Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church



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St Matthew's Gospel part 2
Wednesday 1st – Saturday 11th February 2023

Introduction

Matthew's Gospel is the first book of the New Testament and for millennia Christians believed it was the earliest of the four Gospels. Now, most scholars believe that Mark's Gospel was a source for Matthew - who repeats almost everything In St Mark. The editor of Matthew seems to have access to a body of material shared with the editor of St Luke but not known to either Mark or John and his own sources around the birth of Jesus - the stories of the Magi and of Gabriel's appearances to Joseph are only found in Matthew.

The Gospel is concerned with showing how Jesus' life and ministry was foretold in what we now call the Old Testament. Most scholars think the Gospel was written between AD 80 and 90 with a range of between 70 and

110 being mentioned. A minority think it was written before AD 70 which would make it the oldest Gospel. All these dates are at least 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. We have no idea who the editor was who drew these stories together - the earliest Church identified him as the Apostle Matthew but we simply have no idea who wrote it. Matthew is the Gospel that we will hear read in Church this year and so we will read through it between now and Easter - skipping the birth narratives as we've heard them over the Christmas services and Daily Devotions.

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John proclaimed a turning away from the ways from this world to an embracing of an inner spiritual change, which he fully expected would result in a change that would transform love into action saying that 'the one who has two coats should share with those that have none, and who has food should do the same'. His then was a message of love and inner transformation that ultimately has its expression in action. John like Jesus was marginalised and ultimately like him was imprisoned and put to death. Jesus the 'carpenter's son' was rejected by his own village in Nazareth where he grew up, his message of love was not accepted in the cities either, it being rejected by those who held a narrow interpretation of the Jewish law. The poor living on the shores of Galilee were under Roman occupation and suffered under harsh taxes as well as being exploited by religious narrowness. The rich were clothed in 'soft robes' and the poor suffered. John and Jesus persisted with their message of love and were seen as a threat to the status quo. We see from history that those who oppressed the poor are ultimately doomed. God's love overcomes the world.

Prayer

Gracious God,
We pray for those who feel crushed
by the weight and burden of daily living
and who have the marks
in their bodies and mind
of the strain of life.
We pray for healing and for a sound mind
for those who are troubled.
We pray that the Holy Spirit will soothe their pain
and that your word will give the gifts of wisdom and virtue
to strengthen them today and every day. Amen

Wednesday 1 February 2023 St Matthew 8: 14 - 22

The Revd Geoffrey Roper, retired minister living in Thames North Synod

When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him. That evening they brought to him many who were possessed by demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.' Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. A scribe then approached and said, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' Another of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'

Reflection

Peter had a mother-in-law. As I mourn the recent death of my wife I treasure the memory of her mother who joined the household four years into our marriage. She became a reliable third parent to our children while we busily pursued our different callings which often took us out of the house for long periods. Contrary to the music-hall caricature, my mother-in-law was an active helper to all of us, but sufficiently self-effacing to let my wife and me create and develop our marriage partnership.

So, disciple Peter had a wife, perhaps a child on the way. And he had met and been called by Jesus of Nazareth, who visited and healed his mother-in-law. It seems so domestic, just like many of our lives are, or were once. In contrast Jesus calls people away from their homes and what they see as their domestic responsibilities. No security, no resting place, can't even stop for Father's funeral.

Where are we being called today – domestic duty or risk-taking change?

How can we bear the two-way stretch: home against far wider discipleship? Is our calling to be fulfilled at home? or are home duties our pretext to refuse the hazardous challenge?

Let's pray for one another, whatever calling presses on us, however we sort out the unique priorities of our own setting.

