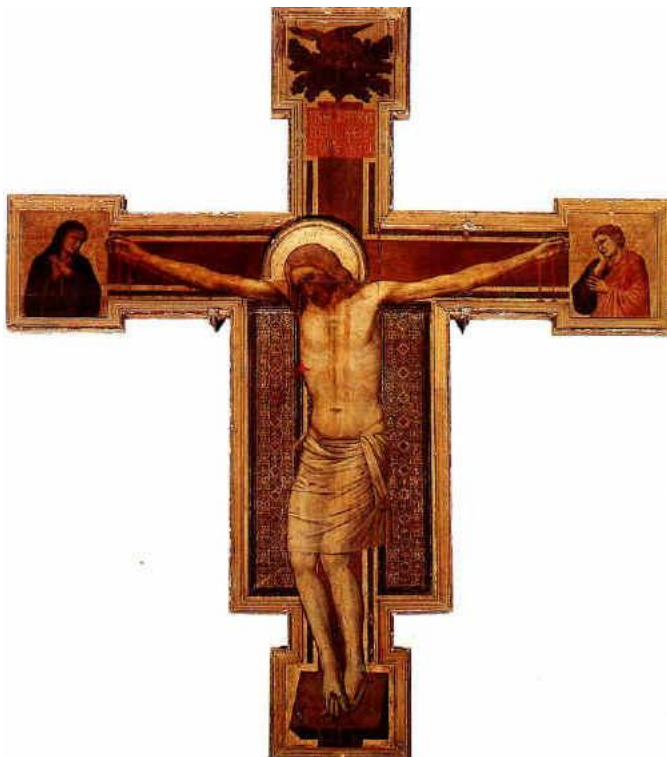


The Parish of Saint Faith, Great Crosby

Devotional Addresses

LENT 2012



A series of Devotional Addresses, reflecting on aspects of Christian living, given by students of the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield

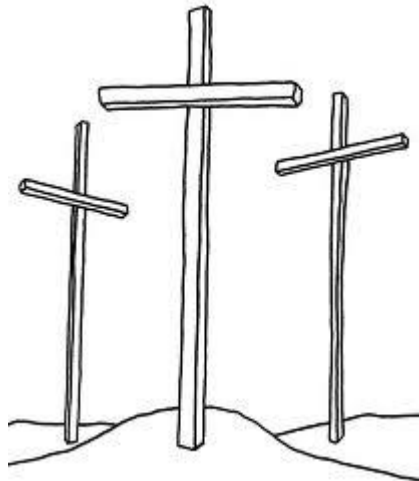
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Christian living and the Scriptures – David Warner

Scripture Reading: Luke 13.31 - end

*“Dearly beloved brethren, the scripture moveth us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess...”*¹ So says the Book of Common Prayer, and so it says because the Christian life is completely bound up in acknowledging, confessing and professing the scriptures. From the *“in the beginning”* of Genesis to the *“Amen”* of Revelation all human life is contained in this book. This is a book which contains violence, hatred, love, politics, betrayal, sex, violence and jealousy. And still they say that coming to church is boring! There are some bits we love and know well, and some which are terminally obscure and even bizarre. Some are poignant and moving while others can be very irritating or even distressing. The story of the grand lady who ended the reading of one of St Paul’s more grumpy tirades in a less than traditional way strikes a chord, I hope with all of us. Instead of a solemn *“This is the word of the Lord”* she is said to have paused, adjusted her spectacles and stared straight at the congregation: *“Whether you think this is the word of the Lord is up to you”* she said. *“I believe them to be the Apostle being VERY silly.”*

A Christian life, a truly authentic Christian life can only be based on prayer, scripture and the sacraments: for some, that means days begun and ended by the recitation and singing of psalms, and by the reading and hearing of the scriptures: begun and ended because our whole life as followers of Christ begins, is lived and ends with Him. The daily offices are extended hymns drawn from the sacred texts of our faith. Of course, the more Catholic the tradition you might think, the less the need for the Bible. I must confess that I arrived at College a good Catholic boy, whose knowledge of scripture was patchy and rather lamentable. I can tell you that 18 months on I am immeasurably better informed and more aware of the treasury that we have as our inheritance of faith, and am eager to continue to learn. These sacred and wonderful words, through God’s grace and prayerful discipline, begin to become fixed in the mind, the heart and the outward living.

