



March 2020

Learning Life From Jesus

**Readings,
Reflections,
and Prayers
from the
Gospel of Matthew 3**

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Monday, March 2: Matthew 12:1-14

What is most important in our community, church, or family: people? rules? things? traditions?

In Jesus' world, rules were critically important. For instance, *Halakha* (Jewish law derived from the Torah) identifies thirty-nine categories of activity prohibited on the Sabbath from baking, sewing, and harvesting, to extinguishing a fire (even if great property damage will result: only if a fire threatens a human life may a person extinguish the flames). According to the rabbis, a Jew is only allowed to violate a Sabbath law in the event that a human life is genuinely in danger. In Jesus' world certain religious traditions – especially the Temple in Jerusalem and all the ceremony that went with it – were also hugely important.

Jesus of course, directly challenges the Pharisees' priorities. Not only is it OK to violate a Sabbath law to save a person's life, it is OK to break a Sabbath law to gather what you need to eat, or to care for someone who is ill (both forbidden by the Pharisees). In Mark's account of this encounter, Jesus adds, "*The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath*" (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath is God's gift of rest, renewal, and blessing to His people: if rest, renewal, and blessing mean enjoying God's bounty, caring, and healing ... great.

Jesus refers to the time when David – anointed as king, but not yet crowned – came to the house of God in Shiloh in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. David was the unheralded king. David and his friends were given special bread to eat that was reserved for the priests. Technically, they "broke" the Law. People were more important.

Jesus chooses to tell this story purposely. David was the true king, even though the people hadn't publicly recognized that yet. Like David, Jesus is God's anointed One, the king. People just haven't recognized that yet. Jesus is every bit as much a king as David. Like David, Jesus can prioritize people over the Law.

Where's your heart at? Is your faith about a checklist of rules? Is it about "right" traditions? Or is it about care and compassion for people? Jesus – God – the King loves all people.

His invitation to us is that we love people with the same heart of compassion. How can we do that? He is also inviting us to enjoy the Sabbath and God's blessings. How can we do that?

*Keep us, O God, from pettiness:
let us be large in thought, in word, in deed.
Let us be done with faultfinding and leave off self-seeking.
May we put away all pretenses and meet each other, face to face,
without self-pity and without prejudice.
May we never be hasty in judgment and always generous.
Let us take time for all things; make us to grow calm, serene, gentle.
Teach us to put in action our better impulses-straightforward and unafraid.
Grant that we may realize it is the little things of life that create difficulties;
that in the big things of life we are as one.
Oh, Lord, let us not forget to be kind.
Amen*

Tuesday, March 3: Matthew 12:15-21 and Isaiah 42:1-4

Most of us like to get credit for the things they do. If you write a book, you have your name on the cover. If you win a race, you stand on the podium. If you win an award, you get your name in print. If you finish a degree, you get a certificate and you can put some letters after your name.

In particular, kings, presidents, prime ministers and other leaders like to get credit. They take credit for trade deals, economic successes, military victories, etc. In fact, if they can, they will often gladly steal the credit from those who actually negotiated the deals, ran the races, and fought in the wars. They gladly receive the applause and accolades of their supporters, even for things they may not have accomplished.

The movers and shakers especially favour and reward their wealthy and powerful supporters. After all, they can give them the loudest cheers and contribute the most to their support.

What about Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Jesus has been doing amazing things, but "*Jesus withdrew from that place ... and warned the people not to reveal who he was*" (12:15-16). Matthew goes on to quote Isaiah 42:1-4, one of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, God's promised Saviour and King. This is not a monarch who seeks the limelight, loves His name in print, tweets about His achievements, longs to pack out stadiums, or loves the roar of the crowds.

Jesus simply does God's work. Day in. Day out. Without notoriety. Without applause. He avoids the spotlight. The people Jesus chooses to help most – the outcasts, poor, ill, demon-possessed, refugees, women, foreigners – are those least able to promote His cause or do anything for Him in return.

Most of us are not the movers and shakers of society. We may not feel like we are important. No one really notices us. But Jesus does. Jesus has come for ordinary people, just like us. He has come for hurting people, just like us. He has come for people who have little to offer Him in return, just like us.

Yet in us, and through us, God can build – and is building – His Kingdom. Yes, Jesus will welcome prime ministers and presidents who humble themselves, pray, and welcome Him as Saviour and Lord. But He is just as pleased to welcome you and I as we humble ourselves, pray, and welcome Him. And He will build His Kingdom through us, ordinary people, as surely as through "powerful" people. God loves you. Thank Him for His love. How can we love others, in the name of Jesus?

*Glorious God, give me grace to amend my life,
and to have an eye to my end without begrudging death,
which to those who die in you, good Lord, is the gate of a wealthy life.
And give me, good Lord, a humble, lowly, quiet, peaceable, patient,
charitable, kind, tender and pity-full mind,
in all my works and all my words and all my thoughts,
to have a taste of your holy, blessed Spirit.
Give me, good Lord, a full faith,
a firm hope, and a fervent charity,
a love of you incomparably above the love of myself.
Give me, good Lord, a longing to be with you,
not to avoid the calamities of this world,
not so much to attain the joys of heaven, as simply for love of you.
And give me, good Lord, your love and favor,
which my love of you, however great it might be,
could not deserve were it not for your great goodness.
These things, good Lord, that I pray for, give me your grace to also labour for.
Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535)

Wednesday, March 4: Matthew 12:22-37

Where does the power come from? In the Oscar winning movie, *Chariots of Fire*, UK Olympic champion and missionary to China, Eric Liddell, speaks after a race: "*You came to see a race today. To see someone win. It happened to be me. But I want you to do more than just watch a race. I want you to take part in it.*"

"I want to compare faith to running in a race. It's hard, requires concentration of will, energy of soul. You experience elation when the winner breaks the tape -- 'specially if you've got a bet on it. But how long does that last? You go home. Maybe your dinner's burnt. Maybe, maybe you haven't got a job. So who am I to say, "believe," "have faith," in the face of life's realities?"

"And where does the power come from to see the race to its end? From within. Jesus said, "Behold, the kingdom of God is within you." "If, with all your hearts ye truly seek Me, ye shall ever surely find Me" – if you commit yourself to the love of Christ. And THAT is how you run the straight race."

In Matthew 12, the crowd are talking about Jesus. Where does His power comes from? The crowd speculates, *"Could it be that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah?"*(12:23).

The Jewish leaders are feeling threatened. So they claim Jesus' power is coming from the devil. Of course, this charge is easily dismissed: why would the devil want to undo his own nasty handiwork?

"A tree is identified by its fruit" Jesus goes on to say. *"If a tree is good, its fruit will be good. If a tree is bad, its fruit will be bad ... A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart"*(12:33-35). What does Jesus' fruit reveal about where His power comes from? What does the Jewish leaders' fruit say about them?

*"Behold, the kingdom of God is within you." "If, with all your hearts ye truly seek Me, ye shall ever surely find Me,"*says Jesus. When His Spirit is in us, we will bear good fruit. The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). How can I live this fruit in my life?

*Lord, for tomorrow and its needs, I do not pray;
Keep me, my God, from stain of sin just for to-day.
Let me both diligently work, and duly pray.
Let me be kind in word and deed, just for to-day.
Let me be slow to do my will, prompt to obey;
Help me to sacrifice myself just for to-day.
And if to-day my tide of life should ebb away,
Give me Your love divine, sweet Lord to-day.
So for to-morrow and its needs I do not pray,
But keep me, guide me, love me, Lord, just for to-day.
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Thursday, March 5: Matthew 12:38-50

Jesus has just healed a man with a deformed hand (12:9-13) and a demon-possessed man, who was blind and couldn't speak (12:22). *"One day some teachers of religious law and Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign to prove your authority""*(12:38). Previously Jesus has healed lepers, blind people, and raised people from the dead. What further proof do they want???

Jesus goes on to talk about Jonah. The prophet Jonah was called to preach God's good news to the people of Nineveh, Israel's enemies. Instead, he fled across the Mediterranean, was thrown into the sea, swallowed by fish for three days, then returned to Nineveh. Jonah was "dead and buried" (metaphorically) in the belly of a fish for three days, then was "resurrected," to preach salvation to Nineveh. Jesus will be dead and buried (literally) but rise again on the third day, bringing salvation. He is foreshadowing what is to come.

Jesus continues the Jonah story talking about how the people of Nineveh – a wicked non-Jewish city – repented and were saved. The Queen of Sheba (now Saudi Arabia and Yemen – non-Jewish) came and listened to God's wisdom through Solomon. In Jesus' day, outcasts, sinners, and non-Jewish people are repenting; they are being saved by their faith in God's grace. However, many Jewish people are not repenting; therefore, they are not saved. Repentance and salvation go hand in hand.

What conclusion should the Jewish people come to? They should be able to see the signs and recognize Jesus is the Messiah. But they don't ... Foreigners get it. "Sinners" get it. Lepers get it. Demon-possessed people get it. But the religious Jewish people cannot connect the dots.

Jesus talks about the fact that the Jewish authorities had been trying to “exorcise the demons” – to purify their religion, to follow all the rules, to get everybody on board with being a pure Jewish nation that followed all the rituals and regulations. But it wasn’t working. In fact, they were becoming more judgmental, more bigoted, more cruel, more unloving, and more evil than ever before. In their attempts to sweep out one set of demons – pagan and secular influences – they had invited in a host of evil, heartless, cruel, judgmental, and empty doctrines. Their religion was heartless, bitter, and unmerciful.

In contrast, Jesus points out the fellowship of those who are discovering the presence and power of God—his disciples: *“Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”* (12:49-50).¹

We can choose between a narrow, bigoted, judgmental, cruel, unloving, uncompassionate, hard-nosed, negative ritualized religion, OR the unconditional love, positive, life-affirming – and joyful – life in the Kingdom of God. I know which I choose. May the fruit in my life show the same good things that Jesus taught and modelled in His life. Love. Mercy. Forgiveness. Grace. Hope. Joy. Peace.

