



ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST, BIRCHGROVE

Prepare the Way...

*Bible Studies for Advent
Week 1*

Prepare the Way...

The study of the Holy Scriptures has always been one of the most important things that any Christian can do. Although we might have different interpretations, Christians have always agreed that the Scriptures are the Word of God and reveal His plan for His creation.

Many Christians no longer try to look at the scriptures, relying on the readings on Sundays for their 'Bible Meat'. This can never be adequate and, to continue the metaphor, a Christian who relies on the Sunday readings will soon starve, spiritually, to death. There are far more nutrients to be found in the Scriptures!

The following studies, or maybe they are meditations, or just thoughts, are based on the Gospel readings for each weekday (Monday to Saturday) during Advent – the readings used at the daily Eucharist. They often seem to jump around a bit, but also have a continual theme – the coming of the Kingdom.

I have tried to explain some of the more interesting, and important, phrases and words; the most important are in bold print, indicating that they have a very short entry in the glossary at the back of the booklet. I have also tried to place each reading in its context; it is a very dangerous thing to take a passage of Scripture away from its context!

I would strongly recommend that you begin your study with prayer – ask God to speak to you from His word. Read the passage – in any version of the Bible – and think about it a bit before reading my comments. You might hear different things to me! If you can, have a commentary available, to explain some of the background.

Try to run the passage through in your head, almost as though you are watching it happen; and pray some more. Let the word come alive!

And, if you want to talk about what you have found, or what you hear, I am more than willing to do so.

May God bless us all in this glorious season of Advent.

Fr Peter Yeats

Context

The passage is part of a series of healing stories all placed together by Matthew:

8:1-4 – the healing of the (Jewish) leper.

8:5-11 – the healing of the (Gentile) centurion's servant.

8:14-15 – the healing of Peter's mother-in-law.

8:16-17 the healing of people possessed with demons.

And is in a section of the Gospel which shows a lot about the power of Jesus.

Matthew describes the ministry of Jesus with three key verbs: *teaching*, *preaching* and *healing*. This part dwells on the latter verb and, as it says in verse 17, is a fulfilment of Isaiah 53:4.

A technical point

The Greek word '*pias*', translated here (v.6) as 'servant' can also mean 'son' – but this does not seem to fit the context here.

This short passage is interesting for a number of reasons, starting with the fact that the man involved is a **centurion** – a man of power and authority, who is used to giving orders and having them obeyed without question. It's worth noting that the New Testament shows a lot of respect for centurions, even though they are part of an occupying force - the centurion at the crucifixion; the centurion Cornelius in Acts; the centurion who rescues Paul from a rioting mob – the list goes on. They are sensible, no-nonsense people who are willing to act on what they believe.

Secondly, the **centurion** cares for his slave – cares enough to go and find Jesus and ask for his help. This in itself is odd; while a slave might be valuable in terms of material worth, it was very odd that someone would waste emotion on them; they were objects just like cattle or dogs!

But the most striking thing – even more so than the long-distance healing – is that the **centurion** is a gentile asking help from a Jew, who not only gives the help but comments positively on the faith of the gentile! For the Jews, gentiles were unclean – as were their houses. The **centurion** must have known that Jesus would not enter his house to cure the slave, but his faith in Jesus does not allow that to become a problem! And this was what mattered to Jesus; not that the man was a gentile, not that he was part of an occupying army; but that he not only had faith but was also willing to act on it.

We have to remember as we read this that many Jews still thought that God was not really bothered with the gentiles and that, at the end of time, the Jews would feast in the **Kingdom** whilst the gentiles would come almost as prisoners to say sorry for all that they had done to God's chosen People.

At the same time, for many it was enough to just be Jewish, to be born into the nation, the faith. And it is this that Jesus really does not like. For him there is no point claiming to be a part of a faith if you are not willing to live out that faith - being a Jew or a gentile is not the issue; living the faith is!

As we read this, we have to ask ourselves whether we are so different. Do we feel that because we are baptised, because we go to church, because we don't really do anything bad to our friends that that is all we need to do?

Tuesday, December the 5th

Luke 10: 21-24

Context

This passage is set in the part of the gospel when Jesus sends out the Seventy to proclaim the Kingdom of God. They return full of excitement and enthusiasm, telling Jesus that even the demons submit to them. And in this we can see a key to an understanding of the **Kingdom**; being under the rule of God is to be free from those things that seem to bind our lives and burden us. Jesus acknowledges this in verse 18 when he says that he saw **Satan** "fall from **heaven**" – the great accuser of humanity, the one who leads rebellion against God – is overthrown.

