

LENT 2023

THAT YOU
MAY KNOW
the TRUTH



THE
DIOCESE
OF
BLACKBURN
THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND IN LANCASHIRE



PREFACE

In a world that many claim is ‘post-truth’, the Gospel of Luke is subversive and radical. The gospel begins with a clear purpose statement: *‘to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed’* (1:3-4). The purpose of Luke’s gospel, according to the Evangelist himself, is that Theophilus—a word which simply means ‘lover of God’—might know the truth about our faith and our Saviour. So that all of us, who are lovers of God, might be strengthened and grounded in Christian teaching through a structured and orderly account of the life of Jesus. For Luke tells us that his Gospel was written about *‘all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning’* (Acts 1:1).

This year, we walk through Lent focused on Jesus, from His birth and ministry to His betrayal and death, and finally to His resurrection and ascension into heaven. Along the way, we will encounter a huge range of faithful and stumbling followers of Jesus, we will learn more about Jesus’ words and deeds and the names He is given, and

we will grapple with Jesus' final words on the cross, unique to this gospel and familiar to many from the Psalms and from Compline: *'Into your hands, I commend my spirit'* (23:46).

This gospel and our focus in Lent is Jesus. For Luke's gospel, Jesus is especially noted as a prophet and, more than this, a rejected prophet. In Him, the prophecy of the Old Testament is fulfilled. And this fulfilment has a very specific purpose: the lifting up of the lowly and the reversal of expectations. Luke's gospel, more than any other, calls us to a clear concern for the marginalised in his world. Women play an important role in Luke's narrative, supporting Jesus' ministry financially and offering models of true discipleship. Children, those who are ill, those socially excluded (such as tax-collectors), and those excluded for racial and ethnic reasons (such as Gentiles and Samaritans) or moral reasons ('sinners') are included, lifted up, and loved. As the words of Mary in Luke's beautiful and challenging Magnificat proclaim: *'he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty'* (1:53).

This Lenten season we are invited, through Luke's gospel, to know the truth of Jesus Christ. We are called to walk with Him to and through the cross. We are called to include those excluded by our society, culture, world, and Church. We are called to fill the hungry and lift up the lowly. We are called to enter into God's saving work through the radical love and teaching of Jesus Christ. We are called to join Jesus in His mission to those outside the places we gather. This Lent, may we be strengthened in our identity as lovers of God and may we not only know, but embody and proclaim His truth in our daily lives.

The Revd Canon Professor Jenn Strawbridge
Canon Theologian, Blackburn Cathedral



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WEDNESDAY 22ND FEBRUARY

Ash Wednesday

Read: Luke 1:1-25

“Because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” Luke 1:20

I feel a bit like a professional pessimist in drawing out a gloomy note from Luke’s mainly buoyant opening gambit. But it is surely appropriate, so we might begin this penitential season in a fittingly reflective and contrite spirit.

Let’s at least mark the joy and promise of this passage before we contemplate its corrective minority report. Luke’s dedication to Theophilus is replete with barely-contained excitement and elation: ‘the events that have been fulfilled among us’ (v.1) are both certainly true and of seismic import (v.4). Luke then takes a run-up to the launch of his main theme (Jesus!) via the person and ministry of John the Baptist. Uniquely, it starts still further back with John’s aged and up-to-now childless parents. John’s conception is the penultimate culmination (permit the paradox) of a pattern that God has used several times previously: enabling a barren woman to miraculously conceive so that she might bear a son who, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, will change the course of Israel’s history. Zechariah and Elizabeth’s child will be none other than the Elijah-type messenger prophesied by Malachi (3:1,4:6).

But we finish this devotional entry with Gabriel’s rebuke and punishment of Zechariah (vv.19-20). Zechariah’s sin is unbelief that God might actually answer his prayer (v.13), bless him beyond what seems possible (v.18), and in Zechariah’s own time and before Zechariah’s own eyes, keep His promises to His people (v.20). We might be so keen to avoid the sin of presuming on God’s answering our prayers, and keeping His promises on the terms and in the timetable that we desire, that we fall into the sinful ditch on the other side of doubting that God could actually act – here! Now! Wonderfully! Bountifully! – As our hearts have so yearned for.

Finally, there’s an extra warning here for those of us – lay and ordained – who have the awesome responsibility to speak in God’s name to God’s people. God would rather silence Zechariah, who in his heart doubts God’s word and promise, than have him speak a benediction in His name insincerely. Let those of us who dare to preach, absolve, or bless rather be silent than say what we don’t actually believe.

The Revd Dr Tom Woolford, Vicar of All Saints, New Longton

Read: Luke 1:26-56

‘The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God’ [...] Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’

Luke 1:30,38

‘Greetings, favoured one!’ the angel Gabriel says to Mary (v.28), and Luke tells us she was *‘much perplexed by his words’* (v.29). What does it mean to be favoured by God? As humans with a limited capacity for love and kindness, a choice to favour one person or group of people often means we are choosing not to favour others. I delight to tell my son that he is my favourite son, just as I love to reassure my daughter that she is my favourite daughter, but I am well aware of the jealousy and sense of injustice that would quickly be stirred up if I should seem to favour one of my two children over the other!

God is not limited in His capacity to show favour. When Mary’s miracle baby is born, nearby shepherds will hear an angel choir praising God and singing of *‘peace among those whom he favours’* (Luke 2:14). God’s choice to favour one woman, Mary, was part of His plan and desire to pour His favour, His goodness and grace, on all people everywhere. Yet that favour will only rest on, and can only be enjoyed to the full by, those who will accept the salvation that Mary’s Son was sent to bring. That is why He was to be called ‘Jesus’, meaning ‘the Lord is salvation’.

God’s favour can never be earned or claimed as a right. We need to guard against thinking that God must favour us because of our respectability, or faithful service to the Church, or generally good life. May we leap with joy, as John did in Elizabeth’s womb, at the wonder of God choosing to come near to us in Jesus.

But perhaps you feel that God would never favour you, that you are too insignificant or have made too many mistakes? Then listen again to Mary’s Spirit-inspired song in verses 46-55 of a God who delights to favour those whom others would disregard. God has plans for your life too. Are you ready to respond as Mary did, to receive God’s favour and allow Him to work out His purposes in and through you?

Sue Champness, Lay-member of St John’s, Leyland

Read: Luke 1:57-80

*‘And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.’*

Luke 1:76

The song that John the Baptist’s father sings in today’s reading is one that many Christians say every morning, during Morning Prayer. The Benedictus, as the song is known, is exclaimed by Zechariah at the birth of the one whom is to make the world ready for Jesus; it is itself both a song of preparation and of joy at God’s fulfilment of His promises. What better way to begin every day than with this reminder that God has kept His promise to redeem His people?

In the first half of the Benedictus, Zechariah sings his great outburst at the realisation that all of God’s promises to redeem the people of Israel are being kept (vv.68-75). If we can learn to start each morning of Lent with this in mind, perhaps we could come closer to understanding the extent to which God’s promises were fulfilled, once we arrive at Easter. Indeed, it could be said that in this season of humble reflection, there is little that could be more humbling than the reminder of all the promises that were kept by Jesus during His crucifixion.

In the second half of his song, Zechariah turns to address John himself and explains that his ministry will prepare the way for Israel’s promised Messiah. In this song there is an immensely personal pivot, that many of us may hear as if addressed to ourselves as we read the Benedictus in the second person, *‘And you, child...’* (v.76). In its reading aloud, this may feel like a personal reminder of the call of the Church, to participate in John’s task of leading people towards the salvation of Christ.

So perhaps in the days to come, each morning, as the dawn from on high breaks upon us, why not remember this song and keep in your heart a humbling joy over the promises that God has kept. May we, too, be reminded of our own participation in the task of leading people towards Jesus, as we prepare our hearts for Easter, in humility and repentance.

The Revd Jordan Bintliff, Church Planting Curate, All Saints, Chorley

Read: Luke 2:1-38

‘Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.’

Luke 2:34-35

Recently our family has spent Saturday nights waiting for a revelation. Not from God. But the revealing of which celebrity was underneath the costume in the TV show, ‘The Masked Singer.’ Each week what is hidden was made known.

As today’s reading recounts the birth of Jesus and His presentation in the temple, two revelations occur. The revealing of Jesus, and our hearts. Simeon speaks of Jesus as ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory for your people Israel’ (v.32). A light has broken in. The Father’s gracious purposes are revealed in Jesus. He is the Messiah, God’s universe ruling king. The Saviour, God’s means of rescuing us from our sin and the punishment it deserves. The Lord amongst us (v.11). The law fulfiller (v.22). The One who has come to console His people (v.25). Simeon rejoices at this revelation.

But he has more to say. Not the usual ‘Congratulations!’ or ‘Isn’t he adorable?’ said to new parents. But a solemn prophecy. The Jesus who unites us to God will also divide. We might be able to live behind a mask before others. They might consider us moral or devout. But how we respond to Jesus shows up the deepest realities – our inner thoughts, our hearts (v.35).

To encounter Jesus and carry on living in our own strength rather than His, or following our own paths, rather than His, will lead to our fall. It is a sobering warning, which repays honest reflection before God. ‘Our Father, show me if this is me.’

But it is not the only thing that can be revealed. Mary’s heart is also shown. It was filled with something else – delight in Jesus (v.19). To follow Mary, Simeon, and Anna’s example, and to treasure Jesus and the words about Him is the way to be lifted up. To examine our hearts, turn from anything we find which is not of Christ, and cling to Him might be hard. But the wonderful promise is that that leads to our rising – both now and for eternity (v.34).

The Revd Paul Bye, Vicar of St Paul’s, Ansdell and Fairhaven

The First Sunday of Lent

Read: Luke 2:39-52

'[Mary said] 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' [Jesus] said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'

Luke 2:48-49

Have you ever seen the BBC TV programme 'Who do you think you are?' Through creative journalism, the programme seeks to uncover lost connections and unfamiliar histories of celebrities as they trace their family trees. What emerges is not always what's expected which in turn can, and sometime does, cause a few problems!

In today's bible reading, the exchange between Jesus and His mother is an illuminating conversation about identity. At the age of twelve, Jesus is clearly growing in His awareness of his 'real' identity and His unique relationship with God and indeed His future mission. Mary's complaint that *'your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety'* (v.48) is gently challenged by Jesus with a simple nod in the direction of His Father in heaven *'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'* (v.49). Jesus, for the first time in Scripture, seems to own His divine identity, indicating that His true parenthood is not rooted in the DNA of Joseph and Mary, but in God.

This growing realisation is not without its difficulties. Cracks within the façade of the Holy Family become apparent as tension continues to grow. Yet despite His mother's frustration *'Child, why have you treated us like this?'* (v.48) Jesus returned home with her and was obedient to His parents. This episode raises questions for me about the impact of faith-based decision making. When we step out in faith to follow Jesus, or choose a particular course of action in our workplaces or family life, sometimes those around us struggle to understand why or what's going on, or perhaps even strongly disagree. Seeing Jesus choose to be obedient to His parents when He knows they do not fully understand the situation is a unifying action!