*Grant us, O God, your protection;
and in your protection, strength;
and in strength, understanding;
and in understanding, knowledge;
and in knowledge, the knowledge of justice;
and in the knowledge of justice, the love of justice;
and in that love, the love of God, God and all goodness.
Amen*

Friday, March 6: Matthew 13:1-23

When a new government is elected, there are expectations. Huge expectations. A new golden age will come. The nation will be “great again.” The economy will boom. Crime will end. Social problems will cease. There will be unity. All will be wonderful. But reality never comes close to meeting the expectations.

In Jesus’ day, people expected the Messiah to come in glory. The Messiah would come from heaven even more magnificently than Elijah had gone up to heaven in a chariot of fire, sweep away all evil, reestablish the political kingdom of Israel in peace, justice, and power. It would be awe-some (literally). It would be a sudden, glorious vindication for Israel and instant, unmerciful, hellfire and damnation for non-Jews ...

What image does Jesus give of the coming of the Messiah? He is like a nondescript farmer, patiently scattering seeds, patiently waiting for the grain to grow, patiently waiting to see what grain will ripen, and patiently harvesting the wheat. If the Jews had read their Scriptures more carefully they would have noticed that, again and again, God’s love is for ALL people. And God is patient: He delays judgment so people can repent. People are not saved because they are ethnically Jewish, but because they hear and respond to God’s word (remember the Ninevites and Queen of Sheba, who Jesus just talked about in Matthew 12).

Jesus talks about the “word” or the “message” of the Kingdom. The word goes out. And God is patient. He wants people to respond. He wants them to genuinely accept it, believe it, love it, and allow it to work in their lives. He wants the word/message to transform us from the inside out so that the kingdom becomes a reality – comes to fruition – in our lives and in our homes, and in our world.

“Still today,” writes Tom Wright, *“not everyone who hears Jesus’ words has the right reaction ... Some allow the evil one to snatch the words away at once. Most of us have experienced cynical and sneering reactions.*

¹ This is not a negative comment about His family (although some of Jesus’ relatives do question His sanity – Mark 3:21). Rather it is a positive expression about Jesus’ disciples. In contrast to the Jews who don’t “get it” – and are miserable, judgmental, unpleasant folks – Jesus’ disciples do “get it” ... and have a wonderful, loving, supportive friendship, community, and new identity as the family of God.

Some seem to be enthusiastic, but when the gospel starts to make demands on them, they quickly show that the word never really went down and became rooted in their hearts. Some really do have a deep-rooted hearing of the word, but then allow other things to take root in their hearts as well; like thorns, the other things choke the delicate plant of the word ... Are we, too, stuck somewhere? Are we in danger of any of these reactions?

*"But then there is the promise of seed that really does bear fruit ... the way to that is by hearing **and understanding**. This takes time, and sometimes hard work. A quick glance at the scriptures, and occasional sitting in church or a study group and being entertained by some new idea, is probably not enough. Care and thought needs to be put in to the task of hearing the word of the kingdom until it has taken proper root. Stones may need moving from the soil; thorns may need uprooting. But when hearing brings understanding, we know we're getting close to the goal, to the heart of the message. And the promise then is this: not just that we will have succeeded for our own sake, but that we will in turn become kingdom-people, bearing fruit in our own right." (Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1*, p. 166)*

Thank God that He loves us ALL. Thank God that He is patient with us ALL too.

What stones do you need to move? What thorns do you need to uproot? God is patient. But the sooner we got on with it, the sooner we discover the blessing and joy of being kingdom-people ...

*Father, make us more like Jesus.
Help us to bear difficulty, pain, disappointment and sorrows,
knowing that in your perfect working and design
you can use such bitter experiences to shape our characters
and make us more like our Lord.
We look with hope for that day when we shall be wholly like Christ,
because we shall see him as he is.
Amen.*

Ignatius (martyred in 107)

Saturday, March 7: Matthew 13:24-43 *Time change tonight (clocks ahead one hour 😞)*

I'm impatient. I don't like to wait. A true product of our times, I want – I expect – instant results. These parables are all about patience and waiting. The farmer waits for the harvest – annoyed and frustrated that weeds are growing among his wheat. The birds wait for the tiny mustard seed to become a tree. A baker waits for the yeast to raise her bread ...

In particular, these parables are about **God** waiting and being patient. Faithful Jews wanted God to act – decisively, dramatically, and instantly NOW – wiping out all non-Jews and establishing a perfect Jewish kingdom NOW. We would love God to act – decisively, dramatically, and instantly NOW – too. If only He would intervene in parts of Africa, in the Middle East, in cases of violence, abuse, injustice, and suffering?

But what would it be like if God were to respond instantly to every evil act? Right away counteract every decision that's made? Immediately punish every thought that is not pure and holy? Could we cope with that? I wouldn't last long in a world of instant justice. And we would cease to have genuine freedom ...

One of the mysteries – and challenges – of faith in God is accepting God's patience. He often doesn't rush in and intervene in the world. He allows people the freedom to make decisions, for good or for bad. And He allows the consequences of those decisions to happen, for good or for bad. If He didn't allow things – good and bad – to happen, "freedom" would be a word with no meaning. If God only allowed good and intervened in any bad situation, our choices would be meaningless. We would be robots.

However, in the long term – in the big picture – Jesus reminds us, there is justice. When it comes to God's ultimate judgment there are two extremes to avoid:

- Some people have a medieval notion of God as a sadistic monster, gleefully hurling most people into a pit of hellfire and brimstone – God is NOT like that;
- Other people see God as an overly indulgent grandparent who never corrects, never gets angry, and never disciplines His children; they can do whatever they – God is NOT like that.

Jesus reminds us God's judgment is real. One day, someday, He will deal with evil – in the abstract – but also in the persons of those who perpetrate it. Ultimately, we all face judgment: for the wheat (those who hear and understand, bear fruit, put their faith in Jesus) this is not a time of fear, but a time of celebration (the good soil in the parable of the sower, 13:23). Forgiven, we are fully welcome into His presence.

Be encouraged. God is a gracious, loving, merciful Father. He desires ALL people come to faith in Jesus. He delights to welcome ALL people who put their faith in Him into His family. We have life in Jesus.

For the weeds – those who reject God – this is not a pleasant experience. Ultimately they get their heart's desire: an eternity of separation from the love of the God whom they reject.

- Pray for those you know who need to Jesus. Pray that they would welcome Him.
- Pray for people in our community who need Jesus. Pray that they would have opportunity to hear about Jesus and would welcome Him.

*O Lord, grant me to greet the coming day in peace.
 Help me in all things to rely on Your Holy will.
 In every hour of the day reveal Your will to me.
 Bless my dealings with all who surround me.
 Teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul,
 and with the firm conviction that Your will governs all.
 In all my deeds and words guide my thoughts and feelings.
 In unforeseen events, let me not forget that all are sent by You.
 Teach me to act firmly and wisely, without embittering and embarrassing others.
 Give me strength to bear the fatigue of this coming day with all that it shall bring.
 Direct my will, teach me to pray, pray You Yourself in me.
 Amen.*

Patriarch Philaret (1553-1633)

Sunday, March 8: Matthew 13:44-52 Time change last night (clocks ahead one hour 😞)

I got an email from "Mr. T. Crist <CRM@clever-corp.coM>" entitled "Eur 400,000.00 Donation #. "You have a donation of Eur 400,000.00. Awaiting your response for further details." That's not suspicious at all (Bruce says, facetiously). Don't worry, I didn't reply. Even I know some things are too good to true ...

Some things are REALLY good **and** REALLY true. Jesus invites us to see there is a treasure worth having – a pearl of inestimable value: God's forgiveness, mercy, and love. We can have new hope, new purpose, new life in Jesus. We welcome Him as our Savior. We follow Him as Lord. It's not rocket science.

Notice, however, that it takes a whole-hearted commitment to get the treasure and the pearl.

Jesus is NOT saying we earn our salvation by what we do. He is saying that if we really want to experience the kingdom of God, love of Jesus, and power of the Spirit, it takes a commitment of heart, mind, soul, and strength. We put our lives in Jesus' hands and trust Him. Completely.

Think of it this way: on a frigid winter's night, you can see steam rising from the hot springs pool in Banff. It looks so inviting. But you have some choices. You can stand shivering on the poolside, in the cold, and be miserable. You can just dip your toe in: that one toe will feel great, but the rest of you may feel even colder. Or you can take the plunge and jump completely in ... and enjoy the incredible feeling of being in the warm, glorious hot springs pool. To really experience of the blessing of the hot springs you have to be

all in ... or you'll be miserable.

I can look at the world around me – with its problems, corruption, suffering, and evil – and be grumpy and miserable. Or I can recognize that there is an alternate way of living. I can choose to live the life of the kingdom of God, outlined so well by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. I can just look at Jesus' way of living, from the outside, and do nothing; and nothing will change. I can just stick a toe into the Kingdom of God: make a decision just to "accept Jesus as my Saviour," just go to church once in a while, or just give a bit to charity. But I will feel miserable. In fact, I may find this little bit of experiencing Jesus' new life actually makes me feel worse. Or I can jump all in. Jesus is inviting us to discover a whole new way of life. A new worldview. A new set of values. A new hope. A new joy. A new purpose. To jump in. All in.

What are you going to do? Just look at the pool? Put your toe in? Or take the plunge?

*Loving heavenly Father, I give my soul to your care.
Protect the desire to serve You and be holy in my soul.
Protect me from the temptations of sin.
Protect my mind and my will so that all my thoughts and desires will be pleasing to You.
Jesus, Son of the living God, I give my heart to your care.
Let me love you with all my heart.
Let me always try to love my neighbour.
Help me be strong around friends who might lead me away from You,
And be instead a light of Your life in a darkened world.
Holy Spirit, I give my body to your care.
Let me always remember that my body is Your home.
You dwell within me.
Let me never sin against you by any impure actions alone or with others.
Loving Lord, Three-in-One, I give my whole self to you.
And if I do fall and fail, help me to quickly confess and repent,
that I may know the freedom of Your forgiveness.
Amen*

Monday, March 9: Matthew 13:53-14:12

It's bad when complete strangers put you down. It's even worse when your own friends and family turn on you. Jesus is from Nazareth. This is where He grew up. The people of Nazareth "*were deeply offended and refused to believe in him*"(13:57). These are His people. His "friends." This really hurts.

