

ADVENT STUDIES

Monday, November 29

Matthew 8:5-12

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, November 30

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

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!

Thursday, December 2

Mt 7:21-27

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.

Friday, December 3

Mt 9:27-31

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 fulfil 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 4

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.

Monday, December 6

Lk 5: 17-26

Context

In this chapter, as Jesus displays more and more of his powers (a major theme in the Gospel of Luke), the opposition in turn begins to build up. The big question starts to be asked – who is Jesus?

In verse 17 we read that the “Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem)”! This is impressive; the religious leaders are worried, and want to find out what is happening. They felt that teaching about faith was their right, not to be taken over by just anybody! What was more, the teaching that Jesus was giving about the Kingdom was not in line with their teaching. They wanted people to follow the Law more closely; Jesus wants people to follow him and obey God.

Notice as well the final phrase of verse 17 – ‘and the power of the Lord was with him to heal’; all power comes from God!

The story of the healing of the Paralytic is really in three parts, each of which confront the Pharisees and the Scribes.

The first part is about the breaking of the Sabbath Law. To carry a burden (even a sick man on a stretcher!) was against the Law; to break open the roof of a house (a form of work) was against the Law; to heal was against the Law.

For the Pharisees, to keep the Law was all that mattered, was all that God wanted – whatever the consequences! For Jesus, the basis of the Law was love and therefore compassion. For him, the Law was not black-and-white, a burden – it was there to help. Possibly this is the yard-stick by which we should measure all that we do; does it reveal love?

The second part is about faith. The man’s friends had such complete faith in Jesus that they were willing to take someone else’s house to pieces! (And, imagine the love that they had for their friend to do such a thing.) For Jesus faith is of the greatest importance, because it is in faith that we learn to trust God. Faith is not certainty; but it is living as though it is. For the Pharisees, faith was secondary; following the Law was the most important thing; that was all that mattered. What Jesus realised was that faith leads to obedience, not out of fear but out of love.

The third part concerns forgiveness, and it was this issue that really got to the Pharisees! (Actually, as one reads the story, one can almost feel that Jesus is baiting them on purpose – with a bit of a smile on his face!) The Pharisees, and everyone else, is waiting for him to perform a miracle by healing the man. Instead, he announces that the man’s sins are forgiven! Not quite what was expected. The Pharisees would have understood instantly; the only person who could forgive in that way was God; so what was Jesus saying? And Jesus must have known that they understood, and one can picture him watching them, waiting for the reaction that he knew was to come. And it does... they accuse him of blasphemy, taking the place of God. So, he throws them another question. Which is easier; to say the man is forgiven or to heal him? The answer is obvious: it’s easier to say that someone is forgiven – whether they are forgiven or not cannot be shown. Yet to forgive in that way is impossible for man... To heal the man would be impossible, but if Jesus did it at least people would be able to see that it had happened. The Pharisees have no answer! So Jesus heals the man! The important thing in this is that he does not heal the man just for the sake of healing; he heals him to show that if he, Jesus, can do that, he can also forgive. This is a direct challenge to the religious authorities; Jesus oversteps the mark, and so seals his own fate.

Miracles are always signs of the Kingdom; they say something about the Kingdom of God. One thing that this particular event says about the Kingdom is that God is concerned with the whole person. Yes, the healing is important; God wants us to be as He created us. But, at the same time, Jesus recognises that sin is as much a burden for the man as is his physical ailment (that is not to say that the one causes the other!). So Jesus wants to help the man with that problem too. That is something we find easy to forget; we need God to work in all of us, and that might involve looking at some of the dark, nasty bits of our lives and letting Him remove them!

Tuesday, December 7

Mt 18:12-14

Context

Chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew is very specifically concerned with the affairs of the Church, and especially about relationships within the Church. This might sound a bit odd – surely all the Gospels deal with the Church? Yes and no!

Matthew's is the only Gospel that actually uses the word 'Church' (ekklesia in Greek) and it seems that Matthew is directing much of what he writes to a particular Christian community. By the time Matthew was writing, possibly around 80 AD, there were a lot of these communities, and it seems that Matthew draws together a lot of the teachings of Jesus as teachings for the young church, directing his writing to the particular needs and problems of the church.

