

Lent Reflections: Wednesday, March 25th – Tuesday, March 31st

Wednesday March 25th: Luke 10,25-37

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ^[a] 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' **26** He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' **27** He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' **28** And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' **30** Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. **31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. **32** So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii, ^[k] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." **36** Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' **37** He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

The story of the Good Samaritan is one with which we are all familiar. Equally familiar is the lesson we are encouraged to take from it; putting ourselves in the place of the Samaritan, we are to love and serve everyone, regardless of race, religion or gender.

In her reflection on the story, however, Maggi Dawn invites us to consider the event from the perspective of the man who was attacked. How would he feel, if he was sufficiently conscious to feel anything, when this member of a despised race came to help him? Would his principal emotion be revulsion, gratitude or fear?

Maggi relates a story of when she was taken ill on a railway station platform and, having approached two "nice looking" people for help, only to be rebuffed, she fainted. Coming round, Maggi found herself surrounded by a group of people of whom she writes:

"Their clothes, makeup, tattoos and piercings and huge dangerous - looking spiked boots all seemed to suggest that I might be in danger." Yet it was these people who helped Maggi; who reassured her, kept her belongings safe, went with her to the hospital and later made sure she got home safely!

Reflection

Have you ever refused help because you were wary of the one offering it? How open are you to accepting the friendship of those whose colour, creed, race or social status differs from your own?

Prayer

Lord and Father of all,

We thank you that you come to us in the form of friend and stranger. Help us, we pray, to recognise that and to be accepting of all people. Give us grace and humility to both serve, and be served by, people whose backgrounds, beliefs and views are different from our own. Amen.

Thursday, March 26th: Luke 18,18-30

18 A certain ruler asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' **19** Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. **20** You know the commandments: "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother."' **21** He replied, 'I have kept all these since my youth.' **22** When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money[☐] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' **23** But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. **24** Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! **25** Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

26 Those who heard it said, 'Then who can be saved?' **27** He replied, 'What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.'

28 Then Peter said, 'Look, we have left our homes and followed you.' **29** And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, **30** who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.'

On two consecutive days we find Jesus being asked the same question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Those asking the question also share certain characteristics; they are both men and both in positions of authority - one an expert in the law, the other a ruler. Yet Jesus replies in subtly different ways. To the lawyer he responds with a question - what does the law say? - thus encouraging the man to answer his own question. To the ruler, Jesus responds by listing a number of commandments which the ruler claims to keep.

As I reflect on this, Hebrew 13,8 comes to mind: "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever." This is true in the sense that Jesus is always loving,

merciful, compassionate. Always with us and always ready to welcome us. It does not mean that he is the same towards everyone. Yes, he is loving towards everyone, but that love takes different forms; it adapts to meet our situations, our stage in our Christian journey, our specific needs. Each one of us is different and Jesus, delighting in our uniqueness, responds to us accordingly. Christianity is not a "one size fits all" faith. We are all called to follow, love and serve Christ, but the other things asked of us, and the ways in which we are called to express our love and service will be as different as we are! So, to return to our reading, the lawyer was told he must love his neighbour, whilst the rich ruler was told to sell his possessions and give to the poor. In the end, you could argue, they come down to the same thing, but the end is reached by different paths. What path is Jesus calling you to follow today?

Prayer.

Loving Lord Jesus,
Help us to put love for you first, above all worldly considerations. Give us ears to hear your call, hearts to reflect your love, and wills to carry out your will through acts of selfless service. Amen.

Friday, March 27th: John 3,1-8

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2** He came to Jesus^[a] by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' **3** Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'^[b] **4** Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' **5** Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6** What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.'^[c] **7** Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You^[d] must be born from above."^[e] **8** The wind^[f] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

"He came to Jesus by night..." There are many debates, and many different views around the significance of Nicodemus going to Jesus at night. For some, it was an act of cowardice, going under cover of darkness to avoid being seen; "hedging his bets." Others take a more sympathetic stance, commending Nicodemus for going to Jesus despite his fear, while others suggest that John only states it was night to make a point about spiritual enlightenment.