It's all too easy when fired up with enthusiasm and commitment in our faith to ignore the concerns of those around us or to believe that they are just plain wrong because we have become so enlightened! But seeing how Jesus responded to His mother opens up an alternative, grace filled, way forward where family and community loyalties are recognised as having their place and can flourish under the higher loyalty and love that we give to God.

The Very Revd Peter Howell-Jones, Dean of Blackburn

Read: Luke 3:1-22

*‘He (John) went into all the region around the Jordan,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.’*

Luke 3:3

Now is the time for the word of God to come to John: as a new act opens, Luke reminds us again of the political stage that John is stepping onto. He lists seven seemingly powerful leaders who will play a significant role in the life of John and Jesus. God is at work and John obeys knowing that God is far greater than any earthly power.

Now is the time to prepare the way: no matter how high the mountain or deep the valley, Luke makes it clear that the good news of Jesus is a fulfilment of God’s promise which must be seen and heard by everyone. God stops at nothing to clear the way. Isaiah spoke to God’s hurting people in exile which reminds us how God works out His plan in challenging times.

Now is the time to change our minds: John tells people how to find forgiveness and make a fresh start. To repent involves turning around and being changed from the inside out. John discerns those who are genuine about finding forgiveness. Some listeners thought that they were secure. Using strong language, John rebukes any complacency and warns that Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire will clear out and burn what is worthless to make room for a precious harvest.

Now is the time to change our lifestyle: Luke notes that tax collectors and soldiers ask how to live differently. The promise of a fresh start is for everyone no matter how far away they might feel from God. John teaches them to live with integrity, generosity and contentment.

Now is the time for Jesus to start his mission: John makes it clear that Jesus is the promised Messiah. As Jesus steps into the baptism waters, heaven opens and God affirms that Jesus is His dearly loved Son who brings joy. Everyone present sees the Holy Spirit descend.

As we reflect, we are assured that God is greater than any earthly power; Jesus is God’s Son and we can find forgiveness and make a fresh start when we turn back to Him.

Joy Rushton, Diocesan Being Witnesses Manager

Read: Luke 3:23-38

'He [Jesus] was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli [...] son of Adam, son of God.'

Luke 3:23,38

My Grandfather's surname was Bond; a traditional British name. He was proud of it and once told me, "My name is Bond and so my word is my bond." As you can imagine, all the family were surprised when, after his death, they found a document detailing his name change. It transpired that my Grandfather was from Poland. His Father had changed their names when they moved to England. Genealogies establish who we are, I have Polish blood in my veins.

Jesus' genealogy comes as even more of a surprise. The divine, eternal Son of God has a human genealogy. He is flesh and blood. Human blood runs in His human veins. He is fully human just like you and me. The divine became human. The mind cannot grasp it, but perhaps the emotions can appropriate it. He understands you. He knows what it's like to live a human life, to hurt, to make decisions that affect others, to fight against temptations, sin, and the devil. He can help you. What sin or difficulty are you struggling with this Lent? Why not take it to our merciful high priest and ask for his help with it?

Jesus' genealogy is also full of promise. David, Abraham, and Adam received huge promises from God about their offspring. David's offspring would rule eternally. Abraham's offspring would bless all the nations. Adam's offspring would defeat evil for ever. God's promise was *'I will take you as my people, and I will be your God'* (Exodus 6:7). Finally, the offspring has arrived to fulfil it all – Jesus. Jesus became a human to take our human sins upon His shoulders and die for them. At the cross His arms were spread wide open to welcome all nations to God. Then He rose again to rule all history and see us safely home where evil will be no more.

Jesus became a son of Adam, so that we might become sons and daughters of God. What sin or difficulty are you struggling with this Lent? Pause to reflect that Jesus has triumphed over everything that could threaten you. Run to Jesus and enter into His victory.

The Revd Dan Freeman, Assistant Curate, The Risen Lord, Preston

Read: Luke 4:1-15

*‘Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”*

Luke 4:8

Oscar Wilde once claimed, ‘I can resist anything except temptation.’ Adam, the son of God, could identify. When tempted in the Garden of Eden he succumbed to the serpent’s (devil’s) lies, and disobeyed God, eating the forbidden fruit. The pattern for humanity was set. Throughout history temptation has resulted in disobedience; every person in every generation. Right up until Jesus, the Son of God, the second Adam.

In Luke 4 Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert where for forty days he was tempted. Forty days in the wilderness mirrors the forty years when God’s people were led into the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt. We read in Deuteronomy 8 that this happened so that God may humble them, testing them to know what was in their hearts, whether they would keep His commandments. They did not. But would Jesus?

The devil tempted Jesus three times: to satisfy His hunger proving He is the Son of God; to take a short cut to glory by worshipping the devil; and to test the faithfulness of God and His word. The temptation was similar to Adam’s: ‘will God really provide for you, honour you, and protect you? But if you submit to me, then you can have it all at far less cost.’

Jesus broke the pattern. Rather than giving into temptation Jesus resisted. His response to each temptation used Old Testament law from Deuteronomy 6 and 8, words given to God’s people whilst they were in the wilderness. In resisting temptation Jesus demonstrated that He is indeed the perfect Son of God. For He alone resisted the devil, not disobeying as Adam did, or testing God as the Israelites did, but by perfectly obeying God’s commandments, trusting in Him alone for His provision.

Have you ever considered what a ground-breaking moment this is. What it meant for Jesus’ ministry? What it means for our future? Imagine if Jesus had failed; there would be no cross, no forgiveness, no hope.

Be thankful that Jesus chose obedience, obedience that qualified Him for His ministry, a ministry that culminated in the cross. Oscar Wilde was right when he wrote, ‘I can resist anything except temptation.’ Rejoice, therefore, that our salvation is not dependent on our ability to resist but rather on Jesus’ ability to obey.

Janet Thorp, Lay-member of St Andrew’s, Leyland

Read: Luke 4:16-30

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed.'*

Luke 4:18

A number of Twitter handles exist to allow people to share difficult truths anonymously so as to avoid the flack of sharing such an opinion publicly. What would your difficult truth be to the world? Mine would be that pineapple belongs on a pizza without question. Those who say fruit has no place need to remember the tomato base they so readily enjoy!

Jesus didn't have the benefit of anonymity so when He says something that riles the crowd, He feels the full impact immediately. We see that in today's passage when they try to throw Him off a cliff. His uncomfortable truth which provoked this reaction was that not everyone would accept Him and therefore not everyone would be blessed by His ministry. This truth quickly moves people from wonder at His gracious teaching to fury at his words. Some see this side of Jesus as license to offend in the name of truth. It's important to note that Jesus doesn't necessarily seek out or court controversy, actually as often as not he tries to slip away when things get hot, but neither does He shy away from sharing the difficult truths when the time is right and the question is asked.

At a time where so many seem content with swallowing comforting lies over accepting difficult truths about the world we inhabit, where might the Church's prophetic edge lie? Well Jesus gives us a clue in His choice of passage to read out – anything which speaks truth to power in a way that sets the captives free, releases the oppressed from the chains of injustice and speaks good news to the poor, that is where we must be heard to speak truth. Whether it's gender based violence, racial injustice, economic oppression or disability discrimination (to name just a few), a Church which is prepared to stand before the authorities and speak truth to these things is a Church which truly reflects Jesus' ministry.

What might you be called to speak against? Even if the consequences are painful to consider?

The Revd Sam Cheesman, Chaplain to the Bishop of Blackburn

Read: Luke 4:31-5:11

‘He saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.’

Luke 5:2

Being something of a clean freak myself I was drawn to the image in this passage of the fishermen cleaning their nets. Having been at work all night they cannot finish and go home for a rest until everything is made ready for the next fishing session, and this includes cleaning and mending the nets. I guess to use dirty or broken nets will mean the quality of the next catch will be poor and fewer fish will be caught.

Then as the story progresses, when Jesus asks them to go out immediately and fish again, they are ready, because the nets have been prepared.

Jesus uses this example of fishing to demonstrate to the fishermen how He is calling them to become His disciples and to ‘fish for people’. So I can’t help thinking that in order for the fishing for people to take place, there must first be some cleaning and mending of nets.

I wonder what this looks like in our own lives? Jesus calls each of us to ‘fish for people’, to be ready to proclaim the Gospel message in our settings. But first we must make sure we are ready. As a priest I often find myself in situations where people ask me about what I believe and why. However, these situations usually happen when I am least expecting them, when I am in the supermarket, or collecting my children from school.

I have found that having an answer ready to easily and succinctly explain the reason for the hope I have in Christ is incredibly useful, it means that when God gives me those opportunities to share my faith I am ready with an answer – just as the disciples were ready with clean and mended nets.

The Revd Anne Beverley, Vicar of Christ Church, Wesham & Dean of Women

Read: Luke 5:12-26

'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God.' **Luke 5:24b-25**

I wonder if anyone had ever said this to this paralysed man before? His condition was clearly desperate, revealed by the lengths his friends went to in order to get him to Jesus. Jesus commends both his and their faith before getting to the core issue – his need for forgiveness. Today, this remains our number one human need too. The answer to Jesus' question about which is more difficult is perhaps meant to be: Neither. Both forgiving someone's sins and commanding a paralytic to walk are impossible for a mere mortal, but neither are impossible for God.

This Lent, in which part of your life do you need to: 'Stand up, pick up your bed and go home?' (Has anyone said this to you before?) Could Jesus be saying the same thing to you as He said to the man in this story? It may be a generational issue for you, that has kept you down, 'paralysed' (perhaps with fear), for years. You may have believed lies spoken over you by others, even loved ones, to the point that you are now dependent on others to be 'carried' when Jesus is saying you can walk all by yourself. Perhaps for you, like this man, the issue relates to un-forgiveness, perhaps not. Today, whatever the issues that are paralysing us are, let us settle in our hearts that we will not stop and we will not rest until we have pushed through the crowd and done whatever it takes to get to Jesus. Having got there, may we be obedient to His instruction, do what He tells us and then give all the glory to God, thereby drawing others, perhaps if necessary even carrying other paralysed believers, to Jesus so that they can be set free too.

The other miracle in today's reading is covered by all three of the Synoptic writers, but only Luke records the extent of the man's illness. It is well known that at the time of Jesus, leprosy made a person 'untouchable' – physically and socially. Jesus chose to break through multiple man-made barriers in touching this man to make him clean. Just like with the healing of the paralytic, the end result is that many people are drawn to Jesus.

Perhaps the hinge verse for both of today's healing stories is verse 16, where we are told that Jesus would regularly withdraw to deserted places to pray. This Lent, may we too draw our strength to keep on directing others to Jesus, from our times alone with Him. May that process start today, right here, right now.

Christian Pountain, Head of R.E., St Christopher's C.E. High School

The Second Sunday of Lent

Read: Luke 5:27-6:11

*‘The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them,
and then they will fast.’*

Luke 5:35

There was a craze some years ago for ‘bobble-headed Jesus’ figures. They were cuddly cartoon-like dolls which you could put in your car and a smiling Jesus figure would nod reassuringly at passers-by as he gave them a thumbs up. If you missed these tasteless characters, be grateful!