This has to be one of the best known of the teachings of Jesus, and surely needs little explanation. The image of the shepherd would have been a strong one to the people of rural Judea: it was a dangerous, often lonely, job. The shepherd was responsible for the sheep, and was answerable for each of them to the owner. They were rough, hard men – and always on the fringe of society not just because they were away from others for so long, but also because the nature of their job stopped them from being able to fulfil many of the requirements of the Law – especially the purity laws.

But this is the image that Jesus uses for God, the one who will risk everything to come after one lost person. But, as we think about this, how often do we think of God as the one who gives up? Do we ever think that there are people, (not us, of course!), who are just too bad to enter the Kingdom of God? What does this teaching tell us about eternal punishment? That there is the possibility that one day God might give up on some people?

And we have to remember as we read this – as the people of Jesus' time would have understood – that sheep are not the wisest of creatures. When they wander away, they really don't know what they are doing. The shepherd not only wants to protect them from the outside dangers; he also needs to protect them from themselves.

But – and we now go back to the context of the passage – this is not just about how God should deal with those who go astray, but is also about how the Church should deal with people.

The first point is that part of the teaching is that the flock is the correct place for a sheep to be! This is a constant theme of scripture, that the *community* of God is essential; that God works out salvation within *communities*. To claim to be a Christian without being a part of the Church is a contradiction in terms; it makes no sense! The Shepherd wants us in the Flock!

The second point is that we, as Church, can never ignore those who stray away, for whatever reason. We do not do this well, and that is a matter of shame for all of us. We all have to take responsibility for each other.

Why not try, during this Advent season, contacting someone you know who has strayed away from the Church, and let them know that you are thinking about them, and would love to see them back in the flock. And pray for them!

Wednesday, December 8

Mt 11:28-30

Context

This passage is the end of Chapter 11, which has been looking at the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus and how the good, religious teachers have just missed the point!

A Couple of Technical Points

- *'I will give you rest'* (V 28) – the idea of 'rest' especially the Sabbath rest was seen as an anticipation of the rest that was to come under the rule of the Messiah.
- *Yoke* – a wooden bar or frame that went around the necks of draught animals and that was then attached to a wagon or plough. A common farming implement, and often used to symbolise submission; but we must never forget that a yoke actually makes the work of the animal yoked a lot easier! It enables more than one animal to share a load, and spreads the load on each animal. At the same time, it allows the person behind the beast to direct it in the way he wants. (A yoke was often 'tailor-made' for a particular animal so that it fitted perfectly and worked as well as possible. There is also a legend that Jesus, as a carpenter, specialised in making yokes!)

This is a passage that speaks deeply of the compassion of Jesus for his people. The burden that he is talking about seems to be the burden of the Law as it was interpreted by the religious leaders of the time. God had given the Law to help people to live well, but over time the Law became harder and harder to follow, especially for the normal, everyday person. Instead of helping it was crippling. (It is interesting that the Jews often referred to the Law as 'the yoke of the Law').

What Jesus offers is a different way. Note that he does not offer to remove the burden, or even make it lighter. What he suggests is that under his 'yoke' the burden will be

easier to bear, because he does not want people to be oppressed or crippled, especially by religion! It's as though he is saying to us: "Look, there is a burden to bear in life, but if you let me direct you, if you let me show you the way, then it will not seem so hard!"

He then goes on to say something about himself – that he is 'gentle' and 'humble'. (The word 'gentle' is the same as the word in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:5 which is often translated as 'meek': it refers to a humility which is always willing to learn). These are surprising characteristics for someone who is the Lord of Creation, but they are characteristics that we are called to imitate.

Does our religion become a burden on us or, even worse, a burden on others? Many people turn away from the Church, not because of the teachings of Jesus but because of the way Christians interpret those teachings, and make them so hard to bear. We must continually try to hear the voice of Jesus, doing things his way rather than trying to do things our way!

Thursday, December the 9

Mt 11:11-15

Context

By this stage, John the Baptist is in prison, and he sends his own disciples to find out if Jesus really is the Messiah. He tells them to report to John all the things that are being done, as signs of the Kingdom.

John the Baptist is one of the most important figures within the Gospels, and yet is also one who seems very out of place! One could say that he straddles the gap between the Old Testament and the New, a typical prophet but one who lives to see his prophecies fulfilled.

Jesus recognises his importance; indeed, earlier, he goes to John to be baptised; and he wants to assure John that he, Jesus, is the Messiah. Yet, in Jesus, there is a massive change. John talks about the Kingdom of God as something waiting to happen; Jesus proclaims the Kingdom in himself.

