you would imagine that he would have dealt severely with the farmers. But Jesus depicts a God who loves beyond

measure and is compassionate even when he has every right to be severe. So he speaks of the owner as sending his beloved son because maybe they will respect him but the farmers treat him unreasonably and kill him.

The parable is a reaction to the test presented to Jesus about the source of his authority and is one of only three parables that appear in all three synoptic gospels, the other two being the Sower and the mustard seed.

The question that needs to be asked is who owns the vineyard?

March 16th

“John’s baptism – was it from heaven, or from men?” Mark 11:30

(Read Mark 11:27-33)

Jesus is in Jerusalem with his disciples. Not their first visit to the great city of the Jewish community and faith. This account describes an encounter between Jesus and the religious authorities where they question his authority. Jesus is simply walking in the temple. It may be seen as a provocative act. It certainly raises the hackles of the whole religious leadership; priests, scribes, elders. They get together and confront Jesus. They want to know by what authority he is performing the actions he's doing. They want to know who gave him this authority. It is noteworthy that they ask from “who” his authority comes, not from where or what. They know this is personal and see Jesus as a threat to the people. Instead of directly answering their question, Jesus responds with a counter-question. He asks them about the source of John the Baptist's baptism—whether it came from heaven or was of human origin. Jesus is skilled at reflecting the questions set against him. He asks them, and us in our turn, to consider why we ask the things we do. What is the motivation? Is it for the common good or is it about our own selfish position in life. Let's be clear, Jesus is not against questions or doubts. His challenge is why we want to know. Is it out of learning and love, or from suspicion and fear. In this instance, it is a classic answer to that question that the religious leaders are brought up short and have to respond to his question. They didn't want an answer to their question. They asked it only to try and catch Jesus out and impress their own authority on him. The religious authorities discuss among themselves the possible answers. They recognize that either response has its challenges. If they say John's baptism is from heaven, they fear Jesus will ask why they didn't believe him. If they say it's of human origin, they are concerned about the public opinion, as many regarded John as a prophet. Faced with this dilemma, the religious authorities respond to Jesus, saying, "We do not know." In turn, Jesus declines to reveal by what authority he is doing things since they didn't answer his question about John's baptism. This passage highlights the strategic and often confrontational nature of Jesus' interactions with the religious leaders. Instead of directly answering their question, Jesus prompts them to confront their own understanding of authority and the messages from God. The episode reveals the reluctance of the religious authorities to commit to an answer, indicating the complex dynamics at play between Jesus and the established religious leadership.

Spirit of God. Make us aware of our motives. Help us see ourselves as you see us. Make us humble people, eager to learn the ways of truth and love. Help us to see Jesus in everyone we meet. Make us people who care for others, as well as ourselves. Help us in our prayers to set our whole lives before you. Make us unafraid to be ourselves with you. Help us to know Jesus as a friend as well as our Saviour. AMEN.

March 17th

“Do you understand what I have done to you?” John 13:12
(Read John 13:1-20)



This verse, from a longer passage within what is known as ‘the farewell discourse’ from John’s gospel, could be about many things, taken on its own.

Jesus has just washed the disciples’ feet, and it could be seen on the face of it as a simple and kind act because – well, their feet were mucky. But of course, it was more than that, so much more than that.

It’s interesting that Jesus asks them ‘do you know what I have done *to* you?’ He doesn’t say ‘for’ you, or ‘with’ you, he said ‘to’ you. He has done something to them, something special, and the disciples are not entirely sure what to make of it. Initially Peter has been horrified at the prospect of Jesus washing his feet. Feet are awful aren’t they? Especially mucky feet, and Peter is mortified that Jesus is going to perform this really intimate act. But what Jesus is doing to them is not simply making their feet clean, he is demonstrating this act of servanthood, of his servant ministry.

What Jesus has done to them is to make a start on making them physically clean and of course all his ministry is about making them spiritually clean too. But he’s showing them what his ministry is about. It’s never been about being a human idea of a King, it’s always been about showing his love of all people – even those with dirty feet. What he has done to them is demonstrate what he expects of them, what he would like them to continue to do in his place – to serve.



And his question is for you too – do you understand what Jesus has done to you?