The biblical Jesus is a long way from the tasteless doll. Far from giving everyone an inane grin of approval, He challenges almost everyone in ways that make them feel uncomfortable. In today’s reading He upsets religious leaders by eating and drinking with sinners, not fasting when they think He should and doing things on the Sabbath that they think He shouldn’t. They become furious and start hatching plans that will ultimately lead to Jesus’ death on the cross.

In many ways we are the religious people of our day and so as I read Luke’s account of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, I find myself uncomfortably challenged. It’s easy to retreat to a holy huddle with fellow Christians and so avoid mixing with modern day sinners and tax collectors, yet Luke tells us that Jesus did the opposite. It’s also easy to misunderstand Jesus’ comments about fasting and Sabbath so that we presume that neither apply to us. After-all, in a very busy world, it’s tempting to never stop for rest and to never rest from consuming. Yet Jesus doesn’t ban fasting or Sabbath rest. Instead, He tells His critics and His friends that when He is taken away from them they should fast, and that He is Lord of the Sabbath.

So this Lent how might a little fasting help you to draw closer to Jesus? Perhaps it’s about what you eat and drink? A simpler diet or no alcohol through Lent will be good for your physical, mental, and spiritual health. But I suspect for many of us it is a fast from busyness that we really need. Just imagine simplifying each day to create some extra space for prayer? I know that might seem an impossible challenge but actually it is something we can all do and if we do it we will find that as we meet with the Lord of the Sabbath we will find rest for our weary souls.

The Revd Nick McKee, Director of Vocations

Read: Luke 6:12-38

*‘Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray;
and he spent the night in prayer to God.’*

Luke 6:12

I’m terrible at asking for help. I don’t know how to do it; I often don’t recognise when I’m over capacity, and I’m bad at the planning ahead that sharing the load often requires. It’s unfortunate, but not unusual! Modern society idolises independence and self-sufficiency, and relying on others feels like weakness in comparison. It feels embarrassing, even shameful, as though needing support or assistance means we’ve somehow failed, or aren’t doing enough to earn our keep. It demands that we relinquish our authority over things precious to us. It requires humility and trust: we may be told things we don’t want to hear, by the people we’d least like to hear them from.

Maybe that’s why it’s so refreshing (or just dread-inducing!) to see that so much of Jesus’ earthly ministry and example is rooted in giving and receiving help – He seeks guidance, shares burdens, and encourages vulnerability. In this reading (and across the whole of the Gospel), Jesus acts only after seeking the will and presence of the Father. Having spent the whole night in deep prayer, He then names twelve apostles, to whom he entrusts not only His immediate ministry of teaching, healing, and proclaiming the Good News, but also His whole journey to the Cross, sharing in their companionship and community. Finally, He greets His apostles alongside the multitude of those who have followed Him – rich and poor, young and old, the sick, frightened and lost, of all status and none, all seeking His help and healing. Jesus embraces their need of help – their need of Him – and assures them that in this weakness, they are blessed. Their salvation is found in turning away from the illusion of earthly power and sufficiency, and towards reliance on Him.

Here, too, is our salvation: seeking the will of the Father, embracing the support of our fellow travellers, and trusting in the strength of Jesus to redeem our weakness and relieve our shame. May His example free us to embrace our vulnerability, in order to be truly open to the work He shares with us.

The Revd Rebecca Feeney, Vicar of St Peter’s, Chorley

Read: Luke 6:39-7:10*‘I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.’***Luke 7:9**

Well, we’ve almost completed two weeks of Lent. How is it going so far for you? How is your prayer, fasting, and abstinence taking shape? Did you start with good intentions, but it’s started to slide? Have you begun to ask yourself what are you doing it for?

Well, what are we doing it for? There can be a real danger that we undertake Lenten observances to feel more holy. The more we fast, the holier we are. The more I pray the holier I am. The less football I watch, the closer to God I get. Not like the ‘me’ before these exercises; not like those who don’t even bother.

The section of Luke’s Gospel is the antidote to such thinking. The antidote to the idea that we are making ourselves more holy; that we are somehow separating ourselves from our unholy past or from others. It should also be the antidote to the idea that people of other denominations, or other faiths, have nothing to teach us about faith, and our own journey of faith.

This journey of Lent is about letting God’s love fill us and give us a loving heart, a pure heart. In Welsh we say *Calon Lan*. The famous Welsh rugby song is in fact a hymn, a prayer, asking God only for a pure heart. The heart of Jesus. The heart that allows Him to see the Centurion’s faith and lift it up as an example to the Jewish elders. The heart of Jesus that should be our foundation. A heart that allows us to remove the logs that are jammed into our own eyes, so that we might see with the sacred heart of Jesus. To truly see others as He sees them. To see the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. To see their innate beauty and learn from God’s work in them.

This Lent let us all pray for a purer heart, with a full measure of Christ’s love, overflowing. So that out of that abundance we might be a blessing to our neighbours. *Calon lan yn llawn daioni* (A pure heart full of goodness.).

The Revd Adam Thomas, Director of Whalley Abbey

Read: Luke 7:11-35

*‘When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her
and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’*

Luke 7:13

I wonder what her name was. This widow, a heartbroken mother who walked behind the bier carrying her only son. What had happened that had seen her end up in this place, walking a journey no one wants to face. Alone in the world. Her men gone. Her position as a widow fragile and vulnerable. A life of loss and grief. Was the crowd so large because they had been paid to be there or because they wanted to walk with her in solidarity at the misfortune that life had dealt her? Was it silent as they walked or were there murmurs and wails in the crowd?

As she approaches the gate of the town, along comes a Man who is travelling, teaching, healing, performing miracles. He is followed by another large crowd. Surely, He won't want to spend time with this woman, she is no one important, a widow who has no family. But Jesus sees her. He has compassion on her. He tells her, (v.13) *‘Do not weep’*, a bizarre command on such a day.

He moves to the bier. Was there a hush in the air as the bearers paused in their walking? Was there a sense of anticipation at what might happen? Had news of His miracles reached these people?

Jesus touches the dead body; He makes Himself ritually defiled and tells the young man to rise up. His touch brings life. A display of lordship, a defiant act declaring and revealing His power and authority. Here is a Lord who is all about life and health. Here is a Lord who is focused on restoration, rebuilding of family. The woman is no longer alone. She has family, security, hope.

Here is an act which points forward to a greater act, a death on a cross and a resurrection that will defeat the powers of death once and for all, bringing life and hope to all peoples everywhere.

Who will you see and encounter today that no one else will notice? How can you minister to them the compassion and love of Jesus? How might you ensure they are seen and valued? Where could Jesus be Lord today?

The Revd Hannah Boyd, All Saints, Higher Walton & Holy Trinity, Hoghton

Read: Luke 7:36-8:3

*‘Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven...
Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’*

Luke 7:48-50

The problem of sin is the biggest dilemma of all humankind because *‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’* and *‘the wages of sin is [eternal] death’* (Romans 3:23, 6:23). We desperately need forgiveness of sins to have eternal life. But another dilemma is, with our own efforts or abilities we cannot save ourselves. Many religions suggest various remedies of forgiveness but these are unsatisfactory. Our living hope is Jesus who alone is the perfect solution to the problem of sin and its consequences. In today’s passage we come across a woman who receives forgiveness of sins from Jesus. Let us reflect on the two key points in her action (vv.37-38).

First, her action expresses extravagant hospitality. Though uninvited and unrighteous her humble conduct shows that God’s love has taken a deep root in her heart. God’s love encouraged and empowered her to go beyond social norms to openly welcome and host Jesus in her life. She demonstrates her generous love for Jesus without any embarrassment. Jesus said, *‘her sins, which are many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love...’* (v.47). Has God’s love taken a deep root in our hearts? Are we encouraged to love Jesus generously and openly without any embarrassment, and welcome and host Jesus in our lives?

Second, her conduct shows an unspoken confession of sins and declaration of faith. She must have examined her life. Her action speaks loudly of the self-awareness of her sinfulness and the need of forgiveness. Jesus grants forgiveness to this woman, *‘Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace’* (v.48, v.50). She is saved by her faith from the wages of sin which is eternal death.

Lent provides us another opportunity to reflect on our own lives and examine ourselves. An opportunity to look deep inside our hearts and lives, see how serious our sin is and acknowledge our need of forgiveness. May we cultivate God’s love in our hearts and be encouraged to generously love Jesus. Let us welcome and host Jesus in our lives through repentance and faith in Him. He has all the power and authority to forgive sins and save lives for eternity.

The Revd Munawar Din, Vicar of St Luke’s, Brierfield & St Cuthbert’s, Burnley

Read: Luke 8:4-21

*‘A sower went out to sow his seed [...] Some fell into good soil,
and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.’*

Luke 8:5,8

The parable of the sower seems to tell us that dirt isn't what you spend your life desperately, hopelessly, trying to scrub off. The dirt is where God grows something new.

I think many of us desperately need a new way of thinking about how God is saving us. What if we used the image of God the sower as our main way of thinking about God and what He is trying to do in the world? God is a farmer, sowing seed. He isn't trying to pull us out and clean us off, he's trying to plant something in us. He's not a hygiene-obsessed food scientist, aiming to sterilise everything, but a farmer who happily gets His hands dirty because the dirt is where things grow. And His vision is a lot broader than we might think.

The problem with our image of ourselves as dirty sinners and God as the one cleaning us off is that we think that until we're clean we're useless.

A farmer who worked like that would carefully prepare a plot of land to plant in, pull out all the weeds, dig out the stones, shoot the birds. Then and only then would they plant the seeds carefully one by one in the good soil. They're not a sower. They're a gardener with a vegetable patch. God is not like that, Jesus says. The sower scatters seed everywhere. There's nothing half-hearted about the way He acts. He doesn't write off any soil as useless ahead of time. He certainly doesn't avoid scattering seed in places that look less than ideal.

That's how God looks at us. Not as people who need to be pulled out of where they are and cleaned off and changed into someone different before He can accept them. But as people who could be fertile ground for something good to grow. No matter how unpromising we might look to others. God values us. In the parable of the sower Jesus is teaching us that the dirt isn't what you have to wash off before you're worth anything. It's what stuff grows in.

The Revd Leah Vasey-Saunders, Vicar of Lancaster Priory, Lancaster

Read: Luke 8:22-39

“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.’

Luke 8:39

Have you ever wished that you had been alive at the time of Jesus? Seen His miracles for yourself; an eyewitness to His divine power in action? Surely that would have been a wonderful, faith-inspiring experience. And yet we find that is not the experience of the eyewitnesses in today’s passage. Here we have two incredible displays of Jesus’ authority and power. A raging storm rebuked, and instantly stilled. A man possessed by many demons, out of control, a danger to others, immediately restored to his right mind. Both situations are completely beyond human control, driven in one instance by terrifying forces of nature, and in the other, by overwhelming forces of evil. But Jesus is completely in control—His supreme divine authority is demonstrated unequivocally.

