Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church



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St Matthew's Gospel part 6
Sunday 26th March – Monday 10th April 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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Prayer

Brother, Sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load

Richard Gillard, Rejoice and Sing 474

hallmark of our own discipleship. It seems simple. If Jesus is really with us, how can we fail? The Message (1) puts it "go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life ... instruct them in the practice of all that [Jesus] commanded". Hence we must be successful.

Why then are crowds not flocking to us? Perhaps it's how we go about things - our approach to sharing the Good News might not appear to be overwhelmingly attractive. Or have we just lost confidence in ourselves, our capabilities, our belief.

Growing up in Glasgow, one might be approached by someone asking "Ur ye saved?" While it might be comforting to know that someone was concerned with one's spiritual well being, such a direct approach could be somewhat unnerving!

In my sending church, there is a board commemorating several doubtlessly wonderful people who went overseas with the London Missionary Society to convert indigenous populations, but often in ways we now understand to be culturally inappropriate.

"In mission work, do not try to call people back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before." (2)

That's what Jesus commissioned his disciples to do.

That's what Jesus commissions us to do.

(1) Eugene H Peterson, The Message (Navpress, 2002, 1-57683-673-1, page 1375)
(2) Vincent J Donovan, Christianity Rediscovered (SCM Press, 1982, 0-334-01935-4, page vii)

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Sunday 26 March 2023 Psalm 128

The Rev'd David Coaker serves with Grays URC in Essex

Blest are they who trust,
who trust in the Lord.

Joy abounds for all the faithful;
those who trust the Lord are filled;
all the good wrought by their labour
is their gain, so God has willed.

those who trust the Lord are filled;
righteous minds, infused with justice
steadfast hearts with love instilled.

Like a fruitful vine they flourish,
branches of a faithful tree,
so shall children's children gather
at your table, you to see.

Joy abounds for all the faithful;

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Reflection

As I write this reflection, I have recently returned from harvesting olives on a trip organised by Embrace the Middle East (https://embraceme.org/) with Palestinian farmers in Bethlehem. As you read it, those same farmers will be planting olive tree saplings. I mention this because the hymn above bases its third verse on: Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Psalm 128:3

Psalm 128 declares blessing on those that follow God's ways. Their labour will be rewarded. Their families will be a blessing to them and will be nourished at their table. In these family meals, they will know they are blessed by God. The blessing of security and prosperity in their land, living to see their grandchildren grow up, and to know peace.

After my time in the West Bank I'm still processing the names that appear in the last two verses: Zion, Jerusalem and Israel. How do we read the Psalms in the light of a land occupied for over seventy years? How do we pray for peace for a city and land divided? How do I reflect on Psalm 128 holding in tension what I experienced of the contrasting lives of Israelis and Palestinians in the Land called Holy?

God's blessing, that Psalm 128 declares, for it to be fully present has to be made real for everyone. For whatever divisions exist or are created, we cannot fully know God's blessing until it is also opened up to everyone else.

Prayer

Peace be upon Israel/Palestine.
May God's peace be known to Israeli and Palestinian, be they Jew, Muslim, Christian or secular.
Peace be upon Israel/Palestine.
Blest are they who trust, who trust in the Lord.
Peace be upon Israel/Palestine. Amen

Monday 27 March 2023 St Matthew 23

The Rev'd Julian Macro, Retired Minister, Member of Verwood URC

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to

He came to love, heal and forgive
He bled and died to buy my pardon
An empty grave is there to prove my saviour lives
And because He lives, I can face tomorrow
Because He lives, all fear is gone
Because I know he holds the future
And life is worth the living just because He lives*

May we find the life worth living, alongside Jesus with all victims of injustice.

*Hymn by Bill Gaither

Monday 10 April 2023 St Matthew 28: 16 - 20

The Rev'd Ron Reid is a retired minister in the Mersey Synod serving as Link Minister at Rock Chapel, Farndon. He is a member at Upton-by-Chester URC

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Reflection

There's a lot in Matthew 28. Not a great deal seems to happen to the disciples in an apparently short time between the rolling of the stone from the tomb (v2) and the appearance of Jesus to them on the mountain (v17). However, it embraces the whole sweep of time: past (Jesus death); present (the Marys sharing the news); future ("Go and make disciples").

v19-20 is the Great Commission, a hallmark of our own discipleship. The

in the beginning the Word, a love that would shape the fullness of God into a human life – the Word became flesh. Jesus came to be that creative setting-free love on earth. Yet, the religious institution, itself created to be a witness to God's love, turned against its very embodiment, Jesus, and cast him out. Thrown to the wolves, Jesus was arrested, falsely accused, tortured, and gruesomely killed as a criminal - the authorities' intention that Jesus, his reputation shattered, his teaching forgotten, would be dead to the world.