Why do people reject Him? Because Jesus challenges them to rethink their expectations of who God is, how God is working, and what the kingdom of God is all about. It's *NOT* about a military hero swooping down from heaven, destroying evildoers and foreigners, and establishing a perfect Jewish nation on earth. It *IS* about people – of all ethnicities, abilities, healths, ages, and genders – taking the plunge to love God with all their hearts, minds, souls, and strengths and living differently, from the inside (the heart) out (in action). The kingdom of God comes when His people begin to live, wholeheartedly, as citizens of the kingdom.

The story of the death of John the Baptist highlights just how deeply evil had corrupted the Jewish nation. Herod had committed adultery by marrying his brother's wife. Now he is seduced by his step-daughter's dancing. It's not just his eyes and hands that are causing him to sin, but his heart and mind are infatuated as well. He is wrapped around the fingers of the women in his life. He is making horrible choices.

Here is Herod – the one publicly recognized as the king of Israel – being as evil and despicable as humanly possible. In ancient cultures, the king embodied the nation: Herod is Israel. John, the one who prepared the way for the Messiah, is brutally murdered by Israel, personified in King Herod. This story is a nasty illustration of just how true Jesus' observation is that, "*A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his own family*"(13:57). Look what the hometown people did to John.

This story also foreshadows the fate awaiting Jesus.

What will Jesus' future hold? His own hometown has deserted Him. Israel as a nation, personified by Herod, is rotten to the core and is willing to do whatever is necessary – including murder – to avoid pesky prophets pointing out its failings ... It's not looking good.

What is it that controls our choices? In Matthew 5:27-32, Jesus talked about lust in a sexual sense. But we can lust after other things, too – money, power, prestige, pleasure, possessions. The feelings in each case are similar. And they can have dire consequences.

When we're tempted (by money, power, lust, pornography, whatever) there are common stages:

1. **You look.** Looking at something or someone handsome or beautiful is not evil. If it were we would have to walk around with our eyes closed all the time. The problem begins in Stage Two ...
2. **You imagine.** We do more than look. Our imaginations kick in and we begin to think all sorts of strange things. What if? Wouldn't it be nice? Just this once? This is when the problem starts, because our relationships begin to suffer. And it is a not that difficult to slide into Stage Three ...
3. **You plan.** Could it possibly work? How could I make it happen? Common sense is not always an issue. People come up with some pretty harebrained schemes. The fantasy seems so attractive ...
4. **You do.** We may actually follow our temptation through and do something. Then serious - often irreparable - damage is done.

When you feel tempted, recognize it. Deal with it. Bring it to God. Get together with godly friends. Fight through it, with God's help and power. It may be hard, but it is SO rewarding.

In doing so, we keep faithful to Jesus and grow in spiritual strength and perseverance (if you do fail, remember God can forgive, as we confess our sins to Him (1 John 1:8-9)).

*Lord, I can see plainly that you are the only and the true source of wisdom,
since you alone can restore faith and hope to a doubting and despairing soul.
In your Son, Jesus, you have shown me
that even the most terrible suffering can be beautiful,
if it is in obedience to your will.
And so the knowledge of your Son has enabled me to find joy in my own suffering.
My dear Father, I kneel before you this day,
and pray for my present sufferings,
and give thanks for the sufferings of the past.
I now realize that all these sufferings are part of your love,
through which you purify me and help me grow.
Amen*

Henry Suso (1295-1366)

Tuesday, March 10: Matthew 14:13-36

Tough times come. We need time and space to deal with them. We need time to grieve.

"As soon as Jesus heard the news (about John's – his cousin's – execution), he left in a boat to a remote area to be alone." Jesus went away to mourn. He needed time alone with God.

But people followed Jesus. Jesus did take time to be alone with God. He also transformed His sorrow into compassion for the suffering of the living people all around Him.

It's curious that when we grieve, one of the most therapeutic things we can do is to care for others. Paradoxically, investing in the lives of others helps heal our own broken hearts.

The people are hungry; the disciples don't have much to work with. *"Jesus is always delighted when people*

around him come up with ideas which show they are thinking of the needs of others. But often what he has to do is take those ideas and do something startling with them ... Our small idea of how to care for people gets bounced back at us with what seems a huge and impossible proposal. You protest. I can't do it. I haven't got the time. I haven't got the energy. I haven't got the ability. All I have is ...

"This is how it works whenever someone is close enough to Jesus to catch a glimpse of what he is doing and how they could help. We blunder in with our ideas. We offer, uncomprehending, what little we have. Jesus takes ideas, loaves and fishes, money, a sense of humour, time, energy, talents, love, artistic gifts, skill with words, quickness of eye or fingers, whatever we have to offer. He holds them before his father with prayer and blessing. Then, breaking them so they are ready for use, he gives them back to us to give to those who need them ..."(Tom Wright). What do we have to offer God? What are our "loaves and fishes"? Small though they be, God can take and transform them into something incredible.

The second story – the storm and Peter walking on/sinking in the water – speaks to our faith in Jesus through this process. In the storms of life, Jesus is there. He may challenge us, stretch us, invite us to do bold things in faith ... and as long as we keep our eyes on Jesus, it's amazing how He gets us through. But *"when Peter saw the strong wind and the waves"* – when he took his eyes off Jesus and looked at where he actually was – *"he was terrified and began to sink. 'Save me, Lord.' he shouted"*(14:30).

There are times Jesus asks us to do what appears to be impossible: how can we deal with the temptation that trips us up again and again? How can we step out in faith to do what He's asking us to do? How can we cultivate the discipline to read/pray regularly? How can we make it through this crisis? How can we face the future when the pain seems overwhelming? How can we deal with the grief?

If, like Peter, we only see the strong winds and waves, we're in trouble. We are invited to keep our eyes on Jesus instead. That sounds so simple; it is so difficult to actually do. But we need to keep at it. When we stay close to Jesus, He takes our ideas, gifts, talents, abilities, and skills and does amazing things. If we are facing insurmountable challenges, He will get us through.

If even the passing touch of His robe can heal sick people (14:36) imagine what He can do when He fixes His eyes on you: *"Don't be afraid. Take courage. I am here."*(14:27). More than that, Jesus says, *"Yes, come."*(14:29). Take that step of faith. Jesus IS with you.

*As I rise from sleep, I thank You, Holy Trinity,
for Your loving-kindness and patience.
You are not angry with me, even though I am lazy and full of sin.
You have not destroyed me for the wrongs I have done.
Rather, You have shown unchanging love for me.
When I was bowed low in dark despair,
You raised me up to sing the morning hymn and glorify Your Lordship.
Now give light to the eye of my mind,
and open my ears to hear Your words and learn Your commandments.
Help me to obey Your will,
sing to You with all my heart,
and give praise to Your Holy Name,
the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
now and ever and unto ages of ages.
Amen.*

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

Wednesday, March 11: Matthew 15:1-28

In times of crisis and stress, how do we react? What is our first response? Our immediate reaction?

- When some people face a crisis, they explode in violence or a fury of curses: what does that say about what is in their hearts? Their faith?
- Others, faced with the same crisis, cower in inconsolable terror. What does that say about what is

- in their hearts? Their faith?
- Still others react like Peter: "Save me, Lord" (14:30). What does that say about what is in their hearts? Their faith?

The Jewish authorities thought Jesus was trying to abolish the law of Moses and the writings of the prophets (see Matthew 5:17). Among many, many other things they were upset about, Jesus' disciples were not following the rabbis' teaching on proper handwashing before meals. They were quite sure Jesus was undermining rabbinical principles. They were looking for evidence to accuse Him of heresy.

How does Jesus respond? Jesus moves deeper than the teaching of rabbis. He goes back to Scripture. He argues the Pharisees and lawyers were actually the ones who were being disobedient to Scripture. For instance, one of the Ten Commandments tells us to honour our parents, which includes caring for them in their old age. The Pharisees, however, taught that if you made a gift to the Temple for the equivalent of what you would spend looking after your parents, your obligation was fulfilled. This was a great blessing to Temple revenues and looked really spiritual. But it missed the point of the command – and left your parents destitute. What does this say about what is in their hearts? Their faith?

Jesus continues to emphasize that true spirituality is a matter of the heart, not outward appearances. How we wash our hands doesn't matter. What's inside does matter. Question: how do we know what's really in our hearts? Answer: what comes out of us our mouths.

Consider the Canaanite woman – a non-Jew – sneeringly referred to by Jews as a "Gentile dog." She keeps her eyes fixed on Jesus. Faced with an overwhelming crisis she knows Jesus can save her: what does that say about what's in her heart? Her faith?

Peter and the Pharisees – good Jewish men – are struggling to get it. A **foreigner** – a **woman** foreigner at that – one who is willing to take on the label of a "dog" – understands. What does she comprehend? That God is more than able to deal with the storms and waves of life. That, when we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus rather than the problems of life, He gets us through. What can I learn from this wonderful lady?

*Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go.
Flood my soul with your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
that my life may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through me, and be so in me, that every soul I come in contact with
may feel your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus.
Stay with me, and then I shall begin to shine as you shine;
so to shine as to be a light to others;
the light, O Jesus, will be all from you, none of it will be mine;
it will be you, shining on others through me.
Let me thus praise you in the way you love best by shining on those around me.
Let me preach you without preaching,
not by words but by my example,
by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what I do.
The evident fullness of the love my heart bears to you.
Amen*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Thursday, March 12: Matthew 15:29-39

I was recently part of a conference call in which one participant was outspokenly critical of Christians and churches who were involved in creation care – environmental concerns. In his opinion, the only thing churches should care about is saving souls and getting people to heaven. The rest is "all going to burn anyway," he said. The fact that creation IS God's creation and we are called to be stewards of it (Genesis 1-

2), seemed lost on him. As was the fact that environmental degradation cause untold human suffering.

What is Jesus concerned about?