And yet the only voice that recognises Jesus for who He truly is, is the rebellious voice of evil, when it asks (v.28) *‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?’* Even Jesus’ disciples are too petrified by the reality of something they know to be humanly impossible, to acknowledge Jesus’ true identity. They can only ask in trembling voices *‘Who then is this?’* (v.25). And, as for the people of the Gerasenes, they are so terrified by Jesus’ authority over evil that they want nothing more to do with Him.

We should not be surprised that they are afraid. Throughout the Bible, witnessing God’s divine nature inspires fear. Trembling before our awesome and holy God is inevitable. *‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’* says the book of Proverbs (9:10). But notice that fear is only the beginning of wisdom. It is how our hearts respond to that fear that will determine our eternal destiny. The people of the Gerasenes wanted nothing more to do with Jesus, so Jesus left them. The disciples, on the other hand, kept on following Him, and soon, like the healed man whose life was transformed by Jesus in the Gerasenes, the disciples would be travelling all over, telling how much Jesus had done for them.

May we too be those who not only tremble before Jesus’ holiness, but also bear witness to His life-transforming love and grace.

Carolyn Bullock, Lay-member of St Paul’s, Withnell

The Third Sunday of Lent

Read: Luke 8:40-9:6

‘When Jesus heard this, he replied, ‘Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved.’ **Luke 8:50**

Some years ago, I attended an outdoor pursuits camp with primary-aged children. One of the activities in the camp was named ‘The Leap of Faith’ and consisted of climbing a telegraph pole to a height of eight meters or so and then jumping off to hit a ball suspended near the pole. Of course, health and safety dictated that each participant was harnessed and secured so no harm could come to them. But, children being children they insisted that I had a go which seemed like a great idea until I started to climb. Fear is a difficult emotion to deal with and builds a physiological response that can leave us frozen. I still remember the feeling in my stomach and challenge of telling myself to believe what I knew in my head to be safe.

Each of these accounts is filled with fear, faith, courage, and reward. Jairus, as a synagogue leader, would have needed great courage and faith to even approach Jesus for help. He would undoubtedly fear rejection from Jesus and contempt from his peers in the Jewish community but Jairus found the courage to approach Jesus and the faith to believe that Jesus could heal, even after he was informed of the death of his daughter. His reward was a restored daughter and a deeper faith in God.

The unnamed woman in the story should not have approached Jesus given the social norms of the time and had to have the courage to approach and the faith to believe that Jesus could help. Nobody likes to publicly admit they have done something that would be considered wrong and yet her courage and faith is rewarded with love, acceptance, and healing.

Jesus then sends out His disciples with power and authority to proclaim the Kingdom of God, but without Jesus by their side. I can only imagine the mixture of emotions and fear of what they would find having taken nothing and needing to depend entirely on God. However, faith and courage yielded the reward of enabling others to draw close to God.

As you read this passage and reflect on what it might mean for you today, I encourage you to act on Jesus’ words in v.50, ‘Do not fear. Only believe’ and enjoy the riches of God’s reward.

Canon Stephen Whittaker, Interim Diocesan Secretary

Read: Luke 9:7-27*‘[Jesus asked] ‘who do you say that I am?’**Peter answered, ‘The Messiah of God.’***Luke 9:20**

One of the TV quizzes I enjoy watching at the moment is called ‘Only Connect’, even though I can’t answer most of the questions. Equally as interesting for me is watching the contestants. Sometimes they get the answer right and come out smiling. Sometimes, they forget something they know perfectly well under the harsh glare of the studio lights. Other times they reveal that they didn’t know as much as they hoped they did. Fortunately, the only thing at stake is the prize at the end, the much sought-after ‘Only Connect’ trophy in this instance.

But, there are some questions that, depending on your answer, will change your life forever. Jesus’ question about who His followers thought He was is a question like that. This wasn’t a quiz question that Jesus asked His disciples. It was a question that would change their lives, depending on the way they answered.

Jesus needed to know that His disciples had worked out who He was. It wasn’t an easy question for them to answer, because Jesus hadn’t done some of the things people were expecting the coming Messiah to do. He hadn’t rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. He hadn’t overthrown the Roman authorities. The coming Messiah was supposed to usher in a new rule which would bring with it justice and peace, a new way of governing God’s people and God’s world. Though Jesus had done many remarkable things, He hadn’t actually done any of those.

If you’d have been with Jesus’ disciples, how would you have answered the question? Might you have followed the crowd and agreed with the people who said Jesus was a prophet? Or would you have shared in the realisation dawning in the hearts and minds of the disciples that Peter voiced: ‘You’re God’s Messiah’? You’re the King, the Coming one. You’re not just a prophet. You’re the One we’ve been waiting for!

Our beliefs have consequences. If, like Peter, you think Jesus is the Messiah, then you are committed to following Him. Are you ready to do that? Jesus shows us that life is more than a voyage of self-discovery. ‘If you want to gain your life you have to lose it’. What do you say? What will you do this Lent?

The Revd Jon Price, Start of Ministry Officer

Read: Luke 9:28-50

*‘Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep;
but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory
and the two men who stood with him. ’*

Luke 9:32

We were walking on the fells above Darwen. There was hardly a cloud in the sky and the winter sun was low. As the day turned to dusk I managed to get some shots on my phone of my family, bathed in dazzling light. Everyone was laughing. None of the kids were fighting! I wished this moment could last forever.

I wonder if this is what Peter, James and John felt. They were used to being with Jesus, watching Him heal people, feed thousands, walk across lakes and calm wild storms. They’d probably even climbed up mountains with Him before and tried to stay awake as He prayed. But this time it was different. Waking up from the drudge of sleep they see Him bathed in an awesome light. And He’s not alone. He’s talking with none other than Moses and Elijah – ancient heroes of the faith! Then God the Father speaks. His voice booms out of the cloud surrounding them. This is literally a mountain-top experience for the disciples. Of course Peter wishes this moment could last forever. But even though he doesn’t know what he’s saying, he captures something so honest about our longing to know Jesus more. It’s like he’s saying, ‘Jesus, seeing you like this, it’s incredible. I don’t understand what’s happening or what this means. I thought I knew You but I’m only just beginning to glimpse who You are. But I want to see You and know You – please don’t let this moment end!’

But the voice from heaven falls silent. Moses and Elijah leave and the disciples follow Jesus back down the mountain, not knowing where He will lead them.

If you’re anything like me, you yearn for moments of powerful revelation where Jesus leaves you in no question of who He is. But such mountain top experiences always provoke a response; now that we’re left with no question about who Jesus is, will we follow Him unquestioningly?

‘Where He leads me I will go, for I have learned to trust Him so...’

Rachel Gardner, Lay-member of St Luke’s, Blackburn

Read: Luke 9:51-10:12

*‘Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough
and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’*

Luke 9:62

Comparisons can be unhelpful. However, it can sometimes be useful to appreciate one thing by noting the similarities and differences with another...just think of websites such as ‘Go Compare’ and ‘Compare the Market’! In today’s passage Luke gives us an exercise in comparison – between Jesus and the prophet Elijah (cf. Luke 9:19, 30, 33).

Jesus begins His journey to Jerusalem, in anticipation of being ‘taken up’, just like Elijah was (9:51; cf. 2 Kings 2:10-11). When Jesus’ steadfast pursuit of Jerusalem leads to His rejection by the Samaritans His disciples suggest that – just like Elijah – they call down fire from heaven to consume them (v.54; cf. 2 Kings 1:9-16). However, here’s where Jesus looks so radically different to Elijah. Jesus rebukes such a suggestion (9:55-56). While a time for judgement is coming (10:12), now is a time of grace and salvation.

Because this period of grace is coming to an end, there is an urgency about Jesus’ call to discipleship. When Elijah called Elisha to leave his plough and follow him, Elisha was permitted the time to go back to his family and say farewell (1 Kings 19:19-21). Not so, with Jesus. The call to follow Jesus is so urgent that He denies a would-be-follower the same opportunity (v.61-62). In fact, Jesus’ call is not to abandon the plough, but to resolutely take up the plough in the work of harvesting a crop for His kingdom (9:62; 10:2). His followers are to take out the message of salvation to all, so that some may be saved (10:8-9). Jesus’ disciples must be stubbornly determined in their mission – *‘greet no one on the road’* (10:4; cf. 2 Kings 4:29).

What then, have we seen from this comparison? The call to follow Jesus is compelling – more urgent and demanding even than Elijah’s call upon his successor. It is a call to hard graft in the field sharing the Good News with the world in this season of grace. Does that describe my life? How about yours?

The Revd Andy Meeson, Vicar of St John’s, Leyland

Read: Luke 10:13-37

'[Jesus] said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.'

Luke 10:18

Luke, a doctor and evangelist is the only known non-Jewish author in the New Testament. He presents an accurate account of the life of Christ and highlights the relationship of Jesus with people of all walks of life. It is the most comprehensive gospel covering Jesus' life from birth to the Ascension. The gospel story continues in Acts.

Reflecting on Chapter 10:13-37 has helped me to build my spiritual capacity to serve Jesus in the context where many reject Jesus' teaching and many continue to serve and follow Jesus.

Capernaum was the base of Jesus' Galilean ministry (vv.13-14). But Galileans failed to understand Jesus' miracles or believe His teaching. It brings it home, as we realise once a missionary-sending United Kingdom is now becoming a minority Christian community. Jesus speaks about judgment against those who reject Him.

But there is a celebration in the midst of gloom (vv.16-18). The confident disciples joyfully report that in the Name of Jesus demons become obedient. Jesus not only encourages them for their good work but exclaimed with joy, *'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning'* (v.18). This is a powerful assurance to all those who continue to suffer persecution for the sake of the gospel. Those who follow Jesus will overcome the devil (vv.19-23). During Lent we are called to affirm Jesus' ultimate victory over Satan on the cross and offering of eternal life to all His followers.

I am called to live the love and compassion of Jesus in my neighbourhood (vv.25-37). My faith in Jesus enables me to serve unconditionally to any race, creed, or social background who is in need. There can be no reason not to help those in need. We are called to be the Good Samaritan. And not like the priest and Levite in the story. If we live the love, the compassion, and the sacrifice of Jesus shown on the cross it is inevitable that Satan will fall and be defeated.

The Revd Dr Sarah Siddique Gill, Vicar of United Benefice of St Stephens with St. James Church, Blackburn

Read: Luke 10:38-11:13*‘Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’***Luke 10:42**

Today’s passage goes right to the heart of our calling as Christians, and that is to be people of prayer. Martha and Mary remind us of the importance of our work-life balance, getting the balance of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ right. Wellness is not just a twenty-first century concept, it is Biblical as this passage from Luke reminds us. And as if to reinforce this, the story of Martha and Mary leads into the Lord’s Prayer, which then leads into a lesson about persistence in prayer.

