

***The King of Kings – Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke (written Sept-Nov 2022)***

*A short introduction when these reflections were first written in Autumn 2022: ‘And so our nation has a new king. As we pray for King Charles, that he might be a godly, wise and faithful leader, it seems fitting to fix our gaze on another king, the King of kings. In this season we will take our inspiration from the Gospel of Luke, which, of all the gospels, presents Jesus Christ as King of the whole world, the Saviour for all. May this King of kings be our light and hope, today and always.’*

**Day 1 – Luke 3:1-14 ‘The herald of change’**

One thing that was somewhat striking about the season of national mourning for the late Queen Elizabeth (in September 2022) is the role of heralds in royal pageantry. It’s not something we see much of in day-to-day life: but the fanfares which accompanied the proclamation of Charles as king, or the various other forms of acclamation used in the many solemn ceremonies of this twelve day period, acted as a reminder that every monarch usually has a herald – especially when a new monarch assumes their authority.

This was especially important in pre-modern societies, when the lack of media meant that verbal proclamation to as many people as possible was vital in securing the attention, and therefore the obedience, of those who were to serve the new ruler. So it is fitting that the story of Jesus’ adult life in Luke begins with a herald, too – one who reached a huge number of people with one simple message: that the King of kings was here, and his reign was about to begin!

As Luke makes clear, though, this was not based on a set of human decisions or structures. The region in which all this takes place already had plenty of rulers, whom Luke names in verse 1. No doubt all were ‘heralded’: but this new proclamation was not an act of humankind. It was ‘the word of God [which] came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness’ (v2). God was declaring that a new King was coming; and John was his herald, fulfilling the promise of Isaiah many centuries ago: ‘prepare the way for the Lord! (v4)

But what sort of obedience was required? Not what we would normally associate with earthly rulers: whilst protestations of loyalty had their place, they were meaningless unless backed up with a lifestyle that matched the talk. John’s call was that every true subject of this new King would live a life of humble service and fair treatment of their fellow human beings, just as God had intended. To share generously (v11), to charge only what was right (v13) and not to abuse their power to treat people harshly or unjustly (v14).

John also says something more controversial to his listeners, namely that simply to be born in the right nation was not enough (v8) – this new thing that God was doing was much bigger than that. The new subjects of the King of kings would be drawn from across the world, to anyone who would lovingly and humbly submit to his kingly rule: thus ‘all people will see God’s salvation.’ (v6)

In our age of growing inequality and increasing poverty, John’s message for all would-be followers of this King strikes a powerful chord today: may God grant us all grace to love our neighbours as ourselves, not just with words, but with actions and in truth. What might that mean for you today?

**Day 2 – Luke 3:15-22 ‘Anointed with fire’**

In a coronation service, always the most special part of the ceremony is the anointing. At our late Queen’s coronation in 1953, the Act of Consecration was deemed so sacred, that it was the only part of the ceremony which was kept hidden from public view: instead, a golden canopy, held by four Knights of the Garter, was suspended above and around the monarch. The Queen was disrobed of her crimson cloak, her jewellery was removed and the young Elizabeth was seated in King Edward's chair, an ancient and simple throne, clothed in a simple white dress.

With the Abbey almost silent, the Archbishop of Canterbury was handed the Ampulla, a flask in the shape of an eagle wrought in solid gold, which contained the holy oil. Concealed by the golden canopy, and alone with the Queen, the Archbishop anointed Elizabeth in the form of a cross, on the palms of her hand, on her chest and on the crown of her head. In doing so, the Archbishop enacted a sacred ritual which goes all the way back to King Saul, who was anointed by the prophet Samuel as a sign of God’s blessing and empowering c.1000BC – or nearly 3,000 years before Queen Elizabeth.

For Jesus, however, the anointing was far more public. As large crowds of people were being baptised in the Jordan by John (v21), Jesus too was baptised – with two significant differences to everyone else. First, Jesus was not repenting, since he was the only human being who had nothing to repent about: as John said to Jesus in Matthew’s account, ‘I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?’

Second, although I’m sure God blessed and empowered many of those who came to be baptised, only Jesus received a tangible anointing from heaven itself: the Holy Spirit visibly descended on him in the form of a dove, and the voice of the Father Almighty was heard to declare: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’ (v22)

Amazingly, though, thanks to the ministry of Christ, this anointing is not limited to Christ alone. The good news of the in-breaking kingdom of God is that it is now available to all who follow Christ too. John declares this quite clearly to everyone: ‘He [The Messiah, Jesus] will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’ (v16) What was previously reserved for rulers is now graciously poured on all who open their hearts to the King of kings.

Such an outpouring is not always comfortable – fire burns up our impurities, such as those John talked about yesterday. But it remains an extraordinary privilege. Thanks to Christ, God can anoint you with his empowering Spirit. Give heartfelt thanks for this wonderful reality today, and pray to be dipped (baptised) ever more fully with the Spirit of Jesus the King.

**Day 3 – Luke 3:23-38 ‘The True Human’**

Ancestry is big business nowadays. Millions of us now regularly use ancestry websites to track down our family trees, and overall the genealogy market is now worth over £3 billion worldwide. Indeed, its popularity has even recently led to a change in the law. In 2021, the way marriages are registered in the UK was changed. Part of the reason for this was because vicars used to make too many mistakes – who knew?! – however, the major reason was so that more information could be recorded about our parents.

So, since May 2021, not just fathers are recorded on a marriage certificate, but you can also, if you wish, include mothers and even step-parents. Their occupations are also meant to be recorded more accurately – and this is all being driven by our thirst to know where we come from, so that, in a hundred years' time, your great-great-grandchildren can find out more about their family lines.

If you read scripture you'll know that the Old Testament is full of genealogies. Implicit in this is the recognition that where we've come from says a lot about who we are and what we'll become. But it's also deeper than that. The bible is a book full of promises: promises made by a loving God to the world, and especially to his people. The genealogies in scripture are really all about *looking for the fulfilment of these promises*: when will all the nations be blessed? When will the anointed ruler come to save us, and set us free?

Jesus' own genealogy is told twice. In Matthew it starts with Abraham and moves forward; Jesus is presented as the true heir, both of Abraham and of King David. However, in Luke, he starts with Jesus and looks back, all the way to Adam. Why? Certainly not to contradict Matthew! Although Luke's genealogy inevitably has more names, as it covers a longer period, you'll find the same key ancestors in each.

Rather, what Luke is telling us is that Jesus is the human being that each of us was always meant to be: he is, if you like, the True Adam, the human who lives in obedient and loving intimacy with God forever, just like God intended. Jesus comes to put right what was lost by Adam and Eve at the Fall, and so to restore us back to wholeness and union with God.

That's the plan. And the next 20 or so chapters of Luke show how God achieves it, through Jesus – the fulfilment of all God's promises to us. Today, give thanks that we are heirs and beneficiaries of the greatest of all family trees: the people of God. And pray that our generation might pass that blessing on to a hungry world, that they, too, may know the joy of joining this global family.

**Day 4 – Luke 4:1-13 ‘The temptations of kingship’**

Today’s passage is one of the most famous in the bible. If you’ve been a Christian for any length of time, you will probably have heard lots of talks on it, and may feel that there isn’t much left to say! However, I’m not going to give you a general guide to this passage, or just re-visit the usual observations about resisting temptation – important though they are, of course.

Instead, I’m going to look at it from the viewpoint of our overall theme for this series, of Jesus as the King of kings. I would argue that this is, in fact, the original lens through which to view this passage. Whilst we can find great value in learning from Jesus how to resist temptation, the key point about these temptations of the devil is that *they are all ways of being king* – or rather, all ways of abusing royal power.

The first temptation is to use power for personal gratification. ‘If you are the Son of God [i.e. the true King of kings], then tell this stone to become bread’ i.e. use your power over nature to manipulate it for your own ends. How many leaders start well but are undone by their own greed, and finish as tyrants who live in luxury while their populations suffer?

The second temptation is to seek power for its own sake rather than to use it for humble service. To make a deal with the devil is to trade integrity for narcissism, to serve darkness rather than light. It never ends well.

The third temptation is to use power for entertainment, for distraction rather than true human flourishing. As the Roman Empire declined, it was often said that its rulers relied on ‘bread and circuses’ to divert a population that was increasingly oppressed and disenfranchised. Such leadership inevitably tends towards the narcissism and tyranny of the other two temptations, since it seeks to avoid the real issues facing people in their real lives. It is a ‘big show’, and nothing more.

It is easy to over-spiritualise Jesus, to paint him as someone who essentially sits above politics and history and human activity. But Jesus comes as a real flesh-and-blood king into a world of competing kingdoms. His kingdom inevitably challenges and confronts all other expressions of worldly power. When we start to look at Jesus in this way, we can see that all the gospels – and especially Luke’s gospel – are studded with references to this ‘clash of kingdoms’. In Luke, see 1:32, 1:51-53, 1:71,74, 2:1-4, 2:34-35, 3:1-2, 3:31 – and that’s just the first three chapters before today!

Today, let’s marvel at Jesus’ faithfulness, at his integrity. This Jesus went into the wilderness ‘led by the Spirit’ (v1) and returned in the *power* of it (v14 – starts tomorrow’s passage!). It is not a worldly power – but it has the power to change the world. And, of course, you and me.

**Day 5 – Luke 4:14-21 ‘The anointed rescuer’**

To really understand a thing, you have to go back to its roots. This is good rule of thumb for life, and it's also true for plumbing the depths of scripture. 'The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is by the New revealed' – that's one way of understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments in the bible. I've also heard it expressed as: 'The New is in the Old contained; the Old is by the New explained': you can decide which you like best!