He then goes on to explain to the disciples that the **Kingdom** is not just for the intelligent, the powerful or the wise; if that were the case, most people would have no hope. The continual message of the gospel is that the Kingdom is open to all – the rich, the poor; the powerful, the weak; the wise and the not so wise! It is for the infants who truly want to grow, who want to learn and develop, not for those who feel that they already know it all and have no need for more!

At the same time, Jesus links being a part of the **Kingdom** with knowledge of God; not just knowledge about God, but true, intimate knowledge. I might know about some celebrity from reading the gossip columns, and watching television; but I could never claim to really know the person intimately. To do that I would have to be with them, talk to them, listen to them – find out about them from the person themselves! And that is the sort of relationship that Jesus wants to share with his disciples.

For Jesus, knowledge of the Father comes through the Son. It is not that the Son, Jesus, teaches people about the Father; it is that by knowing the Son the Father is revealed.

By knowing God, by being willing to enter into a real relationship with him, we will be able to be open to the life – and work – that he wants from us. Without that relationship, we cannot have the strength, or indeed the power, that God promises us through his Holy Spirit.

How do we try to know God? How much time – and effort – do we spend in talking to him and listening to him? Do we spend time in getting to know one major part of his revelation to us – the scriptures?

Wednesday, December the 6th

Mt 15:29-37

Context.

Chapter 15 begins with Jesus once again attacking the **Scribes** and the **Pharisees** as people who failed to follow the truth behind the **Law**. In verse 21 something extraordinary happens; Jesus talks to and helps a Gentile woman – something unthinkable for a Jewish religious teacher!

Again this passage is in two parts, and how the two are linked might be seen by how we answer the question, Why does Matthew have a second multitude feeding story? We will come back to that!

The first part deals with Jesus to the crowds who are following him. Note that in verse 29 Jesus once again goes up a mountain and sits down. Just as in the case of the **Sermon on the Mount**, the mountain will recall to the readers of Matthew's Gospel, from a strong Jewish background, Moses going up the mountain to receive the **Law** from God. That Jesus sits is a strong indication that what he is about to do is teach. A Jewish teacher would always sit when he was to talk with authority, and this is what Jesus does. But, he does not *talk*; he *acts* - he cures and ministers. It is as though the very acts themselves are the teaching, the revelation about the **Kingdom of God**. We can learn from this; that people will sometimes come to know more about the **Kingdom of God** by what we do than by what we say.

The word 'disciple' originally meant 'one who sits at the feet of their master, learns his ways and then teaches them to others. If we are to be true disciples, we must learn first to sit and listen, and then be prepared to share in what we have learnt. We cannot act before we have learnt – but we cannot sit for ever!

But one thing to note here is that the crowd is not an 'ordinary' crowd. They praise "the God of Israel" – a phrase which seems to indicate that they are Gentiles! And this gives us the key to the next part of the passage...

Matthew has already had the feeding of the Five Thousand in Chapter 14:13-22, and seems to be repeating himself. But the crowd fed in this passage are

the same crowd from verses 29 to 31 – Gentiles. The revelation of the Kingdom now starts to move out beyond the Jews. Note that all the numbers are smaller than in the feeding in Chapter 14; this might indicate that the mission to the Jews is still the priority.

The disciples are just as perplexed as they were during the first feeding; Jesus seems to be asking the impossible of them, and they throw up the practical objection that there is just not enough food! (If you compare the two accounts you will see that in Chapter 14 the disciples offer the food; in Chapter 15, Jesus has to ask them).

The people sit, and the miracle begins!

Three Odd Words

v35 – the word translated as ‘sit’ is actually the Greek word for ‘recline’, the way the ancients ate meals. In a Jewish context it means being at a formal meal. One could translate it as “the crowd were invited to recline for the festive banquet”.

v37 – “Filled” – a polite translation; the Greek would be better rendered as ‘stuffed’!

v37 – the word ‘basket’ in chapter 15 is different from that used in chapter 14. In chapter 14 the basket is a small one, used by Jews; in chapter 15 it is a large one, like a hamper, more in use by Gentiles.

An essential part of this passage, which is reflected in the other feeding in chapter 14, are the verbs used, and their order: Jesus “took”; “gave thanks”; “broke”; and “gave”. These are the same words that are used in the Eucharist and reflect the fact that Matthew sees what is happening as a foretaste of what is to come.

For us, the message should be clear. As disciples of Christ we are to continue in his ministry. The resources that we have are always going to be enough, and more than enough, if we use them as Christ wants. If we say that we cannot act because we have too little, we are in danger of ceasing to be disciples!

Context

This passage comes as part of the **Sermon on the Mount**.

It is interesting that this passage does not seem to call into question the ability of people who are not Christians to perform miracles; indeed the early Church never did assume that only followers of Jesus could do such things.