At certain times of year the scriptures become part of our imagination. Many people don’t really think it’s Christmas until they hear that: *“In the beginning was the Word.”* Likewise with horror the grim words of Good Friday are heard *“Crucify him, crucify him!”* Words really matter. The nuances and complexities of language really matter. Blessed John Henry Newman wrote that *“words are necessary, but as means, not as ends; ... they are instruments of what is far higher, of consecration, of sacrifice.”*² Some of the most momentous things only need a few words: *“I love you.”* *“I’m sorry.”* *“Woman, here is your son.”*

¹Invitation to the Confession, Book of Common Prayer.

²*Loss and gain*, Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman.

As well as being powerful for what they do say, the scriptures are often silent, or at best contradictory on some subjects that we probably wish they were more specific about. Too often the words of scripture are used as weapons, for one faction to legitimise its attacks on and prejudice about the group it vilifies. The belief that any one group can obtain the only possible interpretation of scripture for all time, and then legitimately use that interpretation to outlaw this or that even for those whose prayerful interpretation is different, is among the saddest parts of our common heritage. It isn't new of course.

And I hold in veneration, For the love of Him alone,
Holy Church as his creation, And her teachings as his own.³

When Cardinal Newman wrote those words, he was stating his belief in the teachings of Holy Church, inspired by scripture and tradition. That phrase can stick in our throats, because perhaps rightly we aren't used to a total submission to the idea of the Church always being unquestionably right, but as Christians we must acknowledge and prayerfully come to accept the church's authority in our lives, and the church's authority to declare scripture. The creation, and indeed the continuing life of our own dear Church of England is in part a story of a continuing struggle for legitimacy, the quest for this part of the universal church to have and hold the authority to preach, to teach and to admonish. In tonight's reading we heard Jesus himself refer to this problem in his own day: "*Jerusalem, the city that kills prophets and stones those who are sent to it.*" Too often the prophets of change and hope are silenced because their words are uncomfortable, or seek to alter the status quo for a group that wants to believe it has all the answers.

Mirfield is often said to practice training based around the three tables – the refectory table, the desk and the altar. As day by day we study the word of God and pray about what it means to us and to our generation, we are nourished both by the words but also by the sacraments. As you gather in this church week by week you are nourished by the word of God, by the fellowship and hospitality that St Faith's is renowned for, and by receiving the Holy Sacrament of the altar. And indeed these two most central parts of our Christian life are attested to in Scripture. What that Last Supper was like can only be imagined. There were no vestments or processions or even chanting of the psalms or readings and there was certainly no requirement for a College Sacristan! This was a meal of fellowship, during which the Host did something incredible. The Word who had become flesh washed his disciple's feet, and uttered words so powerful that for hundreds of years they could only be whispered: "*this is my body,*" "*this is my blood.*" Jesus knew that his hour was approaching, the hour when he would be killed because his words were simply too hard to hear. The hour when crucifixion

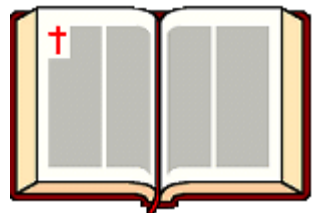
³*Firmly I believe and truly*, Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman.

would triumph. The hour when death would put an end to all his foolish words about the “*sheer stupendous quantity of the love of God.*”⁴

As you ponder the scriptures this Lent, don't think of them only as historical memorial, stories which happened years ago. As T S Eliot wrote, “*Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning.*”⁵ These words relate to events which happen all across our world today and because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ they are taken up into the presence and the love of God. The Word became flesh and shared our life, that the words of his life might nourish us. Nourish us when we hear of the death of one we love, as Jesus heard of the death of Lazarus. Nourish those who live under cruel and despotic regimes that torture people just because they can, as Jesus and his disciples encountered Herod and the regime of Caesar. Nourish those who are bullied and abused because they dare to be who God made them to be and do what he called them to do. Nourish all people when the fear of the wilderness threatens to crowd out the vision of the promised land, when darkness seems to overcome light, when temptation gets the upper hand over our weakness.