Prayer

Jesus, you called Simon Peter out of his setting,
yet you brought your healing into his home life
and caused one laid low to rise and serve.
you call women and men, old and young;
you heal and bear our infirmities;
you challenge us to go beyond the limits we set.
Meet us as we ponder your loving, searching ministry
give us insight to know what it will mean to follow further. Amen

Thursday 2 February 2023 St Matthew 8: 23 - 34

Pat Stannard, Elder, Muswell Hill URC

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A gale arose on the lake, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?' When he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way. Suddenly they shouted, 'What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?' Now a large herd of swine was feeding at some distance from them. The demons begged him, 'If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.' And he said to them, 'Go!' So they came out and entered the swine; and suddenly, the whole herd rushed

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.' Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.' At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Reflection

Our reading today picks up the story of John the Baptist who was imprisoned in Macherus near the Dead Sea. We are told in Mark's gospel that King Herod feared John knowing that he was "a righteous and holy man." John lived as an ascetic, fasting and praying in the wilderness seeking out God. His was a message of repentance and his fame was likened as onto the prophet Elijah and his message a fulfilment of the messianic prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah about the Coming One. Herod the dissolute leader is contrasted with the courageous ascetic John.

Sometimes the most vital choices in life are not between extreme alternatives of good and evil, but rather between the good enough and the best.

Prayer

Loving … and challenging Christ I know I fall short of being worth of you, and the salvation you bring. When I lose myself in the things of this life: rekindle my spirit; restore my focus; bring me back home. Amen.

Saturday 11 February 2023 St Matthew 11

The Rev'd Raymond Singh, Retired Minister, St Andrews URC Brockley

Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.' As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen! 'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,

down the steep bank into the lake and perished in the water. The swineherds ran off, and on going into the town, they told the whole story about what had happened to the demoniacs. Then the whole town came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighbourhood.

Reflection

A family holiday in the Philippines a few years ago to visit our elder daughter came to mind with this two-part reading.

Part of the trip was a stay over Christmas on a paradise island. What we didn't anticipate was finding ourselves rocking helplessly in the dark in a small flat boat on a lively sea. The engine broke down and the crew had no radio or mobile phone to call for assistance. Our craft turned helplessly in circles for more than an hour with the waves washing over us before we were rescued by another boat and taken wet and unsettled to the island to be cosseted back to life by the lovely staff. There's nothing quite like that experience to make one appreciate why the disciples were afraid!

The next day, we woke in our small villas to the squeals of a pig, brought in on a boat to be despatched somewhere out of sight and buried in a fire pit on the beach to provide the traditional Philippines Christmas dinner.

So these memories both link to the text.

In our reading, there are two particularly interesting sections. It was the demoniacs – doubtless victims of severe mental illness – who recognised Jesus as the Son of God and begged him to save them from their suffering, and like the disciples on the stormy sea they were grateful for the demonstration of his powers. The townspeople asked Jesus to leave. It is reasonable to assume that any gratitude they felt for now being able to pass the tombs safely was outweighed by fear that he would ruin them by killing more of their precious herd. They were not grateful. Their economic interests prevailed. They turned him away.

Are you always as grateful as you should be for the influence of Jesus in your daily lives? Regretfully, I know that I am not - though I should be!

Prayer

Lord, help us to accept both life's challenges and your restoring help with grace and gratitude. Help us to remember that no problem is too large or too small for us to call out to you. Amen

Friday 3 February 2023 St Matthew 9: 1 - 8

Ann Barton, Lay leader, Whittlesford URC in the Eastern Synod

And after getting into a boat he crossed the water and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralysed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.' Then some of the scribes said to themselves, 'This man is blaspheming.' But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, 'Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he then said to the paralytic—'Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.' And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

Reflection

The first thing that this text reminds me of as I write this, is the tremendous effort that Kevin Sinfield and his wonderful support team has just undertaken for his friend, Rob Burrow who suffers from MND, because the paralysed man was being carried on his bed by his friends. I wonder where they were taking him.

I suspect that they might have heard that Jesus was in town and were taking him to see Jesus, in the belief that He had the power to heal him.

righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'

Reflection

Are you rather taken aback by today's reading? There seems little here of the Sunday school "gentle Jesus meek and mild"! Instead we have the image of a revolutionary bringing about discord in society and even within families.

It was a popular notion in Jewish belief that when the Messiah came, he would bring peace on earth. Whilst this would be the ultimate goal, Jesus wants to shock his listeners out of a false sense of complacency. Jesus could see that his preaching of the Way, and indeed of peace, will be rejected by many and would, ironically, be the cause of conflict.

How do we see the blunt, stark challenge that Jesus poses in these words for us today? Is there a sense that, like Jesus' Jewish "chosen people" contemporaries, we too can easily settle into a comfortable "ticking along" religion?