March 18th

“Will you really lay down your life for me?” John 13:38

(Read John 13: 31-38)

Jesus has just explained to his confused disciples how He was about to return to heaven, where He would be seated at the Father's right hand. The disciples had expected Him to bring in the kingdom there and then and were distressed to hear Him say He was going away, and they would be unable to go to Him.

Simon Peter put into words the question on the heart of all the disciples: *"Lord, where are You going?"* Christ's puzzling message telling him that although Peter could not accompany him at that time he would follow later, emboldened the big fisherman to press the matter further by asking, *"Lord, why can I not follow You right now?"* and with his typical self-assured devotion, Peter boldly declared, *"I will lay down my life for You."*

No doubt, Peter had pumped up his own self-confidence and courage to such an extent that he could proudly proclaim, in front of the rest of the congregation, that he would die for Jesus. However, his passionate enthusiasm was quickly checked when Jesus answered, *"Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times."*

He simply wanted to stay with Jesus and the message that followed no doubt shocked Peter and must have stunned the rest of the disciples. Peter was known for his boldness and bravery and often became the spokesman for the entire group, but if Peter were to fail so terribly and so soon, what hope would there be for the rest of them? Jesus told his followers that Peter's predicted failure was to take place before the coming dawn.

Early the next morning when Peter heard the rooster crow, his heart must have broken as he recalled the words of Jesus, the man he loved so dearly and remembered how violently he denied Him, three times: *"Will you lay down your life for Me Peter? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times."*

Had the story ended here, it would have been a disappointing end to three wonderful years, but this is not the finale, but a vital step in the unfolding story of redemption. Following the Cross was the Resurrection when death was swallowed up in victory and following Peter's denial was his restoration and commission to feed Christ's sheep and care for His lambs.

The ongoing story of redemption continues today and as we read through the Scriptures we are reminded of our own human frailty, the need to trust in the Lord with all our heart, and of His sufficient grace in time of need.

Help us Lord to follow you, in life's ups and downs. **Amen.**

March 19th

“Who do YOU say that I am?”

(Read Matthew 16:13-15 or Mark 8:27-30)



Many of us have perhaps experienced a turning point; it might have been in a TV program, a book, a sporting event or even in our own lives. A decisive moment when the focus, the story of the direction of play suddenly swings in another direction.

In Mark's gospel, this section at Caesarea Philippi is one such turning point.

It is the pivot in Mark's account. Up until this point the action has taken place in the north with one miracle after another, bang, bang,

bang. It's been a tale of Jesus' power, his priorities and his pull on the crowds but from now on, it will be about the lonely path towards betrayal, brutality and burial.

The disciples it seems are quick to reply when asked who others think Jesus might be. But not quite so forthcoming when asked who they think Jesus is. They all suddenly become tongue tied. Well expect one. Peter.

Peter appears to have grasped just who Jesus is, the long-awaited Messiah, even if his concept of what Jesus will do to fulfil this vocation is far from correct. But just as Peter took a step out of the boat in faith to attempt to walk on water, here he is once again not afraid to step out into the unknown. Off course he hasn't got the whole picture but he has taken another step, a very public one, on his own personal faith journey, one that his fellow disciples are possibly not at the point to take.

But to use a fishing analogy this declaration doesn't mean that Peter's journey is going to be 'all plain sailing' from now on. Peter will continue to get it right and get it wrong almost in equal measure. He will stumble, he will speak before he thinks (don't we all), he will continue to be the rough diamond. Indeed, within the space of a few short chapters, Peter rollercoaster journey of faith will go from proclaiming 'You are the Messiah' to hiding in the shadows and declaring 'I do not know this man' (Mark 14:66-72).

At Caesarea Philippi Peter declared **HIS** knowledge and understanding of the Jesus that he knew, at that point in his life, as a result of his personal encounter, not anyone else's. The fact that the others were not so vocal doesn't mean their faith wasn't as strong or valid. It just means that their experience of Jesus was different. So, when you are faced with the same question.... who do you say I am?...YOUR answer is YOUR answer. Don't compare your faith journey to others because it's YOUR journey, YOUR encounter, Your EXPERIENCE. And as long as YOU have experienced that life changing encounter with Jesus, in whatever form it took, whether it be via a Damascus Road type revelation or a gradual slow burn, that's really all that matters.

March 20th

“You don’t know what you are asking, can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” Matthew 20:22.