When prayer comes first we gain God’s grace and wisdom for the task before us. And most importantly we will have God’s peace in the middle of whatever busy season that we are in. There are times when we are called to be like Martha, busy in the Lord’s service. But there are times that, in order to witness and serve effectively, we need to stop and simply rest in God’s peace. We are called to be a balance of both Martha and Mary. Rick Warren writes: ‘the difference between blessed and stressed is often just rest’.

Lent is the perfect time to reassess whether the balance is right. Does the time we spend in prayer inspire us to act with fairness and justice? Might we read the Lord’s Prayer slowly, a verse at a time, asking for fresh insights into the consequences of praying those words (*‘thy/your will be done’* is the most challenging prayer ever!). Some biblical scholars question the chronology of these events, but one thing is very clear from this passage – the importance of prayer and persistence in prayer.

There’s an old ‘wayside pulpit’ poster that states ‘Seven days without prayer makes one weak.’ And the writer, priest and poet George Herbert, wrote ‘Seven whole days, not one in seven, will I praise thee.’ As we continue our Lenten journey may we find that daily prayer becomes as natural as the air we breathe. And may our prayer give us those moments to refresh and recharge so that we might, in Jesus’ name, be led to action.

The Revd Neil Kelley, Rector of St Laurence’s, Chorley & Diocesan Healing Adviser

Read: Luke 11:14-36

‘Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness.’

Luke 11:34

I knew I was up to my eyes in my own incompetency when the electrician asked me what types of lighting I wanted. It has become clear recently that I am to interior design what Cruella de Vil is to pet care. I thought lights were what you switched on to, you know, light a room. He patiently explained the difference between ambient, task, decorative, and accent lighting. Apparently, ambient light is general light for the whole room. The others offer something which is partial, dividing up the space for different purposes.

Today’s reading shows Jesus doing something eye-opening which is met with division and partiality. He performs an exorcism which exposes discord in the onlooking crowd. Some perceive His actions as evil. Knowing what people are thinking, Jesus responds in unequivocal terms: every kingdom divided against itself is laid to waste. This is true for our own personal domains and for the nature of evil itself. When seen wholly as the work of God, Jesus’ actions reveal that the Kingdom of God has come – the Kingdom for which His disciples have just been taught to pray. In the interactions which follow, Jesus urges His hearers to turn away from partial views and temporary answers to perceive God’s greatest sign, before their eyes, who is offering lasting change.

Our reading concludes with a striking image. Jesus invites His hearers to consider their eyes – the healthiness of their perception. The unhealthy eye is partial and divided: it supplants sincerity with suspicion and scepticism. The healthy eye is whole and undivided: it has integrity, it is broad and generous, it fills the whole body with light. Far too often I hold back from seeking God’s ambient light visible and available in Christ. Instead, I find myself stuck kindling a partial and divided view by wanting light that shines on what I am doing – a flattering light that accents the best features. Today, if we are to be (prayer)fully switched-on to the signs of God’s Kingdom that light up the whole world then we cannot keep our eyes off Jesus.

The Revd Matt Allen, Blackburn Centre Lead Tutor, Emmanuel Theological College

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Read: Luke 11:37-12:7

‘It is these you ought to have practised, without neglecting the others.’

Luke 11:42

As I write this we have a guest coming for supper, and Gill is busy in the kitchen. Have you ever invited someone for a meal, only to be totally embarrassed by their words and behaviour? When the Pharisee invited Jesus to a meal he was taking a bit of a risk. Jesus was a bit of a celebrity, but He was unpredictable – you never quite knew what He might do. No sooner had He arrived than He was raising eyebrows by not observing the ritual hand-washing which was part of the Jewish dietary code (v.38). And then He appears to insult His devout host, a Pharisee, suggesting he is more concerned about the minor details of religious observance, washing the outside of the dish or insisting on giving a tithe of the smallest garden herbs, rather than the more important matters of sharing his food with the poor (v.41) or pursuing justice and the love of God (v.42).

But notice what Jesus says about tithing in v.42. He doesn’t dismiss the principle enshrined in the Old Testament of giving the first tenth, a tithe, of all our produce or income to God, even down to the smallest amounts, like the garden mint. Rather He says that the Pharisees should have given their tithes, even on the smallest things, but without neglecting the needs of the poor, the demands of justice and the priority of loving God.

What about you and me? If Jesus was coming for supper this evening my wife and I would be very excited. However I expect we would also be a bit nervous about what He might notice and comment on over the meal table in front of our other guest. I might think I am quite devout, like the Pharisee, but how often do I give food to the foodbank, or take food to the needy? How concerned am I about pursuing climate justice, or justice for the people of Ukraine? Am I loving God above all things? And am I doing those things without neglecting to give the first proportion of my income to God’s work, rather than my own needs?

EEK, I think I can hear the doorbell...

The Venerable Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn

Read: Luke 12:8-34

'I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God.'

Luke 12:8

Puffing and panting to work one day, I had to face a reality I had tried to avoid for some time – I had become really unfit. How on earth had that happened?! I couldn't deny it most likely had something to do with not exercising or eating well – I clearly had missed my calling as a detective! So, in a decisive frame of mind, I joined a gym. The only time of day I knew I could consistently make was 6.30am; the only class available at that time was boot-camp – a brutal and demanding class. I can tell you, my friends, that I have never felt closer to the Lord whilst having a near death experience each morning! How I prayed as I endeavoured to simply survive each session. I did not become physically fit overnight but gradually saw improvements.

Today's Scripture about denying Christ reminded me about when I first became a 'proper' Christian and the process of becoming spiritually fitter. Growing up in a pretty secular context, to publicly proclaim yourself a Christian could often be met with bemused looks and slightly baffled responses – conversations were not always easy. But I found that over time, the more I talked about my faith, the easier it seemed to get – I became 'spiritually fitter' so to speak. What a comfort it is to read today that when we publicly acknowledge Jesus to others, even in a hostile context, He is faithful and will acknowledge and honour us too. How amazing that Jesus tells the angels about us and is walking alongside us in our spiritual journey!

We all know that life is fleeting and often brings unexpected twists and turns. The Parable of the Rich Fool (vv.13-21) is a timely reminder of this – a somewhat brutal realisation that our time is now and should not be wasted. But we are also assured that there is no need to worry – we just need to seize every opportunity and build our spiritual stamina in sharing our faith with confidence. Are you working on your spiritual fitness by talking about Jesus today?

The Revd Barbara Houghton, Assistant Curate, St Stephen's Preston

Read: Luke 12:35-59

*‘Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes...
if he comes during the middle of the night, or near the dawn,
and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.’*

Luke 12:38

We’ve all seen the bumper sticker and the t-shirt; ‘Jesus is coming! Look busy!’ A tongue in cheek notion that many would believe carries validity and rings true of the coming again of Jesus, but when I read this passage I can’t help but hear the Scouting mantra running through my head, ‘Be Prepared’! This could be because like many my age this particular uniformed organisation holds a significant series of memories from my childhood, or maybe it is the realisation that Jesus is not actually looking for busyness from His followers but readiness.

We see echoes in these early verses of Matthew 25 when Jesus tells the parable of the ten virgins, a parable traditionally used during Advent when thinking about Jesus’ second coming, and again here we see Luke highlighting the same theme – be prepared, be ready for the return of the King – wow that sounded a little Tolkienesque! There are several different focuses to the passage that all build on the narrative of Jesus’ return; what does readiness look like, the reward for being prepared and the punishment if we don’t steward what we have been trusted with well, the tension and division that we will witness as His return nears, and the need to read the signs of the times we live in.

But what does readiness look like in Lent 2023, I hear you ask? What we see in the words of Luke 12 is that ‘who we are’ has to be shaped by the knowledge of ‘whose we are’ and that is way more important than ‘who the world tells us we should be and what we should be doing’! In other words, being ready for Jesus’ return looks like recognising that closeness and relationship with God is of greater value than how much we do and how busy we are, because when we are busy being busy we will miss Him!

Jesus is coming! But don’t panic, you knew that because you know Him and you are watching at the door for His arrival!

Ben Green, Diocesan Youth Adviser

Read: Luke 13:1-35

‘Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.’

Luke 13:30

Something that seems to be a hallmark of British culture is the queue. We queue politely for all manner of things, large or small. There is often anger that rises in us when people ‘jump’ the queue, as we see this as being unfair to those who have waited patiently. When we hear the words of Jesus that the last shall be first and the first shall be last, there may be a sense of indignation that perhaps kingdom queue jumping is going on here.

This is why it is so vital to read the words of Jesus in their context. To understand what ‘first’ and ‘last’ meant in that time, we need to look at vv.10-17. Here we see a woman, crippled for 18 years, unable to stand up straight. She would have been marginalised, unable to fully participate in society, perhaps shunned because of her visible disability. In the queue for power and privilege, she would have been permanently at the back. But Jesus, standing in a position of authority as He taught in the synagogue, sees this woman and calls her forward to occupy that space with Him. Then He honours her, healing her, and bestowing publicly on her the title of ‘daughter of Abraham’ (v.16). There has been a reversal from shame to honour, from being bowed down to being lifted up.

In contrast, we see the synagogue leader, full of power and importance, demonstrating a staggering lack of compassion for this crippled woman. He uses his authority to chastise and shame rather than to heal and lift up. And to this man, and others who would follow his example, Jesus issues a public rebuke, calling them ‘hypocrites’ (v.15). As His mother declared when He was still in her womb, Jesus ‘brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly’ (Luke 1:52). The last became first, and the first became last.

As we consider the teaching and actions of Jesus here, how do we respond? Are we preoccupied with our place in the queue, trying to work our way to the front? Or do we feel permanently last and least in whatever hierarchy surrounds us? Jesus has compassion for all, wherever they may be in life’s queue. And He calls us all to follow Him as He turns our expectations upside down by blessing and using the small and seemingly insignificant in the kingdom of God.

Amy White, Lay Training Officer

Read: Luke 14:1-35

*‘[A]ll who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’*

Luke 14:11

At the opening of today’s chapter the scene is set with an elaborate trap. A Sabbath meal is laid on at the Pharisee’s house. Jesus, their quarry, has been invited. The bait, which is the suffering man, has been placed right in front of him. And the trappers silently watch. If Jesus breaks one of their made up Sabbath rules then they’ve got Him. But Jesus not only willingly springs their trap by healing the man, in the teaching that follows, He also corrects their mortal error.

The Pharisees believed that they could earn God’s blessings by keeping extra rules. They were therefore quite willing to let a man suffer and possibly die in an effort to keep those rules. Something that Jesus points out they were not willing to endure themselves, when the loss might have been theirs. Their rule keeping was an attempt to grasp God’s blessings by their actions, but, as Jesus shows, it was actually robbing them of any blessing they might have received.

If, like the pharisees, we try to claim a place of honour at Jesus’ heavenly banquet by our own merits, our disappointment will be as painful as the guest asked to give up his seat. And if we think we will earn an invitation to the heavenly banquet by inviting God to enjoy the good things we first give to Him, we will miss out on all its joys.