Also, there is perhaps a further fundamental challenge that Jesus raises here which goes to the heart of the conflict within the human condition: born into this world and creatures of the flesh, whilst also being of the spirit and made in the image of God. As such we are torn between being drawn to the things of this world on the one hand, and the greater goal of striving for the kingdom of God on the other.

The key to this passage pivots upon the repeated phrase to be" worthy "of Jesus. What does it mean to be worthy of Jesus, worthy of the peace he brings and worthy to receive it? It may entail significant sacrificing of the material life of this world, even "to be separated from those you love most, and even life itself" (Fenton).

to do, but these words of James remind us that wisdom is as much about our demeanour as our decisions, and concerns our doing as much as our discerning. Being wise is living in relationship with God through Jesus Christ; following his example and putting his teaching into practice in every area of our lives every day. If doing so brings us opposition, even persecution, we can't say that we haven't been warned.

Prayer

Lo! The hosts of evil round us
scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!
From the fears
that long have bound us,
free our hearts to faith and praise.
Grant us wisdom,
grant us courage,
for the living of these days.

Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore;
let the gift of thy salvation
be our glory evermore:
Grant us wisdom,
grant us courage,
serving Thee whom we adore.

(Rejoice & Sing 344)

Friday 10 February 2023 St Matthew 10: 34 - 42

Professor Graham Handscomb Member of Christ Church URC Chelmsford

'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a

This tells us that both the paralysed man and his friends were believers and recognised the power of God working through Him.

Jesus then acknowledges their faith, and forgives the man. This starts the gossip, and the teachers of the law are horrified. Of course, Jesus, knowing what they are thinking, asks them why they harbour evil thoughts and he gives them what for them is a dilemma; which is easier, to tell him that his sins are forgiven or to tell him to get up and walk. Then, to make it clear that He has been given authority on earth to forgive sins, He tells the paralysed man to get up, take his bed and go home. The man got up and did just that. When the crowd following Jesus saw this, they were filled with awe and glorified God because they recognised that the power had come from God.

Prayer

Father, we know that you look upon us and our world with compassion and love. Cast out our sins and heal us, so that we can begin to heal the world. In Jesus' name we ask this. Amen.

Saturday 4 February 2023 St Matthew 9: 9 - 17

Sue Knight, Local Church Leader, Reigate Park URC and Lay Preaching Commissioner, Southern Synod

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?' And Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot mourn as long as the

bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.'

Reflection

I am in the process of candidating for Non Stipendiary Ministry so I empathise with Matthew and his feelings about being called! I can picture Matthew thinking: "Jesus' words are wonderful, but why me?" It was clear to those who saw this take place that Jesus extended His forgiveness to even the most despised outcasts of society; even a hated tax collector. Matthew's response was simple and immediate. Of all the disciples, Matthew paid the highest financial cost in following the Lord.

The activity caught the attention of the Pharisees, so they ask why Jesus is associating with tax collectors and sinners, the outcasts of Jewish society. This was not a question of inquiry, but a rhetorical rebuke. The Pharisees judged everyone else by their own standards and traditions. As far as they were concerned, the righteous associate with other righteous people and sinners with sinners. Jesus claims to be from God, but associates with sinners, therefore He could not be who He claimed. They were gathering evidence to build up a case against Jesus.

Jesus makes three arguments against this premise. The first is an argument from the real world of medicine: healthy people do not need a physician. The second is from Hosea 6:6 - a picture of God's desire for compassion not sacrifice. The third was based on the very purpose for which Jesus came which was to save His people from their sins. Jesus did not come to call the righteous but to call sinners to Him. It is the poor in spirit that enter the kingdom of God. Repentant sinners receive mercy, grace, and salvation.

'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31 So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Reflection

Jesus has been instructing his disciples as they are sent out to do the work of the Kingdom. Now, he warns them that he is sending them out 'like sheep into the midst of wolves'. Scarcely, a reassuring image! They were, and we are, vulnerable to attack. So they, and we, are to be 'as wise as serpents and innocent as doves'.

