Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church



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St Matthew's Gospel part 5
Sunday 12th - March 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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Jesus actually means Y rather than the interpretation you've heard before? I know you think Z, but have you thought about these arguments? If all we do at church is go through the motions, telling familiar stories as if we are watching repeats of a favourite TV show, I would suggest we're not showing much openness to the Holy Spirit moving among us.

But we shouldn't leave this to ministers or elders. On a recent visit to the Quaker centre at Woodbrooke, I came across their 'Advices and Queries' (and I'd commend them as worthwhile reading https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/chapter/1/) . If you were making a list of questions to challenge yourself whether you were living out your faith, what would be on it?

Prayer

Lord, we give thanks for the questioners;
for the experts asking from a position of knowledge;
for the children who aren't afraid to be curious.

We give thanks
for the questions that release us from cages we construct ourselves;
for the joy of 'yes' rather than the fear of 'no'.

Open us up to the power of questions;
help us admit when we don't know;
help us recognise when we are wrong;
excite us to learn more, to change more, to live more.

And may your Holy Spirit inspire us to love and service.

Amen.

Saturday 25 March 2023 St Matthew 22: 34 - 46

Gordon Woods, Elder, St. Columba's URC, Oxford

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, '"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.' Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'"? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?' No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Reflection

I have always rather enjoyed it when my job has meant I've been working with lawyers. Government lawyers tend to bring a different point of view to a question - challenging sloppy thinking, and being creative about alternative solutions to problems. To be able to ask the lawyer's question in this reading, you probably need to know the law so well you actually have an opinion on the question - and I learn that Jesus' answer is pretty orthodox for discussions among Jewish thinkers at the time - but the questioners don't like the question he asks them in return.

I suspect a lot of us don't always welcome the sort of question that makes us rethink our approach - whether at work, home or in our faith life. There is a lot of comfort from familiar patterns, especially when the world around us is so volatile and uncertain. But I'd suggest that some of our most effective ministers are the people who do ask those awkward questions; why don't you think you're the right person to do X? What if

Sunday 12 March 2023 Psalm 126

The Rev'd George Watt, Moderator Thames North Synod

When God first brought us back from exile,
we were as dazed as those who dream.
Then were our mouths brimming with laughter;
joy from our lips gushed like a stream.
The godless cried in envious wonder,
"Look what the LORD has done for them!"
Indeed our God has greatly blessed us;
rejoice and sing, Jerusalem!

2 Once more, O LORD, restore your people;
come with your saving help again,
as to the brook-beds in the desert
you bring the sweet, reviving rain.
Let those who sow with tears and sighing
sing as they reap and joy proclaim;
may those who weep when seed is scattered
gather their sheaves and praise your name.

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You can hear this sung to the early American tune Wayfaring Stranger here https://vimeo.com/329677100

Reflection

As we grow older, we often like to look back and celebrate the past (although for some we might prefer if it were left behind.) Generally, we focus on the good times. We recall the good things that have happened in the past and that causes us to give thanks. For many of us the Church has

played an important part in our lives perhaps for many years or just a few and it has brought us much joy. It has been an oasis when life has been challenging for the rest of the week. It has been a source of joy with faith, fellowship, fun and food playing an important role.

There may have been times when we have not been able to worship and found ourselves separated from the Church family and been overjoyed when we have been able to return. This of course was true during the pandemic and it was good last Christmas to return to celebrate Christ's birth together properly for the first time in 3 years.

But for many, Church is not the same as it has been in the past with the reduction in numbers, the lack of children and young people and the challenges of running the church. Psalm 126 looks to God for hope for the future, when tears and weeping can be turned into joy. Our rescuer God can act today as God has in history, including in our own past.

The Psalm ends with the powerful image of seeds being sown as people weep, which results in a harvest and praise. We can lament the present and do nothing or we can continue in our calling to be faithful in sowing seeds. That's not easy when we are dispirited and life looks bleak. But unless we cooperate with God in declaring his love to a broken troubled world, there will be no harvest of new life.

Prayer

Lord, for the past with laughter on our lips,
we want to give thanks.
Lord, for the present with tears in our eyes,
we seek your hope.
Lord, for the future with faith in our hearts,
we pray for your kingdom to come.

the Jews until after most of the Old Testament had been written. The Sadducees' test case aimed to point out the absurdity of such a belief.