The passage is in two parts, although both parts are linked. The first part (vv 21-24) deals with the whole question of sincerity and motive. What Jesus seems to indicate is that God is more interested in what is inside a person rather than the outward show, which might hide all sorts of thing! On first reading, it might seem a little odd that Jesus is so harsh on those who do good things, even if they are not sincere when they call him 'Lord'. Surely doing good is good enough?

Of course, the key to this lies in the word 'Lord'. To call someone 'Lord' is to put oneself in absolute obedience to that person, to do what they want as opposed to what I want. Jesus' harshness is aimed at those who use the word 'Lord' but have no intention of doing what God wants. Even though they might be doing good, they are doing it for their own sake, and possibly their own glory, rather than God's.

Do we ever act like that? Do we ever join in the prayers which call Jesus our Lord, which ask that God's will be done, yet never enter into full obedience? Do we ever think that doing what we think to be good is good enough for God?

The second part of the reading contains a real warning for us, the ones who week by week hear the words of our 'Lord'. We are warned that hearing is not enough! We actually have to act on what we hear, even when it does not suit us or even when it might disrupt our lives and how we think about God!

First of all we have to listen. So often we think that we know a particular passage of scripture, and what it means; we think that we know what the Church teaches; and, because we think that we already know, we stop listening. We must always be willing to hear the word of God afresh in our lives. That is the surest foundation of all that we do.

Context

This passage is still within that section of the Gospel which deals with the powers of Jesus, and especially his healing power – 9:32-33 deals with the healing of someone mute. Both these events seem to fulfill what was said in Isaiah 35:4-6.

For Matthew, blindness is a symbol of unbelief. In 15:14, he describes the **Pharisees** as “blind guides of the blind”. In the same way, sight is a symbol for salvation; he says of the **disciples**: “blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”

As we read this story today, it might well come across as just one more healing miracle – but it does have a few odd twists to it!

The two blind men begin by calling Jesus ‘**Son of David**’. This is a title which is often used in the Gospels by people who see Jesus as the popular conception of the **Messiah**; they know the word, and they think that they know what it means – but really don’t! Many who call on Jesus use great terms of respect – probably so that they can get something from him rather than a desire to actually follow him.

And that might explain the reason that Jesus asks the two men that somewhat odd question – “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” For Jesus, the most important thing that a person can have is faith – however small that faith is; even if our faith seems to be too small, it is something that God can work on.

Miracles are a sign of the **Kingdom of God**; to be a part of the **Kingdom** is to put oneself under the rule of God – and to do that takes the faith that God is worth being ruled by. When we are able to do that, then we are able to receive all that the Kingdom brings, including the health that God desires for all his subjects.

Faith is not certainty; it is not the same as *knowing* something. Faith is about having the courage to live as though the thing believed in is true. To call on Jesus, using fancy titles and words, is easy; it demands nothing of us. To live as though those titles are in fact true is much more difficult!

And at the end of the passage, the two men who have received their sight are told to tell no-one! Why the secrecy? It is possible that Jesus was concerned that people might take what had happened in the wrong way, that they would see him as a mere miracle worker or magician; or that their false view of the what the Messiah was might be strengthened. He wanted people to see

everything, right up to the resurrection before they jumped to conclusions. The whole story is essential to true belief.

But as was so common when Jesus asked for secrecy, the two men could not keep quiet about what had happened, and had to tell the world about their experience of the **Kingdom!**

Saturday, December the 6th

Mt 9:35 - 10:8

Context

The passage marks an end to a section of the **Gospel**, which finishes by describing the needs of the people, and then continues by the calling of the Twelve to be a part of his work.

Some technical points

'*Sheep without a shepherd*' - A common Old Testament theme: Num 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; Zech 10:3.

'*The harvest*' – another common Old Testament term for the time when God is going to act in the world, in judgement. (Hosea 6:11; Joel 3:13). The 'Lord of the Harvest' is God.

'**Apostle**' – see the glossary.

This short passage is immense in everything that it contains and teaches us about the **Kingdom of God** and our part in it! In the passage, the ministry of Jesus is linked to the ministry of the disciples – and therefore the Church – in contrast to what was being done by the **Pharisees** and other spiritual leaders of the time.

The ministry of Jesus, as outlined in verse 35, can be summed up in three words: *teaching*; *proclamation* and *healing*. The **Kingdom of God** is based on these three: we must learn about God, and his will; we must tell the world about what it means to live under the rule of God; and the fact that in the Kingdom, those things that hold us back from being truly human are removed.