Whatever the truth of the matter, Jesus and Nicodemus entered into a discussion on a question which has divided Christian communities ever since: "Have you been born again?" For the more charismatic Christian such a re-birth involves a definite, and usually quite dramatic moment of conversion, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and, at some point, a "Believer's Baptism" (by full immersion). For the more conservative Christian to be born again might mean simply a quiet, gradual,

deepening of faith as the individual develops their understanding of what that faith means to them.

Maggi Dawn suggests: "What is most important about a birth is not ... the exact moment that it happens, but ensuring the baby is alive. So it is with spiritual birth: we do not have to remember a precise date or time, we simply need to know whether we are alive."

Reflection.

How do you know when you are spiritually alive or dead?

What measures do you take to help ensure your spiritual health?

Prayer

Loving Lord Jesus, the Light of the world,
Dispel the darkness of our hearts and, when it threatens to overwhelm us, give us grace to come to you in humility and love, seeking your light, love and life.
Amen.

Saturday, March 28th: John 3,9-21

9 Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' **10** Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you^[a] do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[a] **14** And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[a]

16 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. **18** Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **19** And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. **20** For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. **21** But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'^[a]

Today we continue the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus and our passage contains one of the best known and most frequently quoted verses of the entire Bible: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone

who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." This brings us back to yesterday's question of what it means to be born again, and, with apologies to those who have heard it before, I would like to share my own experience.

Brought up by Christian parents, I would always have described myself as being Christian. One day, when I was about eleven or twelve, a guest speaker, Dr Doug Calcott), came to my school and gave us all a pocket sized copy of St John's Gospel. On the inside of the front cover was printed John 3,16 with the word "everyone " missed out and a space left. We were invited to write our own names into that space, so that it became personal; God sent his only Son so that *N*, who believes in him. may not perish etc. That made a huge impact on me and I would say that that was my moment of rebirth; the moment I began to follow a Christian faith not because my parents did but because it was my own faith. I warmly encourage you to do this exercise yourselves. The question is, having done so, how will you respond to the enormity of God's love for you?

Prayer,

Father God,

Thank you for sending your Son out of love for the world, and for each individual. As we struggle to grasp the full meaning and depth of your love for us, help us to reflect that love to others in all the ways we can.

Amen.

Holy Week.

Sunday, March 29th (Palm Sunday): Mark 11,1-11

11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

'Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

As we begin Holy Week, we have a very familiar story and one which many of you will have seen at least partially re-enacted in your churches this morning. Perhaps some of you enjoyed a procession, led by a donkey, and everyone who attended church will, I'm sure, have been given a palm cross. In a break from the sombre mood of the rest of Lent, your hymns were likely to have been more upbeat. There is a hint of Easter in the air before, at the end of the week, we return to an even greater sobriety.

Palm Sunday is associated with mass excitement; the crowds welcoming Jesus enthusiastically as their coming king and Messiah. That is certainly how I have always regarded it, but Maggi Dawn makes a point which has never occurred to me before: if Christ's "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem had been seen as a messianic claim, why was there no mention of it at his trial? His enemies would have had no need to trump up false charges - they would have had all the evidence they needed! Perhaps then, contrary to all we have previously thought, the triumphal entry was not arranged around Jesus at all; perhaps he and his disciples simply joined in a procession already taking place - it was after all approaching a major Jewish festival. By the time the Gospel writers recorded their accounts of events, they had connected the events of Palm Sunday with the prophecy of Zechariah (see Zechariah 9,9) and this, possibly, influenced their recollections.

Whatever the truth of this may be, what is certain is that Jesus did enter Jerusalem, thereby setting in motion the chain of events which would take him to Calvary.

Prayer.

Lord Jesus,

You entered your city of Jerusalem in humility, knowing all that was to come and willing to give your life for us.

Give us, we pray, humility to serve you faithfully and each other lovingly and selflessly, that at the end we may be welcomed into your kingdom. Amen.