It's certainly true when we approach today's passage. Indeed, we've already seen several places in Luke's narrative where he (or Jesus) goes back and quotes something from the Old Testament to explain what's going on. Last week, John the Baptist was the fulfilment of Isaiah 40; and yesterday we saw Jesus reply to the devil by quoting bits of Deuteronomy. This is significant because Deuteronomy was Moses' sermon to the people of God on the threshold of them claiming their (earthly) kingdom. In the same way, Jesus is now about to claim his spiritual kingdom, and he does it in the relatively unremarkable setting of the synagogue in Nazareth.

Luke sets the scene for this world-changing moment with great aplomb. The young rabbi Jesus gets up to read the scripture (vv16-17), and then preach what we might call the sermon. Everyone is watching and listening (v20). What will he say?

What Jesus says confounds everyone's expectations. He's just read one of the greatest of all the Messianic prophecies, Isaiah 61. It is a vision of what every devout Jew was longing for: the renewal of the people of God through the ministry of an anointed servant/rescuer/king. This Anointed One (the literal meaning of Messiah) would bring good news, freedom for the prisoners and the oppressed, and ultimately would bring in a new and prolonged era of the favour of God.

How their hearts must have leapt as they heard it! And yet, also, how they might have shed a tear as well, since their lived reality must have seemed so far from this vision of dynamic blessing. And yet... 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' (v21) In other words, this new era is here! And more implicitly, Jesus is declaring: 'I am the Anointed One you've all been waiting for.'

Looking back, we know this to be true, and can praise God with joyful hearts today. But let's spare a thought for the small congregation of Nazareth trying to take this in. And perhaps we can also pray for those we know and love who struggle to take this 'good news' in, too – that they might have 'ears to hear'. May the Lord grant us grace to keep pointing them to the divine bringer of freedom and favour, the greatest good news there's ever been.

**Day 6 – Luke 4:21-32 ‘Home is where it’s hardest?’**

I wonder what you think about your home town (or village or city)? On one level, we never really get away from it: if you have a passport, it’ll be recorded as your place of birth for your whole life. And often our place of birth shapes us in ways we don’t always expect, and maybe find it hard to articulate.

This was brought home to me in 2012, at the time of the London Olympics. I was born and brought up in London, subsequently worked there, and overall have lived about 27 years of my life in various parts of the city. But I moved away in 2008 and four years later was happily living in Bristol. Then came the Olympic Opening Ceremony: I remember watching with Alise in our lounge and feeling this overpowering sense of homesickness – ‘that’s *my* city, why am I not there to be a part of it?’ You can take the man out of London, but can you ever take London out of the man...?

Jesus faces a similar challenge today. He’s just announced to his home town the in-breaking rule of God through his anointed rescuer, which is pretty big stuff: how will the congregation react? Initially, the response is favourable: ‘all spoke well of him’ (v22); but then it turns into something more like patronising surprise: ‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son?’ In other words, can the Messiah really be a carpenter’s son? From Nazareth?? The same Jesus we saw grow up, who got lost at the Temple, who has lived quietly here all these years, until just a few weeks ago?

Familiarity breeds contempt, so they say. And Jesus feels it. Ironically, the fact that they’ve known him all his life should make it easy for them to see the qualities that will define his ministry as the Messiah – instead, the reverse is true: ‘Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’ Give us a real sign!

So Jesus challenges them by reminding them that God’s blessings are not automatically conferred on those who happen to live in the right area: whilst God has consistently blessed Israel, in previous times of national disobedience, God quite happily blessed others too, in Sidon and Syria. Being the birthplace of the Messiah is no reason for a sense of entitlement.

Sadly, the Nazarenes weren’t ready to listen, and whilst Jesus got away unharmed (v30), he only returned on one more occasion to his home town, where he received a similar reception (Mark 6:1-6) – and, from this point, settled in Capernaum just down the road.

As you look back at your ‘home town’, some of you may feel gratitude for what it gave you; others may feel relief that you got away! Perhaps many of us feel a mixture of both. Our past matters: but it does not entirely define our present, nor our future. God anointed Jesus’ ministry elsewhere: might he do the same for you?

**Day 7 – Luke 4:31-37 ‘Supernatural authority’**

Our culture has a strange relationship with the supernatural. On the one hand, there is plenty of scepticism about the existence of the spiritual world; on the other, there has also been a significant resurgence of interest recently – there’s never been so many TV programmes about angels or demons or ghosts.

This ambiguity is partly a ‘Western issue’: most cultures around the world accept the existence of the spiritual world as a given; certainly most people in the world of Jesus’ day would take that view. So when Jesus encounters an unclean spirit in the synagogue (v33), the crowd were fascinated to see how he would respond.

They were already impressed with his teaching (v32): but does Jesus have the spiritual authority to back up his words? The answer, of course, is yes. The demon itself was quite right to be alarmed: Jesus was certainly there to destroy the work of the devil in people’s lives (v34). And Jesus simply deals with this spiritual being with a word (v35). No elaborate rituals or special liturgy – a simple command is enough.

Not surprisingly, the people are even more amazed (v36): he does not just teach with authority, he backs it up with deeds. The demonised man is one of those oppressed who has been set free, just as Jesus promised in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth (v18). Jesus is also demonstrating his authority over one of the things that humans cannot control, thereby proclaiming through his ministry that he is The Anointed One, the Messiah, the King of kings.

In the UK today, there is relatively little emphasis on this kind of deliverance ministry: but it does still happen. The name of Jesus still has authority and power (v36). Why not pray today for those who are called to this very specific form of healing ministry? And give thanks, too, that the all-powerful name of Jesus has marvellously set each one of us free. The One who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world. Amen!

**Day 8 – Luke 4:38-44 ‘The main thing’**

The well-known evangelist J. John is fond of saying: ‘Always remember that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.’ It’s good advice: whilst we long to grow in wisdom, such that we might have the mind of Christ to apply our faith to the whole of life and of society, the heart of the message is very simple. The kingdom of Jesus is good news! And we are called to proclaim and live this good news in our lives to the best of our ability, and by the grace of God’s Holy Spirit.

In this, we take our inspiration from Jesus. In today’s passage, Jesus’ ministry is now in full swing. Having settled back in Capernaum (v31), and having set a demonised man free in the synagogue in full view of the town’s amazed worshippers (vv33-36), news about him is spreading fast (v37).

Jesus’ first stop, though, was much more personal: he goes to his friend Simon’s home – the Simon who would become his key disciple – and heals his mother-in-law (vv38-39). A useful reminder that *ministry is always personal*: our heart is to bless particular people and not just ‘the world’ or ‘the church’.

Thereafter, it all goes a bit crazy. Jesus’ growing reputation means that people from all over are now seeking him out for a miracle. And Jesus, in his great compassion, attends to each one (v40). The implication is that this goes on through the whole night, and an exhausted Jesus needs some quiet time on his own (v42). However, the people find him and try to get him to stay longer.

Jesus’ reply is telling (v43): ‘I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.’ Always remember that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Jesus has good news to share: good news not just for a whole nation but a whole world. So he won’t stop in one place: he must go on to bless others, too.

We may not be called to the sort of itinerant life that Jesus had: but we are called to be bringers of good news where we are, in word and deed, to keep the main thing the main thing. How can each of us share, and be, good news today?



**Day 9 – Luke 5:1-6 ‘Because you say so...’**

I wonder if you’ve had the experience of God asking you to do something surprising? Something that at the time didn’t make a lot of sense? I remember Brother Andrew – who passed away recently after a remarkable life of courageous witness – telling the story of once smuggling bibles into the Eastern Bloc and sensing God ask him to leave them uncovered, rather than well hidden.

Sure enough, he was stopped and the policeman opened the boot. Andrew recounts praying this simple prayer under his breath: ‘O Lord, you who made the blind to see, make seeing eyes blind.’ The bibles were there, right in front of the official, but he didn’t ‘see’ them and waved Brother Andrew on his way! God was teaching Andrew to trust him implicitly.

Today’s passage takes a similar turn. There’s no reason for Jesus to get in the boat in order to teach people, so we have to assume that he had another plan in mind – which becomes clear as the story unfolds. Jesus, who has recently got to know Simon and his family (4:38-39), now has Simon next to him in the boat, and makes a very odd request: ‘Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch.’ (v4)

Humanly speaking, this is basically a daft idea – fish only came to the surface at night; during the day, in deep water, they would be near the bottom of the lake and nowhere near the nets. So Jesus was basically telling a professional fisherman: ‘do something completely pointless which you know will never work!’

Simon’s reply is extraordinary: ‘Because you say so....’ (v5) In other words: ‘I’m doing this for you, Jesus: I trust you because you’ve already shown me your wisdom and authority. Even if I’m wrong, I’d rather be wrong trusting you than put my own judgement above yours.’

We know what happens! Jesus does another astounding miracle (v6), the effects of which we’ll see tomorrow. But today, let’s just spend some time reflecting on what it means to trust Jesus – especially when trusting seems like the harder thing to do. Perhaps Jesus has never asked you to do something daft for him: but either way, this story invites us to trust in the Lord, whose ways are higher than our ways, and whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Is 55:9). May we all choose to place our trust – in every circumstance – in this wise, loving and powerful Lord.

**Day 10 – Luke 5:4-11 ‘Humbling holiness’**

Being in the presence of a truly holy person can be an uncomfortable experience. Back in 1995, I recall meeting one of the holiest people I’ve ever met – someone who really lived the apostolic life we read in the pages of the New Testament – and feeling both terrified and strangely drawn into their presence. The authority of Jesus practically radiated from them, and it was an awesome thing.