But Jesus does make this somewhat odd statement: that John is one of the greatest people that has ever lived, yet the least important person in the Kingdom will be greater than John. How can both of these be true? There might be several solutions:

When Jesus talks about the "least in the Kingdom" he is talking about himself; he comes as the servant of all and is therefore, in the world's eyes the least. But, in reality, he is the greatest.

It might well be that while John has at least an understanding about Jesus inaugurating the Kingdom, it can never be forgotten that John does not see the completion of the Salvation plan; the fullness of the Kingdom, which involves salvation and reconciliation, takes place on the Cross. Without the Cross, and the Resurrection, the full glory of the Kingdom cannot be entered in to. There is something in this for us today; we cannot

just take bits of the Gospel story, the bits that we like or find most comfortable, and use them. We must hear the whole story.

A third possibility is that even at that early stage of the ministry of Jesus, people are already concerned about status, and that Jesus wants people to realise that by not trying to be more important than others we can become great in the Kingdom. A sound lesson for many of us, so concerned with our own dignity, self-importance and worry about how others see us!

Jesus then goes on to talk about how the Kingdom comes with violence - a very odd phrase for something which is supposed to bring peace! Yet, in many ways, the coming of the Kingdom cannot be a peaceful process. The very nature of the Kingdom of God is that it is in conflict with the standards of the world; John the Baptist found this, and lost his head; Jesus knew this and was crucified.

What does the Kingdom mean to each of us? Is it something that we want to always look forward to, but never actually want to be under the rule of God now? Unlike John, who could only point towards the Christ-event, we can see that event in it's completeness; and we have to decide how we are going to react to it.

Friday, December 10

Mt 11:16-19

Context

This passage continues on from yesterdays, as Jesus talks about John the Baptist and his own ministry, and how people react to them.

In this passage, Jesus uses a picture which would have been very common for the village people of the day, that of children playing at weddings and funerals; and he uses this picture to show how people have reacted to both the ministry of John and his own and how they are always going to find fault in both!

John appears as the great ascetic, clothed in skins and eating locusts and honey – the most basic food possible. He is austere, strict and – possibly – with very little of a sense of humour! He lived in the desert, away from people – and people just thought that he was weird! He represents all that is strict about religion, and I am sure that we can all think of people like that. We might respect them, but we're not going to join their way of doing things!

Jesus, on the other hand, was the opposite, or at least his enemies characterised him as such. He laughs; he parties; he turns water into wine! His teachings are always tinted with bits of humour; he hangs around with the bad people and the prostitutes. He is accused of being a 'glutton and a drunkard'! One can just imagine the good, upright religious people of the day turning their noses up at him; he was not 'one of us'!

It seems that what Jesus is getting at here is that many people are never going to be pleased; or even that many people want to find fault in anything, so that they can reject it out of hand.

The people of the day were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, but they wanted that Messiah to be *their* Messiah, not the one sent by God. Religion, and religious people, had to fit in with their idea of what religion should be like; anything else should be rejected.

And, of course, difference might lead to disturbance. I want a Messiah who fits in with my way of thinking, because then I don't have to change. If I am confronted by something different, that might disturb my life.

It is also very easy to judge others by our own standards. Both John and Jesus are rejected because they are 'not quite right'; their lifestyle is not the sort that fits in with 'our'.

But, at the end of the passage, Jesus points to another way of judging people; that is by looking at the fruit of what they do, their actions. I might say the right words in church; close my eyes at the right times; wear the correct hat; but the fruits of my actions might well be bitter, if not non-existent!

The wisdom of God, which can seem so foolish to us, is shown to be right by events!

Saturday, December 11

Mt 17:9-13

Context

Jesus and the disciples are returning down 'the mountain' (probably Mount Hermon) having witnessed the Transfiguration – the appearance of Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing the Prophets) and the voice of God affirming Jesus and what he is doing.

An explanation:

Elijah: There was a very strong tradition among the Jews that the prophet Elijah would return to herald the coming of the Messiah (see Malachi 4:5). This must have been confusing for the disciples; if God has just affirmed Jesus as His 'chosen one' (Messiah), then surely Elijah should have appeared before?

Jesus answers by equating Elijah with John the Baptist – the herald of Jesus. (One similarity between the two was the fact that Queen Jezebel wanted to kill Elijah (1 Kings 19:2, 10), a desire repeated and carried out on John by Herodias).