We cannot fathom the power of a love that, even as Jesus was crucified, forgives his persecutors – 'Father forgive them', a love so powerful that it reached into Hell, the place of damnation, cut off from home and heaven, God and sisters and brothers, and there offer the freedom of forgiveness even there.

We cannot fathom the power of a love that can destroy the hold that death has over us – He is risen. Here we see there were some who still believed in him, a group of women with courage to live out their belief, not running away or hiding, but staying with Jesus as he died, and now returning to anoint his body in death. They bravely faced up to the authorities' anger, guards who could arrest them, an earthquake and an awesome angelic presence, the possible mockery of the disciples in telling their story, and being shunned by their community for challenging the way things are….

We can fathom the power of a love that transforms lives and relationships, communities and even our world, because it happens when we too find that belief in Jesus and courage to follow wherever he leads, , just like those women, to stand alongside the victims of injustice today, and walk with them. That's when we see the risen Jesus and him saying, "Do not be afraid!"

Prayers

God sent His son, they called Him Jesus

move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. 'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. 'Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath." You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? And you say, "Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath." How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it. 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also

on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, "If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets." Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation. 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."'

Reflection

Well, dare we call that a rant? At all events this lengthy diatribe makes a stark contrast with the dozen verses in Matthew 5 where Jesus addresses his disciples with a list of blessings. Our Gospel writer highlights the contrast between the disciples and crowds who flocked to hear Jesus in the Galilee region and the Scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem. Scribes were legally qualified and could interpret and administer the law. Pharisees had no official status as such but formed fellowships committed to observing every detail of a highly rigid interpretation and extension of the law – some of the lawyers were Pharisees but not all.

Jesus identified with ordinary people, including those despised by the lawyers because of their ignorance and by the Pharisees because they failed to observe the multitude of regulations that had been added in their

When our emptiness is all consuming, hold us;
When we feel cold and afraid, shelter us;
When we feel alone and tearful, strengthen us.
And as our tears fall, stay with us until the dawn breaks. Amen

Sunday 9 April 2023 Easter Sunday St Matthew 28: 1 - 15

The Rev'd Kevin Watson, retired minister, member of Woodhouse Close Church, Bishop Auckland

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.' While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, 'You must say, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep." If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

Reflection

We cannot fathom the power of a love that burst the universe into life -

Reflection

Holy Saturday is the most human of experiences, for it is a day of two halves.

I remember my young children, lining up their boxed Easter eggs ready to eat on Easter morning. Sometimes the temptation was too great and the promise of a taste of chocolate got the better of them; they both became experts of unwrapping the golden or purple wrappers and then placing them in the box again, with only one half of the egg present.

Holy Saturday is a day when grief, pain or suffering can be so over-whelming, the darkness covers you like the stone that sealed the tomb, and enters every pore of your being; there seems no light and we feel trapped. Yet, on the other hand Holy Saturday, can be like a stirring deep within ourselves that all is not lost, but we just have to wait and watch, like the women in the passage.

For many people, Holy Saturday has been a mixture of these two emotions, straddling the pain yet hoping for the light to pierce the darkness.

Living constantly in a Holy Saturday emotion and experience, can be exhausting, painful, wearisome, depressing and leave one with a feeling of emptiness.

Yet as Christians, we know that all is not lost; the stirring deep within us holds a promise that a new day will dawn. However until then, let us recognize the Holy Saturdays within our family, within our relationships, within creation, within our world, and collectively hold our breath in the darkness, until we see the first shaft of light of Easter dawn breaking.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that you are with us in our Holy Saturdays.

legal code. We should note that Matthew 23 comes just a few verses after Jesus told a lawyer who was also a Pharisee that the greatest commandments were to love God with one's whole being and one's neighbour as oneself – surely this juxtaposition was intentional!

So, where does that leave us? Whatever our role in the life of the Church those outside will judge the fellowship by the example we set. Referring to the Scribes and Pharisees Jesus told his listeners, "do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they preach." As I reflect on my own example how grateful I am for the grace of God and the assurance of forgiveness – and my resolve must be to set a better example.