That day, I think I understood a fraction of what Simon must have experienced in the boat in today’s famous story. He’s just been told by Jesus to do something which no fisherman would ever do, and witnessed an extraordinary miracle. Add that to the hundreds of people gathered to listen to Jesus while the Messiah is in *his* boat, and the spontaneous healing of his mother-in-law recently, and the ‘divine encounters’ are multiplying rapidly. Jesus is clearly on his case, and, like most of us, he just can’t see why. ‘Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!’ In other words: ‘why on earth would you want to spend time with a wretch like me?’

It is an awesome thing to be befriended by Jesus. Sometimes we can get a bit cosy with that idea: but Simon’s encounter sets us straight. Simon knows who this extraordinary human being is: he calls him ‘Lord’ – the Almighty God, the divine ruler of the universe. Jesus is inviting him to nothing less than to be friends with the king.

Very few of us ever get to be friends with an actual earthly monarch: but the amazing news of our faith is that the King of kings invites all of us into friendship. Not just terrified submission, but real, intimate, loving relationship. Jesus sees, and embraces, not just who we are, but (as he does with Simon) who we can become. This was what Simon found so awesome, and Jesus reassures him: ‘don’t be afraid’. He says it to us, too, today: however unworthy you feel, don’t be afraid. I desire *your* friendship.

Jesus, of course, goes further: he gives Simon a life-changing task. That, too, is a typical outcome of becoming Jesus’ friend. Our call may not be as big as Simon’s: but we can likewise find a new – or renewed – purpose as we grow in our friendship with the Lord.

May God grant us all a renewed vision today of just how amazing – and awesome – it is to be invited into Jesus’ friendship. And may we, too, find our true and inspiring purpose as we journey with our divine master and friend.

**Day 11 – Luke 5:12-16 ‘I am willing’**

If you're anything like me, much of the time (or at least, more than we'd like to admit) you have to make yourself do the right thing. We know what we *should* be doing, and quite often we don't really want to: but, on the other hand, we don't want others to think badly of us, so we do it – but maybe a bit reluctantly. It's holiness through gritted teeth, rather than a genuine joyous smile on our face.

There's a phrase we use nowadays which you'll hear quite often at the moment: 'compassion fatigue'. It means to get weary of doing good: either because we feel overwhelmed by the limitless needs; or because we need some more 'me time' and/or someone to look after us instead; or we just run out of love for our fellow human beings. Again, if you're anything like me, you'll feel tempted towards this disposition on a regular basis.

At times like these, I find it helpful to think about the example of Jesus. If I get compassion fatigue, can you imagine what Jesus must have experienced? The relentless demands for something important: for a wise word, a miracle, a mediation in a dispute. If we were living Jesus' life, how quickly would any of us hit that point when we might just say: 'sorry, but no! I've had enough – find someone else to help you.'

In today's passage, one of society's outcasts comes face-to-face with Jesus (v12): or rather, he can't even look Jesus in the eye, but throws himself face-down on the ground before Jesus. And he's not sure if Jesus even *wants* to help him: which, in the context, is little wonder, since his diseases are infectious, and traditionally holy people would normally avoid such encounters, as it might make them unclean as well.

But with Jesus the power works in reverse. The man does not make Jesus unclean; instead Jesus makes the man clean. He is healed! But what is so striking here is that Jesus does not do this reluctantly, as "the 34<sup>th</sup> person he's healed today"; rather, he says one of simplest but most profound and beautiful words God ever speaks in the whole of Scripture: 'I am willing.'

Jesus is not a reluctant Saviour, but an enthusiastic one. When Jesus looks at this man, he does not see what most others in society see; he sees this man as special, uniquely made in God's image, with a hope and future. And this is how he looks at you and me, too. However unclean we may feel, he reaches out to us, touches us, and makes us whole.

As a final aside, at the end of the passage we get a glimpse of what fires Jesus' 'compassion fuel': time alone with God (v16). Compassion runs on energy tanks: those tanks need topping up, enabling us to receive what we need, that we might pass it on to others. We get 'filled' in numerous ways: adequate rest, healthy relationships, positive testimonies; but, most of all, time with the Lord. As the Lord's compassion fills us, regularly, so it can flow out, through us, to others.

Jesus is willing. Hallelujah! And, as his grace fills us, may we be willing, too.

**Day 12– Luke 5:15-20 ‘True friendship’**

If you ever attended Sunday School, you’re very likely to be familiar with this story! As one of the most visually striking stories in the life of Jesus, it’s a favourite with Sunday School leaders everywhere. The little Israelite house crammed full of people, the friends battling their way up the steps on the outside of the property, then removing the branches which acted as a de facto roof (Luke interestingly adds tiles, which is possible, as a covering on top of the foliage mentioned by Mark and Matthew) and lowering their friend down through the ceiling right next to Jesus.

Tomorrow, we’ll think about Jesus’ encounter with the man himself – but today, let’s give a moment’s reflection to the unsung heroes in the story: his friends. Note that it was *their* faith – not the man’s – that touched Jesus’ heart. Not to mention the huge physical effort needed to climb up on the roof, then make a hole, then manoeuvre their friend safely and slowly down to the ground again: that is friendship in action.

Ultimately, though, what we learn today is that the greatest gift of true friendship is to bring someone to Jesus. It’s what Andrew did with his brother Simon (John 1:42): a simple invitation which not only changed Simon’s life but changed the course of history. It’s what the paralysed man’s friends do here. They didn’t have to preach, promote or pray out loud, they just had to make the introduction, to bring him to the gathering.

Some of us may be called to bear witness with our words, and certainly we can all pray for our friends in our personal prayer time. But what’s so encouraging about this first part of the story is that, even if words are not your strong suit, and we feel inadequate to give wise answers to hard questions or to share inspiring stories about your faith, we can *all* invite someone to something.

That’s what the friends did, and it was enough. Jesus did the rest; he did – and does – do the heavy lifting in the story. It is not our job to ‘convert our friends’: we can safely leave that to Jesus. What we can do is make the introduction, invite them to a gathering, and then keep praying and trusting that our great Lord does the rest.

So why not spend a few moments today praying for a few people you love, and also for courage for yourself: to know when, and how, to do what the man’s friends did today. It might not feel like a lot – but in God’s economy, it may very well be more than enough.

**Day 13 – Luke 5:17-26 ‘Our greatest need’**

In his 1943 paper ‘A Theory of Human Motivation’, American psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed a hierarchy of human needs. These were arranged in five ascending tiers, beginning with basic Physiological Needs (food and shelter) and culminating with the highest tier of ‘Self-Actualisation’.

The theory has been widely adopted and much of it makes intuitive sense. But there’s one huge gap: despite the many needs mentioned – and breaking the model down in detail, more than twenty are listed – forgiveness is missing.

How do we know this is a fatal flaw in the model? Because Jesus thinks it is. As we pick up the story from yesterday, the paralysed man has been brought to Jesus by his friends, who’ve made considerable efforts to get him there. His greatest need is obvious... isn’t it? ‘When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.”’ (v20)

Sometimes followers of Jesus are accused of over-spiritualising things, of ignoring practical needs and making everything about ‘eternal’ stuff, as if this life doesn’t matter. And we have to admit that sometimes those critiques are valid, not least because Jesus does not ignore the man’s practical wellbeing. He ends the encounter by healing the man, thereby blessing him both spiritually and physically. It follows, then, that this is our model too: we care for the whole person.

However, we must also beware the opposite temptation: of being so caught up with physical and material things that we ignore the state of a person’s soul. From Jesus’ perspective, this would be a grave mistake. His assessment of the man’s greatest need was to be right with God first – and then to be healed physically.

As he makes this point to the Pharisees, he also points them (and us) towards the source of this forgiveness: none other than Jesus himself. What Jesus claims here would be blasphemy... unless it was true, and he really was the divine son, with the authority to forgive everything that separates us from God.

As we reflect on this story today, let’s bring our deepest need to the Lord; and let’s do that with a heart full of joy – because we too can know, like the man in our story, that our deepest need has been met. We have been forgiven, for all eternity – praise God!

**Day 14 – Luke 5:27-32 ‘Good news for everyone’**

‘Let me tell you how it will be: it’s 1 for you, 19 for me.’ So sang the Beatles as the first lyrics on their iconic 1966 album ‘Revolver’. The opening song is ‘Taxman’ and is essentially a rant about the 95% top rate of income tax for high earners in the UK, which of course included all four of the Beatles, who by this time were multi-millionaires. Apart from being a great song and an interesting perspective on the current debates about taxation, it’s a salutary reminder that tax officials have never been very popular!

However, if we moan a bit about HMRC today, it’s nothing compared to the status of ‘taxmen’ in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel. This is because Israel was part of the Roman Empire and tax collectors were effectively Roman state officials; to a devout Jew, whose homeland is sacrosanct, the Romans are usurpers and anyone who works for them – especially ‘one of their own’ – is at best a collaborator and at worst a traitor.

This sense of national betrayal was augmented by the fact that many tax collectors took a cut for themselves, so they weren’t just traitors but corrupt and greedy ones at that. So it is, frankly, scandalous that Jesus goes up to a tax booth and invites the chap sitting there to follow him. In today’s terms, we would definitely be talking about ‘reputational risk’ and ‘bad optics’ for the Jesus movement!

But that’s the point: what this simple episode tells us is that Jesus’ kingdom is for *everyone*, and wide open to all who would be a part of it. When we talk about those on the outside, we don’t just mean those who are poor and exploited, but also those who are ostracised for other reasons. Jesus’ arms remain open for them, too.