(Read Matthew 20:20-28)

This is one of those stories that has slight differences depending which Gospel you read. The major difference is that in Mark 10 James and John approach Jesus for a favour. In Matthew 20 it’s their mum who asks Jesus for the same favour instead: “Jesus, can my boys be your favourites and sit right next to you forever?” I don’t think it matters too much which it is, but I think there’s something amusing about the idea that maybe it happened twice, and the brothers didn’t get what they wanted the first time so they sent their mum to ask for them a second time!

In both gospels the account happens thus:

1. Jesus specifically tells his listeners that the greatest in the Kingdom of God are those who would be the least, in particular those both welcoming and like little children.
2. there’s a (seemingly odd) interlude while Jesus debates divorce.
3. a “rich young man” comes before Jesus and asks how to inherit the sort of life Jesus has been teaching about, and he is given answers about following the law and surrendering his human comforts and excesses in order to follow Jesus.
4. Jesus reminds the disciples he’s got an unhappy task before him by returning to Jerusalem where people are looking for him in order to kill him.
5. James and John (or their mother) approach Jesus and ask him to let them sit on either side of him for eternity in a place of honour.

It’s like they just don’t get it. Either that or they’ve not been listening. They haven’t heard that to be someone with a claim to the kingdom, for it to “belong” to them and them to it, they need to be like little children. Little children don’t get the “seat of honour” on either side of the host. They get a separate kids table. And my understanding is that THAT is where you’d find Jesus sitting... They’ve overlooked the (seemingly odd) interlude when Jesus says to the male pharisees (“What about reasons divorce?”) where Jesus again references the law and structures as being prohibitive to finding the fulness of life promised by the kingdom... They’ve overlooked the rich young man’s quest for ultimate fulfilment in belongings, position, influence and power and the incompatibility of the things he holds dearest and prides himself on and his walk with Jesus... And they’ve overlooked the cup. The cup is the task that Jesus has to undertake. A task that even Jesus asked not to have... But that James and John perceived themselves capable of drinking. A cup that would be the greatest humbling of the humanity of Jesus, bringing him humiliation and death, but releasing the fullness of divinity through the resurrection to life... Jesus question essentially tells them that they can have the place of honour, they can sit next to him, but the thrones don’t look like they imagine. There isn’t glory in the journey, and the cup is bitter, but the Kingdom itself is going to be something to marvel at. How does that appeal to you!?

March 21st

“Why did you strike me?” John 18:23

(Read John 18:12-24)

Jesus answered, ‘If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?’

Here we have Jesus, the most peaceful man to have ever lived – the most anti-violent activist ever – and yet they had to defeat him with violence. He could get angry – we know how cross he got in the temple when there was buying and selling going on, when he overturned the tables and threw people out – but he never wanted violence. He knew the answer was never violence.

Why did you strike me? Jesus asks this question in genuine wondering – he has done nothing wrong, and yet he is struck. So, he asks Annas, if you can show what I’ve done wrong, fine, but as you can’t – why did you strike me? He is asking Annas to think about his actions, why did you resort to causing pain?

This verse on the surface talks of physical pain, a strike across the face, but it could also, on another level, be about emotional pain too, and that’s when it gets tricky for us doesn’t it? If we replace the word ‘strike’ with the word ‘hurt’ and place it in the mouth of Jesus speaking to us – it could become quite uncomfortable for us. Why did you hurt me? Jesus asks us, after the time we have ignored him. After the time we have had the opportunity to help someone in need, but we have walked by on the other side. After a time when we could have told someone of our love of Jesus and maybe helped them to come to know him like we do – but we failed to act. Why did you hurt me? Jesus asks.

We are forgiven, and we are loved, but that doesn’t mean it gives us a right to behave however we want. Our actions have consequences, and just because we can go back to Jesus and say we are sorry – really, deeply and absolutely sorry – and we are forgiven by him, it doesn’t make it right that we hurt him sometimes, even when we don’t mean to. Think of the night of Jesus’ arrest, Peter is asked three times – ‘do you know this man?’ and right in front of Jesus he says ‘Man, I do not know him’ (Luke 22:55-62) and Jesus looked at him.

I don’t know about you, but I can imagine the pain on Jesus’ face at that time, and I never, ever want to be the person who causes such pain on the face of Christ, our Saviour.