Monday, March 30th: Mark 11.15-19

15 Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; **16** and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. **17** He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written,

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?

But you have made it a den of robbers.'

18 And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. **19** And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples^[a] went out of the city.

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild...." These opening words from my childhood prayer, probably evoke the image of Jesus most familiar to us all. Today's reading, however, shows us a very different side to Jesus. There is nothing "meek and mild" about the man we find overturning tables and accusing people of turning the temple into a den of robbers!

One of the dangers of following a faith based on love and forgiveness, is that we come to regard anger as being wrong, not something in which we, as Christians, should ever engage. There is, however, such a thing as righteous anger and Jesus demonstrates this in his behaviour in the temple. Temple worship involved sacrifices - of animals and money. Money had to be in Temple Currency and the animals sacrificed were determined by the worshipper's status; rich or poor. Traders and money changers took shameless advantage of this, often cheating people and with their chief concern being not to help the worshippers but to make as much money as possible for themselves. It was this injustice which angered Jesus and as his followers we should be similarly angry in the face of injustice. This is not a call to go out and commit criminal damage! But it is a call to care enough to see social injustice around us and to be sufficiently angered by it to speak out; to lobby MPs and local councillors and to support charities and campaigns that work to right social injustice in all its forms.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,

As you were angered by the injustice you saw in the temple, so may we be angered by the injustices we witness today. Help us to channel that anger into speech and actions which will help to right wrongs and bring justice for all people. Amen.

Tuesday, March 31st: John 12. 1-8

12 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. **2** There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. **3** Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them^[a] with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. **4** But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, **5** 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii^[b] and the money given to the poor?' **6** (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) **7** Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it^[c] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. **8** You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

Take a moment to bring to mind your oldest and/or closest friend. When and how did you meet? What history do you share? How does it feel when you enter their home for a visit?

An old and trusted friend is one with whom we can relax: words are not needed; effort is not required; we can leave behind the cares weighing us down and relax. So Jesus, approaching the end of his life, sought the company of his old and trusted friends and relaxed with them.

Unusually in the Gospels, this story does not involve Jesus giving anything. There is no teaching and no miracle. Instead, Jesus receives from others. He accepts their hospitality and food and, more significantly, he accepts Mary's extravagant anointing with the costly nard. We know that this action annoyed Judas, but we rarely stop to consider what it cost Mary or the implications of her action for herself and for us.

Pure nard was exotic and expensive: a pound of it would have represented all Mary's savings, her dowry and her future security. Yet she poured it out for Jesus - and he allowed her to do so. Jesus, at that point in his life, needed this level of devotion and support: something to bear in mind at times when we feel stressed and overwhelmed. It is not a sign of weakness to need help or to "take time out." Even Jesus needed this.

In terms of our own giving, particularly of our time, efforts and gifts, we must also remember that Mary's gift was a once in a lifetime offering. She would never be able to repeat the gesture and she had chosen her moment well; Jesus would never again be in such need.

Whilst our offering of ourselves in service is not a one-off occurrence, we too need to choose our moments carefully and prayerfully. As Maggi Dawn says: "We can only pour out our life's resources so many times. We need to ... understand the value of ... our gifts and talents, our time, the welfare of our ... family..... If we keep on pouring out all that we have without a thought for the timing and the effect, we may find ourselves at a moment of great significance with nothing left to give."

Reflection

When did you last take time out - either for a Quiet Day* to refresh your spiritual well-being or for a purely physical or emotional rest?

Whilst serving and caring for others, do you remember to serve and take care of yourself?

Prayer

Lord Jesus,

Thank you that you understand our need for support and rest. We ask you to give us grace to recognise this need in others and humility to recognise it in ourselves.

Please be with all who are weary, anxious or afraid at this time and fill them with your comfort and peace. Amen.

*If you would be interested in attending a Quiet Day at some point in the summer, please contact me on the email address given below. I would be very happy to organise one either at my home or elsewhere, depending on numbers.

Sarah.

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