Jesus' response is worthy of any seasoned Rabbi scholar. He turns the tables in showing that it is in fact the Sadducees who are absurd in their assumptions. First he says that when God calls himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob this indicates that they were, or would be, alive and so scripture does clearly pre-suppose belief in the resurrection.

Jesus' second point is even more potent and damning. He says that they underestimate the power of God who will introduce a new form of life, in which there will be no marriage or birth, because there will be no death. It was naive and crass to assume the afterlife would be a mere continuance of the pattern of this life.

These are not just rarefied philosophic issues that pass us by. Each of us has the gift, some would say the curse, to be born as the only physical being able to contemplate our own mortality. All are faced with reflections about the afterlife and for Christians this is intimately bound up with the core of our faith and Jesus' assurance: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

Prayer

Dear God,
when, in the dark night of my soul,
I feel lost and forlorn,
fearful of life and the uncertainty of death,
let me again hear the assuring words
of my resurrected Lord Jesus
who promises life,
true life beyond death.
Amen.

Lord Jesus,
We belong to you.
Help us to live as those who believe that everything is gift from you.
Save us from clinging on to the blessings we have received,
lest we become selfish and lacking in compassion.
Help us to look at our talents, our time and our bank balance
as ours to use for the growth of your Kingdom. Amen.

Friday 24 March 2023 St Matthew 22: 23 - 33

Professor Graham Handscomb Member of Christ Church URC Chelmsford

The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother." Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.' Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.' And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

Reflection

Despite appearing to be a rather obscure theological debate between religious factions lost in the midst of time, this passage touches a nerve for every human being living in all times.

The Sadducees observed only the written Law and did not acknowledge any oral traditions or beliefs which could not be clearly evidenced in the Scriptures. This included belief in life after death which was not held by

Monday 13 March 2023 St Matthew 20: 20 - 28

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

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.' But Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' They said to him, 'We are able.' He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.' When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Reflection

A mother kneels before Jesus and asks a favour. Earlier in Matthew's gospel someone suffering from leprosy kneels before Jesus and asks to be healed, and a leader of the synagogue kneels before Jesus asking him to restore life to his daughter who has just died. I imagine that there were many more, unrecorded, who knelt and asked.

You and I may or may not kneel in prayer, but, kneeling, sitting or standing, as we pray we share with these characters from the gospel the same longing and hope for those we love and for ourselves.

However, this mother's plea is not for healing or for the restitution of life. It is for a position of privilege for her sons in the coming kingdom. Jesus cannot grant her request. He can only promise suffering, and use the

incident as a springboard to teach a fundamental truth. Sacrificial service is the way of greatness. He came not to be served but to serve. They must do the same. So must we.

Coming back, then, to a mother's prayers, what should we pray for our children? What should we pray for ourselves and for each other in the church? Clearly not for success or status, good salary or trouble-free lives! Nor even subtly disguised versions of those things. Rather, that God may put them (and us) in situations where people need help. And that God may supply the strength and love needed to act effectively.

I am reminded of the story of Dr Hawa Abdi, who established a clinic serving tens of thousands when civil war broke out in her home country, Somalia. Her daughters recall how even when they were very young their mother's mantra was "Help your people." No wonder that as adults they followed her example.

Prayer

From Heaven, You came helpless babe
Entered our world, your glory veiled
Not to be served but to serve
And give Your life that we might live.

You are our God, The Servant King
You call us now to follow You
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to The Servant King.

So let us learn how to serve
And in our lives enthrone You
Each other's needs to prefer
For it is Christ we're serving. Amen

Adapted from Graham Kendrick
The Servant King lyrics © Thank You Music Ltd., Make Way Music

penalty for such a crime was execution. If on the other hand he says 'yes' he may be called a blasphemer, disloyal to Israel, a lover of Rome. It seems impossible to get out of this unscathed.

Still Jesus outwits his hearers. "Whose head and title are on the coin?" "The emperor's", they say. "Well, then, give the emperor what belongs to the emperor and give God what belongs to God." Brilliant answer. The end!

But is it really that simple?