And so Levi – who becomes Matthew, one of the twelve apostles and the writer of the gospel – joins Jesus (v28), and, in overflowing gratitude at his welcome into the fold, throws a big party (v29). Not surprisingly this party is attended by lots of other outsiders: not just his tax-collecting friends but others who are also referred to by the religious elite rather dismissively as ‘sinners’ (v30). And Jesus is there: no doubt welcoming and blessing these ‘sinners’, too.

As Jesus replies to his questioners: it’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Levi knows his moral failings and gratefully receives a second chance and a new life. We, too, are given that same invitation by our loving Lord Jesus – who knows what we’re like but invites us anyway! May God grant us grace to keep saying ‘yes’ – and, today, give heartfelt thanks that Jesus’ arms still extend in welcome to you, too.

**Day 15 – Luke 5:33-39 ‘The shock of the new’**

We’ve lived in our current house for nine years, and I’ve started to notice some places on the walls which need a bit of touching up – nothing major, some minor marks here and there, but where a dash of paint wouldn’t go amiss. The problem is that, even if we buy some new paint which exactly matches the colour in theory, we all know what happens when a dab of fresh paint is applied to a wall which was painted a few years ago. The slight fading of the colour over time means that the new dab of paint will stand out worse than the slight mark it was covering over!

Jesus refers to something similar in today’s passage: or rather, two examples which would be easy to recognise among his hearers. You don’t sow a new patch on an old piece of cloth, he says, and you don’t put new wine into an old wineskin. Try either of those things, and disaster awaits.

The underlying issue here is that Jesus appears to be breaking all the religious rules – at least, as far as the Pharisees’ understanding of their religion went. In the previous episode it was: Jesus, why are you eating with all the wrong people? Today, it’s: why aren’t your disciples fasting enough? Tomorrow, we’ll see them asking another question: why are you breaking the Sabbath rules (as we understand them)?

At this point we need to be clear that Jesus is not de-bunking the law. Elsewhere, he is very clear that God’s law is good and right, and is not being re-written. Rather, he is challenging their human interpretation of the law.... and also making the point that when God breaks in and does a new thing, suddenly our eyes are opened to new ways of understanding God’s will and ways. Jesus is the ‘new wine’, and it’s too vibrant, too fresh to be held within the old wineskins.

He admits that this new thing God is doing is going to challenge expectations: if you’ve been brought up with the old ways, then you’ll naturally think the old ways are better (v39). Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be! But what he wants is for his listeners to open their minds, to be willing to embrace God’s in-breaking kingdom and accept that something new and incredibly exciting is happening.

Today, let’s also resolve to stay open to whatever God has in store for us. It might not be revolutionary, as it was for Jesus’ contemporaries; but there’s always more to learn about Jesus, new ways to grow in our relationship with him. Even if you’re teetotal, this kind of new wine is for all of us. And may we drink deeply of it today, and this week. Dear Lord, of you three things I pray: to know you more clearly, to love you more dearly, and to follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

**Day 16 – Luke 6:1-5 ‘Sabbath – back to basics#1’**

It’s easy to miss the wood for the trees. We all do it at times – and it’s just as likely to happen in matters of faith, too. What is the point of the Sabbath? That’s the million-dollar question here: why did God command every human to rest for one day in every seven? What is ‘the wood for the trees’ here?

The theological answer goes back to creation: God rested on the seventh day, so that forms the pattern for us, too. However, it’s worth noting that God’s Sabbath post-creation doesn’t end: there isn’t a second week, as it were! Rather, from that point, he invites all of us into his rest. One day we’ll enjoy that eternally – but for now, we’re invited to sample it once a week.

If that’s the ‘big picture’ reason, the Ten Commandments give us the practical reasons: the point of having a day’s complete rest every week is (a) for worship and time with God, and (b) for justice and fair treatment – if we rest, then others can rest too. The particular people mentioned in both Exodus and Deuteronomy are household servants, whose conditions are dependent on the goodwill of others – and God reminds his people quite pointedly that they know what it was like to have been slaves, so they of all people had good reason to respect the Sabbath for their workers.

But what is the definition of ‘work’? This is where the human debates and interpretations come in – over the years, lots of things got added to that definition, including almost all forms of preparing food. This is why the Pharisees challenge Jesus’ followers about eating grain which they had to pick off the plant. The act of picking constituted ‘work’ according to the complex regulations they had devised for the Sabbath (as an aside, had it already been picked it would have been fine!).

It’s a classic ‘wood for the trees’ moment. Human regulations make great servants but lousy masters – and in their noble quest to try and obey the law the Pharisees had lost sight of the point of the law in the first place. Jesus replies by reminding them that the greatest Jewish king there’d ever been did something much ‘worse’ – so maybe they needed to revise their thinking!

He finishes with something even more controversial: this is not just about a true understanding of Sabbath, but also a true understanding of *who* gave the Sabbath to us, too – in claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus is making a clear reference to his divine identity. For us, though, today and tomorrow are a healthy reminder of the importance of rest – and also of remembering that it’s the spirit of the law that matters most. Jesus desires our hearts, not anxious rule-following. May God grant us all grace to enjoy our Sabbaths wisely – and may Jesus be the Lord of our Sabbaths, too.



**Day 17 – Luke 6:6-11 ‘Sabbath – back to basics#2’**

If yesterday’s story needed a bit of explanation – why was rubbing grain an issue? – today’s passage is rather more straightforward. We’re still looking at Jesus’ encounters with the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath, and the fundamental question we posed yesterday still applies: what is the point of the Sabbath? Why did God give it to us? And, therefore, how can we use it wisely?

Yesterday, the disagreement with the Pharisees centred around complex rules regarding what constituted ‘work’ when it came to preparing food. Today, it is more direct: Jesus is asked to heal someone on the Sabbath. Bearing in mind that he’s in the synagogue (i.e. worshipping the Lord, as the Sabbath is designed for) and he’s not getting paid to heal anyone, it almost beggars belief that this act of kindness could be classed as ‘work’ and therefore breaking the fourth commandment. But there it is – that’s why he’s under scrutiny.

Jesus’ reply once again gets to the heart of what we might call the spirit of the law. Can it possibly be wrong to do good on the Sabbath? Surely loving our neighbour in simple but practical ways is *exactly* the sort of thing God would encourage us to do?

It’s a healthy reminder to us that we, too, can use our days of rest in a number of beneficial ways. Generally as a society we’re paying a heavy price for abandoning our commitment to a day of rest across our culture as a whole, and it’s right to keep challenging ourselves to find ways to make sure we rest appropriately...

...But, rest does not have to mean total inactivity – that’s the trap the Pharisees had fallen into. Serving in the worshipping community on the Sabbath is a good thing to do; doing something simple which blesses another human being – if it isn’t our paid employment on our ‘Sabbath’ – is a good thing to do. If it restores our wellbeing (and many of us find simple acts of blessing restorative) then it’s using the Sabbath as it should be used.

As we reflect on Jesus’ life-giving teaching over the last couple of days, take a moment to review your ‘Sabbaths’. Are there any changes Jesus is prompting you to make? Whatever your reflections on that question, pray today for a renewed commitment to practising healthy Sabbaths, that it might command a blessing for you, and those around you.

**Day 18 – Luke 6:12-15 ‘The team’**

Things work better in a team. It’s pretty much universally true: whether in companies or organisations, and certainly in churches. We need people to journey with, to share life with, and also to work with.

Jesus might be the Son of God, with all the authority in the universe and a mission to save the world – but even he doesn’t plan to do it alone. He needs a circle around him: and so he spends the night in prayer (v12) and then chooses twelve (v13). Presumably these are all people who’ve been part of his team for some time, and we’ve met some of them already.

Neither Jesus nor the gospel writers reveal how he made his choice – but Mark gives us an extra insight in his version of this passage as to what being part of the team means: ‘that they might be with him, and that he might send them out to preach’ (Mark 3:14). Notice how relationship is the priority: first and foremost, their calling is to *be* with Jesus.

That’s true for us, too. Before we are given useful work, what Jesus desires is simply that we want to be with him. From that, everything follows. We may not have the big calling of these twelve – and the word apostle means ‘sent one’ so the clue is in the name! – but whatever Jesus calls us to do will flow of out spending time with him, getting to know him, enjoying just *being* with him.

In the future, these twelve will continue the work after Jesus goes back to heaven, so there’s a long term plan here. In the medium term, they will also get the chance to cut their teeth doing what Jesus does a bit later in the gospel (Luke 9 and 10), all the while being mentored by Jesus. But let’s note, even then, that he sends them out in pairs: it’s still about team and relationship. The God who is relationship within himself – Father, Son and Spirit – has fashioned us to work in a similar way.

You may still be in paid work, or retired; you may be part of clubs or voluntary organisations; you may have a good group of friends that you journey with; you may be part of a group at church. If any of those apply to you, give thanks today for your ‘teams’. And re-commit to the joy of just being with Jesus – and from that, may all that God has for you flow, and grow.

**Day 19 – Luke 6:17-23 ‘A radical manifesto’**

So Jesus has just picked his cabinet –if you’ll pardon the political analogy – and it’s time to set out his manifesto. The crowd that has gathered is remarkable, not least for its geographical breadth: Jerusalem and Judea are in the southern part of Israel, Tyre and Sidon are so far north that they are in modern day Lebanon, more than 100 miles north of Jerusalem.

It’s interesting to speculate where this ‘level place’ might have been to cater for a crowd from such a wide area, because Samaria is right between the two – a place which is effectively off-limits to the orthodox Jews of the day. It would have been near the coast, though, as the east of the country is more hilly (or even mountainous).