In one of the great Old Testament passages about the coming Messiah, Isaiah writes (Isaiah 35:1-7):

*Even the wilderness and desert will be glad in those days.
The wasteland will rejoice and blossom with spring crocuses.
Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy.
The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon,
as lovely as Mount Carmel or the plain of Sharon.*

*There the Lord will display his glory, the splendor of our God.
With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands,
and encourage those who have weak knees.
Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, and do not fear,
for your God is coming to destroy your enemies.
He is coming to save you."*

*And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf.
The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing for joy.
Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the wasteland.
The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land.
Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish where desert jackals once lived.*

Matthew is deliberately bringing passages like Isaiah 35 to people's minds as he describes Jesus healing people who were lame, blind, crippled, those who couldn't speak. And here in the wilderness, streams and springs of blessing flow as Jesus feeds thousands of people with seven loaves and a few small fish. The wilderness and the desert are glad. Creation is healed and rejoices. These are ALL things the Messiah does.

We believe Jesus is alive and at work in our world today. Through the Holy Spirit and His body, the church, He is still caring for people who are lame, blind, crippled, and those who cannot speak – physically and spiritually. He still cares for those who are hungry – physically and spiritually. He cares for ALL His creation.

Yes, Jesus does desperately want all PEOPLE to know Him, love Him, respond to His grace, welcome Him as Saviour, and follow Him as Lord. But the good news of Jesus is bigger than just "saving souls." God's love is more than BIG enough to include caring for people's physical needs, caring for His creation, and redeeming it ALL. Sometimes we have too small an understanding of God, His love, and His power.

How can I make a difference in the lives of people – and God's creation – today?

*Hands who touched the leper, touch my wounded heart;
Hands who healed the blind man, heal my aching soul;
Hands who cured the lame, mend my disjointed life;
Hands who embraced all life, enfold me in your peace.
Lord, merely touch and heal, cure and forgive.
This is my prayer to You, my Lord;
Give me strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows;
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service;
Give me the strength never to disown the poor
or bend my knees before insolent might.
Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.
And give me the strength to surrender my strength to Your will with love.
Amen*

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)

Friday, March 13: Matthew 16:1-20

Imagine the Conservatives and the Green Party working together. Wouldn't it be great if parties could put aside their partisan agendas and simply do what is best for the country? How likely is that to happen?

The Pharisees and Sadducees are rival political/religious parties – for them to cooperate on anything is at least as inconceivable as the Conservatives and Greens working together. But they are conniving **together**. They must be really riled up. Jesus, of course, recognizes their tricks and refuses to play their game. When Jesus does miraculous things, He does them as blessings for hurting people, not signs to satisfy cynics.

Jesus goes on to warn His disciples that these “teachers of the law” are missing the whole point of God’s love, obsessed as they were with everything from healing on the Sabbath to how you washed your hands.

While most of the disciples don't understand yet (they are more interested in who brought lunch), Peter is starting to get it. Perhaps his experience walking on/sinking in water helped him begin to appreciate that Jesus is far more than just another rabbi. As Jesus asks, *“But who do you say I am?”* Simon Peter blurts, *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”* (16:15-16). Whether he really understands what he is saying or not, we don't know. There is at least a glimmer of comprehension in Peter’s answer.

Jesus renames “Simon” as “Peter.” This man’s birth name was Simon. But at this point Jesus gives him a new name, “Peter” – the Greek word for “Rock.” Simon/Peter’s confession of faith is the rock-solid foundation upon which Jesus’ church will be built.

Peter, of course, is the name by which most of us know him. In the Old Testament, when a person is given a new name – for instance Abram is renamed Abraham – it signifies a change in relationship with God, the establishment of a new covenant. As Jesus gives Simon the new name, Peter, He is recognizing a change in relationship with God, too – a new covenant. Through Peter’s affirmation that *“Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God”* he becomes a new person in Christ. And the church is born.

Through our affirmation that *“Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God”* we are invited into a new relationship with God, as well. God gives us a new identity: His children, brothers and sisters of Jesus. Unlike the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees that produces nothing good or useful, this new life in Jesus makes us people of God who can bear good fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. You are God’s beloved child. How does that change how you live?

*O Eternal God, King of all creation,
forgive me the sins which I have committed this day
in thought, word, and deed;
and cleanse, O Lord, my humble soul from every stain of flesh and spirit.
Grant me, O Lord, to pass through the sleep of this night in peace,
that when I rise from my bed I may please Your holy Name
all the days of my life, and conquer the enemies, both corporeal and incorporeal,
that contend against me.
Deliver me, O Lord, from the vain thoughts that stain me, and from evil desires.
For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
now and ever and unto ages of ages.
Amen.*

Macarius of Egypt (330-391)

Saturday, March 14: Matthew 16:21-28

Life with Jesus is good. But that doesn't mean it is always easy. In my experience, I've been teased. I've had to “explain myself.” I have chosen to live my life by certain ethical standards, which have precluded me making choices and following paths some of my friends have taken. I have been led to a vocation that has been (on occasions) rather challenging and not as lucrative as other options. But over the past 40+ years,

as I have tried to honour Him, I have no regrets about my decision to follow Him.

Jesus warns us that choosing to put our faith in Him and follow Him is not always going to be easy.

First, He talks about His own path. Then He warns us that our paths may not always be smooth either.

He is inviting us to think about the priorities we have in our lives. The paradox He presents us with is this, *"If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it."* This seems nonsensical. But the testimony of those who have given their lives completely to Jesus is that they have experienced His blessing in unexpected ways.

Think of it in terms of a really healthy marriage. It is when each spouse desires the best for their partner that each of them really discovers fulfillment and joy in their own lives. Paradoxically, when spouses seek their partner's well-being first, they, themselves, thrive best. It sounds counterintuitive, but the lived truth is that when we do live for someone else, we become more alive ourselves.

What does it mean to *"give up your life for Jesus' sake"*? How is He challenging me?

*It's all in the touch:
the touch of love, the touch of healing
the touch of compassion, the touch of reassurance,
the touch that says, 'You are special, wanted, held in high regard'
It's all in that touch, that very special touch
the touch you give through us who reach out to those in need,
to those who need to know.
Help us to be channels of your touch in this dark world
to bring your love, healing, compassion,
and reassurance to a world that knows none of these.
Amen*

www.faithandworship.com

Sunday March 15: Matthew 17:1-13

"The scene at the transfiguration offers a strange parallel and contrast to the crucifixion (Matthew 27:33-54). If you're going to meditate on the one, you might like to hold the other in your mind as well, as a sort of backdrop. Here, on a mountain, is Jesus, revealed in glory; there, on a hill outside Jerusalem, is Jesus, revealed in shame. Here his clothes are shining white; there, they have been stripped off, and soldiers have gambled for them. Here he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's greatest heroes, representing the law and the prophets; there, he is flanked by two brigands, representing the level to which Israel has sunk in rebellion against God. Here, a bright cloud overshadows the scene; there, darkness comes upon the land. Here Peter blurts out how wonderful it all is; there, he is hiding in shame after denying he even knows Jesus. Here a voice from God himself declares that this is his wonderful son; there, a pagan soldier declares, in surprise, that this really was God's son.

"The mountain-top explains the hill-top – and vice versa. Perhaps we really only understand either of them when we see it side by side with the other. Learn to see the glory in the cross; learn to see the cross in the glory; and you will have begun to bring together the laughter and the tears of the God who hides in the cloud, the God who is to be known in the strange person of Jesus himself. This story is, of course, about being surprised by the power, love, and beauty of God, But the point of it is that we should learn to recognize that same power, love and beauty within Jesus, and to listen for it in his voice – not least when he tells us to take up the cross and follow him ...

*"Jesus isn't just a prophet; he is God's own son, the Messiah, and God is delighted with what he is doing. The word to the disciples then is just as much a word to us today. If you want to find the way – the way to God, the way to the Promised Land – you must listen to him." (Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, 14-15)*

As you reflect on the incredible mystery, wonder, and glory of who Jesus is, bring together this mountaintop and the hilltop of Calvary. Notice the similarities, and the differences ... Listen to Him.

The glorious God of the Universe revealed on this mountain-top chooses to humble Himself and be humiliated on the hill-top. Yet through His weakness He proves His power: absolute and complete power over sin, death, and forces seen and unseen. Listen to Him. What is He saying to you?

*Lord, help me never to forget your teaching,
but to keep your commands in my heart.
May love and faithfulness never leave me;
help me bind them around my neck,
and write them on the tablet of my heart.
Help me to trust in you with all my heart
and lean not on my own understanding;
In all my ways may I acknowledge you;
please, Lord, make my paths straight.
Help me not to be wise in my own eyes,
but to fear the LORD and shun evil.
Help me honor you with my wealth, with the first fruits of all my earnings.
May I not despise your discipline or rebuke,
because you discipline those you love, as a father the son he delights in.
Amen.*

Monday, March 16: Matthew 17:14-27

"Why couldn't we cast out that demon?" Good question.

Jesus answers in terms of faith (remember Matthew 13:31-32: "*The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches*"). It's not that serving Jesus takes a lot of faith, so somehow we have to conjure up a greater volume of faith. It is that we have to have faith in the right Person: **GOD**. It's **God** that does things – whatever those things are – not us. The challenge for the disciples to learn is who Jesus really is – **God**. They haven't got it yet. When they do actually trust Him, they will discover that the tiniest grain of faith will be more than enough for Jesus to work with.

Most Jews put their faith in the Temple system. Each year they brought their sacrifices, made their offerings, and were made right with God. There was no real faith involved – just following the rules. One rule was every Jew had to pay an annual Temple tax which supported the upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem. Like any tax it was resented (have you filed your income tax – with a smile ☺ – yet?).

There will come a time when Jesus will stand up against the whole Temple system, overturn the tables of the money changers, and reveal the hypocrisy and hollowness of the Temple for what it was. But this was not the time. So Jesus was willing to pay the tax. But what's with the fish??? Scholars have all sorts of ideas: most suggest it shows Jesus' power over creation by either having had the fish swallow the coin or by having the coin just appear in its mouth. It really doesn't matter. It's one more amazing incident in a long line of amazing incidents that define Jesus' life and remind us of God's power and providence.

In contrast to the emptiness and dull ritual of the Temple, faith in Jesus is full of surprises ... even on the beach. When we have the tiniest seed of faith in God, God can – and does – do incredible things. If we have eyes to see. If we have ears to hear ... What is God doing in your life these days? In the lives of people around you?