March 22nd

“Why are you trying to trap me?” Mark 12:15

(Read 12:13-17)

“We’ve got him this time guys...” The teachers of the law think they’ve got Jesus trapped between a rock and a hard place. If he suggests they don’t need to pay their taxes they’ll be able to convict him of treason against Caesar and the Roman way, but if he suggests paying it then he will enter into a political conflict with those who would do anything to see Israel free from Roman tyranny.

The flattery they offer beforehand is designed to butter Jesus up so that his words are given extra weight by those who are listening, his influence being used as added fuel to whichever side he is about to upset with his answer...

But Jesus isn’t wet behind the ears. He can smell the trap a mile off, and so he asks today’s question: **“Why are you trying to trap me!?”**

And then Jesus lives up to the integrity that the flattery mentioned. In spite of the trap instead of choosing not to answer (which was an option that would have had other ramifications I’m sure) his answer falls in line with everything he stands for. It is true; Honest; Presenting a single face to the world; One; Whole; Complete.

His answer puts his priorities first. And Jesus’ priority is not to rob Caesar, but to redeem what is God’s.

“Bring me a coin and let me look at it...
Whose image is this? And whose words are on it?

...

Then let the one whose image is there claim what he owns.”

A beautiful navigation of a complex issue! Something that was deliberately divisive and loaded with passion and inflammatory potential quashed, and the focus restored to who Jesus is. And in that one line - “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” - presents the whole Gospel.

He reminds people of that Genesis moment of the instilling of God’s image in humanity: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...” (Genesis 1:26). Give to God what is God’s.

He reminds people of God’s words and laws, his inscription on their very hearts, as the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed: “declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:33) Give to God what is God’s.

We are also made in the image of God. God’s word and law are engraved deep within our hearts and God’s Spirit flows through us. May we find the courage to recognise to whom we belong, to offer ourselves to God, and continue to give to God what is God’s.

March 23rd

“Why are you sleeping?” Luke 22:46

(Read Luke 22: 39-46)

For three years Christ had taught and trained His disciples. For three years He had let them share His ministry, His miracle-working power, His comfort, His encouragement, and His blessing. Now He had come to the hour of His agony and He took His disciples with Him to Gethsemane, going a little distance further with His chosen few. In the midnight hour of prayer agony, He longed for their prayer-companionship, but they soon fell asleep.

The Son of God was wrestling with the burden of the world's sin – but the disciples slept. He prayed until His heart was crushed with the weight of their sin – but the disciples slept. He prayed until His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground – but they slept on. One of their own number had become a traitor and was even now doing his worst – but they slept on.

It was arguably the hour of the world's greatest crisis; the disciples were needed; they were given the privilege to be alongside Jesus in this important hour – but they slept through it. It was the greatest opportunity they had ever had to prove their love for Christ – but they slept on. Three times Jesus came and awakened them.

It is really hard to understand why the disciples did not realise the significance of this moment. As a result, it perhaps can be too easy to chastise them for it. But the reality is, would we have done the same? I wonder if you were to imagine yourself as a disciple ...

For years Christ has been training you. He has blessed you, supplying your material, physical, and spiritual needs. He has guided you step by step. He has been your constant help; He has never failed you. For years He has been preparing you and training you – but spiritually you are still asleep.

Once more the world, your land, your friends are in sorrow and in need. Once more it is a crisis hour. Mighty forces, seen and unseen, are engaged in a crucial conflict. Decisions taken today may lead whole nations to war or to peace. Decisions taken today may lead to wider doors of gospel opportunity or to restrictions on the people of God. The destiny of many is in the balance – but are you spiritually asleep?

While it may be easy, do not condemn Peter, James, and John for their neglect. I wonder, do we not fall into the similar trap in the busyness of life's chaos? Do not despise those sleeping disciples, because are we sleeping too? Christ's voice is echoing down the centuries speaks to us today: ***“WHY ARE YOU SLEEPING? GET UP AND PRAY!”***

March 24th

“Judas is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?” Luke 22:48

(Read Luke 22: 47-53)



To many people the fact that Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, an intimate, personal act, is shocking. And it is but perhaps not for the reason we think? I mean did Judas need to identify Jesus at all. Yes the scene takes place in a garden at night but there was probably a full moon (due to when Passover falls in the Jewish calendar) and we might assume the people coming to arrest Jesus as well as the disciples themselves had torches. Members of the arresting party might even have seen Jesus before after his antics in the temple earlier in the week.