Again, Jesus begins this passage by commanding the disciples to secrecy about what they have just seen. It is clear that at this point, as in others, they still do not fully understand what the Messiah really is; they are still thinking in terms of what they understand the Messiah to be, as opposed to the true Messiah. And the truth of the

Messiah will not be fully known until after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus had no wish to be a 'popular' Messiah but wanted to obey God!

As Jesus goes on to point out that John was the herald of the Messiah, as was prophesied, he continues the theme that we have been reading for the last couple of days; that people are blind to the truth because they are convinced that they know what they are looking for. The Jews were waiting for Elijah, the great prophet; when John appears, they dismiss him because he is not what they expect. The same is true for Jesus. Yes, he performs some pretty good miracles; he has some nice teachings; but he never, in the eyes of the people, takes the next step of proclaiming himself King and leading the people to freedom. That was what they wanted, and that was what they expected. The trouble was that they were wrong! Yes, Jesus would become King; yes, he would lead people to freedom; but he would lead *all* people, not just the Jews, to the complete freedom and salvation of the Kingdom of God.

Are we willing to allow Jesus to be what he is, or do we only want him to be what we want him to be, in a way that suits us?

Monday, December the 13

Mt 1:1-17

Context

One would have to say that to the modern reader, this is not the most riveting part of the Gospel! A long list of unpronounceable names, with no real information about them. One wonders why Matthew bothered!

The answer is that for Matthew this was *essential*. Remember that Matthew's Gospel is the most 'Jewish' of the Gospels; it seems very likely that the writer was from a Jewish background and his Gospel was intended to be read by people from a Jewish background. For the Jews, it was essential to know the ancestry of any person, in order to judge their purity and therefore their importance and suitability. So Matthew's first readers could be assured that Jesus was indeed 'kosher'! But there's more about this which can be of interest to us...

A Few Details about Verse 1:

- 'genealogy' – the word used is 'genesis', a direct link with Creation and the beginning of scripture.
- 'Jesus' – the Greek form of the common Jewish name 'Joshua', meaning 'God is salvation'.
- 'the Christ' – this a title not a name; it is the Greek word for 'Messiah'.
- 'son of David' – See glossary.
- 'son of Abraham' – It was to Abraham that God's promises were made (Genesis 12:3), and Jesus was seen as the fulfilment of those promises (Galatians 3:16).

The genealogy itself is split into three sections of fourteen people each (which would make them easier to remember in a society in which such things were learnt off by heart.) The three sections are also significant:

The first section goes from Abraham to David. Abraham was seen as the father of the Jews, and it was therefore necessary that Matthew (the great 'Jewish' Gospel writer) make Abraham the starting point. (Luke, on the other hand, is the great 'Gentile' Gospel writer, concerned with all people; his genealogy goes back to Adam, the father of humanity.) So, this first section shows the rise of Israel as the people chosen by God to act for the world.

The second section goes from Solomon to the Exile in Babylon; this section in many ways represents the fall of Israel away from God into total depravity.

The third section brings the story down to Jesus himself; the rescuing of Israel and the turning of tragedy into disaster.

A Slight Problem

It will be noticed that there is a bit of a problem with Joseph; he is the one connected to David, yet Jesus was not his biological father, according to Matthew. Matthew gets round this by just stating that Joseph was Mary's husband, and therefore Jesus' legal guardian.

It might also be noticed that Matthew's list of names does seem to miss a few people out. The reason for this would seem to be that Matthew is more concerned with ideas rather than historical accuracy.

What all of this does is place Jesus firmly as the culmination of the Salvation History begun in Abraham. More than that, it also gives us a good, and comforting, picture that God is in control. Even when humans move away from Him, making the plan falter, God will always bring things back to the way He wants them.

One other interesting thing about the genealogy is Matthew's mention of women. This in itself was unusual, as they did not really matter in proving the purity of the line. But even leaving that aside, it is interesting to look at the woman he does mention:

- *Tamar* (Genesis 38) – an adulteress and seducer.
- *Rahab* (Joshua 2:1-7 – a prostitute.
- *Ruth* – not even a Jew but a Moabite foreigner! ('No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord...' (Deut 23:3).
- *Bathsheba* – the wife of Uriah, whom David had murdered. (Note that Matthew actually stresses this point, even though by the time that Solomon was born, David had already married Bathsheba – Matthew seems to want to emphasise David's sin!)
- *Mary* – an obscure nobody!