Ask a friend or two, "*What is God up to in your life?*" "*How is your spiritual life going?*" "*What is God teaching you?*" You may be surprised at the answers ...

*Thank you, Lord, that you are my shepherd; I have all that I need.
 You let me rest in green meadows;
 you lead me beside peaceful streams.
 You renew my strength.
 You guide me along right paths, bringing honor to your name.
 Even when I walk through the darkest valley,
 I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.
 Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.
 You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies.
 You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings.
 Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life,
 and I will live in your house, O LORD, forever.
 Amen*

Psalm 23

Tuesday, March 17: Matthew 18:1-14

Jesus is speaking specifically to His disciples ...

1. They have been struggling to understand that *"faith as small as a mustard seed"* (17:20). They are trying to do things on their own and it just isn't working. *"Anyone who becomes as humble as this little child,"* Jesus says, *"is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven"* (18:4). Real faith recognizes that we cannot ever be good enough, smart enough, or strong enough for God ... in humble faith, we come to God, our heavenly Father, trusting His love, grace, and mercy. He works through us.
2. Jesus challenges them to have a much broader picture of who is welcome in the kingdom of God, not just Jewish men. Even children, including female children and non-Jewish children, are beloved by God (a surprise in that culture). *"Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me ... Beware that you don't look down on any of these little ones ..."* (18:5, 10)
3. Specifically, Jesus is concerned that we never lead little ones astray. We need to be careful how we teach kids, what examples we set, and how we help them get to know God. *"If you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea"* (18:6).
4. Jesus recognizes the reality of temptation: *"Temptations are inevitable, but what sorrow awaits the person who does the tempting. So if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It's better to enter eternal life with only one hand or one foot than to be thrown into eternal fire with both of your hands and feet. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It's better to enter eternal life with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell"* (18:8-9). Jesus is using hyperbole. He is not literally encouraging us to maim ourselves; after all temptation is really a heart/mind issue. He is emphasizing how seriously we need to take temptation and sin. When you find yourself being tempted, resist. Pray. Get together with godly friends. Do something to distract yourself. Don't give in.
5. God loves ALL people – children, women, men, Jews, non-Jews, healthy, ill, together, troubled – He loves you and me – *"If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others on the hills and go out to search for the one that is lost? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he will rejoice over it more than over the ninety-nine that didn't wander away. In the same way, it is not my heavenly Father's will that even one of these little ones should perish"* (18:12-14). That's great news.

God welcomes each of us. The Kingdom of God is open to ALL people. You have never met anyone that God does not love and desires to come into His Kingdom. Pray that we would welcome ALL people with the love, mercy, and grace of God.

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through the belief in the three-ness,
through confession of the oneness of the Creator of Creation.
I arise today through the strength of Christ's birth and his baptism,
Through the strength of his crucifixion with his burial,
Through the strength of his resurrection and his ascension.
I arise today through the strength of heaven:
Light of sun, radiance of moon, splendor of fire, speed of lightning,
swiftness of wind, depth of sea, stability of earth, firmness of rock.
I arise today through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me from snares of devils, from
temptations of vices, from everyone who shall wish me ill,
afar and anear, alone and in multitude.*

*Christ to shield me today.
Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.
I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through belief in the three-ness, through confession of the oneness,
of the Creator of Creation.
Amen*

attributed to Patrick (340-440?)

Wednesday, March 18: Matthew 18:15-20

Sin can be serious business. Sometimes we sin very privately. Most often our sin affects those around us. *"If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense ..."* (18:15-17). Jesus outlines some specific steps to follow when problems happen in a community like the church. Not surprisingly, His counsel – speak privately, then take a friend, then go to others – is very wise. We seek to make things right privately. We want to protect and restore relationships. We don't air our dirty laundry publicly.

Jesus goes on to say, *"whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven"* (18:18), we need to be read this in the context of Jesus' recent discussion on sin. We are God's presence in this world. We need to act with the same passion for holiness, mercy, grace, and forgiveness, as God. Dealing with sin in a mature way, therefore, is important.

"If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them" (18:19-20). This sounds great. If I just get a couple of friends together, we can pray to win the lottery, and God MUST give us \$40 million this Friday. He promises this in Matthew 18:19 ... No, Jesus isn't saying that. Sorry.

This comment is also in the context of a discussion of sin in the Christian community. When we, as a Christian community, agree on how to handle an issue – such as forgiving a fellow-believer who has sinned – God honours that decision. This is not a blanket statement we can yank out of context and claim God is bound to give us whatever we want. It deals with life and relationships in the Christian community.

This is how the church should work: everyone is welcome (18:1-14). We come in humility, recognizing we are not holy people. God, our loving heavenly Father, however, blesses us with love, mercy, and forgiveness. When we fail, we deal with it. If we do have to deal with issues as a community, we seek to be holy and righteous – but also loving, gracious, and forgiving. We seek God’s wisdom. Our goal is to restore one another, encourage one another, and help one another be more and more like Jesus.

What is Jesus saying to me?

*May all I do today begin with you, O Lord.
Plant dreams and hopes within my soul, revive my tired spirit:
be with me today.
May all I do today continue with your help, O Lord.
Be at my side and walk with me: be my support today.
May all I do today reach far and wide, O Lord.
My thoughts, my work, my life:
make them blessings for your kingdom; let them go beyond today, O God.
Today is new, unlike any other day, for God makes each day different.
Today God's everyday grace falls on my soul like abundant seed,
though I may hardly see it.
Today is one of those days Jesus promised to be with me,
a companion on my journey,
And my life today, if I trust him, has consequences unseen.
My life has a purpose.
Amen*

Thursday, March 19: Matthew 18:21-35

Jesus has been talking about how to deal with sin within the Christian community (“*If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense ... For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them*”(18:15-20)). Peter has issues with this. The disciples did not always get along – they had some “colourful” discussions. They argued. Peter, himself, is impulsive and has a temper.

Peter asks a great, practical question: “*Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?*”(18:21). Peter is pretty generous offering to forgive a person seven times.

How does Jesus answer? As He responds, Jesus is not literally saying to forgive someone 490 times (seventy times seven) and then don’t forgive him on the 491st offence. He is saying forgive, and forgive, and forgive, and keep on forgiving ... forever and ever. I don’t like that.

Jesus goes on to tell a parable about forgiveness. His point is not that we should bite our tongues, simply “forgive and forget” again and again, be a doormat, and never confront issues. As Jesus mentioned earlier, when someone sins, you deal with it. You do talk about it – individually, with a friend, and, if necessary, with the community. But the key principle is we never, ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation our goal. We deal with problems ... in constructive, redemptive, and community-building ways.

God *never* gives up on us: His goal is *always* forgiveness and reconciliation with us. We are not to give up trying to restore relationships with one another either. We want to keep relationships or rebuild relationships. We are peacemakers. God, of course, is also never content to leave us as we are: He always wants to deal with the sin in our life. We are encouraged to help other people deal with the sin in their lives

and be restored to wholeness. We help people work through the issues in their lives.

The final verse (18:35) seems harsh. How can this be? Throughout the Sermon on the Mount and the His later teaching, Jesus emphasizes that what is in our heart is critically important ("*The words you speak come from the heart – that's what defiles you. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you*" (Matthew 15:18-20)).

If we cannot forgive other people ... what does that say about what is going on in our hearts? If we cannot forgive other people, are we really experiencing God's forgiveness?

I find that if I am enjoying God's forgiveness (if I am honest with Him about my issues, confess my sins, and know He is leading me forward), I experience God's joy and peace. And, when I know God is forgiving me, I find it relatively easy to be a forgiving person with other people. However, if I am not dealing with my problems with God (if I won't confess my sin, won't face up to my mistakes), I am miserable and unhappy. And I am much less gracious and forgiving toward others.

When I am a forgiving person toward others, I generally feel peace as well. However when I don't forgive others (because I want to punish them for what they did to me) the other person rarely suffers at all, but I am miserable – I lose sleep, I get ulcers, I fume, I stew ... It's just not worth it.

Being a forgiving person provides a double-blessing: the person you forgive has the blessing of being forgiven – and you have the blessing of being at peace within yourself as well. You sleep better. You grind your teeth less. You don't sit there grumbling and complaining. You don't get ulcers. You are a much more pleasant person to be around, too.

*O sweet Saviour Christ, in your undeserved love for us
you were prepared to suffer the painful death of the cross:
let me not be cold or even lukewarm in my love for you.
Lord help me to face the truth about myself.
Help me to hear my words as others hear them,
to see my face as others see me;
Let me be honest enough to recognize my impatience and conceit;
let me recognize my anger and selfishness;
Give me sufficient humility to accept my own weakness for what they are.
Give me the grace - at least in your presence –
to say, 'I was wrong - forgive me.'
God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
increase in me faith and truth and gentleness and grant me eternal life.
Amen.*

Polycarp (b.69-martyred for his faith in 115)

Friday, March 20: Matthew 19:1-15

One of the dashboard warning lights in the car was on, so I was looking through the owner's manual. In the process, I discovered a whole section on winter driving, how to handle skids, and what to do if you are in an accident. The reason all that safety/accident information, of course, is not to encourage me to drive in such a way I'm skidding or having accidents. The car manual does NOT encourage dangerous driving. But, if, unfortunately, I were to find myself in trouble, it's good to know this information is there.

Within the Old Testament there is information about how to handle a divorce. That doesn't mean it encourages divorce. However, the Pharisees took the mere fact that divorce is addressed to say that, therefore, Moses thought it was quite acceptable. Since there is a law about it, it must be Ok.

Jesus shows them the flaw in their thinking. Just as a car is not made to have accidents but to be a pleasant way to travel safely from A to B, God did not create marriage for divorce. Marriage is intended to

be a safe, secure relationship for a man and a woman for a lifetime. Moses did not say (so to speak), "*when you drive a car, this how to have an accident*"; Moses did say "*when you drive a car, if – tragically – an accident happens, this what you do ...*"

Jesus is clear: Scripture does not encourage divorce. But just as car accidents happen, relationship disasters happen, and life doesn't end at that point. You can move on. Ideally, you work things through and keep the marriage together. Divorce is never the preferred option. But on occasion – if there is marital unfaithfulness, a real difference of values (1 Corinthians 7:15), or violence and abuse – reluctantly, divorce may be the only option. It's never an ideal path. But sometimes – when we are dealing with real people and real people's problems – it is the only way forward.