Not surprisingly, many of the crowd long for healing – word about his miracles has spread far and wide. However, at some point Jesus chooses to speak. ‘Looking at his *disciples*,’ Luke says, Jesus gives the most extraordinary manifesto any leader has ever given. Who is really blessed in this life?

Jesus looks around at those who have chosen to follow him (the disciples are a larger group than the twelve apostles) and commends those who hunger for him: as they must do, having travelled so far to listen to him; those who weep, as many who had come with diseases and spiritual oppression must have done; those who are poor, which is more than just a material poverty, but a recognition of spiritual need as well; those who are hated for their beliefs, as Jesus’ increasingly testy encounters with the religious elite indicate will be an inevitable consequence for those who follow this radical Messiah.

He reminds them that the heroes of the faith have usually been despised in their own generation (v23). (As an aside, this is a striking challenge to the way we elevate particular church leaders today – dare I say that we might sometimes be looking in the wrong directions? Every leader, myself included, should occasionally reflect soberly on this!)

I don’t know if you particularly identify with one of these groups – if you do, then may today’s extraordinary teaching be good news: yours is the kingdom of heaven! If not, this may be a day to pray for all those, especially in the Suffering Church, who are poor or hungry or weeping or hated, that the Lord Jesus might raise them up – not just at the last day (which is a sure promise – v23), but in spirit this day, too.

**Day 20 – Luke 6:20-26 ‘Strange woes’**

Yesterday we looked at Jesus’ groups of people who are blessed. This was revolutionary enough – however, it doesn’t end there. Jesus goes on to describe four other groups who are the opposites of those blessed (vv24-26). What are we to make of these?

The context here is a long-standing misunderstanding of the Law by much of the people of God. When Israel was about to enter the Promised Land, God presented them with a similar idea of two paths: blessings and curses (Deuteronomy). Holiness – i.e. faithfulness to God’s law – would produce blessing, unholiness would lead to curses. The blessings God describes are broadly in two categories: fruitful harvests (and therefore food security), and peace and safety from their enemies. In contrast, ungodliness would negate either or both of these blessings.

The problem is that the link between godliness and these particular blessings became extended to the idea that *all* wealth was a sign of God’s blessing. It’s a subtle distinction, but God did not promise a faithful Israel excessive riches or comfort, only plentiful food and physical security. The ‘rich’ here are not, therefore, godly (or blessed) by definition: some may be, but the implication here is of wealth beyond what is needed. These are the ones who have prioritised (idolised?) material comfort in this life, rather than ‘true wealth’ in the next.

Similarly, poverty was not, in and of itself, a curse. As the Old Testament progressed, more of its content came to address the idea that many people were poor not because they were ungodly but for precisely the opposite reason: because they *were* godly, and were exploited by the unscrupulous rich. It is this latter group who we can imagine being ‘well fed’ or ‘laughing’ at others’ expense (v25). They have climbed the greasy pole, courting popularity rather than principled godly living (v26) – and it these to whom Jesus addresses the woes.

We, too, must beware a similar temptation to apply this text beyond its limits: however, it is a healthy reminder that God’s values are not ours. Jesus came for those who have been aptly described as ‘the lost, the last and the least’ – which is good news for most of us! Today, give thanks for this extraordinary, radical Saviour. And pray for grace to hold lightly to the trappings of this world.

**Day 21 – Luke 6:27-28 ‘Divine wisdom’**

When I used to work in London, I had a very difficult client, who for a while made my life a misery. Nothing was ever good enough, and whilst the work we did for her was generally of a high standard, I remember one particular occasion when I made a small mistake and got a real dressing-down.

I'd never experienced quite this level of ferocity before with any client, it was almost vindictive in its rage. Despite having been in the role I was in for nearly ten years, and thinking (naively) that I'd seen most things under the sun when it came to the work I did, I was at a loss to know how to deal with it. I was tense and unhappy, and – as we'd signed a long-term contract with this client – this feeling persisted for some weeks.

Then, one morning, as I was waiting on the platform for the train into work, I sensed the Lord say: 'Pray for her.' I didn't like this at all! Lord, why on earth should I do that? I grumbled away inwardly to myself for a few minutes and then decided that I should, reluctantly, have a go.

So I prayed. I forgave her and then I asked God to bless her. Almost immediately I could sense my whole attitude to her change. This thought suddenly came into my mind: can you imagine how unhappy she is, that she treats people like this? What pain or sadness must there be? At once I began to see her differently, and even to feel the stirrings of something I thought I could never feel for her: compassion.

Over the weeks and months that followed, I got into the habit of praying for her every week. I don't know if my prayers for her made a great difference, though our relationship did improve: but they certainly made a great difference to me. That compassion I felt on the platform never left me.

Today's passage is one of those extraordinary pieces of Jesus' teaching that's so crazy that only God could have thought of it. Loving your enemies? Doing good to those who hate you? Blessing and praying for those who ill-treat you? What strange ideas these are! And yet.... and yet, anyone who's tried it will know that, bizarrely, it works. As we pray for these people, a remarkable thing happens. Our hearts change. And as they change, we become more like Jesus, whose heart always seeks to bless, even those who hate him. We enter the very centre of Christ's own heart.

As you reflect today, you may not have a real personal 'enemy': but is there someone you could pray for in the way that Jesus commends? In faith, we trust that it will make a difference to them; but I can testify that it will certainly make a difference to you.

**Day 22 – Luke 6:29-31 ‘The golden rule’**

We live in a society that loves making laws. We pass between 25 and 50 new Acts of Parliament each year, and rarely repeal the old ones – although one major clear out in 1867 took 1,300 statutes off the book. This love of creating rules and laws runs throughout every area of society – just to give two examples: I understand that the current UK tax code runs to 2,000 pages – and that’s just tax... or in the area of justice, between 1983 and 2009 Parliament approved over 100 criminal justice Bills, and over 4,000 new criminal offences were created – 4,000 new offences! Can you try to imagine what all of those might be – 4,000 new ways to break the law? I suppose when you have tens of thousands of laws, then it gets easier and easier to break them!

In the kingdom of Jesus, however, you can reduce the whole moral law – the way that God wants to live among our fellow human beings – to just *one golden rule*. Imagine that: just one rule! And we find it here in today’s passage, v31: ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you.’

If we actually obeyed this rule, then we wouldn’t need any other laws. If we truly treated others the way we would like to be treated, then our society would be one of perfect equality, peace and justice. Love would indeed reign supreme, in every dimension of our society.

We wouldn’t gossip or slander or tell lies, because we wouldn’t want gossip, slander or lies being told about us. We wouldn’t cheat or steal because we wouldn’t want to be cheated or stolen from. If we had something hard to say, we would say it gently and lovingly, because that’s how we’d want someone to say that to us. The prisons would be empty, the courts would have nothing to do, and we could stack tens of thousands of pages of laws in the middle of Parliament Square and burn them, because they would all be redundant.

But Jesus knows our hearts. He knows that the way most of us live is: ‘Do to others as *has been* done to you.’ Tit for tat. Eye for eye. We know that two wrongs don’t make a right – but we kid ourselves that it’ll make us feel better.... which of course it doesn’t.

This is why he gives us these bizarre sounding instructions about turning the other cheek and giving away more than we should: it breaks the cycle. Tit doesn’t become tat. Eye does not take eye, for then, if it continues (as Gandhi said), the whole world is blind.

This golden rule is the simplest and also the hardest thing in the world. We need help! We need the constant grace of God to enable us to do it – more on that tomorrow. But today, pray for grace to break the cycle, to treat others as we would like to be treated. It’s the way of Jesus, and, ultimately, the way of life.

**Day 23 – Luke 6:32-36 ‘As your Father is merciful’**

We all want to be like someone. When I was a child I wanted to be like John Robertson. John was a skilful winger who played for my favourite team. For my 6<sup>th</sup> birthday I got my very first team kit – a visual feast of red nylon, for those who pine for the heady days of the late 1970s – and I would practice in the garden for hours, trying to be like John. Even though I was right-footed, I even forced myself to play with my left foot as much as my right, because John Robertson was left-footed, and I wanted to glide past defenders like he did. Not that I ever did, obviously.

The point is, we become what we worship. Our lives and our behaviour change to copy the people we aim to be. The stakes were pretty low for me as a child – if I failed to kick as well with my left foot as with my right, my life wouldn't be much affected. But it's much more important in the spiritual life. Who do we want to copy, to emulate, to be like?

Jesus' teaching today is that our ultimate goal is to be *like our heavenly father*. This is not the serpent's lie of Genesis 3, designed to give us a false view of ourselves: 'Then you will be like God...' Rather, it's the reverse: we were made in the image of God, so of course our ultimate goal is to be like God – as he really is, not as the serpent painted him to be.

*This God* is generous and merciful, and kindness is at the very core of his being. Therefore, this is the rationale for Jesus' extraordinary teaching of the last few days: why should we love our enemies, be generous to our persecutors, give sacrificially? Because *that's what God is like*: 'he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.' (vv35-36)

It's also why it's not enough just to be nice to people who are nice to us: as Jesus says, everyone does that! It's the classic human temptation of setting our moral bar low, and patting ourselves on the back for doing just enough to achieve it. No, true divine love goes beyond: it loves and gives and blesses people who may not be nice to us, who don't deserve our giving or blessing.