Each says something about Jesus and what he came to do – by the very fact that he is linked to them so closely:

- He is not only for the good people.
- He goes to those society normally rejects

- The wall between Jew and Gentile is broken down
- God is willing to chose the unknown, irrelevant person and make them the Mother of God!

As we read this list, we can truly give thanks not only for the humanity of Jesus and for the great plan of salvation, but we can also give thanks that that salvation plan brings in a new order which includes *everybody!*

Tuesday, December 14

Mt 1:18-25

It is important for Matthew to make it clear that Mary was a virgin and that Joseph, while the legal father of Jesus, was not the physical father and the birth of the Messiah came about in an unusual way. The role of the Holy Spirit is a link back to the story of creation where the Spirit was hovering over the waters of the deep (the Greek word used for the birth is genesis). The law said that if a man married a woman and found that she was not a virgin she was to be returned to her father's house (Deut 22:13-21) and stoned to death by the men of the city for she had brought shame to the house. Joseph wanted to avoid this process and to quietly divorce her. The angel's proclamation puts a different picture to him. By calling Joseph "Son of David", Matthew is establishing again the line of Jesus, making him Son of God and Son of David. The angel also makes it clear that the paternity of Jesus is to be traced back through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Being engaged to Mary meant that they were already married. All that was required to complete the process was for Joseph to take her to his house. This is what the angel encouraged. Joseph was to give the child the name Jesus which in Hebrew is *Yeshua*, a shortened form of Joshua. This name means "Yahweh saves", neatly summing up his ministry. Matthew says it all so neatly: Joseph awoke from sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...

The name Jesus is important in the story of salvation. The great religious movements of the time placed an enormous emphasis on the observance of the Law as the means of salvation. They looked to political and military solutions to the problem of their occupation by Roman soldiers. They went off into the desert and set up new communities of very strict observance hoping to encourage God to act. But God sent his Son with the name: God saves. There is the summary of the Gospel message. It is God who offers salvation. It is God who will set free; God saves; God is the source of life, of hope, of healing, of forgiveness, of love; God is the way for communities to come together in a new way. God, in all the Gospels, is the one who loves his people and wants to bring them into his Kingdom. It is all about God and this is the central theme of these opening chapters of Matthew. Discipleship, then, is about stepping back and allowing God more of a say in how we live and what we do. Life in the Church is all about listening to and obeying God's will.

Gracious and loving God, fill us with your graces that we may see your hand at work in all that happens to us and serve you faithfully with lives of love.

Luke, it has to be said, does a great job of building up the story of the birth of Jesus; he does not rush in, but leads the reader through the background first; notice that the name 'Jesus' is not mentioned until verse 31! Our passage today points to the fact that while many considered that the age of prophets had ended at the end of the Old Testament period, God's plan will involve the birth of another prophet – John.

Zacharias was a priest; one of the twenty thousand around at the time. They took it in turns to go to Jerusalem and perform the rituals of the temple. Some of the more important jobs were settled by lot; when we read that John had been chosen to offer incense, we should remember that this was a once-in-a-lifetime honour for him. Priests could only marry pure Israelites; John's wife, Elizabeth, was even above that – in the direct line of Aaron, the first priest of Israel. They were good people; righteous people; the best pedigree; the right sort of people.

But, they had no children – and that, for many Jews was a sign that God was not happy with them. For Zacharias and Elizabeth this was a personal tragedy, especially as they were now going into old age. But, of course, this situation was not new in Jewish history: Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 21); Rachel and Jacob (Genesis 30 & 35); the birth of Samson (Judges 13); and the birth of Samuel (1 Sam 1). It's as though God likes to show that He is the Lord of biology as well as everything else!

The offering of the Incense was not a long ritual, although the priest performed it alone. So, only Zacharias saw the angel and heard his message. The angel started with what, in this gospel, is a customary, and probably necessary, greeting – don't be afraid! He then announced that Zacharias' prayer had been heard. What was this prayer? Some have suggested that it was a personal plea for a son, and that that was to be given. But others suggest that a priest, on such an important occasion, would be praying for more than that; that he would be praying for the redemption of Israel. This prayer had been heard!

The angel then explained that Zacharias and Elizabeth were to have a son – the starting point of the coming Messiah. But note Zacharias' reaction – and especially when compared to Mary's in tomorrow's passage. Zacharias acted with real disbelief; he asked for some sort of proof that this was all going to happen. The scene is almost comical; in the Temple of God, Zacharias stands before an Archangel who is telling him that his miraculous son will be the herald of the Messiah; and Zacharias demands a sign!