The scriptures can never be anything but central to our Christian life, because Jesus Christ is central to our life. We must always seek to understand and learn from the words which have been handed on to tell us about the love God has for each and every one of us. Love that caused Him to send his Son into the world, love that watched that Son suffer and die, love that would raise him to the heights of heaven so that you and I and all creation might live fully and eternally with the one who created us.

As we gather around the altar in this house and gate of heaven we share a glimpse of paradise from the wilderness where we watch and wait with our Lord. Let us recognise our Lord in the words written about him and acknowledge, confess and profess him and them to our world. Nourished by the words of scripture and our sharing and fellowship with one another let us be strengthened in our Christian lives and give thanks that there in our midst, beyond all time and language, is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the Genesis and the Revelation, the very Word of life.



⁴*The Shape of the Liturgy*, Gregory Dix.

⁵*Little Gidding*, T S Eliot.

Christian living and Prayer – Ben Bradshaw

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-end

I am aware last week you were able to listen to the wise words of my friend and fellow student David Warner talking a little bit about Christian Living and the Scriptures and my talk this evening follows on the theme of Christian Living but this time on the focus of prayer. In our scripture reading we heard from St Paul and his rather confusing command to pray without ceasing. On first hearing it seems an impossible command, how on earth can we pray without ceasing? After the recent events with the National Secular Society and the Bideford Town Council incident it may actually now be illegal for us to pray without ceasing! Let's make sure we don't tell them about that one!

To understand what Paul is instructing us to do requires us to investigate at the core what prayer actually is and to help us do that I want to read you a saying from the desert fathers- Bishop Epiphanius of Cyprus was told this by the abbot of his monastery in Palestine. 'By your prayers we have kept our rule; we carefully observe the offices of terce, sext, none and vespers.' But the Bishop rebuked him and said, 'then you are failing to pray at other times. The true monk ought to pray without ceasing. He should always be singing psalms in his heart.'

This saying from the desert fathers is there to help us to understand that prayer is not simply the saying of the daily office or of praying intercessions. Both of these aspects are what we commonly think prayer is all about, and both of them are vital to our Christian life and they need to be done, but they are the fruits of prayer rather than the seeds of prayer. Prayer goes much deeper into our hearts and into our souls, and it is this form of deep, life-changing constant prayer that St Paul instructs we must do without ceasing.

In his rule, St Benedict calls prayer, 'The Work of God'. I think this is an excellent way to describe prayer and if we see prayer in this way it becomes possible for us to understand St Paul's command. For when we are constantly praying, God is working in our hearts, in our minds and in our souls. Prayer for St Benedict and the desert fathers is a relationship with God which opens one to the awareness of God's presence permeating all of one's life. And if we are to have a relationship with God then we need to be silent and listen to the voice of God deep in our hearts and in our souls.

I have sometimes seen on TV these very charismatic Christians in America, we have probably all seen them, shouting, singing, waving their arms in the air and they say this is how to pray to God. But all I can think about when I see them doing this wild prayer is that they are not letting God get a word in edge ways! Prayer is about God, not about us. Listening is a vital aspect of prayer. Listening requires

setting aside one's own preoccupations so as to give oneself time and space to be present to the Other.

To pray without ceasing is to attempt to widen our vision of the world and our neighbours. So that we begin to see as God sees, to love all that God has created, to view life's situations as God does. It is only in the silence that we can do this, by listening to God in our heart and in our soul. When we pray without ceasing we turn to God in love, in trust and in faith. The sun brings light to the eye, when we pray without ceasing; God's presence brings light to our heart.