The implications are uncomfortable, not just for us as individuals but for our world. If we want to take Jesus at his word, it means that we pray for Russian soldiers and not just Ukrainian ones. It means we welcome and care for those crossing the channel in boats regardless of whether they 'deserve' it (and three-quarters of UK asylum claimants are granted refugee status, so the vast majority do, in fact, deserve it). It also means that we embrace and respect those who disagree with us, because our common humanity – as those made in God's image – trumps our divisions.

This is what it means to be a child of the Most High. I, for one, am profoundly grateful that Jesus promises his Spirit to help us live like this. Lord, transform me from the inside out. Grant me grace to be merciful, as you are merciful. Amen.

**Day 24 – Luke 6:37-38 ‘The measures we use...’**

One of many peoples’ all-time favourite Christmas films is ‘It’s a wonderful life’. I happily admit that it’s also one of my personal favourites! It tells the story of George Bailey, a man who gives his life to helping others, but falls on hard times. Despairing of everything, he thinks about ending it all, when he happens to meet an angel, Clarence Oddbody, who shows him a series of visions which demonstrate how his life of service has changed the community in which he lives, and made so many lives better.

George returns to his town and his home and finds people crowding round to bless him in return. It’s the ultimate feel-good, heart-warming story, and its message is simple: what goes around, comes around. What George gave out to others for all those years was paid back to him when he needed it.

As it happens, this simple proverb is not just found in Christmas films – it’s also right here in the teaching of Jesus. You could say that Jesus invented it! ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you.’ (v38) It’s the flip side of the golden rule: ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you.’ Whilst this sounds incredibly daunting, there’s a follow-up, which sets it in context: if we give ourselves in this way, God always repays – we’ll find that our kindness is paid back to us. If we refuse to judge or condemn, then neither will we be judged or condemned. If we give generously, then we will receive generously in return. And because our great God is gracious and generous, it won’t be a sparing return: ‘a good measure... will be poured into your lap’ (v38).

This is what distinguishes Jesus’ teaching from the ancient principle of karma. It sounds similar, but this is not ‘the universe’ paying you back, it’s a person: it’s God himself. And this God usually repays more generously than we expect. Yes, it might come via the giving of other people, but there is a divine hand behind it. The measure we use is returned to us.

This is challenging teaching for those who use bad or sparing measures; but it is wonderfully encouraging for all of us seeking to live out Jesus’ teaching. God sees our efforts, and we can trust that he will repay – he always does. May that thought lift your heart today to keep living Jesus’ way – and may God grant all of us all that we need, returning the measure we use back to us.



**Day 25 – Luke 6:39-42 ‘What’s in my eye?’**

It is an unfortunate fact of human nature that we’re very good at spotting other people’s sins. More than that, we’re most likely to spot the things in other people that we’re most prone to doing ourselves. I personally know loads of people who do that... and that’s the point isn’t it? *Of course* I can spot this failing in others – but what about closer to home? The truth is that I do this, too. We all do – it’s part of the selfishness of the human condition.

So Jesus gives us one very simple, life-changing principle: test your own actions first, make sure your own behaviour matches up – and only then can you address it in others. He’s not saying that we should never challenge wrong behaviour – only that we should get our own house in order first. Once we’ve done that, then, as he says, we’ll see clearly what’s wrong in the world around us, and have the integrity to address it.

There’s an undercurrent of humility which runs throughout this section of Scripture. Humility is really about self-awareness, having a true estimate of yourself. The more we see ourselves as we really are, the more we’ll cultivate a life which looks more like the master’s – and also, the more grace we’ll share with others.

In a world where public discourse is increasingly dominated by who can tell the best lies most convincingly, and where the shortcomings of our own position are best drowned out by vocal finger pointing at the other side, how we need this teaching of Jesus! Life is ultimately about following the right models, the right examples, the best teachers. If we choose the wrong people to follow, they’ll lead us (and themselves) into a hole (v39).

On the other hand, if we follow the best teacher (v40 – and we know who this is) then we can become like them: a fully aware, gracious, humble, authentic human being.

Today, let’s all pray for grace to live with this kind of humility – in other words, with self-awareness, and a willingness to look first at our own hearts, before reacting to others’. And may the master teacher be our guide, our way and our life this week.

**Day 26 – Luke 6:43-45 ‘Bearing good fruit’**

Surprisingly, 2022 was a bumper year for apples – at least it was a bumper year for the apple trees in our garden. To be honest I know very little about these things – I’m generally better at destroying than growing things in our garden – but I had expected the very hot, dry summer to have reduced our yields; however, the reverse was true. After a lean year in 2021, even the tree at the back (my favourite, but very erratic in its output) has been laden with fruit.

The point of fruit trees, of course, is that they bear fruit. That’s what they do. But it’s not just any old fruit that matters: it’s *good* fruit we’re looking for: fruit that we can eat and enjoy. I usually lose at least a third of my apples to insects and birds (which I don’t mind at all) and also a smaller proportion to apples that rot on the tree and then ‘infect’ the apples next to them. If you’ve left a rotten apple in a bag of other apples for a couple of weeks, you’ll know how quickly the rot spreads!

We’re lucky that most of our apple trees are good trees: healthy, productive, reliable. They bear good fruit. One, however, produces almost nothing, and what it does produce is usually small, shrivelled and sour. Interestingly, by outward appearance it doesn’t look much different to the others: but what it produces is very different.

Over the last few days, we’ve soaked up some of the most profound and powerful teaching ever spoken in our world, by Jesus the great teacher. The core of it is, however, very simple: and it’s Jesus’ point today. If you want to know what’s in a person’s heart, observe how they *live*. You can tell what someone really believes by how they behave. You recognise them by their fruit.

How can you tell if someone is ‘good’? By what they say and do. If their life is characterised by kind words and compassionate speech, then the good fruit tells you it’s a good tree. On the other hand, you can’t claim to be good and then treat others harshly, gossip, slander etc. Bad fruit betrays a bad tree.

And perhaps, outwardly, just like my failing tree, such people might not look all that different: but then you see how they speak (v45) or how they relate to other people, and you know what is in their heart. Out of the overflow of the heart, Jesus observes, the mouth speaks.

It’s so simple, and yet so profound – as the greatest wisdom usually is. And if you’re anything like me, your immediate response may well be: ‘Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner!’ It shines such a light on my heart – and my speech, my actions – that all I can ask for is help! I long to be someone who produces good fruit; perhaps you do, too. If so, may we all pray for Jesus’ love to fill our hearts, that what flows out of our heart this day, this week, this season is grace, peace and kindness.

**Day 27 – Luke 6:46-49 ‘ Good foundations’**

I've always loved a good sandcastle. As a family we often head for the beach if we're on holiday, and my particular speciality was always a sand speedboat. Give me half an hour and a half-decent spade, and I can rustle up a passable sand-boat, complete with two seats and aerodynamic bow design. And the great thing about this design is it can be fairly easily adapted to any kind of vehicle: car, tractor, plane even a rocket. 5- or 6-year-old children aren't too choosy!

It's easy to build on sand, but we all know what happens when the tide comes in. I've seen many a family at the seaside desperately trying to salvage their castle, frantically digging a trench to divert the water: but all it buys is a few extra minutes, before the shore is smooth again, and all traces of civilisation have disappeared. Castles made of sand always fall in the sea... eventually.

Jesus continues his main point from yesterday – that real faith is shown through obedience, through how we live – by telling the famous story of two builders: the one who built on rock, and the other on sand. And the comparison he draws is that to obey his teaching is to build our life on the right foundations: solid, dependable, a foundation that will last. On other hand, if we don't practice what Jesus preaches, then our foundations will be shaky, unreliable. Our house is in danger of collapse.

Foundations matter: they matter for buildings – and they matter for our lives. But the sting in the tail of this story is that it's *easy* to build on sand, and *hard* to build on rock. This is the point we need to spend time reflecting on. To follow me and my teaching, Jesus says, is much the best way to live: but it's also much harder to live that way. It's easy to follow the crowd (which is really what building on sand is) – to join in with the gossip, to lie to cover your own tracks, to buy something we don't need on credit because we can't wait to have it. This is digging into sand... and sandcastles always collapse.

On the other hand, to dig into rock is hard graft – imagine how much harder in the pre-industrial society of Jesus' day! It's frustrating, we may feel we are making little progress, for lots of effort: and yet, for those who persevere, the reward is immense. When the storms of life hit, our house stands firm 'because it was well built' (v48).

Deep down, we all want that kind of life; but there are no short-cuts. It takes what John Stott used to call 'daily dogged discipline': not a very fashionable idea, but one which has stood the test of time. It's Jesus' way; and thankfully he longs to pour out his Spirit on all those who would follow this way. May God grant us all grace to build on good foundations today, that the house of our life stands firm, whatever storms we face at present.

**Day 28 – Luke 7:1-10 ‘Deserved or undeserved?’**

Many years ago I had a wonderful spiritual mentor who had been a very high ranking officer in the army. He was also a great man of God, and in many ways he epitomised the kind of faith shown by the centurion in today’s story. Although Christians serving in the armed forces has long been a subject of debate, my mentor’s answer was simple: ‘if you ever happen to meet someone with a gun in their hand, would you rather they had Christ in their heart, or not?’ That may not resolve every discussion on this topic, but it’s a good answer.

And just like my mentor, the centurion was able to recognise greater authority when he saw it. True, he was, himself, someone invested with real authority in his sphere of work: but the authority of Jesus was on a different level entirely. The centurion understood, not just that you need to look for authority in the right places, but was also humble enough to recognise that, in the grand scheme of things, he was ‘middle management’: the King of kings, though, was here in his neighbourhood!