How about you?

Prayer

Gracious God: help us to be honest with you and with ourselves. Forgive us, we pray, for thoughts, words and actions that so often fall far short of the example and teaching of Jesus. Guide us to live as you would have us live, following in the Way of Christ, on whose power we rely. Amen.

Tuesday 28 March 2023 St Matthew 24: 1 - 35

The Rev'd Ruth Watson SCM MediaCityUKChurch, Salford Quays

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.' When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' Jesus answered them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Messiah!" and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be

famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs. ‘Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But anyone who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come. ‘So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath. For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, “Look! Here is the Messiah!” or “There he is!”—do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Take note, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, “Look! He is in the wilderness”, do not go out. If they say, “Look! He is in the inner rooms”, do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. ‘From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that

Prayer

Lord Jesus, our Loving Saviour,
Your message to us is one of boundless love.
This Good Friday, send Your Holy Spirit,
that we might have a fresh experience
encountering the familiar Scriptures.
We pray for all who have been betrayed;
forgive us when we misunderstand;
give us strength and courage to believe and proclaim:
“Truly, You are the Son of God”. Amen.

Saturday 8 April 2023 Holy Saturday St Matthew 27: 57 - 66

The Rev’ d Ruth Dillon, Retired minister and member at Glenorchy URC, Exmouth.

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, ‘Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, “After three days I will rise again.” Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, “He has been raised from the dead”, and the last deception would be worse than the first.’ Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.’ So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

the extent of God's love for us all.

The Gospel-writers wrote their accounts. For centuries, artists have depicted the Crucifixion in paint, stone and stained-glass. Similarly, musicians like Bach and Lloyd-Webber. And in film, we range from 'Godspell' [U-Certificate] to 'Passion of the Christ' [18-Certificate].

Good Friday's Lectionary reading is always from John's Gospel. While Matthew, Mark and Luke offer similar accounts, Matthew's account contains three unique elements (marked in bold).

(1) vv.3-10 - All Gospels mention Judas' betrayal, but Matthew includes Judas' fate. "Judas!" This one word, his name, has become a synonym for betrayal. Betrayal cuts so deeply because it tears apart the trust in a relationship. Anyone who has been betrayed will be only too aware of the enduring pain and other powerful emotions.

(2) v.25 – "His blood be on us and on our children!" Herein lies a lesson in the dangers of taking a verse out of context: it has led to appalling Christian antisemitism. In Rowan Williams' words: "The most corrupt and murderous misreading of the Passion stories that has disfigured the Church's record". German theologian Luz calls it "redactional fiction", meaning that it is an attempt to explain Jerusalem's destruction in the year 70.

(3) vv.51-53 – The earthquake is common in films depicting the Crucifixion, but not the dead being raised. As a linguist, I spotted that these verses contain passive verbs. Who tore the curtain? Who shook the ground? Who broke the rocks? Who broke open the tombs? Who raised the dead? As these things happen after Jesus' death, the beginning of the New Covenant in Jesus' blood, God is the agent. Matthew depicts a foretaste of resurrection life!

Finally, the pagan Roman Centurion challenges us to believe, as he testifies to Jesus' divinity.

summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Reflection

Wow! What a lot to take in! Images of Jesus arriving on a bolt of lightning and pictures of false prophets telling us things that aren't true.

Many have linked the change in climate to the End Times – the storms, the floods, the fires, the extremes of temperature. Is the end on its way? We don't know. No-one knows. We are told there will be signs to look out for – but how do we know what signs are the right ones? Will God communicate with us as to when the end will be? Or will we continue to add 1+1 and make 3??

Advances in technology and in understanding have helped us to move forward in our predictions of the future. We now have 7 day weather forecasts; political fortune telling; financial forecasts and lots of other ways to know what is coming. Even pandemics are predicted – despite not recognising one when it came!

We are obsessed with knowing what is coming next instead of being in the moment now. Our focus is on how we can move forward; get more; get ahead; leave the past behind. Yet without our past, we would not be who we are. If we look too far into the future we will lose sight of the now. There are many needs to be met today that need to be considered so that the future can be bright.

May our focus be "upwards" rather than "forwards" that our response is to the Word of God which never passes away rather than material gains that will be gone long before we are.