However, if we, as the spiritually “*poor...crippled...lame and blind*” (v.13), humbly accept the free invitation that we have no prospect of earning or repaying, then we will feast forever, with Jesus, the Lord of the heavenly banquet.

So we can be confident that the griefs we may bear in this life, and the pleasures we may forego as we follow Jesus, will all perish into nothingness, when compared to the abundance we will receive at His table.

The Revd Paul Davies, Associate Vicar, St Andrew’s, Leyland

Read: Luke 15:1-32

‘But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’

Luke 15:32

It can be so easy to forget where we were before God made His presence known to us. The times we very much felt that we were more in charge of our own destiny than our Maker Himself. Once young it felt as if the world was our oyster to explore and place our mark upon it. We were open to all that came our way eager to experience all things. Drawn into the world we became addicted to its wiles. Whilst the age of freedom dawned there was an element of impatience, and letting nothing hold us back, neither family, friends, or those in authority.

I have heard stories from young and old, now lost, weak, and empty. Alone they find themselves left with nothing and wanting to turn back to before the secular world took hold. They returned to families and friends only to be turned away, staying homeless, in need, and addicted to all manner of substances to get by; to cope.

There but for the grace of God go I when things don't quite go to plan. Alas, in Luke, God does not just focus on the son who returned, He focused on the son who stayed. Both needing to look inwards and allow the Spirit of God to let them acknowledge who they are and who they can be through God Himself after repenting. As we focus on the son who stayed, we realise that no one is perfect and that there is need to give mercy to the returning son who now knows how wrong he was. Thankfully their father modelled our Heavenly Father in his ways; grace, mercy, and love overflowing. Forgiveness in abundance, rebirth, and immortality to unfold.

Luke breathes unity into being, from father to sons, from one son to another, and ultimately from God the Father to us, His much-loved adopted children. We now in Lent open ourselves up to the fact that those without sin cannot cast the first stone (John 8:7), because there are none of us who are sinless.

Let being clothed in Christ's righteousness inform, reform, and form us in Christ's likeness. Amen.

Gloria Birdsall, Lay-member of St Peter's and St David's, Fleetwood

Read: Luke 16:1-18

‘And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.’

Luke 16:8

My Mom has always been a murder mystery fan, so my childhood was filled with Cluedo, puzzles, and often riddles. When she first read to me the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, it felt like another riddle to unpick. Which seemed odd. Jesus’ parables are supposed to be understandable to all, yet this one left me confused. Why does a man who gets away with cheating get praised in the Bible?

Until I realised, like most riddles, the answer was in plain sight and I was getting lost in the wrong details. The dishonest manager is not praised for his dishonesty, but for his shrewdness. He was wise and showed foresight to prudently prepare for what was coming. It took me even longer to realise that when Jesus points out how shrewd unbelievers are in dealing with their own generation compared to Christians, it is not an insult, but the act of a parent teaching His child an important skill.

How often do you hear “We make plans and God laughs?” and use it as a reason to not prepare for the future? There is virtue in listening to the Holy Spirit and trusting that no matter what God will provide. But planning and preparing are very different things.

How much time do we spend considering what we invest in? As Christians, shrewdness is an important skill to hone. The dishonest manager invested in his master’s debtors to provide himself with his earthly needs. We have our earthly needs to invest in and our inheritance and relationships in God’s Kingdom. Not just with our time and talents but also our finances.

As Christians we don’t just hang around for our next calling, waiting for what we have to run out. We start getting ready. We prepare by caring for what we have and investing in the ministry, mission, and vision of the Kingdom of God. We invest in our inheritance, just as the dishonest manager who didn’t wait until he handed in his accounts, to invest in his future. How shrewdly are you investing all the Lord has gifted you?

Christy Sawyer, Stewardship Resourcing Officer

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Read: Luke 16:19-17:10

‘Increase our faith!’

Luke 17:5

Few of us will ever be guilty of having been said to have too much faith. In fact, I don't think it's possible to have too much faith. In today's reading we hear two sections of scripture offered.

Firstly, the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Lazarus, though the one named in the story, had been an unobserved person in his earthly life. Here, he enjoys everything that is good because he is enjoying God's beneficence. The rich man who had great entitlement in his earthly life has nothing now other than torment. The faith that Lazarus has is not explicitly referred to, but he is commended by the reward that he gets in heaven. To be given a place at the side of the great patriarch of the faith in Abraham must be a commendation of faith.

The rich man by contrast sees his error and wants to put it right for his family. However, he is told if they have not listened to the great prophets and patriarchs before, why would they start now?

As Jesus tells this story He hands a further warning – never be one who puts a barrier in the way of faith. Do not keep from God those who have a right to draw close to Him. Be people of faith so that, like the grain of mustard seed, your faith will flourish.

Finally, we have the slightly unusual ending which is a teaching about what it is to be a good servant. Few of us have servants, but we do know what it is to experience, and to offer, good service.

Today we are offered a reflection on the importance of getting our priorities right in life and noticing those who often go unnoticed. Proclaiming that we have great faith will mean little if it is not backed up by actions that suggest an option for the poor. Similarly, carrying out the actions of service will only mean so much if they are backed up by the character and desire to truly be a living sacrifice.

The Venerable David Picken, Archdeacon of Lancaster

Read: Luke 17:11-37

*‘Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!”
For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.’*

Luke 17:20-21

Jesus was asked by the Pharisees about the coming of the Kingdom of God, a hot topic in His day. His answer may well have surprised His hearers. They were probably expecting a physical Kingdom, centred on Jerusalem with the Messiah as the King. Clearly visible to all. Jesus’ answer says it will not happen like that. The Kingdom cannot be pointed at on a map; there will be no visible throne; you will not be able to visit it. Nevertheless, the Kingdom is present. It is among (or within) you.

Jesus now turns to His disciples, teaching that the Kingdom is closely connected to the coming of the King. Jesus Himself is the King but will not usher in the Kingdom until He has first suffered (v.25). Like Noah and Lot before Him, He and His message will be rejected, and that rejection will bring God’s judgement. It is a serious business.

For us the Kingdom is both a present and a future reality. We constantly pray ‘Thy Kingdom come.’ At the Second Coming of the King, when the Kingdom comes in all its fullness, it will be a similar story to the first coming (vv.30-35). The acceptance or rejection of the King has consequences. However, the ones who accept the King may come as a surprise. Gratitude to God for this king and His power to heal and forgive may be found in surprising places. The first part of our reading has ten lepers healed and only one returning to give thanks, and he was a foreigner.

During the period of Lent it is good for us to examine ourselves and ask if we are truly grateful to God for the saving power of the King. His Kingdom may be at work silently in our times, but the day is coming when everything will be laid bare. Are you prepared for the coming of the King?

The Revd Alan Hogarth, Vicar, St Paul’s Withnell, & St Barnabas, Heapey

Read: Luke 18:1-17

‘Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice’

Luke 18:5

What makes us righteous before God? Can we be righteous before God? What does God see as true and right?

The easiest thing to understand is the failings of the Pharisee. He is not a bad man by the standards of the Jewish laws, in fact, he keeps them all if we are to believe him! He tithes, he fasts...he goes above and beyond in his religious observances; and yet in his heart is firmly rooted the sin of pride. Pride, the very thing that keeps us furthest from God.

It is simple enough to see that Jesus tells us that we must come before God as the tax collector, not seeking to try to sell God some weak story, trying to convince God of our own holiness, but to acknowledge our failings, to be honest and turn to God with humility in our hearts, and trust in His forgiveness with the innocence of the little children. But how might this be achieved?

Persistence, like our widow. Prayer is the practice of persistence and patience. We simply need to keep at it. This can be especially hard when we are setting out though. We might think that our prayers are not being answered, and thus, the whole exercise is pointless. How we enter prayer is key. Do we enter in with love, and thankfulness, or do we spend our time comparing our virtues with those of our neighbours? Do we spend time talking at God, or do we spend our time listening for His loving words?

Prayer changes us when we spend our time simply being with God in the silence of our hearts, waiting for Him to be with us. In this silence we learn childlike trust, innocence, and we see the times we have stepped away from God’s path and failed to live up to His expectations. In prayer we change and grow, and our life becomes just that little bit more ‘Christ-shaped’.

Let us pray persistently in humility and love, that we may approach God as children, trusting only in His goodness.

**The Revd Matteo Zambon, Assistant Curate, Church of The Ascension,
Torrisholme**

Read: Luke 18:18-43

*‘Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet,
but he shouted even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’*

Luke 18:39

The labyrinth of streets are narrow. Buildings line their sides. The streets are dusty and frequented by people who walk the same streets each day hurrying along as they go about their business. Sometimes they notice him but more often they don't. Or they choose not to. He sits in the same place day after day, week after week, month after month. He hears what goes on, he knows all the different sounds, the different footfall. Today though, something is different. The sounds have changed. There are more people than usual. So many more. Different people. There is excited chatter in the air. He longs to know what is going on but from his seat on the floor at the edge of the road he cannot tell. He dares to ask one of the crowd and is told 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.' Jesus! He knows this name! His vision veiled by darkness he dare not risk getting up for fear of being knocked over and trampled by the multitude that now fills the narrow street. But he has to get to Jesus! Though his eyes cannot see his soul can and it longs for Jesus.

'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' He shouts (v.38). Be quiet he is told but he shouts all the more. Those that ignore him are now trying to silence him as well. Who is he that he is trying to bother Jesus?

But those attempting to silence him are soon to be silenced. For Jesus hears him and calls out to him. Jesus does not pass by, He does not look down on him, He does not ignore him. Jesus invites the blind man to come to Him and then (v.41) asks him *'what do you want me to do for you?'* Jesus does not tell him what to do, He seeks his opinion. For Jesus came to serve.

Jesus comes to serve and to save everyone. For the last, the lost, and the least. Not just the rich, the powerful and the mighty.

Where do you place yourself in this story – the blind man, one of the crowd, the silencer, the reader?

Jesus invites all to come and to follow Him and His example. How do you respond to His invitation?

The Revd Liz Gethin, Assistant Curate, St Cuthbert's, Fulwood

Read: Luke 19:1-27

*‘When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him,
“Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”*

Luke 19:5

Zacchaeus came up short in every way. For one thing he was short in height, but he also lacked standing among the townsfolk of Jericho. Everyone looked down on him. But don't go feeling sorry for little Zacchaeus; he'd brought contempt upon himself. He was a chief tax collector and had become excessively rich by adding a personal surcharge on top of the revenue demanded by the authorities. Zacchaeus was a greedy, exploitative, obnoxious little man.

But it seems that he'd become interested in Jesus. Not that he wanted to have any meaningful interaction with the Man who was causing such a stir. Rather, Zacchaeus decided he would find a vantage point above the crowd in a tree and there, from a safe distance, he would look down and watch Jesus pass by. "Stay aloof," seemed to be his attitude. What an irony! The man who comes up short thinks he can look down on everyone else. Do you see anything of Zacchaeus in yourself?