Are we to separate matters of faith from the secular? Is the old saying right that politics and religion should not mix? Has our faith nothing to say about how we use the money in our bank accounts?

For what in this world belongs to God?

Psalm 24 reminds us that "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

There is nothing that truly belongs to the rulers of this world, or to us. All that we have is graciously given to us from God, to use for his glory. Thus everything we have and everything we do, from how we handle our money, to the way that financial systems operate and the way that rulers exercise their power, come under the reign and lordship of our God.

This is no more than a call to give all that we have and all that we are to God. For we are his people, to be spent in his service.

What would our world look like if we viewed our lives and the resources at our disposal as gifts to be shared for the good of our neighbours?

Prayer

Christians tend to picture ourselves) once I've done so I'm expected to behave in the right way.

If the image of God in this parable still worries you, take care to read it as part of the bigger Gospel story, where the Son also speaks, and we find that God is 'With Us', not against us.

Prayer

O God,
May I never take your loving invitation for granted.
May I always listen out for what your Son is saying.
May I be ever mindful that you are with me day by day. Amen.

Thursday 23 March 2023 St Matthew 22: 15 - 22

The Rev'd Camilla Veitch, Minister Wirksworth and North Derbyshire Resource Area

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Reflection

It's Catch 22 for Jesus. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor? If he says 'no' he could be reported as a traitor and agitator against Rome. The

Tuesday 14 March 2023 St Matthew 20: 29 - 34

Dorothy Courtis, lay preacher and elder, Wortwell Chapel

As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, 'Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!' The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, 'Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!' Jesus stood still and called them, saying, 'What do you want me to do for you?' They said to him, 'Lord, let our eyes be opened.' Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

Reflection

Sitting by the roadside sounds so passive, so helpless. I suppose they were there to beg, dependent on other people's generosity, trying to catch the crowds of folk who would be going into or leaving Jericho. Even so, they're firmly connected to what is going on, and when Jesus comes by they know about it - and who he is. Which is more than a lot of the folk around them. Maybe it's years of having folk walk on by as they beg that gives them the courage and tenacity to keep shouting. Even when told bluntly to shut up.

And they are rewarded when Jesus asks for them to be brought to him. He gives them his full attention, treats them and their needs with respect, and gives them what they ask.

I wonder how quickly we give up when our prayers aren't answered the way we want? Can we find reassurance and encouragement in this passage to keep shouting for Jesus's attention to our needs?
And when he answers our prayers, do we trot off back into our own lives - or like the two men in this story, do we respond by following him?

Prayer

Loving, caring Lord Jesus,

Help us trust that you hear all our prayers,
Know and respect our needs,
And will always answer with whatever is best for us
And in line with your loving and holy will.
Enable us to persist, trustingly, in prayer. Amen.

Wednesday 15 March 2023 St Matthew 21: 1 - 11

The Rev'd Fleur Houston, retired minister, member of Macclesfield and Bollington United Reformed Church

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. 'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'

Reflection

Some years ago members of a URC congregation read their way through Matthew's Gospel during Lent, meeting weekly to share reactions. In discussion, one member commented, "we do a lot of wailing and teeth gnashing when we read Matthew."

Weeping and the teeth gnashing feature in this parable of the wedding banquet, but that's only one element in what's alarming about it.

The king, who has issued an invitation to his son's wedding banquet, takes rejection badly. Those who declined the invitation and mistreated royal messengers are killed by his army, and their city is burned to the ground. Even those who accept the king's invitation are not safe. One guest, who has been brought in off the street, is consigned to outer darkness (with tears and teeth gnashing) because he is improperly dressed. (How many of us habitually walk down the street dressed so as not to look out of place at a wedding?)

If the king in the parable represents God that's a frightening picture. There's a hint, though, that this picture is not complete. In the parable, although we hear from the king, and only from the king, the son, for whom the banquet is given, is silent.

Certainly, if I'm rich, I'm unwise to reject God (as did landowners and business owners in the parable). I might find myself replaced by the poor. Even if I'm someone who has accepted the invitation to God's party (as we

The answer, of course, is simple. It is God. But one has to wonder if we might not put others and ourselves first. Human nature is such that we all desire a little limelight and accolade at times. We want a share of the success and not to just hand it over. Yet, when we say 'yes' to God's call to tend God's land, we not only have to accept the trials of this but not buckle at the temptation to reap the rewards which are God's alone.