Constant prayer which St Paul writes about is a lifelong transformation of our lives as we try to align ourselves to the will of God. And it is out of this form of deep prayer that we go on to say the Daily Office and forms of intercession.

In one of the hymns we have tonight we find the line-

'Prayer is the Christian's vital breath'

I find that a wonderful way to describe prayer- it's our breath. It's our lifeblood, it's what sustains us. It's our continued relationship with God. It's the constant conversion of our lives to follow the will of God. One of the lines in our other hymn we have this evening follows along the same theme of comparing prayer and breath, the line goes

'We perish if we cease from prayer'.

Because if we cease to pray, we cease to try to follow the will of God, we cease to allow the Work of God to transform us. That is not to say that we will not sometimes struggle to pray, even the great Saints sometimes struggled to pray, there is nothing wrong with that. The key is that we persevere, we don't give up. We must humble ourselves and ask for God's grace to help us when we are struggling in our prayer.

When we pray without ceasing, when we attempt to see our neighbours as God sees them, when we love our neighbours as God loves them, we find our actions and the way we treat those people also changes. We become kinder to them, less judgemental, we have more patience. We put aside our own preoccupations and we listen.

The command to pray without ceasing is a huge challenge for us; it means we must constantly be open to the Work of God, constantly listening to discern the Will of God. And we will slip up, because we are human. But, we must keep on going, keep praying without ceasing and what is impossible for humans becomes possible with the help of Divine Grace- the Work of God active in our hearts, our minds and our souls, transforming our lives.

Christian living and Stewardship – Helen Coffey

Scripture Reading: Malachi 3:6-12

Stewardship! Isn't that's about getting us to give more money? Did anyone feel like that when they saw the subject for this evening's sermon? I'll be honest, there was certainly a time when that would have been my response.

The dictionary tells us that stewardship is the responsible planning and management of resources. It's about ethics and sustainability – and about taking good care of something that actually belongs to someone else.

So yes this sermon should prompt us to think about financial giving, but it's about far more besides. Christian stewardship is a vital part of our transformation to becoming more Christ-like, and to serving him more effectively, and Lent is a perfect time to be considering it.

But I don't want to start with the Malachi passage – so let's go back to Genesis ch1 and the first Creation account. Every aspect of life that God created is described as being 'good' - The balance and diversity of natural resources, 'And God saw that it was good' – the phrase is repeated several times to reinforce the message – everything God made was good. I can remember as a child learning that the carbon dioxide we breathe out is re-used by plants to make oxygen so that we can then breathe it in again - how clever is that! Everything God made, everything God makes is balanced and good.

At the offertory during communion in my home church, as we present not only our money but the bread and the wine at the table, we say together 'all things come from you and of your own do we give you'. We remind ourselves that actually God is the giver of all that we have, even of life itself.

This overflowing generosity is at the heart of God's character! He created us in love, he calls us into relationship with him in love, Jesus died on the cross to make that loving relationship possible and the Holy Spirit pours his love and grace into our hearts so that we can freely respond in worship and service. 'All things come from you and of your own do we give you'.

Now we don't often remember to think about it in those terms – and that's human nature. We're busy getting on with life – going to work, bringing up the kids, coming to church, paying the bills – we're not constantly thinking about God's gifts around us. We just get on with it; though we like to think we are independent and self-sufficient, which is why it's good to intentionally remember God's prior generosity, like the offertory prayer.

So any discussion about stewardship needs to come with an understanding of God's prior generosity as a given – all that we have comes from this overflowing generous heart of God, who loves to give good gifts to his children. Giving 'All that we have' looks different for each one of us, but it will include our time, our talents, our relationships, our family, and our money. All of which, we are called to hold in trust and to use in ways that their rightful owner – God - would approve of!

So, with that as background, let's move on to Malachi. He's the last in a long line of prophets who have continually called the people of Israel back to the covenant relationship they entered into with God – that familiar strain of 'you will be my people and I will be your God'.