But Jesus doesn't allow us to stay aloof. He stopped abruptly and said, *‘Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down, for I must stay at your house today’* (v.5). And Zacchaeus knew he couldn't refuse; salvation came to his house. But notice that Zacchaeus doesn't simply welcome and love Jesus, salvation also transforms the way he regards his riches and other people (v.8).

You can imagine that such a wonderful changed life must have caused great excitement among the disciples. Maybe Jesus was about to transform the whole world into the place it ought to be – *‘they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately’* (v.11). But Jesus warns them not to jump to that conclusion by telling the parable of the Ten Pounds or Minas. The key points are that the Man destined to be King will first be hated and those who should be His people will do anything in their power to reject Him (v.14) – surely a reference to the cross which is now only days away. And secondly the parable urges Christians to continue as faithful servants of King Jesus even though His Kingdom hasn't yet fully appeared (vv.15-17).

The Revd Canon Mark Jones, Vicar of Padiham Parish

Read: Luke 19:28-48*‘The Lord needs it.’***Luke 19:31**

I wonder if, like me, you have found yourself staring intently at the computer screen, the cursor hovering over the ‘Buy It Now’ icon, as your right hand grips the mouse, but still not really sure if you need the item in question. Do I really need it?

Consumerism has had a radical effect on our society. We are encouraged to acquire things, to become more like the people we admire. As that thought transits through my head I am reminded of a conversation that I once had with my dear wife after a new handbag arrived at our home. After I had enquired whether she really needed another bag, she helpfully informed me that it “wasn’t about need!”

We see the two disciples obeying Jesus’ instructions without really understanding the significance of what was happening. The colt (or donkey) which would bear Him into Jerusalem, also reminds us that Mary was carried on a similar animal to Bethlehem, and it would have also carried the Holy Family into exile in Egypt.

‘The Lord needs it’ (v.31). It is very easy to fall into the trap of believing that acquiring more possessions will in some way bring about a real sense of contentment in our lives. I am reminded of our Lord’s instruction to His disciples to *‘Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic’* (9:3). Do we need, really need, many of the things which we desire? Would we benefit from a physical and spiritual de-cluttering?

Lent gives us an ideal opportunity to ask ourselves what the Lord need from us. Have we matched His generosity in our own lives, lives which should reflect the fruits of that generosity? Lent is an ideal opportunity for us to take stock, and to focus on what is truly important – our relationship with God in the person of Jesus.

Am I where I would like to be?

If not, what am I going to do about it?

The Revd Glen Brooks, Vicar of St Anne’s, St Anne’s on Sea

Read: Luke 20:1-26

‘But [Jesus] looked at them and said, ‘What then does this text mean: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?’”

Luke 20:17

You’re probably familiar with the saying, ‘Don’t shoot the messenger’ – the phrase which is used when someone doesn’t want to be blamed or punished for being the bearer of bad news. The religious leaders were displeased with the things that Jesus had been doing and saying, and so they were trying to discredit Jesus again by questioning His authority as He taught in the temple courts. In response to their probing, Jesus told the crowd the Parable of the Tenants.

In Jesus’ time, it wasn’t unusual for a wealthy person to invest their money through buying land on a farm or vineyard. This land would be looked after by tenants and when the harvest came, the landowner would send someone to collect his share. The tenants in the story knew that if the landowner didn’t have an heir, the land could become their property, so after badly treating the landowner’s servants, they see an opportunity. Instead of being respectful of the landowner’s son, they decide to kill him so they would inherit the land. The significance of Jesus’ story was unmistakable. All the prophets that God had previously sent had been treated the same – they were persecuted. So, God had sent His Son, Jesus, in the hope that He would be afforded the respect that He deserved. In saying that the landowner’s son was killed, Jesus foretold His own death at the hands of the Pharisees. The religious leaders were confronted with their denial and like the tenants in the story, they didn’t appreciate what Jesus was saying, so they chose to ‘shoot the messenger’. Instead of wanting to please God, they looked for a reason to arrest Jesus.

Although we may find it difficult to liken ourselves to the Pharisees, our desire to be in control can sometimes mean that we are reluctant to fully submit to God, insisting that our way is better. This passage reminds us that Jesus Christ is our ‘cornerstone’ – the most important part of our foundation. If we genuinely have faith and put our trust in Him, He is the One on which everything rests and the One who holds all things together. Through daily prayer and study of the Bible, Jesus is the rock on which we can build our lives so that everything is made secure.

Sarah Earnshaw, Diocesan Children’s Work Adviser

PALM SUNDAY 2ND APRIL

Holy Week

Read: Luke 20:27-47

'[God] is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.'

Luke 20:38

A gang of teenagers taught me a new phrase recently. To 'mug off.' It means to leave someone feeling stupid by defeating them in an argument. These young people delight to mug off their teachers by knowing more than them. And they mugged me off a few times over lunch by being quick and cheeky.

These verses of Luke represent an attempt to mug Jesus off. The wannabe muggers are the Sadducees, a wealthy and powerful group in Jerusalem who had the key roles in the Temple. They were the respectable establishment, and unlike the Pharisees, they did not believe in any sort of physical resurrection. When you died, either that was the end of you, or you went to a gloomy place called Sheol.

These men wanted to prove that Jesus, who had been teaching about the resurrection, was wrong and so they create a crazy hypothetical situation. Imagine seven brothers who marry the same wife. If there is a resurrection, whose will she be?

I'm always struck by the passion of Jesus' response and the forcefulness of His argument. Because whilst, for the Sadducees, the resurrection may be a subject of speculation and intellectual game playing, for Jesus it is personal – a matter of life and death.

This encounter happens just a few days before Calvary. Jesus is about to undergo bloodshed, abandonment, unimaginable agony, even death itself. And He will endure all this precisely in order to make available to us a Resurrection so rich and wonderful that all earthly delights, even marriage, will be as nothing in comparison.

We have reached Palm Sunday, the start of Holy Week. Today is the day to commit ourselves to walking with Jesus all the way to the bloody Hill of Calvary, remembering the death He died on our behalf. That's not an easy thing to do, but it's important. Why? Because as we walk the way of Jesus' cross, we can delight to live with Him His Resurrection life: not a theoretical concept to be argued about, but a lived reality richer and more wonderful than we can possibly imagine.

The Rt Revd Philip North, Bishop-Elect of Blackburn

Read: Luke 21:1-28

‘Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

Luke 21:27-28

I vividly remember a day when I was studying at university, I was walking hurriedly to the library stressing about all of the upcoming deadlines, when I looked up and I saw a beautiful view of the cathedral up ahead in the distance. It struck me that I had walked that route to the library countless times before and I had never noticed the amazing view that was up ahead before! I was so focused on the here and now that I had missed what was up ahead.

Reading today’s passage can seem overwhelming as we read of ‘wars and insurrections’ (v.9), nations ‘*rising against nation*’, ‘great earthquakes’, ‘famines and plagues’ (v.10), and the expectation that followers of Jesus will be arrested and persecuted (v.12). However, sadly this list also comes as no great surprise, because as we look around our imperfect world we see such struggles and sufferings. When we look around, the outlook can seem pretty bleak and hopeless.

However, like me on the walk to the library, let’s not allow our current experience and struggles to overshadow the bigger picture, rather, let’s look up. There is hope in our passage that God is still at work, in the present, and in the future. In the face of present persecution, Jesus promises to give His followers the words to say (v.15) and assures that ‘*by your endurance you will gain your souls*’ (v.19). Crucially the souls of the faithful are eternally safe, not by perfection, not by good works, not by service, but by endurance, by sticking with Jesus in good times and bad. Our ultimate hope, amidst all the struggles and sufferings, is that Jesus will return, and we ‘*will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory*’ (v.28).

As we edge closer to celebrating Jesus’ death and resurrection again, let us take time to consider: what practical things can we do to help us to look up, look ahead, to take heart, and so endure until Jesus returns?

Natalie Print, Lay-member of St George’s, Chorley

Read: Luke 21:29-22:6

‘So [Judas] consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray [Jesus] to them when no crowd was present.’

Luke 22:6

How easy is it to do the wrong thing when you think that no one is looking? Then once it is done, it seems far too late to change course, and much easier to carry straight on. Novels abound with characters making these moral choices, and we readers are meant to learn from them. The characters grow better or worse depending on the choices they make, and the further down one path they go, the harder it seems to reverse course.

Judas learns this at the cost of his soul. He agrees to betray Jesus, his master, in the absence of the crowd—for he knows that Jesus is popular with them, but Judas now wants to be in favour with the officials in Jerusalem, and he also wants to be richer. So he will betray Jesus at night. The chief priests themselves will hold a council at night, in secret, to condemn Jesus to death. Money will exchange hands, twice, and then Judas will himself flee from his deed into the night, ashamed to bear witness at Jesus’ trial, ashamed to stand before the Son of Man as He hangs on the Cross, and to state to all the world *‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood’* (Matthew 27:4). Judas’ duty to confess the truth about Jesus will fall to the penitent thief, and to the Roman Centurion who supervised the Crucifixion.

And so Judas’ later deeds bear witness against himself. He gave a kiss as if of peace, but with war in his heart. His love of money was the root of all his evil. Yet only days before, his Master had declared that it was necessary to pray to have the strength to escape such temptation. In other words, the strength to do right comes from God Himself, as does the opportunity to repent. But first of all, we have to watch, to be alert, and to recognise that we are not alone. God is looking: better still, He is looking out for us.

The Revd Tristan Meares, Assistant Curate, Holy Trinity, Tarleton & St. Mary the Virgin, Rufford

Read: Luke 22:7-34

‘You are those who have stood by me in my trials.’

Luke 22:28

Set in the context of the Preparation of the Passover, Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist is presented as His legacy to the Church. Here is Luke’s version of Jesus’ farewell address to the Church. He provides exhortations about how to prepare for the Eucharist; he justifies and illustrates the divine plan of history – for example, Jesus’ fate was determined by God (v.22); the transitions in authority (vv.24-34); and the soundness of the foundations that Jesus laid for the future Church – for example, the Eucharist (vv.15-20) as the central expression of the church’s fellowship in His memory. He will go on to deal with the question of future missionary praxis (vv.35-38).

Luke invites his readers to reflect on what it means for the Church to follow, with courage and changed circumstances (when He will no longer be with them in bodily form), in the footsteps of Jesus. The emphasis is on humble service. Jesus’ disciples, if they are to be true to Him, will seek to serve others and never to exalt themselves.

The question of betrayal immediately presents itself. Will future disciples betray Jesus? As Luke continues his farewell discourse, he addresses a searching challenge to his communities: will they, who receive the Eucharist at the Lord’s table, betray Him? Jesus foretells the betrayal of Judas (vv.21-22) without mentioning his name, which might imply that the betrayer could be any one of the assembly. He goes on to see through Peter’s protestation of loyalty (vv.33-34). Jesus knows that each of those who have shared fellowship with Him at table has the potential to betray Him, as well as the potential to follow Him faithfully.