Unlike today when to greet someone with a kiss on the cheek (or both) or just kiss the air adjacent to a cheek alongside the associated sound effect...Mwah, is perhaps a common practise, in his book 'The Longest Week' (a fabulous account of the last week of Jesus' life), Nick Page suggests that such displays of intimate affection were very much frowned upon in the ancient world, both within the Jewish and Roman communities.

Yet for Jesus and his inner circle it appears to be a regular practise, one that marks them out, one that creates an intimate bond between them. We might remember Jesus castigating Simon the Pharisee for not greeting him with a kiss (Luke 7:45) and indeed Paul on five occasions in his letters to the churches across the Mediterranean often encourages those early Christians to 'greet one another with a holy kiss / kiss of love' (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; or 1 Peter 5:14)

Given that according to John's gospel account Jesus' ministry has been going on for three years, this greeting with a kiss, has probably become a distinctively Christian form of greeting whenever they met. Even if that meeting was one of betrayal. For Judas, even knowing what he was about to do, it was quite possibly 'the most natural' way that he would greet Jesus rather than simply point towards him to identify him. Perhaps the one thing Judas struggled to betray was a force of habit that was ingrained in him.

Perhaps in this intimate, inclusive and yet exclusive act, Judas doesn't just betray Jesus but betrays of the whole fellowship, their ritual, their habit, their distinctive greeting. AND YET...and yet in Matthew's account (Matt 26: 50) immediately following 'the kiss of betrayal' Jesus turns to Judas and says "**Friend**, do what you are here to do. 'I wonder which one of us, after being fatally betrayed by one of our closest confidants, would be able, just like Jesus, to still call them friend. And I suspect if Judas hadn't committed suicide, would almost certainly, post resurrection, have sought him out and forgiven him too.

March 25th

“Do you see all these great buildings?” Mark 13:2

(Read Mark 13:1-23)

In the past I've lumped this question together with the conversations Jesus has where he instigates something with getting people to picture things... Like when he talks about the sparrows and the lilies and uses them to talk to people about worry. Or when he's about to embark into a parable and asks something like "have you ever stopped and thought about...? Well, the Kingdom's like that! You see..."

This time I noticed that there's an intro to Jesus' question. Jesus had been in the temple with his disciples and one of them is captivated as he walks out. Perhaps he looks up this time more than he normally does (I wonder when the last time was you looked upwards as you were walking through town? I wonder what flourishes we'd see in architecture above our normal feet staring level, or eye level? I spotted a stone fox on the top of a building for the first time the other day!). Whatever it is, he's got reason to comment: "Look at this place! Can you see it!? Isn't it something special?"

The disciple is responding to the beauty of the world around him, at the creativity of those who have used their gifts to build something impressive. And Jesus' responds with a question that I imagine means "oh you noticed that too did you!?" And Jesus starts from that disciple's place of wonder, and a shared appreciation of what is before them, and goes on to say, "It looks good, but it won't last." Jesus doesn't condemn the sense of wonder or being impressed by what is there, but he manages to change the perspective and perception of the object of wonder.

The passage that follows sees those simple questions turning into complex and varied warnings about the future, about the instability of the structures of humankind, about the destructive influences that can ruin even the man-made structures that seem strongest and impress us most.

For a passage titled "The Destruction of the Temple and Signs of the End Times" in the NIV, there is very little about the temple beyond the starting point. I don't want to get bogged down in "Eschatology" (Study of the End Times) other than to recognise something that I think Jesus is saying to me this time I hear this question, and ask myself a couple more questions whilst I'm at it:

It's ok to be impressed by beauty, especially things that have been built to help people celebrate and worship God, but how are you also going to invest in things that will last even longer?