Prayer

Gracious God,
you call us to fertile land,
to land that will bear fruit
in your name and as you desire.
You ask of us
to tend and care for it,
may we do so in humble service
giving you all the glory
in Jesus' name. Amen

Wednesday 22 March 2023 St Matthew 22: 1 - 14

The Rev'd Dr Trevor Jamison, Minister, Saint Columba's URC, North Shields

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered

Reflection

There are no palms in this reading for Palm Sunday but that doesn't detract from the drama. From the start Jesus's entry to Jerusalem is deliberately stage-managed. Jesus instructs the disciples with authority; he chooses not to approach Jerusalem on foot like other pilgrims but to ride a donkey like an eastern monarch, garments spread on the road before the beast in token of subjection. This is an intentionally symbolic action for the benefit of his disciples. Here surely is Israel's king, coming to his kingdom.

Yet Matthew's readers are also given to understand that this is not a military triumph. The animals are the clue. The strange image of Jesus riding a donkey and its colt is a cogent reminder that Zechariah's prophecy (9.9) is now fulfilled. This king Jesus is Israel's long-expected deliverer, the Messiah. As if there were any doubt, Matthew associates it with the joyful acclamation of the Messiah in Psalm 118. 25-26.

Jerusalem, however, does not understand that its king has come and prophecy fulfilled.

Jesus is acclaimed by those going with him to Jerusalem, not those inside the city and this anticipates upcoming events. In his Passion, he will be humiliated but in his Resurrection he will also be glorified.

How may we connect this story with our own situation? Like the first readers of the Gospel, we experience increasing uncertainty and latent fear of the future. Our context arouses fear of economic decline, increasing destruction of the natural world, wars rashly started with incalculable consequences. But as followers of the risen and glorified Christ we may with confidence face the challenges of the present in the triumphant hope of the Resurrection.

Prayer

Gracious God,
Fix in us the image of your Son in glory
To sustain us in the path of discipleship,
That we may pass over with him to newness of life.
May his name be blessed. Amen

Thursday 16 March 2023 St Matthew 21: 12 - 17

The Rev'd Terry Hinks, Minister of Trinity, High Wycombe and Cores End URCs

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written,

"My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.'

The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they became angry and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read,

"Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself"?'

He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

Reflection

Today we contemplate an act of defiance and radical protest that has reverberated down the centuries – Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple and releasing the doves to their freedom. It was one of the opening salvos of Jesus' Passion, yet for the money changers this was probably just a blessed nuisance[10]. I wonder who are the 'blessed

They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.' Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.' When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Reflection

This parable, coming a few chapters before Matthew's recording of Jesus's death, tells of the coming events. It does this in the context of Israel's and Judah's history and the response, particularly of those with authority, to the prophets of God as well as Jesus, son of God. It again highlights the difficult relationship between Jesus and the religious leaders, and it leaves us with no doubt why the Gospel writer goes to great lengths to point out what would seem to be a great hatred of Jesus among them.

Yet, although this is all part of the Gospel's narrative about who Jesus is and what Jesus's purpose was in the world, this parable also offers a cautionary tale for the Church and particularly those that lead it. Within our tradition, we have that language of call when it comes to leadership. We have that sense that God calls us to a place where we are to do God's work tending a community. We take on that responsibility humbly, sometimes with trepidation, but always, we believe, in the strength of God's spirit. Then that community flourishes, it bears more fruit than we might have even dreamed of. We celebrate. We make a name for ourselves in local church circles, denominational circles, maybe even further afield. And finally, Reform comes knocking and asks, "to whom do you give the credit for this success?"

see in various ways - using (parts of) Reformation theology to assure ourselves we're forgiven, seeing ourselves as righteous in no great need of forgiveness or finger pointing at those dreadful other people who really are sinners!

Time and time again Jesus turns the table on such thinking, and on us, and reminds us that those who seem furthest away from the Kingdom are often closest to it.