Prayer

Lord, the present is a gift that we often take for granted in our search for the future. Forgive us that we are so desperate to know what is coming that we lose sight of what we can do today. Help us to learn from our past and embrace our present so that we are ready for the future when it arrives. Amen

Wednesday 29 March 2023 St Matthew 24: 36 - 51

The Rev'd Lindsey Sanderson, minister, East Kilbride and Hamilton Joint Pastorate.

'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

'Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that wicked slave says to himself, "My master is delayed", and he begins to beat his fellow-slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son."' The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!' Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Reflection

On Good Friday we recall Jesus' death on the Cross, an event central to our faith: a death so gruesome and so public, beyond our experience to comprehend fully its horror and significance. Yet, we strive to understand

they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'

gnashing of teeth.

Reflection

It is the occasions of 'not knowing' in life which I find difficult. Once something is known it can be dealt with, but the 'not knowing' is hard, when my mind can wander down all sorts of paths about what may or may not unfold.

Today's reading concludes Jesus' description of the chaos that the disciples find so threatening as they await the coming of the Son of Humanity. Jesus finally offers a direct answer to the 'when' part of their questions, though it is not the answer they had been hoping for. Only God knows the 'when', not even Jesus is privy to that knowledge. Jesus goes on to stress the importance of wakefulness and readiness.

I wonder if reading this passage in Lent rather than Advent encourages us to think about it differently? Instead of focusing on the triumphant second coming of Christ at some point in history with the chaos and destruction the Gospel writers predict, what happens if we understand this sermon more in light of the events of Good Friday and Easter Day, so we live as those who are ready in light of death and resurrection of Jesus?

Being awake and ready is a hallmark of discipleship, a norm regardless of the circumstances of the world or our individual lives. Wakefulness is a sense of heightened attentiveness to the signs of God's presence and power, as well as the signs of the times.

We are called to watch for the signs of God's presence in healing the sick, standing with the broken and suffering, bringing sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. This is Jesus' message in the final parable of this sermon. So we discover that in this time of not knowing, is it only the 'when' that is unknown, the 'who' 'what' and 'how' of being awake and ready is set out for us, we simply need to ensure our eyes are open and our hearts are ready.

Prayer

We may not know when,
but you have told us how to be ready,
what and whom to be ready for.
Crucified and Risen Lord,
ready us now to be your disciples in the world,
attentive to your presence
in our world and in our lives. Amen.

Thursday 30 March 2023 St Matthew 25: 1 - 12

Dr Sam Richards, serving as Head of Children's and Youth Work, Messy Church team, Chalgrove

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Reflection

This is the first of a series of parables Jesus tells whilst talking about the final time God will send the Messiah and call time on the world as we know it - they relate to the future and describe different aspects of the kingdom

Friday 7 April 2023 Good Friday St Matthew 27: 1 - 56

Walt Johnson, Ordinand at Northern College, Member at Wilbraham St Ninian's URC in Chorlton, Manchester

Reading

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor. When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.' Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.' After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me.'

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he realised that it was out of jealousy that

Princess of Wales famously did, that the relationship was rather more crowded than we had realised. We may find that kisses were given without meaning, real love, or commitment. There again, we may be the one who betrayed a lover. We may have kissed treacherously, desiring more than was legitimate, taking what we ought not to have taken.

Today we reflect on betrayal and kissing; the intimacy of treachery and the bonds of love nurtured in Eucharist. Jesus, knowing that Judas would betray him, that Peter would deny him, and that the disciples would desert him, still shared in the intimacy of the Eucharist with them. He offered not just the simple things of bread and wine but his own self as food, sustenance, symbol, sign and sacrament. Broken bread and broken relationships find a place at the Lord's table. Wine, like love, is poured out and offered as a way to wholeness.

When Judas betrayed Jesus he was still named as "friend". Even in the moment of betrayal there was forgiveness on offer. Too late did Judas come to repent of what he'd done and, in the horror and guilt of the moment, he despaired believing that his kiss betrayed him forever. If only he'd dared hope; if only he'd remembered Jesus' teaching.

In our loving and believing, our kissing and worshipping, and in our sharing and arguing we can choose either to betray or to commit. When we've made the wrong choice we can, like Judas, despair or, like Peter, turn back to Christ.

Prayer

Lord, let my kisses be loving, my loving be loyal, and my loyalty be holy. Amen.

of heaven.