He *is* given a sign, but it is more of a punishment – he can no longer speak, and will not be able to until his son is named.

And part of the reason for what can be seen to be annoyance on Gabriel's part was who Zacharias was. If anyone was going to have a grasp on this message, if anyone should be able to accept it then it should be a priest; someone trained in the scriptures; someone brought up in the traditions of the faith. Yet, he asked for a sign! (And,

furthermore, what a dumb thing to ask for – a sign that his wife will become pregnant; the sign will be that she did become pregnant!)

In the whole account of the birth of Jesus, we are continually brought up against various characters, who are used by God in bringing out His purpose; some are very odd; some, like Zacharias, one would expect. But, so often, the people chosen don't act in the way expected! God is willing to use everybody, even if He has to change their way of thinking.

Thursday, December 16

Lk 1:26-38

A Technical Point

'engaged' (v27) – the word means a little bit more than it does in our current usage. For the Jews it was very much a legal state and one would have to go through legal processes, similar to divorce, to get out of it. It was almost actual marriage. So, if it could be shown that Mary had had sex with someone else, various things could happen:

- The 'engagement' would be off – and it would be very hard to find an alternative!
- Her parents could throw her out – with really only one choice for a future profession.
- She could be stoned to death.

As we consider these, we can understand why Mary might have been a bit concerned!

'virgin' or 'young woman'?

This is a bit of a side issue – only read it if you are interested! In Isaiah 7:14 we read that 'a young woman' shall have a child. The Hebrew word for "young woman" in that particular sentence is '*almah*'; this means a woman of marriageable age still under the protection of her parents. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek (the Septuagint), the Greek word used to translate '*almah*' was '*parthenos*', which means 'a virgin'. Many Jewish scholars have argued that this is incorrect – '*almah*' refers to age, not sexual purity; the correct Hebrew word for 'virgin' is '*bethulah*'. But, even this is not clear, as the two Hebrew words can seem to be interchangeable. Thus we have the controversy over whether Mary was a Virgin or not!

It can be no coincidence that these verses are some of the most significant in the Gospel story, and have been taken, by the Church, as being some of the most important in the story of the birth of our Lord. This critical moment in salvation history focuses in on a teenage girl, a nobody in the eyes of the world. Not the priests; not the kings; not the wise men, but Mary. As this small act takes place, one can almost hear the heavens draw breath and pause – waiting to see what will happen at this eternal moment of choice!

The news is the same as that delivered to Zacharias – but the whole tone changes. Gabriel is respectful and gentle; it is clear that Mary is of much greater importance than Zacharias would ever be. She is the ‘favoured One’ – full of Grace! Her fear is natural – such things as she was seeing did not happen often! To be told, in her position and in her circumstances, that she is to have a child, must have been bewildering. When Zacharias, the priest, the man of God, was told, he demanded a sign. Mary just shows her confusion, shows that she does not understand. “How can this be?”

Once again, the angel tells Mary not to be afraid. So often, this is the immediate reaction to anything that we do not understand, or feel that we cannot control; fear. This can then take over, and run our lives. The angel says ‘Don’t be afraid’ – in other words, trust God; what you are experiencing may seem difficult, but the Lord *is* with you!

And then that fateful moment; those words that have rung out down the centuries, showing us the true model of the Christian. The Church respects Mary as the Mother of our Lord; but we venerate her for those few small words, spoken in absolute humility, which teach us everything about what our relationship with God and what it means to be a disciple: ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’

The difficulties; the problems; all the things that must have sprung into her young mind; the good reasons why it should not be her – all are pushed aside as she submits to the will of God, and she is wrapped in His love. Whatever the future brings for her, she would always remember this moment. There would be pain; sorrow and many doubts – but there would always be this moment.

*Hail, Mary, full of Grace!
The Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.*

*Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners now
And at the hour of our death.*

Friday, December 17 & Saturday, December 18 Lk 1:39-56

(The readings for today and tomorrow have been joined together, as they are more naturally one.)

There is almost an unseemly haste in Mary's desire to visit her relative Elizabeth. The angel had said that she too was pregnant – another involved in the divine plan – and it's as though Mary was desperate to share the excitement of what was happening with someone else who would understand.

And the excitement is shared; it might seem that the older woman might be tempted to jealousy, that she should be the important one, not just because of her age but because of her social position. Yet, she just expressed joy at what was happening with Mary and, much more than that, acknowledged her superior position. It really was a time of joy in the workings of God, knowing that each was doing the will of God, and without the jealousy or desire for 'acknowledgement' so dear to all of us.