We may well ask why Jesus chooses serpents and doves as epitomes of wisdom and innocence but that question is not easily answered, and we do better to focus on our need for these qualities as we live as witnesses to Jesus. What it means to be innocent may well be clear to us, even if, at times, we are guilty, but what does it mean to be wise? What is wisdom? 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 1:7). 'Fear' in the sense of awe, reverence, that is. And it is only the beginning of wisdom, not the whole of it. We have to increase in wisdom, as Jesus himself did (Luke 2:52). He describes those who act on his teaching as wise (Matthew 7:24). The letter of James says, 'show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom...The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality or hypocrisy' (3.13,17).

We may sometimes think of wisdom in terms of discerning the right thing

be commended in this pattern. We so easily lose focus, always thinking of new things to drag our attention away from our core purposes – to glorify God and enjoy God forever, and to make disciples. Many, many good things are possible for us to do, none of them must distract our focus from what we must be about, in Jesus' Name.

Prayer

Lord, there are so many claims on my time, and so many things I might do: good, godly things to benefit others. Help me to choose wisely, always guided by you, as to what I should do today, and resist the temptation to own responsibility for fixing everything. Help us, by Your Spirit, to keep focussed on what matters most – loving and serving You, and drawing others to Jesus. Amen.

Thursday 9 February 2023 St Matthew 10: 16 - 33

The Revd John Matthews is a retired Baptist minister and member of Wellingborough URC

'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

What good news this is because it means that no matter who we are, whatever our past, if we ask God for forgiveness, He will call us to Him. He has a pathway set for each one of us if only we answer that call.

Prayer

Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart. Amen

– words from the hymn: I the Lord of Sea and Sky – Daniel L Schutte

Sunday 5 February 2023 Psalm 121

The Rev'd Andy Braunston is the URC's Minister of Digital Worship and a member of the Peedie Kirk, Orkney

I lift my eyes up
Up to the mountains,
Where does my help come from?
My help comes from You,
Maker of Heaven,
Creator of the earth.

Oh, how I need You Lord,
You are my only hope
You're my only prayer.
So I will wait for You
To come and rescue me.
Come and give me life.

Written by: Brian Doerksen

© 1990 Mercy/Vineyard Publishing. You can hear this here
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veXyN37AgMU
CCLI licence number 1064776

Reflection

The opening words of Psalm 121 are some of the most powerful known in the English language - especially in their earlier form (I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the

Lord, which made heaven and earth). There's a resonance of hope in despair, of looking for help in desperate times, and the realisation that our help is only, ultimately, in the Lord's hands.

For most of my life I lived in cities, rejoicing in the chance to get away to the wide open spaces of North Wales or Scotland's Highlands and Islands. Majestic mountains always make me recall these words and, in the busyness of life, I found help in the mountains - to relax, slow my pace, and think. It's not that the mountains were the help but that in the mountains, away from the press and stress of life, I found time for re-creation.

Where, I wonder, does our society look for help? Foreign alliances can prove tricky (and as Brexit shows rather transitory), financial markets prove unstable, captains of industry prove unreliable, and political leaders have feet of clay. Institutions which appear stable can be easily rocked as Mr Trump proved on 6th January 2021. We, of course, can find help in therapy and pharmacology, in spirituality (not always associated with the Church), in music, or in escape through fiction or film. All these things can be good.

Just as I needed my escape to desolate places, we all need various things to help but, in all those things our help is found in the Lord. God works through mountain and music, therapist, landscape, and carefully made medicine; through the wild waves and chanting, wind, media and heartfelt prayer.

Where do you find the Lord helping you?

Prayer

We find our strength in you, O Lord, from whence will you help?
Will we find you in music and song, in mountain and sea,
in therapy and crowd, in stillness and silence?
You are our strength, help us to find You. Amen.

house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.

Reflection

Focus. That's what we need to be effective.

Jesus empowered the Twelve with authority to heal the sick and deliver the oppressed from evil spirits, then sent them out to get to work.

He told them where they should focus their ministry – to go amongst the Jews and not the Gentiles. (This was not a lasting ordinance – our ministry is to make disciples amongst all nations and people groups – Matthew 28:19). As they travelled around, to proclaim the Good News of God's reign and rule, they were to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons – to give people life before death as Christian Aid's former slogan so beautifully put it. And yes, in giving people a taste of happy, healthy, dignified life now, there is the underlying expectation that they will turn to God in gratitude and seek eternal life as well. That's why they were to tell people about God's love, so that the people knew why they were doing what they were doing. Let's not be slow to remember that part too.