Prayer

Eternal One,
we pray for those who are despised
and on the margins of our society;
we pray for those who sell themselves in order to simply live,
and for those who work with them
offering health, wholeness and a new start.
Help us to see your Kingdom
in the most unlikely of places. Amen.

Tuesday 21 March 2023 St Matthew 21: 33 - 46

The Rev'd Dr Elaine Colechin, Minister, St Mark's United Church, Greenwich and Bromley United Reformed Church

'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?'

nuisances' in our day and age? The Spirit inspired over-turners? And might we have the courage to join them? Or rather join the One who is 'Blessed in highest heaven'.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem the crowd greeted him as the 'blessed one who comes in the name of the Lord!' Now Jesus enters the Temple – the heart of the city, the nation and the people's faith – and acts out what that 'blessed one' is all about. In echoes of the Beatitudes that were the centre of his teaching ministry, he speaks up for the poor and exploited ones (Blessed are the poor). He grieves over the abuse and distortion of the Temple, a sacred God-filled place of prayer turned into a robber's den (Blessed are those who mourn). In vulnerability he confronts the powerful (Blessed are the meek) and risks all to call out injustice (Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail). He turns to the poorest and most vulnerable – welcoming the blind and lame – and brings healing (Blessed are the merciful). He welcomes the children too and their exuberant praise (Blessed are the pure in heart). And he brings down on himself an avalanche of anger and hatred which ultimately leads to a Roman cross - the Prince of Peace, turned Lamb of God (Blessed are peacemakers and the persecuted).

No wonder that after this act of uncomfortable blessing, Jesus needs time to recover and regroup. He slips out to Bethany, no doubt to the house of friends to eat and reflect on the next step in God's work of turning the world upside down and right way up, God's work of passionate love.

Hosanna to you, Son of David,
Son of Mary, Son of God.
Truly blessed, you show us
what true blessing might mean:
Justice for the exploited,
Welcome for all,
Prayer that unites,
Healing for the broken,
Love in the face of anger,

Truth on children's lips,
to humble the oppressor,
Praise and amazement.
Come among us now and lead us
into fervent prayer and joyful praise,
renewed hope and determined action.

Friday 17 March 2023 St Matthew 21: 18 - 22

Sam Goodman, Elder, Central Derby URC

In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?' Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea", it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.'

Reflection

I do feel sorry for the fig tree, it's done nothing wrong. If you look at the parallel account in Mark's gospel it also tells us that it wasn't even the season for fig. A little bit of digging shows that the fruiting season is August but small semi-fruit can grow in spring. If none shows in spring it's a sign of a poor harvest later.

It seems the passage is less about this one fig tree than Jesus not being able to see fruit around him, fruit of the spirit that would grow and carry the seeds of the Good News. It's partly a miracle (not healing but harming) partly a parable.

The tree is condemned to wither because it is fruitless, but what of the disciples and us?

may we keep you in our mind's eye,
and inquire of you what is best for our souls.
We ask this in Jesus' name Amen.

Monday 20 March 2023 St Matthew 21: 28 - 32

The Rev'd Andy Braunston, Minister for Digital Worship and member of the Peedie Kirk URC in Orkney

'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Reflection

Tax collectors and sex workers seemed to have a hard time in first Century Palestine. The former worked on a franchise basis where they purchased the right to collect taxes from the Empire then recouped what they paid by charging more than they were entitled to. Add to that they were collecting taxes on behalf of the occupying power - it would be like Russia collecting taxes in occupied Ukraine. Sex workers always deal with the shame of society - the shame of sexual failure, the shame of lack of support for (overwhelmingly) vulnerable women, the shame of not facing male power and abuse.

Jesus highlights that the tax collectors and sex workers heard John's message and changed their ways but his hearers, part of the religious establishment, didn't. Religious folk often have problems understanding what we're sinners in need of redemption. We can dress up our failure to

Reflection

This Psalm has hidden gaps between its sentences - gaps which represent many of the dividing lines in life we experience in life.

This Psalm appeals to the home - or nest maker within us. It plays upon contemporary sensibilities as expressed in television programmes such as Grand Designs and Escape to the Chateau. But at the same time it is a Psalm of royalty and national government. The Psalm's mention of "house" refers to the Temple, guards on Jerusalem's city walls implies national security, and the "sons in the quiver" are probably the royal line of succession - a continuation of the royal line of David. This Psalm was possibly written by a Bronze Age contemporary of our own Poet Laureate. The divide between domestic life and the royal courts couldn't be larger.