God can forgive. We can move on with our lives and our relationships with one another, and with God.

Jesus goes on to speak about marriage and singleness. While many of us get married, not everyone does: that's OK; it's even good. Despite what some recent movies/books might suggest, Jesus never married. Many of His disciples appear to be single. For some, marriage is good. For some, singleness is good.

Jesus' aim is to bring about a new order of things – the kingdom of God. And in the new order things each single person, and each married couple, seeks to live for and glorify God in their lives and their relationships. If we could all do that perfectly, things would be fantastic.

Unfortunately, in our humanness we struggle. We fall back on the love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God: Lord, forgive us for our sins; and help us to love one another – as singles, as married people – in ways that honour and glorify you ...

*Lord, grant us simplicity of faith
and a generosity of service,
that gives without counting cost.
A life overflowing with Grace,
poured out from the One who gave everything,
that we might show the power of love
to a broken world,
and share the truth from a living Word.
Lord, grant us simplicity of faith,
and a yearning to share it.
Amen.*

Saturday, March 21: Matthew 19:15-30

Back at Expo 86 in Vancouver, each participating country produced pins with their flag on them. People loved to collect them. Some pins were easy to get. Others were notoriously difficult to find. The people who were into that sort of thing, who got a complete set, thought they were pretty special.

This young man seems to be collecting commandments. He's got a pin for collecting all sorts of them, especially commands 5-9 (see Exodus 20). Jesus challenges him to think about commands 1-2, "*You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol ...*" there are some crucial pins this young man still has to collect: to really love God. And not to over-love/idolize his money.

This command was specific to this young man; it was not addressed at everybody. Jesus doesn't often tell people to give everything away except when speaking to His twelve disciples (so they could be with Him, helping Him all the time, learning lessons of faith), or when He is speaking with a man like this: his possessions are an idol, an alternative god, whom he loves more passionately than he loves God Himself.

Each of us has things in our lives that tempt us to put God on the back burner: money? Sports? YouTube? Travel? Retirement? Work? Leisure? TV? These are all good things, in moderation. But if they take over

our lives, they can become bad things. Does Jesus need to challenge us about idols in our lives? What might we love more passionately than God? What takes precedence over Him?

Jesus challenges us to be like children – in good ways. Young children don't get hung up on wealth, power, appearance, possessions, ethnicity, or social status. Children simply enjoy other children; everyone is equal. There is no racial prejudice or bias based on ability. Children know spending time with other kids is way more fun than collecting "pins" on their own and not getting out with others. Children also depend upon their parents (in a good way); they know their limits.

People who are like children in these ways are not necessarily going to be the rich, famous, or powerful. But they will have rich and rewarding lives in terms of relationships. What these people have discovered is those who have the richest, most fulfilling and satisfying lives are those who have turned cultural priorities upside down: they have invested in people, relationships, and serving God. In contrast, those who have spent their whole lives accumulating "stuff," power, and prestige may find their lives disappointingly empty.

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God." says Jesus.² His point is that it's impossible to buy your way into the kingdom of heaven – as impossible as trying to get your camel – or, in today's terms, your Lamborghini Veneno Roadster (retail price U.S. \$4.5 million) literally through the eye of a needle (you might scratch the paint, too). Jesus' point is we are saved by God's grace – not our possessions, or whatever else you may think is most important in life.

We are all equal in the kingdom of God. Wealthy people are not more "special." Jesus is also reminding us, invest in what really matters: People. God.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
be still and remember all the Lord has done;
in our darkness when his word was our light,
in our gladness when his joy was our song,
in our weakness when his touch was our strength,
in our coldness when his love was our warmth.
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
be still, be still and remember.
Amen*

Sunday, March 22: Matthew 20:1-16

When my brother and I were young, I would carefully scrutinize the size of the piece of cake on his plate. If, in my opinion, he got a little bit bigger piece than I did, I was upset. It wasn't fair. This story just isn't fair either. How come the people who worked all day didn't get more than those hired right at the end?

It is significant that the ones hired early did get everything they expected: they didn't lose out at all. In fact, in a work-and-eat or don't-work-and-don't-eat world they had the job security of knowing all day long they would eat that night. Yes, they worked hard. But they also could enjoy their security. They were never treated unfairly in any way. The surprise is that those who worked very little got the same amount: they were blessed by the landowner's generosity. Note: they had not been out carousing and having fun all day – they were waiting, desperately hoping to work so they would be able to feed their families – but no one hired them. No, they didn't work, but they had had a stressful, miserable day. Then came the

² Some say there was a tiny gate in Jerusalem called "the Needle" – a camel had to crawl through on its knees. This is a great metaphor for how we have to come to God – take off your "load" and get down on your knees. There's a problem: there was no such gate. Others say the Hebrew word for "camel" is close to the word for "rope" so maybe Jesus meant trying to thread a rope through a needle's eye. Or maybe – just maybe – Jesus is actually talking about a real camel and a real needle's eye. It's not HARD to get a camel through a needle's eye – it's IMPOSSIBLE. That's the point. It is absolutely un-do-able, without God. Jesus' point is we cannot earn God's favour. Every blessing in our lives is totally a gift from God.

astounding miracle: they were treated more than fairly. They were blessed beyond anyone's expectation.

This story is not intended to be a story on labour relations. This story is really about the Kingdom of heaven. Some, like the disciples, come to know Jesus early on. And although they might feel hard done by following Him and serving Him, they also know the joy, peace, hope, and unconditional love that comes from a lifelong relationship with Jesus. In the end, they will enjoy an eternity in perfect relationship with Him.

Maybe that's our story. We have been Christians for years. We have followed Him, served Him, supported His work (with time, money, ability), prayed, and sacrificed. It has been a pretty good life – I don't regret the "sacrifices" associated with following Jesus (such as they have been) – in fact I have been blessed in unexpected ways. But some of us wonder if it might not have been more fun not being a Christian ...

In contrast, some people go through their whole lives not knowing Jesus. Having spent several years of my life in that camp, I know that it is really not the wonderful, fun life it's supposed to be. In fact it is empty, pointless, painful, and bleak for those who really think about it (ask philosophers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Foucault). Contrary to the popular myth, most people "on the other side of the fence" are not having a good time. When I discovered faith in Jesus, it was as if life went from being a stodgy, grainy, old, black and white, silent movie to being a super high definition 3-D IMAX movie with Dolby Atmos sound.

If people come to faith in Jesus later in life, don't feel hard done by – that somehow they had a better life than you did. In fact the opposite is true. You have had the privilege of knowing the joy, peace, hope, and love of God all through your life. That's an amazing blessing. Never take it for granted.

And pray for those you love who need to know the blessings of a full life that only come from God ...

*God of Love, God of Peace,
This fractured word cries out in pain,
Burns deep into my soul,
And challenges me to make a difference.*

*God of Love, God of Peace,
God of this world,
Scarred by grief and tears, ignorance and fear,
Soften hearts of stone, and begin with mine.*

*God of Love, God of Peace,
Create within me a heart for people,
A desire for change,
For new beginnings to start this day.
Amen*

Monday, March 23: Matthew 20:17-34

Do you want to know what the future holds? Or not? Would you like to know what the day ahead will bring in advance? Or take it as it comes? Why? Why not?

Jesus knows what's coming. It's weighing on His mind. He is trying to help the disciples understand what is going to happen so they can be prepared. He is also, I suspect, looking for some support as He begins the final days of His ministry – of His life – before His crucifixion.

How do His friends respond? James and John's mother has had an idea (or maybe James and John had an idea and talked their mother into expressing it): wouldn't it be great if they were Jesus' right- and left-hand guys in the kingdom of heaven? Probably they still held out hope that Jesus was going to become the physical king of the restored geographic nation of Israel: they could left- and right-hand men on earth, too. They are playing politics, buttering up the leader to get a plum appointment in His Cabinet.

Jesus' answer, about "*the bitter cup of suffering*," is a foretaste of the cross. But it is much more than that. He is deliberately invoking another Old Testament image the disciples would have known well. The Old Testament prophets speak about "*the cup of the Lord's wrath*" (e.g. Isaiah 51:17-23, Jeremiah 25:15-29). This bitter cup of suffering is a sign of God's judgment on the people of Jerusalem, Israel, and foreign nations for their injustice, evil, rebellion, and wickedness. Evil people drink from this cup, not the righteous. Jesus is pulling out this Old Testament imagery to help His disciples understand that He – the righteous one – is taking upon Himself the wrath and judgment of God the Jewish people, and all people of the world, deserve. Jesus, the perfect One, is willing to drink the bitter cup we deserve to drink.

Ultimately Jesus will not gain the physical throne of the geographically-limited kingdom of Israel. He will serve us **ALL** by giving His life as a sacrifice so that we will **ALL** be spared that horrible cup of judgment we deserve. That, ultimately, is a far greater blessing and accomplishment, than being an earthly king of a small kingdom for a few decades in history. It's not about power. It is all about serving others.

We can never serve one another as Jesus serves us, of course. But we can find little ways to care for, bless, and serve one another. "*You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them*" Jesus says, "*But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (20:25-27).

Jesus practices what He preaches by taking time to stop and care for two blind people. Surrounded by the crowds, buoyed by all the excitement, it would have been easy for Jesus to overlook the two men. They were nobodies. The mob wanted them to be quiet. But "*when Jesus heard them, he stopped ...*" (20:32). He stopped. I can get so busy, so focussed, so caught up in doing "important" things ... do I hear the quiet voices around me? Do I stop? Do I listen? Do I help? It's not about power. It is all about serving others. Whose voice do I need to hear?