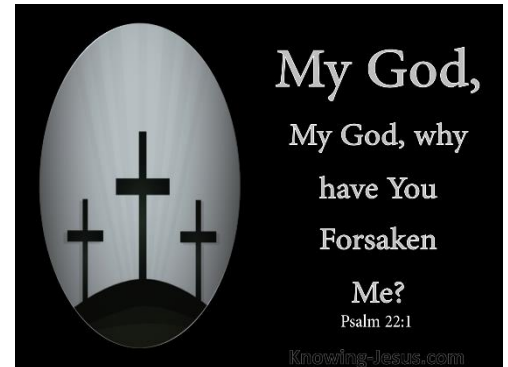
The Kingdom model is to live and love as lasting, worshipping temples made of breathing stones, built on the unshakeable cornerstone of Christ. How is my life being built in line with Jesus today?

I wonder what wonderings Jesus' question inspired in you today.

March 26th

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Matthew 27:46
(Read Matthew 27:45-55)

This passage is one of the most poignant in the whole Bible, perhaps the most poignant of all things ever written down. Jesus, dying in agony, humiliated, gasping his last breath, cries out to God, ‘Why have you left me alone? Where are you?’



This line that Jesus gasps, is from Psalm 22 - it is the first line of a Psalm of someone in so much torment, so much pain, that they can barely express how they feel. And Jesus obviously knew the scriptures very well, this was the most appropriate Psalm for him to throw out to God. ‘Where are you?’

Jesus had gone through so much, his ministry had been one of servanthood, of healing, caring, showing compassion and teaching. He had loved the unlovable, the people he was not supposed to go near, the people he shouldn't be associating with – like lepers, women, tax collectors, Samaritans. He has done what God asked of him, he has lived his life knowing that it would come to this, deliberately going to Jerusalem knowing that it would be the death of him. And he has suffered at the hands of the Romans, suffering humiliation, scourging, the horrendously evil crown of thorns, and now he hangs on a cross, expending his last breaths to shout at God.

I have felt like shouting at God, I have in fact done it once or twice. I wonder if you have ever felt like that. Sometimes we can feel very alone and we cry to God for help, it can feel as though God is not there, or we are being forsaken.

But there is hope – because of these words of Jesus, because of his hideous experience, we know that when we cry out to God, we are heard, and Jesus knows exactly what it feels like for us. We are not being forsaken, God is there, and God is listening. Jesus had this experience and so he understands how we feel when it seems as though God is not with us. Jesus does not leave us feeling forsaken, Jesus is beside us, walking with us, strengthening us as we go through the hardest of times, even when (maybe especially then) we don't feel like he is there.

Me: My God, why have you forsaken me?

God: I'm still here love, always and forever. I will never forsake you.

March 27th

“Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” John 20:15

(Read John 20:10-18)

I wonder how you read this question. I wonder what tone of voice you give to Jesus, or indeed to the Angels who ask the same question of Mary two verses prior. One commentary I looked at suggested that there is a sense of rebuke in the way that the Angels ask their question. “What are you crying for? Dry your eyes! Can’t you see the tomb is empty!?” I’m not sure that’s how Jesus asks it though. I think Jesus asks it in the same way as he asks those who seek healing from him “What is it that you want from me?” I think it’s about Jesus recognising and celebrating humanity and honouring them in their moment of need.

I have no issues with God being able to know all that is needed, and I have no doubt that the power of God working in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit is able to renew, restore, heal and make things well, to turn mourning into joy. But in the same way we are instructed to pray and petition, to bring our hearts before God in prayer when God already knows everything, I think we are called to name and express the longings of our hearts. I think it’s about the moment of relationship that helps us to live and process what is going on. It is by doing so that we maybe find ourselves looking deeper into ourselves, discovering answers that we didn’t know we needed to give, or questions we didn’t know we needed to ask.

Honouring and naming our feelings is important. Naming what we’re looking for is important. Allowing ourselves to be fully human, including loving and losing, mourning, and dancing, hoping, and despairing, feeling both joy and sorrow (and sometimes even both at the same time!) is important. Recognising that Jesus does not seek to negate or do away with our feelings is important. Instead, what Jesus does is call us by name and make us aware of his affection in the midst of our suffering.

And sometimes that reminder allows us to carry on our journey through life, still processing all we have experienced, but sometimes without a direct presence of Jesus. It doesn’t help for us to jump straight to platitudes and “everything is ok” in the midst of pain. It doesn’t respect the power of life and love to neglect mourning and jump to “Life goes on.”

For Mary the answer to the second question, “Who is it you are looking for?”, happens to be Jesus. I’d suggest that Jesus isn’t always the answer for you and me. Yet I think that in those moments I could do with reminding that Jesus is there.