But their meeting is not just expressed in joy as Mary proclaims the song which the Church has called the Magnificat. And what a song it is! Tom Wright says of it: "It is the gospel before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stamp. It's all about God, and it's all about revolution. And it's all because of Jesus – Jesus who's only just been conceived, not yet born, but who has made Elizabeth's baby leap for joy in her womb and has made Mary giddy with excitement and hope and triumph."

Revolution! As we again read the Song of Mary we hear how God works in the world, how even what we consider normal and natural is shaken up and turned around. The proud are scattered even though they hold such high certainty in themselves in their hearts! The powerful are overthrown, because there is only one power! Those oppressed and done down are lifted up because they have no pride; those who have nothing are given all they need, while those who have so much have it removed from them! This really is stark revolution!

This is the Song of the Kingdom; it describes how things will be under the rule of God. The bullies, the proud the self-conceited will not win; the structures that we live under today will not last forever. The revolution will begin with Jesus, the Kingdom of God smashing into the World. It is of little wonder that the World did not want to hear!

Monday, December 20

Lk 1:57-79

This long passage reflects for us the great hope that we should have in God, as He works His purpose in the world, and in history!

Again, the passage begins with a little humour. Zacharias and Elizabeth have brought their baby for circumcision. (This always happened on the eighth day after birth. It is an interesting event in the context of what is about to happen as circumcision was the great sign of the covenant between God and Israel; the hope that is to be revealed takes place within the covenant. As a slightly side issue, there is no indication that the child was named during the circumcision – it seems to be a bit of poetic licence!) By tradition, the parents had the absolute right of naming a child, and a son, especially

the eldest, would often take on the name of the father. So, the gathered relatives expect the boy to be called 'Zacharias'; but Elizabeth says no! Slight consternation, and the gathered turn to the father! (Notice that the text says that they 'motioned' to him as though he was deaf and not just mute!) His answer is emphatic - that the boy is called John; again, note that odd use of the present tense: the child is already called John! It is as if Zacharias is a bit worried about what might happen if he shows even the slightest reluctance after his initial meeting with the angel.

And his mouth is opened, and the first thing he utters after such a long silence is a hymn of praise to God! This hymn - called the Benedictus - has come all the way down to us, and is still said daily during Morning Prayer. It is a prophetic song (again, there is the symbolism of the fact that the gift of prophecy had seemed silent in Israel for so long - just as Zacharias was silent - and was now bursting out again); it is a song of triumph, which declares that God is not just in control, that He is not just still at work, but that His plan for salvation has reached a new and momentous moment. It is a song of pride as a new father not only recognizes the birth of his child, but also recognizes the part that his son is to play in God's plan; John was chosen, as Elizabeth was chosen, as Mary was chosen, as David was chosen, as Abraham and Sarah were chosen - as far back as one would wish to go.

What is also wonderful about this passage is how personal it is. The realisation of all that is happening comes at a small, private family gathering. Nothing too grand; a rural priest and his relatives. And God bursts into the world.

Tuesday, December 21

Lk 7:24-30

Context

The disciples of John have returned to him, taking Jesus' answer. And Jesus now speaks to the crowds about John – and so, also, about himself.

Jesus asks the crowds what they were expecting to see when they went out to see John – indeed, did they have any expectations at all?

Were they expecting a *reed*, being blown around as the wind took it; bending and swaying according to the prevailing forces? That was hardly John - a man steadfast in what he was doing; a man unafraid to criticise the powerful religious authorities; a man in prison for standing up to the ruler of the day.

Were they looking for someone in 'soft' clothing (the word for 'soft' (*malakos*) means 'soft to the touch' but also acquired another meaning – 'effeminate')? Those who wear such clothes were the rulers, the ones who lived in comfort in the palaces. Again, obviously not John, the man who wore camel skins and lived in the desert.

People often don't quite know what they are looking for; they have expectations, which are often disappointed. Sometimes crowds gather just to gawp, hoping that

something might happen. Sometimes crowds gather just because other people have gathered.

But the people must have known that there was something very different about John, and they wanted to know what he was about! So, were they looking for a Prophet? The answer to that was, of course, yes. John fitted right in with the Prophets from the past; a man unafraid of anything, who was willing to proclaim the word of God. And Jesus goes on to say that not only was John a Prophet, he was more than a Prophet.