The Jewish people were surrounded by tribes and nations who seemed to be doing much better than them. The good times seemed to be as far off as ever for God's chosen people. They had drifted into sin; and were not paying enough attention to their relationship with God.

'I the Lord do not change' – says God through Malachi's prophecy. 'It's you that's moved, not me. You've lost sight of the focus and turned away from the path I asked you to keep to. I still love you, I'm still committed to you, you're still my chosen people but your behaviour needs to change. You need to examine yourselves, go back to the agreement we made and keep to it!' The language is sharp and cutting. You've turned away, you've robbed me, and you're under a curse. It's not a comfortable passage to read – not if we are to take its message seriously.

Times were hard in Israel, and the people were sinning by not giving their full tithe as they had promised to in Exodus. But does the amount of money really make any difference to God? No! It was about their motivation, the attitude that lay behind why they weren't giving what they had agreed to. They were supposed to perform sacrifices using unblemished animals – offering their best to God. But the people were using blind and crippled animals instead. They were giving to God from what they had left over after they had done all that they wanted to with their resources first. Malachi slams them for this attitude and behaviour – it's clearly not honouring to God – the God who rescued them from slavery in Egypt, who fed them in the desert, who kept his covenant with them throughout the heights and depths of their history.

God says – Try me! Test me in this! Get your attitude right and see if I won't pour out blessings. Don't hold anything back, and neither will I!

Are we courageous enough to take God at his word today? What's our motivation to give? It's less about what the hand is doing and more about what the heart is doing. We might not be offering blind or crippled sheep, but are we really offering back to God the best of all that he has given us?

Though Malachi was talking about financial tithes and animal sacrifices, we recognised earlier that God's gifts to us included our time and our talents as well as our money. Our biggest mistake is in trying to work out what we can 'afford' to give in any of these areas of our lives. When we recognise that everything we have comes from God, we will get our motivation right and start offering all of our resources to him first, rather than what's left over – God says to each of us – try me and test me in this!

Ordinarily I wouldn't speak publicly about the way in which I support the church financially. But while I was on placement here, Fr. Neil and I had various discussions about discipleship and commitment – including financial commitment – and because my personal practice is to try to tithe, that is, to give 10% of my income to God first, before my other commitments, Fr. Neil asked me if I wouldn't mind including a few words tonight about why that has been an integral part of my discipleship.

When Tony were both working, our salaries went into the bank, and our financial giving to God came out by direct debits almost the same day! We give in three ways, firstly we don't put money on the collection plate; we have a monthly direct debit to our home church. Secondly, we sponsor a little girl in Bangladesh through World Vision, so a monthly direct debit comes out for her education and health care and to support her family. Finally, we have a Charities Aid Foundation bank account, and the rest of our tithe money goes there via another direct debit. This account is like any other bank account – cheque book, debit card etc, except you can only give the money in it to charities! So if there's something special that we want to support at church, or there's an international emergency we want to respond to – the money's already there, ready to be given away! Because it comes out of our account first, before we spend on anything else, we don't really miss it.

The most incredible blessing is that since I've been at College, and we've been living on a far lower income, our giving has remained the same – the direct debits are at the same level as they were before – but we're not overdrawn! We didn't think we could manage, but by prioritising our giving to God, he has ensured we have had enough for everything we've needed. Test me in this – trust me in this says God. Well we did, and it works!

As Christians our giving is intended to be a joy and a blessing. Paul says that our giving should be in keeping with our income and in line with the needs of the church (1 Cor 16: 1-2 – maybe that will be less than 10% at some points, and maybe it will be more than 10% at others. We need to pray and seek God's wisdom and guidance about our giving, but above all, our giving needs to be from an attitude of worship to God and service to the Body of Christ – 2Cor 9:7 'We should give what each of us has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver'. This is the giving that delights

God's heart, so much so that the floodgates of heaven are thrown open and his blessing is poured out upon us as individuals as we grow in faithfulness and trust in this aspect of our discipleship, and upon his church as the resources of time and talents as well as finance are made available to further the work of drawing others into his kingdom.