The disciples' task was focussed, and set around with boundaries.
Whilst our areas of focus will vary across our churches, there is much to

health workers and school teachers as well as preachers in difficult remote valleys of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Jesus was not just healing bodies and minds, but relationships in the community too: the man with leprosy to be welcomed back to worship, the servant to the centurion's household, Peter's mother-in-law to the family and guests; and the news about the leader's daughter and the two blind men was a blessing throughout their districts. The summary of Jesus's work in 9:35 – teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing disease and sickness – showed the foundation for those three dimensions of the circuits' and region's work of the emerging church in the PNG Highlands.

Prayer

God of the whole world,
whatever type of community or culture we are in,
whatever the systems of health care and education,
food production, other industries and services,
help us to see that Jesus is concerned with
the life of the whole person and whole communities.
Help us to respond by using our gifts and skills,
resources and opportunities, in his ways,
and to encourage others in the sharing of your love, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Wednesday 8 February 2023 St Matthew 10: 1 - 15

The Rev'd Steve Faber, Synod Moderator, West Midlands Synod

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the

Monday 6 February 2023 St Matthew 9: 18 - 26

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While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.' And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.' Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Reflection

There's a thing in physics called entropy. Basically, it's disorder and there's a rule that says that disorder always increases. Leave an apple on its own and it will eventually rot away to dust and scatter to the four winds. Same with a car, or a house, or a human. The classic example of always-increasing entropy is the teenager's bedroom.

The only way to fight entropy is by putting energy in. Rust-proof the car. Freeze the apple. Bribe the teenager with pizza. But in the end, entropy always wins.

The Jewish concept of uncleanness worked in a similar way – it always increases. The uncleanness spreads. If a clean pot touches an unclean one, the uncleanness spreads and both must be broken. If a clean person touches an unclean one, the uncleanness spreads and both need to perform the rituals for cleanliness. Left to ourselves, uncleanness always

increases, and in the end, it will win.

But Jesus reverses that. In these readings we have two unclean people – a dead girl and a haemorrhaging woman. Anyone who touched either of them would become 'infected' with their uncleanness and unable to worship in the Temple. But not Jesus. He touches them and spreads cleanness, wholeness, life, blessing.

The flow of power is the opposite way – not darkness, brokenness and hurt flowing out and hurting others, but light, healing and love flowing in and restoring God's image. Entropy reversed. Eden restored. Life, very much in all its fullness.

Prayer

Loving Creator God,
thank you that your healing is greater than all my hurts,
Your mercy is greater than all my failings,
Your love is greater than all my doubts. Amen.

Tuesday 7 February 2023 St Matthew 9: 27 - 38

The Rev'd Bernie Collins, retired minister, member of Avenue St Andrew's URC, Southampton

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David!' When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' They said to him, 'Yes, Lord.' Then he touched their eyes and said, 'According to your faith let it be done to you.' And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, 'See that no one knows of this.' But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute was brought to him. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, 'Never has anything like this been seen in Israel.' But the Pharisees said, 'By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons.'

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

Reflection

The crowds were amazed!

Today's reading concludes two chapters about Jesus' ministry in action, after the sermon when he was sitting on the mountain. On his way down the mountain, to Capernaum and across Galilee and back, he took opportunities to heal people from leprosy, paralysis and fever, and to show his authority over the natural world, the supernatural, and human sin. He had challenging exchanges with some people who wanted to follow him, and later with scribes and Pharisees, and with the disciples of John. Then he brought healing to more people who had shown faith in him.

Matthew 9:27-34 recounts two incidents about seeing and speaking. Healing is given to these people who are blind and mute. But the stories are also about whether people can see who Jesus is, and whether they can tell others about him. They end up with crowds being greatly impressed by his achievements, while the Pharisees call him demonic. Matthew summarises that Jesus went on to all the cities and villages, curing every disease and sickness.

These chapters were helpful when leading devotions to encourage church