Think about this for a moment, and think about what Jesus means by it. Firstly, it is a direct criticism of those who rejected John – especially the religious leaders. They would pride themselves in being true followers of the Law and God; people who would have completely supported the Prophets against the stupid authorities of the past. But Jesus now throws them into the same basket as the authorities of old, those who killed the prophets of God. Secondly, Jesus makes it clear that as John was a Prophet, then what he said was true – so, what John had said about Jesus was true! To reject Jesus was to reject John.

But the human way of judging greatness is not the same as God's way, the way of the **Kingdom**. Whilst Jesus was the first to say that John is great in human terms, it is also true that those who enter the Kingdom are greater. Whilst the inauguration of the **Kingdom** began with the arrival of Jesus, its completion only came at the Resurrection.

And then it is back to the religious teachers, who had refused to accept the baptism that John proclaimed. For Jesus, this was not just a rejection of John but a rejection of God's way of doing things. The teachers obviously thought that they knew the way that things really should be done; they didn't seem to think that they needed to repent of anything, and so they turned their backs on what God was offering. It is always interesting to hear people, even good Christians, say that they have no need of the free gifts that God offers in the Sacraments – they can do without them!

Wednesday, December 22

Mt 1:1-17

Context

One would have to say that to the modern reader, this is not the most riveting part of the Gospel! A long list of unpronounceable names, with no real information about them. One wonders why Matthew bothered!

The answer is that for Matthew this was *essential*. Remember that Matthew's Gospel is the most 'Jewish' of the Gospels; it seems very likely that the writer was from a Jewish background and his Gospel was intended to be read by people from a Jewish background. For the Jews, it was essential to know the ancestry of any person, in order to judge their purity and therefore their importance and suitability. So Matthew's first readers could be assured that Jesus was indeed 'kosher'! But there's more about this which can be of interest to us...

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'**son of David**' – See glossary.

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As we read this list, we can truly give thanks not only for the humanity of Jesus and for the great plan of salvation, but we can also give thanks that that salvation plan brings in a new order which includes *everybody*!

Glossary

Angel

In popular thought, a being of great power sent by God; one of the Heavenly Realm. The name comes from the Greek ‘*angelos*’ which can mean ‘message’, ‘messenger’, or even the one who sends a message. Four Archangels are mentioned in scripture: Michael (‘*who is like God?*’); Gabriel (‘*God has shown himself mighty*’); Raphael (‘*It is God who heals*’); and Lucifer (‘*Light Bearer*’).

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.

Circumcision

The removal of the foreskin of males. For Jews, this was the sign of the Covenant with God (Gen 17:9-14). It was usually performed on the eighth day after birth.

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.

Galilee

A region and large lake in northern Israel. It was bordered on three sides by three other nations, and was known as an area with quite a large number of Gentiles.

Gabriel

See Angel.

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.

High Priests

The priests came from the tribe of Levi, and served in the Temple in rotation, offering the sacrifices. The High Priest was a direct descendent of Aaron and among his tasks was the offering of the sacrifice for the whole nation on the Day of Atonement.

Judea

The Greek and Roman name for Judah. Usually it refers to the south of the country, but was also used to include Galilee and Samaria.

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.

Passover

A festival to remember the 'Passing Over' of the Angel of Death in Exodus 13:3-9. Also called the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

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.

Rabbi

A title of respect given to spiritual leaders and instructors.

Sabbath

The seventh day of the week, which was a constant reminder of both creation and the Exodus. Along with circumcision and the dietary laws, it was a badge of Jewish identity, and a huge body of laws grew up concerning its observance.

Sanhedrin

The highest Jewish Court or council, made up of the Chief Priest, elders and scribes.

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.

Scribes

People who were trained to write, and especially draw up legal contracts; thus they were often experts at the Law. Many scribes were also Pharisees.

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, although more common in Matthew's Gospel. The Messiah was to come from the line of David (see 2 Sam 7:12). For many ordinary people, David was the great hero of Jewish history, and it was therefore logical that the Chosen One (Messiah) would be his descendent.

Teachers of the Law – see Scribes

Transfiguration

An event in the Gospels in which Jesus goes up a mountain (possibly Mt Hermon) with three disciples: Peter, James & John. On the mountain he seems to shine, and talks with Moses and Elijah, and then his ministry and Mission are once again affirmed by a voice from heaven. (See Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36)