So what's the challenge to us here at St Faith's and St Mary's this Lent? When the horizon is full of thinking about paying the Parish Share and surviving the coming interregnum. Can I dare to suggest that the remainder of this Lent is a good time for each of us to consider prayerfully whether we have anything to repent of in the way we give to God? And then, after that, to ask God to help us re-prioritise our giving.

Can I encourage you to make it the subject of your prayer regularly between now and Easter - what can we offer, how huge is our debt, to the one who suffered and died, who offered his very self for us on the cross. Could you come to celebrate communion on Easter Sunday having made a new commitment in your giving to God?

Viewing this from God's perspective rather than our own is key to our journey of discipleship. Paul reminds us that as followers of Christ, as his disciples in this place, we are being transformed to becoming more and more like him – in our attitudes and relationships, in our words and actions, so that we can serve him more effectively with our lives. So yes, our finances are part of that, but recognising and offering our time, talents and experiences requires examination too.

Let's finish in Luke's gospel - Jesus says, 'give and it will be given unto you – a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap!' What an image!

'Test me in this' says God through Malachi! Let's take God at his word – what are we waiting for?



Christian living and Evangelism – Nick Nawrockyi

Scripture Reading: Acts 2.38-47

To see me standing here, dressed in black, and participating in a service of Benediction, in this beautiful church with its statues, candles and incense, you might be surprised to learn that up until about 7 or 8 years ago, I was a Baptist. I went to church with my Bible and notebook, happily listened to sermons which lasted longer than 45 minutes, and lifted my hands in the air during the singing of our worship songs. When I went to university in 2003, I joined the Christian Union - the natural gathering place for my like-minded peers - and threw myself wholeheartedly into that life. I wore a WWJD band around my wrist, I wore a hoodie with "The wages of sin is death" printed on the back, I went to church, I went to bible studies, I went to prayer meetings, I joined in with the annual Mission Week, inviting my friends to talks and film nights, and stopping people in the streets to hand out Christian leaflets and talk to them about Jesus.

It's a much longer story to tell how I left that life behind, and came to be the man standing before you now, one to be ordained in the Church of England. But what I am here to talk to you about tonight is Christian living and evangelism. For me, as a young Christian at university, that was evangelism. Sporting bible verses on my clothes, talking about Jesus to random people, trying to convert my friends by inviting them to specially-designed mission events. Evangelism, in those halcyon days at Durham, was all about conversion. We were on a mission to convert people, to save souls, because we believed without a doubt that if people did not hear about Jesus and respond to the call to repentance, they would be condemned to eternity in hell.

The rather painful process of departing from the conservative evangelical community and finding a new home in a church of affirming Anglo-Catholics, to begin with left me with a deep cynicism of the word 'evangelism.' For me, the very word bore the image of a self-righteous and judgmental God who condemned all who turned away from him, even those who never had a chance to hear the name of Jesus. The God I have eventually come to know is loving and merciful - all of those qualities of God's nature are given to us in scripture: Psalm 145 - 'The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.' John ch 3 - 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.' Ephesians ch 2 - 'God... is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us.' I could no longer equate this God with a god who is vengeful and unforgiving, and so I became understandably cautious of this practice of evangelism.

But over the intervening years, as I came to perceive a call to the priesthood, as I have been exploring and discerning that vocation, I realised that I could never be a priest without reconciling myself to the place of evangelism in the Christian life. I had put evangelism into a box - and associated it with everything I once believed and practiced in the name of God. I had to ask myself - what is evangelism? What

is at the heart of evangelism? Is there a way of doing evangelism which did not replicate my previous experience?

Evangelism literally means 'Good News'. We Christians may disagree about lots of things, but we can at least agree that Christianity is about the Good News, which is the teachings of Jesus in his earthly ministry, recorded for us in the Four Gospels. The fact that we call it the Good News implies that it is in fact something we want people to know about. This is what evangelism is all about, but what I came to believe after my own experiences is that there is more than one way of putting the Good News into practice.