*Heavenly Father and God of mercy,
I believe that Jesus is alive and has become the Lord of life.
Increase in my mind and heart the risen life I share with Christ
and help me to grow in your wisdom and grace.
Lord Jesus, you appeared to your apostles after the resurrection
and filled their hearts with joy when you said to them, "Peace be with you".
May the peace of your presence abide with me
and make each day you give me the most beautiful day of my life.
Lord Jesus, you triumphed over death and destroyed the power of death in me,
may I live only for you.
Risen Lord, you brought confusion on the guards at your tomb
but joy to your disciples,
grant me the fullness of joy as I serve you in spirit and truth.
You promised to be with your disciples, Lord, to the end of the world,
stay with me today and remain with me always.
King of glory, center of my life, grant that when you come again,
I may be one with you in glory.
Lord, remember me as in my own way I minister to your people,
may my life be holy and an example to your people.
Lord Jesus, purify my heart with your truth
and guide me in the way of holiness,
so that I may always do what is pleasing in your sight.
Amen.*

Tuesday, March 24: Matthew 21:1-12

Matthew's gospel is written for Jewish readers. So Matthew makes more reference to the Old Testament prophets than Mark, Luke, or John (for instance, by recording Jesus' words about the "*cup of suffering*" yesterday). As Jesus enters Jerusalem, Matthew is anxious for his Jewish readers to catch all the significance of His entrance into the Holy City ...

1. Centuries earlier, the righteous Jehu was anointed king of Israel even while Joram (an evil king, descendent of the evil Ahab and Jezebel) was still king. The people spread their cloaks out before Jehu (2 Kings 9:13). The symbolism is clear: Jesus comes as the righteous king, even while Herod (an evil king from an evil family) was still king; the people spread out their coats before him.
2. When Judas Maccabeus drove out pagan armies in the 2nd Century B.C., he was welcomed into Jerusalem by crowds waving palm branches (2 Maccabees 12). The symbolism is clear: people are welcoming Jesus in the same way. Their saviour has come.
3. The greatest king in Jewish history was David. The symbolism is clear: when the crowds shout, "*Praise God for the Son of David. Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Praise God in highest heaven.*" (Matthew 21:9), they are praising Jesus as the true heir of David's dynasty.
4. Zechariah 9:9, which Matthew quotes in 21:5 ("*Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey, riding on a donkey's colt*"), refers to a time when God miraculously delivered Jerusalem from foreign armies. The symbolism is clear: the crowd senses that something dramatic is about to happen. They had a long tradition of hoping that God would send a king – a Messiah – like David who would clean the foreign armies out of Israel and re-establish the physical kingdom of Israel once again. It all seems to be coming true. Their saviour has come.
5. "*Hosanna*" – literally meaning, "*Save us now.*" – is the cry of their mouths and hearts. The symbolism is clear: salvation from Roman occupation and oppressive businessmen.

Jesus is doing all the right "Messiah" things. People have a growing expectation that He will be crowned as the physical king of Israel – like David, Jehu, or Judas Maccabeus. But Jesus will redefine kingship ...

Jesus' triumphal entry is a classic mismatch between our expectations and God's answers. For instance, we may never bother to pray to God at all until there is a crisis in our lives. Then we blame God. We cry out to Him for help. We get annoyed if God doesn't suddenly do everything we want Him to do.

We're a bit like a person who never learns to use their cellphone. When there is a car accident, they have to figure out how to call for help. When they finally figure out how to turn the phone on and use it, they dial 911, bawl out the operator for causing the accident, and then beg for help. Of course, it wasn't the 911 operator's fault the accident happened. It would have been so much better if they learned to use the phone when it wasn't a crisis. But the operator patiently listens. Then she sends help – she has heard it all before.

The good news is Jesus always hears our prayers, even if we wrongly blame Him for our misfortunes. He hears even a single word prayer: "*HELP.*" He doesn't put us on hold. He doesn't wait till we have our lives sorted out. He doesn't care if we're "good enough." He patiently listens to our complaints. He hears us dump our blame on Him. Jesus has come to seek and save the lost. After all, Jesus Himself says, it's the sick that need a doctor, not those who are well.

The challenging truth is that His answer to our prayer may not be what we want to hear. When I'm sick, I just want the doctor to snap his fingers, give me a prescription, and send me on my way, totally healed. The doctor may tell me, instead, that I have some critical injuries or a chronic health condition. He may need to do some surgery. I may have to do some work and make some major lifestyle changes. It may hurt. It may take time. There may be no cure. When I pray, God may challenge me to change; it may hurt; it may take time ... or I may have to live with my situation.

The people of Israel knew what they wanted: a king on a throne in Jerusalem. They wanted Israel to be saved from the Roman army. They wanted physical peace, prosperity and freedom right now. Jesus, the king, will hang on a cross outside the city walls. Jesus *is* going to rescue everyone – from every nation and

every time – from the power of evil, sin, and death: Jesus *is* offering a far deeper peace, far greater (spiritual) fulfillment, and more transforming freedom than we can imagine for everyone, forever.

"Hosanna" – "Save now." is the right prayer. But the salvation Jesus brings may be different than what we expect. It will be far deeper and more profound than we can begin to appreciate ... Can we accept that?

*Lord, I give myself to You, whatever the cost may be.
Take every aspect of my life and use me for Your Kingdom to glorify Your Name.
I'm not here on earth to do my own thing,
to seek my own fulfillment or my own glory.
I'm not here to indulge my desires, to increase my possessions,
to impress people to be popular,
to prove I'm somebody important, or to promote myself.
I'm not here to even be relevant or successful by human standards.
I'm here to please You.
To live like this, I yield myself to You,
to know You, to love You, to obey You, and to grow in your Holy fear.
I desire to become a person who understands and lives in reverent awe of You.
I'll do anything that You want me to do, go anywhere that You want me to go
and say anything that You want me to say.
Father, there isn't any gift that You have for me that I don't want.
If You want to use me in a way that I'm not used to, I yield myself to that.
Today, I affirm my love for You, my God,
and I choose to live and minister in Your way.
I trust You, Lord, to do that which I cannot do for myself.
Teach me, guide me, and empower me to fear Your name.
In the Name of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of the Father, I pray,
Amen.*

Wednesday, March 25: Matthew 21:12-22

There once was a king who ruled a large kingdom. But there was one pesky city on a steep crag – a strongly fortified city – that defied him. In fact, the citizens boasted their town was so hard to attack and so well fortified that the lame and blind in their town would be able to hold off the king and his army. But like any city it had a weakness: its water supply. So the king issued a challenge to his men: the first one to climb up through the spring from which the city got its water, fight his way in to the city, and open the gates would become the general of the army. It was easily done. The city fell. It became the jewel in the king's crown. It became his city. And a law was passed that the blind and the lame were not welcome there.

The king was David. The city was Jerusalem. The story is told in 2 Samuel 5:6-10 (check it out).

Now, Jesus is in the Temple, the heart and soul of Jerusalem, the city of David. And He is "invading" its sacred space and upsetting the apple carts (quite literally). "*The blind and the lame*" – those not welcome here, thank you very much – "*came to him in the Temple, and he healed them*" (21:14).

Jesus, symbolically, is "taking over" Jerusalem just as David had done hundreds of years earlier. He is claiming His city. But His is a radically different kingdom – one where even the blind and lame can come to find hope and healing. In fact, the blind and the lame are among those most welcome.

This passage is a stern indictment and judgment of what Jerusalem – and the Temple, the centerpiece of Jewish religion – had become. The business of religion (selling and buying the superficial trappings of sacrifices) had become more important than the spirit of religion, a genuine love for God and love for His people (including the blind and lame). The priests and religious leaders had lost their way.

In a dramatic parable of the emptiness of what Jewish religion had become, religion is likened to a healthy-

looking fig tree that had no fruit. It looked great but it was useless. It was unable to fulfill its basic role in life: bearing figs. It couldn't feed anyone. It couldn't bring joy to anyone. The religion of the Jewish elites was as barren as that fig tree: it brought no life to anyone. Our faith ought to be a transforming relationship with God, that changes us and our world as we live out His love. Faith out to bear fruit.

In what ways can our "religion" look healthy but be empty?

How can we keep our faith alive and dynamic? How can we bear fruit (see Galatians 5:22-23)?

*If God is for me, who can ever be against me?
Lord, since you did not spare even your own Son but gave him up for us all,
won't you also give us everything else?
Who dares accuse me whom God has chosen for his own? No one –
for God himself has given us – including me – right standing with himself.
Who then will condemn me? No one –
for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us,
is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.
Can anything ever separate me from Christ's love?
Does it mean he no longer loves me if I have trouble or calamity, or am persecuted,
or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?
No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is mine through Christ, who loved us.
Lord, may I be truly convinced that nothing can ever separate me from your love.
Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,
neither my fears for today nor my worries about tomorrow—
not even the powers of hell can separate me from God's love.
No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation
will ever be able to separate me from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.*

Romans 8:31-39

Thursday, March 26: Matthew 21:23-46

Some stories are just good stories. Other stories have a deeper meaning. Jesus' stories always had more profound things to say than people often realized.

Do we understand the point of Jesus' parables? The leading priests and Pharisees understood what Jesus is saying all too well. They realized he was telling the stories against them: (1) they were the children who told their father he would go to work but didn't, and (2) they were the wicked farmers.

The Jewish people were quite sure God loved them best: they could trace their bloodlines back to Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. But Jesus is blunt and unequivocal: *"I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit"* (21:43). Their ethnicity was not sacred. The lineage that matters is a heart that loves God and loves its neighbour, that proves its authenticity by the fruit that it bears. God is far more interested in our hearts than our heredity.

The good news for all of us is that God doesn't care if you are technically Aboriginal, Asian, African, Caucasian, none of the above, or all of the above. He loves you unconditionally. And He invites you to follow Him. We may be like the son who initially says, "No, I won't go," but as long as we change our mind at some point and "go" anyway, God is thrilled (just don't say you'll "go" and then don't actually do it). It's our heart that matters. God cares about what's in our hearts than our DNA.

If we welcome God's Son – Jesus – and His servants (His people), we're part of the family of God. We're saved. It's not rocket science. It's simply a matter of putting our faith in Jesus. Then, it's a matter of putting our faith into practice. We live our beliefs by loving God and loving our neighbour. We will not be perfect, but we just keep at it. We keep going. And we discover His power and peace in our lives ...