Humility, in fact, lies at the heart of this story. Faith and humility are closely linked, and indeed what I noticed as I was preparing today’s reflection is the contrast between what the religious leaders say about the centurion and what he says about himself: the religious leaders ask Jesus for miraculous intervention ‘because this man *deserves* to have you do this... he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.’ (vv4-5)

The centurion’s approach is quite different, however: ‘Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I *do not deserve* to have you come under my roof.’ (v6) In the way that Luke has told this story, the contrast is deliberate. Matthew’s version does not have the preamble with the religious leaders – Luke has clearly included this part of the story to make a point.

And the point is... grace. The world works on the principles of just desserts; but we can never approach God like that. God does not treat us as we deserve – thankfully! Rather God pours out his blessings on the undeserving. Despite his high rank and good works, the centurion grasped this; he recognised that his only plea was the goodness and compassion of God, not his status or works.

This is good news for us, too. And yet, it’s also so easy to get sucked into ‘slot machine religion’ – put this in, get this out. Let today’s story be a healthy reminder that it is God’s grace that saves us, that pours blessings out to us, and ultimately, draws the Lord close to us. May that grace be our light, hope, peace and joy today.

**Day 29 – Luke 7:11-17 ‘His heart went out’**

It’s easy to get into the habit of reading something into all of Jesus’ actions: he says this because.... he does this because.... And that’s all well and good, Jesus usually does have a bigger picture in mind – he is, after all, the Son of God! But there is a risk to over-analysing: we can get so caught up with the ‘big picture’ that Jesus starts to appear more like a military strategist or a marketing guru – carefully lining up all his ducks to fulfil the mission of the kingdom.

Sometimes we read a story and the best response is just to marvel at his glorious compassion for people like you and me. Today’s story is a case in point – on the face of it there’s nothing unique here. It’s not a unique place: Nain is a village in Galilee eight miles south of Nazareth, so familiar territory. It’s not a unique encounter: Jesus raises others from the dead (the little girl, Lazarus).

There are striking details, but again not unique: he touches the coffin, which would make him unclean according to the regulations – just as touching the leper did in chapter 5. Likewise, the people’s response in v16 – ‘God has come to help his people’ – seems deliberately to echo Zechariah’s prophetic song (1:68), thereby fulfilling the expectations which accompanied Jesus’ birth: but it’s not an exact match, so we can’t be totally sure.

Ultimately, none of that is the point. What matters here is exactly what is written on the page: it’s the story of Jesus’ encounter with a person in need, and how he met her at her point of need. What matters is what it tells us about Jesus’ heart of compassion for a hurting world. When Jesus saw the funeral procession, ‘his heart went out to her’ (v13).

For all the demands on his time and energy, Jesus still kept seeing the world with God’s eyes of compassion. His heart broke for *one* person – and he met with that person and changed her life.

This is how Jesus feels about you, too. His heart is big enough to encompass every person – he doesn’t just look at the mass of humanity with compassion: he looks at *you* with compassion. So, today, offer your troubles to him, and receive his love. Let him wipe your tears and soothe your mind – because you matter to him.

**Day 30 – Luke 7:18-23 ‘Are you the one?’**

Back in my old job, I did a fair amount of recruitment. It was a rewarding experience: whatever role we were recruiting for, we’d sit and interview the prospective candidates, all of whom were eager to please and make a good impression. Most of the skill was in teasing out what *wasn’t* in the CV – the bits people were exaggerating or trying to hide! At its root, though, we were asking the same question John the Baptist’s disciples were asking in today’s passage: ‘Are you the one?’

This is a strange interlude in the story, because it suggests that even John the Baptist had a moment of doubt about who Jesus really was. Perhaps it was because, to his eyes, Jesus’ CV was starting to look a bit less like the one he thought he was preparing the way for. Not enough brimstone! Not enough wrath, perhaps? (See Luke 3:7 and 3:17 for context.)

We need to remember that John was an ultra-orthodox Jew, quite possibly one of the radical Essene community. And, for all his greatness, it seems that even John was expecting a Messiah more in the mould of popular thinking. So when he hears of Jesus blessing (and healing the servant of) a Roman centurion (7:1-10), and then touching a dead body (v14) – which no devout Jew would ever do – he suddenly starts to think: is this really the One?

And so, with characteristic bluntness, he sends a couple of friends to ask Jesus directly: ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’ Jesus (John’s cousin, remember) has known John all his life, so no doubt is well used to his prickly edges! He responds with equally characteristic grace and wisdom: in effect, ‘take a look, John, at everything God is doing – the miraculous is commonplace, the prophecies are being fulfilled – *who else* would be doing this?’

Just to reinforce the point, Jesus deliberately finishes by quoting the passage from Isaiah 61 which announced his ministry: ‘Good news is proclaimed to the poor’ (v22, see 4:18). What Jesus is doing is exactly what the Messiah is meant to be doing!

So often we try to make Jesus fit what we want or expect him to be. It’s always best to let Jesus speak for himself, to be who he really is. May God grant us all grace to see Jesus with pure unfiltered eyes, that we might again – and every day – behold his glory. Blessed is the one who does not stumble on account of him.

**Day 31 – Luke 7:24-30 ‘Greater than John’**

I wonder who you consider to be the greatest human being who ever lived? Apart from Jesus, obviously! Some of you may think of those known for great courage or conviction – someone like Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela. Others may think of great geniuses – someone like Leonardo da Vinci, who managed to revolutionise art, science and engineering in one lifetime. A series entitled ‘Great Britons’ at the turn of the millennium boiled the popular vote down a straight contest between Winston Churchill and Isambard Kingdom Brunel – with Churchill coming out as victor.

Jesus’ view, however, is different: ‘among those born of women,’ he concludes in our passage today, ‘there is no-one greater than John’ (v28). John the Baptist gets Jesus’ vote for the greatest human being of them all – at least to that point in history.

There is an extraordinary sting in the tail, however. Jesus follows up with this bombshell: ‘Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’ How is this possible? What does he mean?

At the heart of this section is a clash of ideologies around this fundamental question: how will the rule and reign of God come into this world? How will the Messiah usher it in? To orthodox Jews – embodied by the religious leaders – it will be the triumph of obedience to God’s Law, through which God’s people will also prosper and triumph over their enemies. Jesus, however, points to a different way: the way of grace. As we humbly receive this divine gift – most appealing, Jesus admits, to ‘the lost, the last and the least’ – so we enter into this glorious new kingdom.

It can *only* be received as the gift of God – which is why even the greatest human cannot enter without it. John himself, of course, knew this: he welcomed the Messiah who would baptise with ‘the Holy Spirit and fire’ (3:16). Ironically, those who had received John’s baptism of repentance (i.e. return to obedience to the Law) were also most able to receive Jesus’ invitation of grace; whilst those too proud to repent under John’s ministry would also resist Jesus (vv29-30).

For us too, the way of beautiful grace is open. John’s ministry, like Jesus’, points us towards the Lord in all his glory. We, too, may feel like ‘the least in the kingdom of heaven’, but – thanks to his loving initiative, his wonderful grace – being the least is enough. Hallelujah!

**Day 32 – Luke 7:31-35 ‘Spoilt children’**

When I was seven years old, my nan sent me 10p in the post as a gift – oh for the days when you could still post coins! I opened the envelope, saw the coin and note from my nan, and said, to my enduring shame: ‘Is that all?’ My mum, usually the gentlest and most gracious of people, gave me such a telling off for ingratitude that I never forgot the lesson.

Jesus recognised a similar trait in his generation, too. More than a thousand years of being God’s chosen people had created among many a sense of entitlement, and a cynicism about true spiritual renewal. For all that Jesus was welcomed by thousands, many others looked down their noses at him and found fault. As Jesus observes wryly, they are behaving like spoilt children, for whom nothing is good enough (v32).

Such people criticised John for being too ascetic and Jesus for being too lax (vv33-34)! The issue, of course, is not with Jesus or John, but their determination to reject the way of God, which Jesus and John *both* came to bring them. For all that they resented the Romans, their lives were OK as they were – just religious enough to feel entitled, but not so much to feel harassed by it.

As an aside, in the gospels Jesus only uses the phrase ‘the Son of Man came...’ three times. ‘The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost...’ ‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...’ – these two are rightly celebrated. The third is much less noted, and we find it here: ‘The Son of Man came eating and drinking...’ Hospitality and welcome were central to Jesus’ ministry. There’s nothing wrong with John’s rigorous self-discipline, but Jesus’ willingness to socialise with those on the margins is perhaps just as central to his theology of the kingdom as the other two. It calls us to reflect on how we practise this today.

Either way, Jesus concludes with another reference to judging things only by their fruit. ‘Wisdom is proved right by her children’ (v35): in other words, look at the outcomes. Jesus calls us, not to be spoilt children, but those who receive the kingdom *like a child*: open-hearted, trusting, ‘all-in’. And as we do that, our hearts overflow with gratitude, and energise us to share this welcoming love wholeheartedly with those around us. May that be our inspiration today.



**Day 33 – Luke 7:36-50 ‘Forgiven much’**

I don't know if any of you have ever had the experience of having your debts cancelled. I must confess that I haven't, but I know friends who have, and they have shared the exhilarating feeling of a heavy load being taken off their shoulders, a sense of being free, of being able to look forward with hope to the future and not always back with dread to the past.

To have any debt cancelled is wonderful – to have a huge debt forgiven must be almost indescribable. Such a feeling lies at the heart of today's famous story. Jesus is welcomed to a posh dinner party by one of the religious elite. I say 'welcomed' – it's clear from the complex social rituals of Jesus' day that he was not one of the honoured guests. The things that Simon *didn't* do for Jesus were designed to put him in his place, near the bottom of the pecking order – no water, no kiss, no oil (vv44-47). Jesus would have been on one of the tables at the back, not at the 'top table' with Simon.