For some people, putting the Good News into practice is as I described it earlier - telling strangers about Jesus (what we used to call cold-contact evangelism), knocking on doors, handing out leaflets, holding mission events, that sort of thing. There isn't anything inherently wrong with those practices, but for me, evangelism needs to start somewhere else. It needs to begin in our own lives, and in the lives of our church communities. The scriptures speak not just of conversion, but of a conversion of LIFE. I firmly believe that it is in the faithful living out of the Christian life, at home and in church, that is the foundation for proclaiming the Good News, the message of the gospels, to the world.

And where do we find this living out of the Christian life put so succinctly? In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles I read at the beginning: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."

This scripture is an important one to me, for it is the foundational text of the Community of the Resurrection, alongside whom I live and work at Mirfield. It is the life they are dedicated to living out in monastic community: devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles, to fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers. It is a pattern of life which we are all called to follow.

Lent is a time of reflection, and so I invite you to reflect on this Christian life as described here:

How do we devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching? Do we read scripture on our own? Do we listen to the readings when we're at church? Do we go to a bible study group with others? How do we devote ourselves to fellowship? The second part of the Acts reading tells us that the new Christian community spent much time together in the temple... How much time do we give over to spending time at church in fellowship with others? How well do we know those other people who come to church? How do we devote ourselves to the breaking of the bread and the prayers? To me this passage speaks so powerfully of the Church's liturgy - the

liturgy enables us to offer ourselves to God, and to dwell in his presence. The church has a duty to celebrate the liturgy regularly so that others may be enabled in living the Christian life. How much time do we spend in the presence of God? Do we give time to private prayer? How often do we come together as a church to give thanks and praise to God?

Do we give to those in need, as the early Christians did? We don't need to sell all our possessions in order to support those in need, but do we give to charity? Do we give of our time and money to the church to support its continued presence in the community?

This quiet service tonight is a time when we can reflect upon these questions in the presence of God in the Blessed Sacrament. Taking time to pray and reflect is also an important part of the Christian life. But remember those words we pray at the end of the Mass: Send us out in the power of your Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory. Evangelism can incorporate being direct with people, just as St Peter said in our reading from Acts: 'Repent and be baptized.' But I believe that kind of evangelism is a vocation to which not everyone is called. But through our common baptism we are all called to live the Christian life, to pray, to live in fellowship with one another, to break bread together.

This life of witness has most famously been interpreted by St Francis of Assisi, who said: 'preach the gospel at all times... if necessary, use words.'

Evangelism is not simply the act of telling people about Jesus. Evangelism is living and breathing the Gospel - and by doing this, you are making the Good News known, and offering others the opportunity to know and be changed by the living God, in whose name we meet today.



Christian living and the Eucharist – Luke Maguire

Scripture Reading: John 6:51-58

I have been invited to speak this evening on the theme of Christian living and the Eucharist. As I was preparing for this reflection I was struck at just how much there was to say, at just how significant Holy Communion is to our lives together with each other and with Christ, in his Body. And so, tonight, I simply offer what I can, and pray that Christ be present with us, and that the Spirit of God open our hearts to him and give us ears to listen when he calls.

As Christians we are a community of people who look in three directions: we look backwards, we look forwards and we look upwards. This three-dimensional life is grounded in what Christ has done for us, it is grounded in what will become of us in Christ, and it is shaped in the here and now by both of these things. As disciples living in the Body of Christ we are called to be three-dimensional, we are called to fullness of life, and for us, that means looking back, looking forward, and most importantly, looking upwards at all times in thanksgiving to God. This threefold act of looking is at its most evident in the Holy Eucharist where our lives as God's chosen people are caught up most fully in the story of salvation.

So first of all, we look back. In life, so often, people talk of looking back as a negative. 'Don't look back', they say, or, 'stop living in the past'. Indeed, there is a way in which we can be so caught up in the past that we can forget to live now, that we can forget to look where we are going. We remember Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt as she turned back. Even Jesus tells us that 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God'. Jesus is clear that his disciples are to set their faces towards following him, just as he willingly set his face to Jerusalem and the gruesome reception he was to receive there.