This one starts happily enough – there is going to be a wedding and we are to be ready to welcome the bride groom. Who doesn't love a party! We are all cast in the role of the bridesmaids, traditionally girls or young women. Everyone thinks they are ready – but some have only prepared for the arrival, whilst some have also prepared to wait should there be a delay. I grew up a Brownie, Girl Guide and Ranger – with the motto 'Be Prepared!' ringing in my ears and taken to heart. I remember part of the challenge of parenting was to be prepared for my child's needs when away from home. At different stages this meant taking with me nappies, a change of clothes, snacks, drinks, toys, books, colouring pencils and paper – particularly to help my child endure an unexpected time of waiting.

The surprise in this parable is that Jesus doesn't want us to 'be nice' and share our oil (if we are one of the wise) but rather to 'be prepared' for the big moment when it comes, AND the wait in the meantime. So we will be ready to join in with the celebration banquet when it starts. The consequences for the foolish and unprepared seem harsh – they are too late and unknown, forever on the wrong side of a closed door.

Keep awake' we are urged (yet both wise and foolish bridesmaids fall asleep in the story). Perhaps 'Be Prepared' is more helpful – be ready in body, mind and spirit – we truly never know when or where we might be called to respond to God's presence and invitation. So we are left waiting in readiness….

Prayer

Give me oil in my lamp – keep me burning
Give me joy in my heart – keep me singing
Give me love in my heart – keep me serving
Give me peace in my heart – help me keep waiting
Waiting til the break of day
Ready to join in the heavenly wedding feast. Amen

Friday 31 March 2023 St Matthew 25: 14 - 30

John Collings, Lay Preacher, Rutherglen URC

'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

"You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophesy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?" Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away." Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Reflection

We kiss only those we love. A sign of intimacy, friendship, trust, love, and, sometimes, desire. To be betrayed by a kiss is the ultimate act of treachery undermining the kiss's meaning.

Many of us know what it is to be betrayed by a kiss. Relationships can end unexpectedly, hurtfully, and angrily. We may find, as the late Diana

is weak." He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus replied, "Do what you came for, friend."

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"

In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, "This

Reflection

Three slaves all entrusted with money. Which of them was the most honest? Was it one of the two, who used their skills to make more money for their master or was it the one who spoke the truth? The words "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man" might not have been welcomed by the master, but his subsequent actions seem to show them to be true.

Some translations use the word "servant" rather than "slave". Then as now slaves are usually treated badly. Some organisations estimate that there are about 45 million slaves today, which is more than during the transatlantic slave trade. We need to do all we can to stop this and protect people from exploitation.

If we think of these three men as servants, it can be a little different. A servant is paid and usually skilled. Servants should use their skills to do what their master wants or needs. I was about to write that I've never had a servant but that is untrue. In a couple of days I'll have a servant in my house, I'll not call him a servant as he is a carpenter who will be fitting some new doors. A skilled tradesman who, I hope, will do an excellent job as he did when he fitted our kitchen. That is what a servant should do, use his or her skills to do what is required. One of these servants, or slaves, failed and was criticised.

In Daniel 6:20 we read "O Daniel, servant of the living God". We share that attribute with Daniel. We are servants of God and should do our best, not because God will punish us if we fail, but because we act out of love for Him.

Prayer

Almighty God we are pleased to serve you,
Loving God show us what You want us to do,
Enable us to serve you as You want served.

Make us true and loyal servants showing an example to others so others will want to come to know You.
We pray that just as the number of talents increased
so will the number of people following you.
Help us all to be good and trustworthy servants. Amen

Saturday 1 April 2023 St Matthew 25: 31 - 46

The Rev'd Carole Elphick is a retired minister worshipping at Muswell Hill URC

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And

with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "You have said so."

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written:

"'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." "Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same. Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh

out by a person ambling into town on a donkey and who was caught up in a war of words with the religious leaders of the people rather than the occupying forces. There must have been those who felt deceived by Jesus's promises not living up to what they had hoped.

Sometimes when one feels betrayed, it seems logical to betray that person in return. You may do this for the right reason, so that that person does not do the same to someone else. Yet, you also might do it for the wrong reason because that person did not act or fulfil a promise as you expected. One has to wonder whether this is part of Judas' narrative too.

Prayer

Merciful God, forgive us when we betray you
because your ways are not our ways or your words, our words.
Forgive us when we turn from you
because your reality is not our dream or your certainty our hope.
Through the grace of your Holy Spirit open our hearts and minds
so that your will become ours and we follow without condition
where you lead in Jesus Christ, Amen.