Each time we celebrate the Eucharist we are challenged, as were Jesus’ first followers. We are challenged to embrace humility and a desire to serve rather than dominate. We are challenged to be faithful to Jesus in every circumstance of life and never to betray Him by our words or actions. Jesus, in St Luke’s Gospel, is making clear to the reader that no disciple, not even the one for whom Jesus has prayed (Peter), will be safe from a test to his/her loyalty and fidelity.

The Revd Canon Stephen Jones, Vicar of Christ Church, Carnforth

Read: Luke 22:35-62*‘[Peter] denied it, saying, ‘Woman, I do not know him.’***Luke 22:57**

What will you do when push comes to shove? I admit that I have never quite understood the full meaning of this saying but have certainly heard it being used on many occasions. Nevertheless, it seems that at the heart of this little phrase is an enquiry as to how we will act when we are faced with the harsh reality of a particular eventuality, rather than what we claim we might do whilst chatting through the possibility over coffee.

Slightly ahead of today’s passage, Peter had asserted that there would never be a time when he would deny his relationship with Jesus. Gathered in the Upper Room this was easy, there was no impending threat or approaching risk and so Peter could feel comfortable in making this claim. However, jumping ahead to the events in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus’ arrest and imprisonment, Peter was no longer in a comfortable environment where his words did not need to be accompanied by actions. Now was the time when he needed to speak unashamedly of his discipleship and show by this action that the words of his mouth were true. The reality, of course, is quite different and under sustained questioning, and aware of the surrounding authorities, Peter denies his association with Jesus three times.

In our own lives we are often faced with situations where it is the easy option not to speak of our faith in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we sometimes find ourselves in positions where putting aside the teachings of Jesus might be the simpler route. Just think, how often do we preserve our resources in order to retain material goods rather than giving freely to those less fortunate than ourselves? How often do we pass comment on someone before getting to know them to a deeper level? How often do we keep quiet about our faith when in the company of people who so desperately need to hear the life transforming message of the gospel? When push comes to shove will you stand as a beacon for Jesus Christ and speak boldly of your faith in Him?

Sam Walmsley, Lay-member of St George the Martyr, Preston

Read: Luke 22:63-23:25

'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.'

Luke 23:4

Jesus can bring out the worst in people! When God-in-the-flesh shows up, humanity tries to get rid of Him. Good Friday shows what we are capable of. Everyone in our passage today, bar one, overtly rejects Jesus. Yet against this dark and grim backdrop Jesus Himself shines bright as the innocent One determined to accomplish His mission to save.

The Jewish guard, probably temple police, mock and beat Jesus. They call for the Word of God, the Prophet surpassing Moses, to prophesy. The Jewish leaders condemn the Judge of all the Earth for speaking the truth about Himself. Herod wants Jesus to perform for his amusement and resorts to ridicule when he will not. Pilate, the Roman governor, three times announces Jesus' innocence from all charges, speaking more truly than he knows. But he gives in to the will of the crowd and condemns the Prince of Life to the cruellest of deaths.

Luke unflinchingly holds a mirror to the worst humanity can do. This is the humanity we belong to. We deceive ourselves if we think the same darkness does not have a place in our hearts. The very events of Good Friday show us why we need Good Friday.

Barabbas is the only person in the passage who doesn't explicitly reject Jesus. Astonishingly the rebel and murderer on death row is the one the crowd call to walk free as they cry for Jesus to walk to crucifixion. Here is an exchange that illustrates Jesus' work on the cross.

Guilty Barabbas is free and acquitted whilst innocent Jesus is condemned and crucified. Barabbas should have died and Jesus lived, yet Barabbas lives and Jesus dies. Barabbas does nothing to deserve his release and Jesus does nothing to deserve His death.

Even before Jesus set His face for Jerusalem in chapter 9, this has been His destination. Jesus goes willingly, determinedly, to His death for us in our place. He takes our guilt and our death and gives us His righteousness and His life in exchange.

Meditate on these things today. Marvel at Jesus' grace and love towards us. Be humbled by the depth of evil we are capable of. Rejoice that as we come to Him in repentance and faith, He takes our guilt away and gives us His righteousness.

The Revd Jonny Lee, Vicar of All Hallows, Bispham

Read: Luke 23:26-56

‘On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.’

Luke 23:56

When we stop to pause and reflect on all that has happened thus far in our Lenten pilgrimage through Luke’s Gospel there’s no better word to describe it than that of a mystery, for there’s much that is clear and obvious, but there are also those things that puzzle.

We could try to dissect the events of Holy Week and offer up eloquent theological treatises on the who, what, where, and when of Jesus’ words and actions. But there comes a time in the midst of activity and busyness to just...stop.

Holy Saturday offers us just that opportunity. To stop. To rest. To ponder and to reflect. Today, no doubt, there are many questions begging for answers. But for now we must content ourselves on letting those questions hang in the air. Holy Week marks a high point for the Christian, for as the apostle Paul said: *‘the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God’* (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The paradox at the heart of the Christian faith is profound. Out of evil comes good. From death comes life.

Today we wait, and the words from an ancient homily for Holy Saturday speak powerfully into that waiting ...

‘Today a great silence reigns on earth, a great silence and a great stillness. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and He has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep...I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead.’

Let us pray:

Loving Father, in the stillness of this day help us to pause and reflect on the events that have been and in expectant hope for all that is to come. Amen.

The Revd David Craven, Priest-in-Charge, St George the Martyr, Preston

Easter Week

Read: Luke 24:1-35

‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’ Luke 24:32

We have an Easter tradition in our house. Even though my sons are grown teenagers, it’s still essential for the Easter Bunny to pay a visit in the night. Leave a trail of raisins (guess why?) leading to an Easter egg, hidden away. With a Bible verse – for full theological integrity. There’s something exciting about a surprise. Today we come to the climax of our devotional. A surprise ending. Easter is the biggest surprise in history. As ever, the work of God isn’t what we expect. Notice three questions on that first Easter day.

First. *‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’* (v.5) Jesus had given them – apparently – clear instructions. But the Spirit’s power to bring Jesus back from the dead, was not on the radar. It took the women time to remember Jesus’ words (v.8). And even then, Jesus’ closest friends, didn’t believe the women ‘because their words seemed like nonsense’ (v.11).

Second. *‘Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’* (v.26) Suffering? Trials? Surely that’s a sign that God’s plan has gone wrong? No, it’s the Spirit who leads Jesus into the desert to be tested by Satan (Luke 4:1). No, Peter, who had been trained through the school of hard knocks, Peter, who had denied Jesus because he was afraid of the pain, writes in his letter *‘Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal ... as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ’* (1 Peter 4:12-13).

Third. *‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’* (v.32) Mr and Mrs Cleopas realised late in the day that the burning sensation in their hearts was caused by the presence of Jesus opening their eyes to His wonderful truths in Scriptures. Truths that had previously not made sense. *‘The god who answers by fire – he is God’* (1 Kings 18:24)

Take a moment to pause. What might it look like to expect the unexpected? To be open to the life-giving power of the Spirit? To be open to sharing in Jesus’ sufferings? To dare to expect God to answer with fire? To expect Him to open our eyes to wonderful truths in Scripture? (Psalm 119:18). On this Feast of Feasts, ask for the unexpected – for the visitation of His resurrecting Spirit of fire on the people of Lancashire?

The Rt Revd Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster

Read: Luke 24:36-53

‘Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.’

Luke 24:50-51

After all the events of Holy Week, we think we know Jesus’ last words memorialised in sermons and in music: ‘My God, why have you forsaken me’ (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34). But in Luke’s gospel, these are not Jesus’ final words. Only after Easter Day, as Jesus goes to a hill outside of Bethany, do we get His final words on earth. There we find words of blessing for His disciples and a prayer for them to go, to repent and forgive, and a promise that they will be given power to do all these things from on high. Then, Jesus disappears from their sight, ascends into heaven, and the disciples return to Jerusalem seemingly surprised by joy.

Jesus’ final words and Ascension as the conclusion to Luke’s gospel make clear that our Lenten devotions don’t end with the cross and resurrection. In His final words and actions, Jesus’ desire is that we, His followers, will know that we are loved, cherished, empowered, and protected. If we live out the call of Luke’s gospel and the truth he proclaims, the promised power from on high sustains us as we love God and our neighbour so extravagantly that we need the Holy Spirit to protect us from the cynics. This power so fills us with compassion and kindness that we need the Holy Spirit to keep us from being marginalised ourselves. This power enables us to give so tirelessly to help others that we need the Holy Spirit to comfort us when we struggle with how the world treats people and what difference we can make. This power so empowers us, that we need the Holy Spirit to settle the feathers we will ruffle and to remind us to pray and love and love some more.

Jesus ascends so that He is no longer on earth in one body, but is everywhere. Like His disciples, we are called, blessed, loved, and given power joyfully to worship Him. By His ascension into heaven, Jesus gives us the sure and certain hope that we are not alone in our mission and ministry to share His truth and His eternal joy. May we go forth and do precisely that. Alleluia. Amen.

The Revd Dr Jenn Strawbridge, Canon Theologian of Blackburn Cathedral

WHAT'S NEXT?

We really hope you've enjoyed walking through Lent with this booklet. If you're wondering how you can continue with this pattern of daily reading there are a whole host of resources available to you. For ease of access, many resources are now available either online or as apps. A few suggestions are:

Daily Prayer

www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer

Daily Prayer is available free as an app or on the Church of England Website and gives complete services for Morning, Evening and Night Prayer in both contemporary (Common Worship) and traditional (Book of Common Prayer) forms.

Lectio 365

www.24-7prayer.com/dailydevotional

Lectio 365 is a devotional resource that helps you pray the Bible every day, and is inspired by Lectio Divina – a method of Bible meditation that's been used by Christians for centuries. Written by leaders from the 24-7 Prayer movement, and produced in partnership with CWR, this resource helps you engage with Scripture to inspire prayer.

BIOY

www.bibleinoneyear.org

With BIOY each day you receive a Psalm or Proverbs reading, a New Testament and an Old Testament reading. It also provides daily audio and written commentary to walk you through each day's reading, to provide fresh understanding of the texts.

The Vine

The Vine Community is a simple and flexible framework for living out a Christian life; sometimes called a 'rule of life'. This isn't necessarily about doing something 'extra', but about giving yourself the space to be the person God has made, and to grow in your relationship with Him, with an active, practical response to the teachings of Jesus Christ. For more information: www.blackburn.anglican.org

Bible Podlets

www.bdeducation.org.uk/podcasts/bible-podlets

Bible Podlets is a Bible study and discussion podcast for primary aged children to do with adults. Each episode has fun games/activities, an engaging Bible reading in the form of a news story, and discussion, with places to pause and talk together about the topic. You can download discussion notes from the resources area of the site.

If you prefer a hard copy resource, Christian bookshops carry a large range of Bible reading material, from daily reading notes to study books on particular themes or books of the Bible.

In addition to these resources there will be regular Quiet Days and Retreats offered by Whalley Abbey: www.whalleyabbey.org





*All texts in this booklet are taken from the
New Revised Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated*

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