The dividing lines could also delineate the space between heaven and earth too. The Palmist calls on us to bring God into the heart of our decision making processes, whether making the family home or establishing the economy of an entire country. But do we really believe our prayers will make it to heaven, or fall somewhere in the gap between, so we stay silent?

But the implications of not praying are stark. Life risks becoming unnecessarily laborious and meaningless without the divine presence. So let us pray!

Prayer

Gracious God,
thank you that you have closed the gap between the divine and humanity.
As we face making decisions that can affect the future
of family, friend or stranger
may we invite you into the heart of that decision making process.
Whether we are considering issues of shelter, security
or the wellbeing of our families

This passage is set on the short journey from Bethany to Jerusalem and looking at the lie of the land about half way on your route you would have to climb near Bethphage up to the brow of the Mount of Olives. From here you have a view looking over Jerusalem.

There's a subtlety to the mountain reference that I don't think I'd seen before, Jesus isn't simply saying here that you can uproot any mountain, but this mountain in particular, and put together with the reference to the fig tree you can hear a call to the disciples to go out and be witnesses because no-one here is either equipped or prepared to take the Good News out.

This passage asks us to have faith in how we pray, to trust. It calls us to be engaged in active prayer that guides us, challenges us, comforts us, upsets us... but ultimately prayer that connects us with a God who loves us and shows us how to love, to bear fruit and to begin to move mountains.

Prayer

God of fig and mountain
Hear our prayers
Help us to own the words we pray
May we pray with confidence
that you will use us to make our prayers active. Amen

Saturday 18 March 2023 St Matthew 21: 23 - 27

The Rev'd Jacky Embrey, minister in the Bolton and Salford Missional Partnership

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one

another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’ So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

Reflection

The chief priests and the elders were not happy.

Yesterday Jesus had caused havoc. First he had stirred the city of Jerusalem into turmoil, leaving everyone asking who he was. Then he went straight to the temple and turned over the tables of the money changers and the seats of those selling doves. Next he had the temerity to hold court inside the Temple, purporting to cure the blind and the lame and rudely rebuffing those who remonstrated with him when children began to call out ‘Hosannah to the Son of David!’.

Now Jesus was back again, teaching the people as though he owned the temple. So they accosted him, knowing that they were in the right – that they had the right, because they were in charge, as their caste had been for centuries (albeit now with the shadow of the Romans ever present). They didn’t beat about the bush. ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’

Jesus, like the seasoned teacher he was, answered their question with one of his own. One that reminded Matthew’s audience that it was at Jesus’ baptism that he had received confirmation of his authority from heaven and that the Spirit had descended upon him then, making him the anointed one, the Messiah.

Jesus’ question also left the chief priests and the elders in a quandary. The people believed in John and they did not. They could not or would not believe that either John’s or Jesus’ authority came from heaven, because that would have meant drastic changes to their understanding of God and

God’s purposes, and, as a consequence, to their lives.
The question for us, is what do we believe and are we willing to let our beliefs change our lives?

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to you.
Help us not simply to believe this,
but to let our beliefs change us and the way we live our lives,
that we may become every more true to your image in us.
Thanks be to God Amen.

Sunday 19 March 2023 Psalm 127

The Rev’d Daniel Harris, Community Minister , Rochdale, Bury and North Manchester Missional Partnership

Unless the Lord
constructs the house,
the builders work in vain;
the Lord alone designs and builds
foundations that remain.

2 Unless the Lord is keeping watch
the city cannot stand;
the sentry guards the gates in vain
without God's mighty hand.

3 In vain you labour night and day,
by constant care oppressed;
the Lord supplies
his loved ones' needs
and grants them sleep and rest.

4 The Lord designed the family,
providing earthly love;
our children are his heritage
a gift from heaven above.

5 Like weapons in a warrior's hand are those who bear our name;
with them we face a hostile world assured, and free from shame.

Mollie Knight (1917 - 1993)
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You can hear the suggested tune, St Anne, here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_ZTlOUsMJI