I think the answer to the first question, “Why are you crying?”, is complex. Yes, she has just seen Angels and noticed the empty tomb, but in her heart, she’s still not finished with Jesus. The loss and pain are raw. Things may be left unsaid. His body is left untended. Physically, spiritually, mentally she must have been drained and confused... And in our humanness, we can appreciate the complexity of emotion, especially around death.

So, I wonder: “What is it you’re feeling? Who, or what, are you looking for?”

March 28th

“What are you discussing together as you walk along?” Luke 24:17

(Read Luke 24:13-35)

I remember, some years ago now, being at Easter People in Llandudno. I was a relatively new Christian and filled with excitement at what was going to unfold in that morning's Bible Study in a theatre.

I can't remember all the details of that morning but I remember very clearly it being about the road to Emmaus and I left with a sense that the road was not just about Jesus and the disciples, but it was also about me.

How must those disciples have felt as they travelled on that road? They had seen so much in recent days which was literally ground breaking. They had seen the very core of their lives being tested and challenged. How easy it would have been to have sunk into despair.



I wonder if we ever feel the same. The world around us often seems to be on very shaky foundations – who would choose to live in a place where bombs ravage the streets and lives are torn apart by war? Who would want to live a life that is controlled by someone stronger than you, whether a partner, or even some invisible force online? So many distractions to threaten our security. Where is love in these dark times?

But something happens on this Emmaus road. Jesus appears and changes the disciples' hearts and they return along that road already travelled. Maybe the truth is that when we too meet with Jesus on the road to Emmaus we can experience something which is life changing. Maybe God opens our hearts to new possibilities and, even more, to greater depths of love like we've never experienced before.

And we have a choice; we can continue on that road towards Emmaus or we can go back and, as we return, we can experience a world that is no longer filled with despair, but with the hope of a future filled with promise.

March 29th

“Do you have anything here to eat?” Luke 24:41

(Read Luke 24:36-43)

There's an old observation that if you knock on someone's door at teatime in Glasgow you'll be greeted with a question: "you'll be here for your tea, then?" If you do the same thing in Edinburgh, you'd get a different question: "you'll have had your tea, then?"

And to this day, this question that Jesus asks is often in the first 3 questions I ask when I visit my parents.

In Glasgow you'll be welcomed in for a meal, squashed round the table as family and well fed. In Edinburgh you'll be hurried along with your business so that you can be turfed out again. And at my parents' house I have to ask because they get lost in the joy and wonder of my miraculous appearance and forget to feed me...

I know people have told me that this passage is about Jesus eating to prove he's real and not an apparition (because ghosts can't eat fish, except for "Sole" or "Hali-boo-t"! See what I did there!?). It's a biblical thing for those who are seemingly other-worldly (angels dining with Abraham) or recently resurrected (Jairus' daughter) to be given food and so that's a valid observation.

But I believe that the stories we read in the Bible are like onions and ogres: They have layers. And I wonder what other layers we might discover.

What if there is something in here about hospitality as well?

And what if in that moment it's about re-grounding the miraculous overcoming of sin and death that the resurrection stands for in the earthly and immediate?

What if the risen Jesus is inviting himself in and is expecting the time and relationship that sitting down for a meal suggests?

The disciples are clearly delighted, and their wonder and disbelief is because of their joy and amazement. They've already had a poke and a feel to attest Jesus' tangibility, so perhaps they're so excited about the extra-ordinary nature of Jesus' appearance that they forget about the importance of eating and sharing the moment with Jesus. But in this simple question Jesus brings them back into the room and re-focusses them on the immediate and not just the eternal. (Maybe Jesus was even a little bit hangry, having had a long few days...)

These disciples are not the first, nor are they the last, who will come to recognise Jesus in the act of eating with him, in the moment of sharing a meal with him. Many of Jesus' most poignant encounters involve food and the things that come with dining together, and at the house of Cleopas at the end of the road to Emmaus they recognise Jesus in the way he takes and breaks the bread with them. During this meal verse 45 says he "opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

I wonder: If Jesus turned up today would we respond with an Edinburgh welcome ("State your business and go"), like my parents or the disciples (lost in wonder but neglecting to eat with Jesus), or like a good Glaswegian who makes space and time at the table for one more? What might we learn whilst eating with Jesus?