As Jesus does this, one can feel his genuine feeling of frustration at what he sees. The word 'compassion' in verse 36 is the strongest word available in Greek; he truly feels for those around him, and what he seems to feel most is that they have no direction, no purpose. Two other words in the verse

emphasise this: the word 'harassed' originally referred to a mangled corpse; and the word 'helpless' means a person who is too drunk to even stand. Strong language! And this is because the people have no shepherds, no one to lead them. Those who were given the task make no attempt to make life better, but just more of a burden (Matthew 23:4). The **Kingdom of God** is not **Good News** under the 'guidance' of those spiritual leaders!

How do we present the **Kingdom of God**? When people look at us, at our church, do they see the Kingdom as being something attractive – or as something which is, at best, no different to the rest of the world or, at worse, something to avoid! Do we have direction to offer the world?

But Jesus also knows that he cannot do all the work alone; people are going to have to take part in the mission of God. Labourers are needed! It can be very easy to assume that everything is going to be done by God alone, and that we need to do nothing. What Jesus makes clear is that when we are called, we are called to be a part of the work, to be active!

This need for help is emphasised in chapter 10 with the call of the Twelve, who are given the task of continuing in, to start with, the healing work of Jesus. The assumption of this is that they in turn will pass that task onto others who come after – right down to us!

One difficult question about this passage comes in verses 5 and 6; why is Jesus so exclusive? Why are the **Gentiles** and **Samaritans** not included? There might be a couple of possible answers:

Firstly, it is possible that the first chance of entry into the Kingdom must be offered to the Jews, the chosen People. They might refuse, but the offer is made.

Secondly, and probably more importantly, Jesus recognised that the **Gentiles** would not yet be ready to receive the **Good News**. So much of that hinged on an understanding of 'the **Messiah**' - and, while their understanding was not too accurate, at least the Jews were familiar with the concept. After the resurrection, when the fullness of what God had done in Jesus could be proclaimed to all.



GLOSSARY

Apostle

The word literally means 'one who is sent'. In the Gospels it is usually reserved for the inner circle of Twelve, although later, with Paul, others are referred to as 'apostles'.

Centurion

A Roman soldier with command over one hundred men. Centurions were really the backbone of the Roman army, like a modern Sergeant-Major.

Disciples

'one who learns from a master, then teaches others that learning'. While we often think only of the Twelve as disciples, the gospels include many more; all linked to Jesus are disciples.

Gentiles

Anyone who is not a Jew! While Jews and Gentiles did live together, Jews tried to avoid any physical contact with Gentiles, whom they considered 'impure' and liable to bring impurity to a Jew.

Good News / Gospel

The Greek word for this is '*euangelion*', from where we get the word Evangelism and Evangelist. The same word in German is '*gut spiel*', which, contracted, gives us the English word 'Gospel'. All refer to the Good News of Jesus Christ!

Heaven

Whereas 'earth' is the world set in time and space, 'heaven' is the dimension of God set beyond time and space. 'Going to heaven' is not about going to a place after death but is about living in the present under the rule of God.

Kingdom of God / Kingdom of Heaven

(Luke uses the phrase 'Kingdom of God' while Matthew, as a Jew tries to avoid the use of the word 'God', out of respect, and uses the phrase 'Kingdom of Heaven').

The phrase refers not to a place, a geographical Kingdom, but to the sovereign and saving rule of God. This rule is not just in the future, it can be here and now.

Law

For the Jews the Law was primarily the first five books of what we call the Old Testament, the Books of Moses, the Pentateuch; the Jews refer to these books as 'Torah'.

Messiah / Christ

The two words mean the same thing: 'Messiah' is Hebrew, 'Christ' is Greek. The word means 'the anointed one' in other words one chosen by God. The Jews looked to a Messiah who would come and free them from their physical bondage to foreign powers; someone who would come as a mighty king. It was probably for this reason that they found it so hard to accept Jesus as Messiah.

Pharisees

A group within Judaism who kept the **Law** very strictly, and encouraged others to do so as well. They were not priests, but lay-men, and had great influence outside Jerusalem. Unlike many Jews, they believed in a resurrection and life after death.

Satan

'The Accuser'; the bible is never really clear as to the identity of the Satan – at times he is like a divine prosecutor serving in the heavenly Council (e.g. Job). But he also becomes the one trying to lead humans away from God.

Sermon on the Mount

A series of teachings (which include the Beatitudes) by Jesus in chapters 5-7 of Matthews Gospel. It seems likely that Matthew is bringing together into one 'slot' a lot of quotes from Jesus spread over his ministry. Luke has the same teachings, but he places Jesus in the plains; in Matthew, Jesus goes up 'the mountain' a very typical Jewish symbol of being close to God, and reflects Moses on Mt Sinai.

Son of David

A somewhat rare title for the Messiah – in the Gospels it is used by those who really don't understand what they are saying, but just need a title to call Jesus!