Thursday 6 April 2023 Maundy Thursday St Matthew 26: 17 - 75

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

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl

these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Reflection

Many years back when training for ministry, I crafted a sermon on this passage and delivered it with some fluency and insight, or so I thought, in the church near Cambridge, where I was a member. I no longer recall the details, but I'm sure it was pretty strong on how the way of Jesus is about starting on the edges of life and serving those who are hungry and thirsty, and naked, etc as a priority, and not as an afterthought. It probably didn't pay much attention to the eternal punishment angle nor the severity of the judgement of the Son o fMan on "those who did not do it to me". It did polarise the story into sheep, good - goats, bad, rather like a Middle Eastern 'Animal Farm'.

That congregation was blessed by the regular presence of at least two retired moderators and other URC luminaries. It was a rigorous training ground and so it proved on that Sunday particularly. The next day, I received a handwritten note from one of those people. It pointed out that on the hillsides of Palestine, especially when seen from a distance, it was practically impossible to tell which animal was a sheep, and which animal was a goat as they look so very similar. They often roam together on the hillside during the day and that would explain why the Shepherd needed to separate them on occasions. I had been working on the narrow British-based pictures of fluffy sheep and wiry goats and that was not the reality of the context. It was a helpful correction, although I didn't fully appreciate the note at the time!

But it also carries with it a powerful message about judgement. Not about the judgement of the fiery pit as a result of our actions in life, but the judgement that we so easily exercise when looking at what other people are doing around us. Life would be so much more simple if we could tell at a glance who were the good people, and who were not but the reality is they look very similar. We look very similar. What is significant is not

what we look like or what we profess, but the outcome of our actions. Sheep and goats may look similar, but their behaviour and their feeding habits are very different. Jesus does not hide in plain sight to be mischievous, or to be misleading, but simply to teach us to love without judgement and without prejudice all of the least, who are by definition "members of my family".

Prayer

Holy One,
Let me never despise those who seem to be your little ones;
rather, free me from judgements and let me be humbled,
recognising those who live with generosity and courage,
love and faithfulness as my teachers and guides.
Amen. (SCM)

Sunday 2 April 2023 Palm Sunday Psalm 129

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

I will sing a song of triumph,
sing to reassert the truth,
sing although unnumbered troubles
have beset me since my youth:

2 When the conflicts I encountered
left me wounded, scarred, & sore,
God the Righteous One
was with me
to destroy the chains I bore.

3 Those who hate
what God has chosen
in the end, how can they thrive?
Plants with neither
earth nor moisture,
what can help them to survive?

4 Those who trust
the Lord to save them
may they find, instead of shame,
kindness from the One they worship,
endless blessings in God's name.

Martin Leckebusch Kevin Mayhew Ltd. ONE LICENSE A-734713 You can hear the tune here https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/205786

Help us to be less opinionated about others and more focused on what you are asking from ourselves. Amen

Wednesday 5 April 2023 St Matthew 26: 14 - 16

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

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

Reflection

What would it take for you to betray someone?

This account of Judas Iscariot's actions is rather shocking. The Gospel writer of Matthew has told the reader of there being a plot against Jesus, but to hear that ultimately it will be one of the disciples who would give Jesus up is difficult to comprehend. How could one who would be so villainous be one of those Jesus closely associated with? How could one who sat at Jesus' feet, dedicated to following Jesus's teachings, be so disloyal?

From this episode and other short snippets about Judas Iscariot within the four Gospels, we come to see Judas as a self-interested character who does not get what Jesus was all about. The fame and fortune he possibly thought would be his from being associated with the Messiah never seemed to materialise, so he looked elsewhere for reward. Yet, given the little we actually know about Judas, can we claim this as his only motivation for betraying Jesus as he did?

When one considers what the prophets said about the Messiah and then how Jesus fulfilled that prophesy, there is discord. That expectation of a mighty warrior king charging in to save their people was not exactly lived

proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

Reflection

Whenever I read this passage, I am always struck by the fact that the disciples, who aren't earning money while they follow Jesus all over the country, feel that they have the right to tell this female disciple how she should be handling her resources. Jesus quickly corrects them, but he shouldn't have needed to. Maybe there are folk in your churches and communities who you sometimes look at and think "you should be doing X to help the church, the community, yourself" because as humans it is something we do without even thinking, but the truth is we each have to stand before God at the allotted time and God will judge whether we used our resources, money, selves to the best of our abilities.