*Lord, I long to be part of a caring church family,
But often I'm not sensitive to what people are really saying.
Please teach me to listen with your ears of compassion.
Teach me to see what you see.
Teach me to feel what you feel.
I pray for **(a specific need you know of)**
Lord, help me to respond with a heart that cares the way you do.
Amen.*

Friday, March 27: Matthew 22:1-14

This parable follows on the heels of the previous ones: when the Master (God) called the invited guests (the Jewish people) to a wedding feast to celebrate His Son (Jesus):

- Some *"ignored them and went their own way, one to his farm, another to his business"* – some people were just too busy with "life" – looking after the house, taking care of business, checking their investments, working, making sure their retirement plans were good, setting up their next vacation, paying the mortgage, shopping for a new camel ... These were/are not bad people – they are just preoccupied people. They are people running around, busily doing all sorts of "good" things. But they are missing the "best" thing. Their priorities are on things that, in the big picture, don't really matter. They are invited to a glorious feast, but they are too busy grabbing a bite at a greasy fast food place to notice what a feast life could be like if they slowed down and enjoyed God's blessings.
- *"Others seized his messengers and insulted them and killed them"* – some people were not too busy and preoccupied; they had time to actively oppose Jesus. Some people still do. I am not really surprised many people are too busy with life to bother with Jesus. I am surprised at how many people spend a lot of time and energy actively attacking Jesus. I can't find the time and energy to write one positive book about anything, but some people find the time to write many books with no other purpose than to oppose Jesus (Richard Dawkins comes to mind). How can they find the energy? What drives them to expend so much energy challenging Jesus?

But look at this parable positively. We are the people of the highways and byways – the tramps, beggars, travellers, wanderers, foreigners, women, children – who are invited to come and enjoy God's blessing. This is a parable of amazing hope to those of us who would have no hope of a relationship with God if the kingdom of God were limited to ethnically Jewish people. We don't deserve it. We don't pay admission. We simply need to accept the invitation. That's great news.

We are all invited. When you go to a wedding feast, however, you accept the gifts the Host is offering you. One of those is food. In this case, the other is a clean set of clothes. The Master wants you to enjoy the feast, clothed in clean, fresh linen, not old, smelly, dirty rags. God takes people off the streets of life, but then He cleans them up. He transforms them into something new and beautiful.

When Jesus met the lame, blind, prostitutes, tax-collectors, bleeding, and demon-possessed people He met them where they were, but He never left them there. He loved them too much. He changed them.

God meets each of us where we are. But He loves us too much to leave us there. He wants to forgive us – to take off the mucky, stinky rags of our selfishness, pride, lust, jealousy, anger, lies, greed, etc. – and to put on His holiness: mercy, justice, truth, and love – clean, fresh ways of living. He doesn't want to leave us in the filthy trappings of our old lives. He changes us.

What needs to be transformed in your life? What bits old smelly rag does God need to deal with? What good things – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – do you need God to help you work on?

*Oh God, I ask not for easier tasks.
I ask for stronger aptitudes and greater talents
to meet any tasks which may come my way.
Help me to help others so that their lives may be made easier and happier.
Strengthen my confidence in my fellow men in spite of what they may do or say.
Give me strength to live according to the Golden Rule,
enthusiasm to inspire those around me,
sympathy to help lighten the burdens of those who suffer,
and a spirit of joy and gladness to share with others.
Give me courage to share Your Good News with those who do not know it,
perseverance to pray for those who are far from You,
and hope to know that You work your good in all things.
Help me walk through the door of opportunity set before me
with Your courage, Your confidence, and Your power.
Amen.*

Saturday, March 28: Matthew 22:15-22

It's income tax time ... what an appropriate reading. There is something quintessentially human about begrudging taxes. But think about the blessings we, as Canadians, enjoy: security, health care, education, infrastructure, supports for those in need, parks, transportation services, defence ...

Imagine what life would be like without all the things taxes provide? Imagine, for one day, not having roads, sewers, running water, police, ambulance, hospitals, defence, schools, snow clearing, airports, parks, ice rinks, old age security, garbage collection, colleges/universities, food inspectors, traffic lights, etc. Imagine how difficult life would be for young families, those with chronic health problems, seniors, those with disabilities ...

One of my friends regularly reminds me that having to pay taxes is actually a good thing – it means I actually earn enough money to have to pay tax. If I didn't have to pay any tax, I also wouldn't have much income. And life would be much more stressful than it is.

I am not really grumpy I have to pay tax. I wouldn't be annoyed if I really felt government was being a good steward of my dues. But I do get perturbed by how governments abuse tax money. A few years ago, one of the top news stories at tax time read: "*The top-spending senators routinely purchased high-priced business class fares and repeatedly used public money to bring spouses with them on trips to Ottawa, even as the Senate expense scandal was in full swing last fall. In one case, Senator Scott Tannas of Alberta billed \$12,000 to taxpayers to fly himself and his wife in executive class to Ottawa for a two-day trip. Another senator, from Toronto, was one of the party's highest billers for travel despite being just an hour by air from the national capital.*"³ This is the kind of nonsense that offends me. It's just wrong.

One of the blessings we enjoy as Canadians is a tax break for charitable donations. So ... rather than paying so much income tax and wonder where it's going (like paying exorbitant travel expenses), you can target some of your money to really make a difference where you believe it's most needed. The tax credit for the first \$200 of charitable donations is 15%, and the tax credit for the amount over \$200 is 29%. Provincially Alberta uses 21% as the rate for donations over \$200.

Therefore, on money you donate (over \$200), you receive a 50% tax credit. Why not consider taking advantage of these tax breaks to support the church, overseas mission, relief and development (Canadian Baptist Ministries), or another charity of your choice to make a real difference for people who really need help (not perks). You can check out how charities spend their money – for instance how much they spend on administration and fundraising – easily online at Canadian Revenue Agency.

³ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/tory-senators-expense-business-class-flights-with-spouses-1.2534725>

Tax time also reminds me I need to pray for government officials. They need wisdom to rise above partisan politics and really do what is best for everyone – not their party or their personal portfolio. Please pray for our political leaders that they might see themselves as “public *servants*” – with the same calling to seek and serve the lost, hurting, and needy as Jesus had.

We are called to pray for our politicians (1 Timothy 2:1-4 – Paul wrote this while Nero, a very evil man, was emperor). Whether you prefer their policies or not, pray today for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Premier Jason Kenney, Mayor Chris Spearman, our MP (Rachael Harder), our MLAs (Shannon Phillips and Nathan Neudorf), and City Councillors (Mark Campbell, Belinda Crowson, Jeff Carlson, Rob Miyashiro, Joe Mauro, Ryan Parker, Blaine Hyggen, Jeff Coffman). They need our prayers. And this is God’s command.

*Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory,
my understanding and my will;
all that I have and possess.
You have given them to me;
to you, O Lord, I restore them.
All things are yours: dispose of them according to your will.
Give me your love and your grace; for this enough for me.
Lord by thy grace, let the poor see me be drawn to Christ,
and invite him to enter their homes and their lives.
Let the sick and the suffering find in me a real angel of comfort and consolation.
Let the little ones of the streets cling to me because I remind them of him,
the friend of all little ones.
Amen*

Mother Teresa, 1910-1996

Sunday, March 29: Matthew 22:23-33

I am writing this reflection during a week in which we have two memorial services/funerals at the church. Death is always difficult to deal with. It always seems unnatural. But it is also part of life. It is a reality we all face with our loved ones, and personally. The good news of the Jesus is that death is not the end, but the doorway to an eternity with Him.

The Jewish powers-that-be are out to get Jesus, plotting how to trap Him into saying something for which he could be arrested (22:15). The Pharisees had a go at it by asking about paying taxes to Caesar (22:16-21). Now another Jewish faction, the Sadducees, get involved. The Sadducees were from the upper classes in Jewish society. They rejected many of the rules and regulations the Pharisees loved. They also believed there is no life after death/resurrection.

They were convinced the first five books of our Old Testament (written by Moses) were the real basis of Jewish faith: the later books (like the prophets) were less important. The Sadducees saw no evidence of resurrection in Genesis through Deuteronomy so they argued that the resurrection was an invention of later prophets like Daniel. And they believed Daniel was wrong. So they crafted this hypothetical situation as a mind game to trap Jesus (and the Pharisees) on the impracticalities and impossibilities of resurrection.

This is not really a passage focused on the NATURE of resurrection (what our bodies will be like, what our relationships will be like, etc). This is a passage intended to emphasize the FACT of resurrection. So Jesus goes back to the first five books of Moses and emphasizes that there, too, the doctrine of resurrection is evident. While Jesus does not go into detail, He does emphasize that God’s faithful people are very much “living” in Him. This is not yet the final resurrection in all its glory, but they are “alive in God.”

There is a lot of mystery about death, what it means to be “in God” or “in Christ” before the Day of Judgment, and full resurrection. The Bible does not give us all the details. Jesus does assure us that:

- resurrection is REAL – His own life, death, and resurrection will prove that.

- resurrection is GOOD – whatever our life in God will be like, it will be wonderful.
- REAL life is something we look forward to, being fully with God, in the future.
- God is in control. Nothing and no-one can ever take us out of His hands. Now. Or in eternity.

We may have questions. We would like more complete answers. We'd love to know details. But we have to live with the mystery of not understanding it all – yet. Perhaps it is impossible for us to comprehend what life will be like with God, in all His glory. Maybe it will be so amazing words cannot begin to describe it.

The great news is that this life is not all there is. Yes – we are called to live fully and passionately here and now – as if there were no tomorrow. But we are also invited to live as eternal children of God, knowing that this is not all there is. God is with us TODAY – to help us live fully, as His people. God will be with us in ALL our tomorrows: there is an incredible, astounding, overwhelming future ahead of us ...

Gentle ... yet powerful.
Lowly ... yet almighty.
Shepherd ... yet King.
In your gentleness, guide us.
In your power, strengthen us.
In your lowliness, strip from us our selfish pride which only destroys us.
In your greatness, lift us up that we might aspire to greater things.
As a shepherd, call us to be your servants.
As a King, call us to be your royal priesthood.
O God, who is our shepherd and our King;
O Christ, who was crucified and is now risen from the dead;
O Spirit, who comforts and empowers;
O great One in Three, Holy Trinity, this hour, set us free to worship.
Amen.