March 30th

“Friends, haven’t you any fish?” John 21:5

(Read John 21:1-14)

This is the third time that Jesus has appeared to the disciples following his resurrection. The disciples are doing together what they have done for years; fishing for food to feed their families and in doing this I imagine that they might have found some comfort. They hadn’t caught any fish that night and Jesus told them to cast their net on the other side of the boat and when they do the net is full of fish, so much so that they can’t haul the catch into the boat.

It was certainly someone who knew the fishermen of the Sea of Galilee who wrote this story.



When Jesus speaks to the disciples, we may wonder why experienced fisherman would listen to the direction of someone on the shore who they didn’t initially recognise. It happens very often that the man with the net must rely on the advice of someone on the shore who tells him to cast either to the left or to the right, because he can often see what’s

in the clear water more easily than the person who is doing the fishing. So, Jesus was acting as a guide to his friends.

It was probably difficult for the disciples to recognise Jesus, but Peter’s eyes were sharp and he knew that it was him. We can imagine that Peter wasn’t in great shape and it’s as though Jesus gently searches his heart and uncovers Peter’s real commitment to him. Peter must have felt completely defeated and the last person he wanted to see was this man who he had betrayed in the most terrible way, however he jumps into the water so that he could be the first to meet his Lord.

Jesus shows forgiveness to Peter when he reinstates him. Jesus speaks to Peter and asks him three times how much he loves him which echoes the three times that Peter had previously denied him. At the end of this questioning Jesus asks Peter to follow him; there is no telling off or criticism of Peter but just a desire that Peter will be his faithful disciple. So, with a lightness of spirit, Peter is invited along with the other disciples to share in a breakfast on the beach, a breakfast that probably never tasted so good.

March 31st

“Do you love me?” John 21:17

(Read John 21: 15-25)

“Do you love me more than these?” Are we meant to measure our love for Christ by comparing our love to others? Is it enough for us to say, I know I don’t love Christ as much as I could, but at least I love him more than this other person? Of course not. We are not meant to measure our love in this way. So why does Jesus ask this question of Peter? Because earlier, Peter had done just that. On the night of the Last Supper, when Jesus predicted that the Apostles would fall away from Him, Peter boasted, *“Though they all fall away... I will never fall away”* (Mt 26:33). But of course, Peter did fall away, denying Christ not once, not twice, but three times that very night. By asking Peter, *“Do you love me more than these?”* Jesus is not inviting Peter to compare his love to that of others. Rather, He invites Peter to realize the weakness of his own love. He invites Peter to move from a place of pride to a place of humility. It is only from that place of humility that Peter is able to restore his relationship with Jesus.

Jesus asks Peter three times “do you love me?” Here is where the limitations of the English language hinder us. There is a dynamic in this conversation— a dance, if you will — where Peter not only moves toward Christ, but Christ moves toward Peter. Our English word *love* is used for so many things. We use it to describe our most intimate human relationships and how we feel about ice cream! In the original Greek in which John wrote his gospel, there were multiple words for different types of love. Jesus asks Peter twice “do you love me?” using the Greek word *agape*, meaning a pure, unselfish, self-giving love. Peter responds by using the word *philia*, which refers to affection shared between friends. *Philia* is a wonderful kind of love, but it is less than *agape*. *Agape* is universal love; it is what we mean by the virtue of charity.

I can imagine Peter’s inner struggle as he considers Jesus’s question. He knows he does not love Jesus with total, self-giving *agape*. Despite his failures, he still wants Jesus. He wants to love him better than he does. And that’s enough for Jesus. Jesus does not reject Peter’s offer of a lesser love. He accepts it. He tells Peter to *“feed my sheep.”* Despite his inferior love, Christ gives Peter a share in his role as the Good Shepherd, placing the entire flock of the Church into Peter’s care.

And when Jesus asks Peter a third time, *“do you love me?”* He does not use the word *agape*. He uses the word *philia*, which is the love Peter was able to offer. He takes Peter’s offering, and he magnifies it.

The good news here is the truth that Christ meets us where we are, no matter what we have done; He accepts whatever we have to offer. Christ accepts us as we are, in our brokenness. We can only love at all because He first loved us. (1 John 4:19).

Amen.