Jesus knew that being prepared for burial at that point in time was the most important thing, even if the disciples didn't know it, or understand that it wasn't their place to judge. And that is the other thing, sometimes we will look at folk and think that they aren't using their resources "correctly/appropriately" but we don't know the big picture in other people's lives and situations. This reading makes clear that only God can know if our actions and spending of resources is for the right/true reason, but this reading also reminds us that we give what we can, and not berate ourselves for not having more to give, because God will fully utilise whatever we can offer, each and every day. Plus, Jesus told the disciples that this female disciples' actions would be remembered always, her name has been lost to time in this gospel, but her actions have lived on and Jesus knows who she is, and that is what matters.

Prayer

Lord, often it is easy to point at others and comment on how they should be doing more for the Church, but you remind us through Scripture that what each of us give through faith is only between you and the individual.

Reflection

Martin Leckebusch's rendition of Psalm 129 focuses on triumph, truth, and trouble. Today we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His Passion; triumph and trouble indeed. But what's the truth?

For many, Jesus' death is about His sacrifice in our place. On Him the sins of the world were laid and, by taking our place, Jesus suffered the punishment due to us. Many Biblical writers, and Christians since, held that our sins were such that death was the price that had to be paid. However, in great mercy, God - in Jesus - took our place and suffered for us. By Jesus' wounds we are healed.

Others hold that on the Cross the Devil thought he'd won. Inciting the religious leaders to jealousy, Satan had ensured they tried Jesus and sent him to His death. Here evil reigns supreme and the loving kindness of God isn't enough to defeat this injustice. And yet, the Devil was tricked and, by raising Jesus from the dead, God redeemed humanity from the grasp of the Devil and from death itself.

Others still, hold that the penalty for confronting the powers of the age was Jesus' death. He'd unsettled the Establishment, called them whitewashed tombs, overturned their tables in the Temple and, by riding into Jerusalem at the start of Passover, fulfilled ancient prophecy that was tantamount to revolution. He had to die but, through his resurrection, God vindicated Jesus and the struggle for freedom from all forms of sin.

The events of Holy Week are a mystery to us; Christians have been reflecting on (and arguing about) their meanings since the earliest days of the Church. Like the Psalmist we can see the triumph and the troubles but take longer to reflect on the truth of it all. With the Psalmist we trust God will save us and we hope for kindness from on high but know, if we know anything at all, that the path to that loving kindness runs through Calvary.

Prayer

Lord, by your cross and resurrection, you have set us free.
You are the Saviour of the world. Amen

Monday 3 April 2023 St Matthew 26: 1 - 5

The Rev'd Ruth Watson, SCM MediaCityUK Church, Salford Quays

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.' Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'

Reflection

This passage gives us the calm before the storm. Jesus has told the disciples about being ready in the previous chapter and what awaits those who do not care for their neighbour. The Chief Priests have not yet put their plan to get rid of Jesus into action.

Timing is everything. But waiting is frustrating.

The Chief Priests know that if they do nothing, Jesus's popularity will grow and they will lose more face, as their power hungry leadership will be exposed. However, if they move too soon, they will cause a riot, as Jerusalem will be packed for the Passover.

So they must wait.

Jesus too must wait. It is not yet time for his anointing or for his last meal, but his mission is too far along to turn back now (as he is to realise in the garden).

We find it hard to wait when there is a job to be done. We struggle to be patient if we have worked towards something only to hear "not yet". At Oasis MediaCityUK, one of the 9 Habits is Patience, the Habit of the month for January - the time of writing.

Patience is a virtue we often hear, but often difficult to possess. We live in a world of now if not sooner; buy now, pay later; why wait when you can have it now? We want to know what is coming up, what to expect and want to be able to act on it now.

As we reflect on this lull in the story towards the end of Jesus' life, let us be patient in our lives and on our journey of discipleship. May we use a "not yet" as a time to reflect; regroup and discern if our plans are God-driven or human-made.

Prayer

Lord God, we don't want to wait for action – we want it now! Still our hearts, calm our fears, hear our prayers as we listen for your word on what we are to do next. Help us to wait, to pause, to be patient that we do your will, not ours. Amen

Tuesday 4 April 2023 St Matthew 26: 6 - 13

Kirsty-Ann Mabbott, CRCW, Ansty Road United Reformed Church, Coventry

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.' But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is