In the Eucharist, however, we do look back. In fact much of the Eucharistic prayer is looking back. We retell, day after day, the story of Christ's passion. We recall his words at the Last Supper and we remember the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for us. But this looking back is different.

We are not remembering some distant event and lamenting the loss of a great friend who is no more. We are not running away from the present and losing ourselves in some golden age that exists in the distant past. No! At the Eucharist we remember those events of Christ's passion and resurrection with expectancy. We remember them in the power of the Holy Spirit that makes that reality present now. In our remembering, we sit around the Lord's Table now, we stand at the foot of the Cross now, and we recognise the power of sin and death put to flight by God in Christ now, here, today, in our own lives.

And so we also look upwards. The Eucharist is at its heart an act of thanksgiving. As Christ's disciples we are called to give thanks in all things, to lift our hearts up to the Lord and to praise him with all our being. And for what are we thankful? We give thanks for nothing less than Jesus' gift of himself on the cross. We give thanks that by his death he has conquered sin and death and we give thanks that in his glorious resurrection we shall be raised up to newness of life in him; for indeed, whoever is in Christ is a new creation.

Are we a thankful people, I wonder? Are we people whose lives are filled with the sounds of praise and thanksgiving? In our daily Christian discipleship, and especially throughout Lent, we can become acutely aware of just how much it can cost to follow Jesus, and of how little strength we have of ourselves. There are many times when we struggle against sin and temptation, or when we find ourselves called to acts of service and love that seem beyond us. Sometimes we find ourselves in situations of great desperation and pain, in suffering and loneliness. What does it mean at these times to look up towards heaven and to give thanks?

At these times we can look back and know that Christ has already been to the depths of hell for our sakes. We can look back and know that Christ has already borne the pain of temptation, hunger, rejection and death. In Lent we recall how Christ went out into the wilderness and underwent great trial. As we enter into Passiontide and move towards the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we remember how Christ bore in his own flesh the sins of the world. *And for that we can be thankful.*

We can be thankful because the story doesn't end with Jesus' death, but because it continues with his resurrection. In baptism we are baptised into Christ's own life. Our history becomes enclosed in his; Christ's story becomes our story. As St. Paul writes, 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me'.

If we live in Christ and he lives in us, then we must also look forwards. Looking back at the events of that first Holy Week is not that negative form of remembering, precisely because those very events have opened up our future. As the Body of Christ, we are called to follow Jesus not just to the Cross, but through death itself into the glorious light of the resurrection, where we shall live in union with God in the bliss of eternal life.

As Christians, we are called to walk in Christ Jesus' footsteps. In fact, we are not only to do the things that he does, but we are called to become more like him. We, who are made in his image, are to grow into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. We are to grow in the Holy Spirit into 'the measure of the full stature of Christ'. We are to be transformed.

But we cannot do this alone. Certainly, following Jesus can be difficult and costly. It is therefore only by God's grace that we can follow him so closely that we become like him, that we can become adopted sons and daughters of God. At the Eucharist Christ gives himself as heavenly food. He is the living bread that came down from heaven and if we eat of it we shall have eternal life. Christ desires us to share in his life so much that he feeds us with himself; he changes us from the inside out and gives us such food that we shall neither hunger nor thirst. In a very real sense, we become what we eat.

And so we look back to what Jesus has done and we look up to heaven and give thanks for his wonderful work of redemption, and we look forward to the resurrection life in Christ.

In tonight's reading Jesus said: 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink'. When we come to the altar to share in Holy Communion we come as those in need of forgiveness, we come in need of healing and we offer up what we have and all that we are in thanksgiving that Christ died for us, and we feed on Him in our hearts by faith and with thanksgiving.

As Jesus himself tells us, 'the one who eats this bread will live for ever'. And this bread, this living bread, is none other than the Christ.

Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again!