This makes Jesus' encounter all the more divinely-inspired. At the other end of the room, Jesus could not have heard the Pharisee muttering away to himself about the actions, either of the woman, who anointed Jesus' feet, or of Jesus, who received this act with grace and humility. But Jesus knew what was going on, all right – and so he challenges Simon with the simple example of a debt forgiven. The one whose debt is large inevitably feels more gratitude than the one whose debt is small.

Therefore, the woman – no doubt an outcast in society, despised by respectable people – expressed her love for Jesus in a much greater way than the mealy-mouthed, polite-but-cold 'welcome' given to Jesus by Simon. As always with Jesus, he doesn't just make the point in a beautifully concise yet powerful way, he does two more things: first, he gives the woman his blessing, perhaps enough to restore her to some sort of place in the community as well.

He also leaves an implied sting in the tail: we know from plenty of passages elsewhere that the Pharisees' spiritual debt was, in fact, no smaller than most of the 'undesirables' they avoided. Their hearts were just as corrupt, even if their outward appearances were impeccable. Simon's 'debt' before God was likely as large as the woman's: he just didn't realise or acknowledge it.

Today, give thanks that Jesus receives *all* who come to him with gratitude and faith – people like you and me. And let's resolve to guard our hearts from pointing the finger at others, when we know our own debts which God has wonderfully cancelled. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.

**Day 34 – Luke 8:1-3 ‘The value of practical support’**

Before we move on to the next (famous) chunk of Jesus’ teaching, today I want to highlight a group of people who rarely get any attention, but whose ministry and support for Jesus is every bit as important as those who get more of the limelight.

We all know about the twelve apostles: these are the twelve close friends of Jesus, specially chosen by him, who journeyed with him and were trained to do what he did. These became the key leaders who went on to establish the church, and such is their reputation, Luke is simply able to refer to them as ‘The Twelve’ (v1).

However, we rarely stop to ask *how* this group (including Jesus) were able to live this itinerant lifestyle. Who bought the food (and other necessities), who washed their clothes, who provided the ‘support team’ to make this viable? Of course, Jesus received numerous invites, and no doubt he was led by the Spirit to various places and particular hosts. But divine provision is rarely just manufactured out of thin air – of course, God *can* do that; more often, though, God provides through other people.

In vv2-3 Luke tells us about Jesus’ and the Twelve’s support team. These are the people who, Luke says, ‘were helping to support them out of their own means’ (v3). In other words, it was this group who were paying for the remarkable ministry that Jesus and the Twelve were exercising. What an amazing gift!

As we look at this group, two things are notable: first, they are all women. This is not a comment on roles per se: in the patriarchal culture of Jesus’ day, being part of the Twelve would not have been possible in the way that it might be now – rather, what is remarkable is how Jesus welcomed women into his inner team, and relied on their support. Even if the culture of the time required those roles to be different, the giftings of women flourished under Jesus.

Second, this group came from widely different social backgrounds. Mary had led a troubled life, Joanna was from the ‘upper class’ – she was married to one of the most powerful men in the country, and presumably her personal wealth was instrumental in financing Jesus’ team. Much as we rightly prioritise Jesus’ mission to those on the margins, he was just as willing to embrace wealthy followers, too. With Jesus it is always about the heart.

Today, let’s honour and give thanks for those whose practical support makes ministry and mission possible. How we need people willing to offer time, talents and money to resource the work of the gospel. May the Lord raise up such people in our day, too. If you are one of these people, called to practical support – thank you! And may we always cherish their (your) work among us.

**Day 35 – Luke 8:1-10 ‘Puzzling it out’**

Most of us love a good puzzle. I certainly do – and I’m not just talking about jigsaws, but all types of head-scratchers. Perhaps it’s Sudoku for you, or crosswords, or logic problems... or a good old-fashioned crime drama. Agatha Christie remains the best-selling author ever – apart from the Bible – because we love a good puzzle. And the dramatic success in 2022 of the mobile app Wordle shows that this fascination is as strong as ever.

Today begins a section of Luke’s gospel which focuses on Jesus’ parables. It is commonly thought that one reason Jesus’ parables were so effective is because they earthed theological ideas in everyday matters: Jesus talked about God and life in the language of farmers and fishermen – the world of the people he lived among. Of course, this is true.

What is less well known is that Jesus didn’t necessarily do this to make his teaching easy to understand. It might be earthed in everyday life, but it was still meant to be something of a puzzle. Something to make us scratch our heads and wonder what it means. Something, even, that might remain veiled to those not prepared to look closely – he said as much at the end of today’s passage: ‘to others I speak in parables, so that, “though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.”’

It might come as a shock to hear Jesus apparently wanting people to be puzzled. Surely a great teacher would want things to be clear? Aren’t simple soundbites better than slippery stories? Why make things difficult?

The answer is that Jesus wants us to *seek* him – to have hearts and minds that go beyond surface thinking and feeling, to yearn for deeper things, real connections. Life is complex, and full of mystery. Simple answers offer short term benefits but are rarely satisfying for a whole life. Jesus wants us to puzzle it out: to wrestle with the big questions of life and faith.

So he tells parables: teasers, puzzles, always asking the bigger questions – what is life *really* about? How do we live fruitfully for the *whole* of our lives? Where do we get distracted, or misled? And what is a truly good heart?

When I think about it, these are the questions I really want answers to. Perhaps you do, too. That kind of deep truth doesn’t come quickly, or easily. But when it is revealed, it is like pure gold. Take a few moments today to ask God to reveal more of that deep truth to you – that the Word might fall on rich soil in our hearts. And may Jesus continue to amaze us, that we might worship him afresh today, and this week.

**Day 36 – Luke 8:11-15 ‘Good soil’**

2022 has been a strange year for our gardens. The hot spring and summer caused all kinds of havoc with what most of us might have planned to grow. And if you went away on summer holiday without anyone to water in your absence, invariably you came back to a lot of withered glory... Bizarrely, despite the ‘boom and bust’ weather, we had an enormous crop of apples that autumn – to be honest I’ve no idea why, but I’m grateful all the same!

Nowadays, gardening is for most people a leisure activity: even those with allotments rarely grow food because they have to. But in the culture of Jesus’ day, as it still is for many places around the world today, the growing season was vital for their life and future. Most families would only eat what they – or their fellow villagers – could grow. Preparing the soil and sowing the seed were part of the fabric of life.

But what about the soil of our *lives*? What makes for abundant growth and fruitful harvest? Conversely, what stifles growth and leaves us choked with weeds?

This passage is one of Jesus’ most famous parables, and we’re also fortunate that it’s one which he explains to us. At one level he does the hard work for us! And yet, the real value of this timeless story lies in what we do with the meaning. In just a few verses, Jesus presents us with a vision of how to live – and also how not to live – a fruitful life. He gets to the heart of what real ‘success’ is, and how we sustain this kind of fruitfulness long-term.

And it is all a matter of what we do with God’s Word in our lives. Let’s note that this word (seed) is inherently fruitful. As long as the soil is good, it will multiply the benefit – Luke doesn’t include this detail, but in Matthew’s and Mark’s versions, the reward is ‘30, 60 or a 100 times’. It is powerful and amazingly abundant. But it can be rendered ineffective by other factors, and it is these that form the real challenge of the parable.

For the Word to bear fruit it needs to go deep into our hearts – if it stays shallow, it won’t withstand troubles in life. It can also be choked: either by worries, or by the distractions of wealth and the pursuit of other dreams or pleasures.

Life is a long journey, and the great treasure of this parable is that it brings us back to first principles; it makes us take a fresh look at where we are now. Is anything ‘choking’ us? Are we going deep or staying shallow? God is good, and merciful, and he is well able to ‘restore our soil’ – and our soul! Give thanks for the work of the Word in your life; and pray for it to become ever more fruitful – just as it’s meant to be.

**Day 37 – Luke 8:16-18 ‘Close attention’**

Back in the day when I worked for a market research company, detail was a key part of my job. Often the client paid thousands of pounds for one set of results contained in one book of tables, so it was vital that every figure was checked and double-checked to make sure it was correct. Similarly, whenever we submitted proposals for new projects, we all proof-read each others' documents, to make sure it was both clear and easy to read – as well as containing no spelling mistakes!

I can't say that I ever enjoyed this type of work, though I learned to do it thoroughly, and get a sort of weird pleasure in spotting a missing apostrophe or a figure that was one digit out. I do remember once, though, getting the all-clear from a colleague on a proposal of mine only to discover when we'd won the project that the price I'd included was wrong (which the colleague couldn't have known) – and we were obliged to run the project at a loss! It pays to pay close attention.

And if that's true in our workplaces, it's also true when it comes to the most important piece of writing of them all – the text of scripture, and in particular the teaching of Jesus. Here we find the key to life, both now and in eternity: no wonder Jesus tells us to 'consider carefully how you listen' (v18). He's just shared one of the greatest stories ever told – the parable of the sower – which has implications for every single one of us. But, he counsels, are we listening carefully enough?

Jesus' encouragement to us today is that close attention to him is always rewarded, both in terms of wisdom – 'there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed' (v17) – and in terms of spiritual fruit: 'those who have will be given more' (v18). Just as the parable reminded us, how we sow determines what we reap: and seeking Jesus brings rich reward in a life full of faith, hope, purpose and gratitude.

Conversely, Jesus warns against a sense of complacency or entitlement – which is perhaps especially important to heed if we come from a strong Christian background, or have been fortunate to be part of great churches for most of our lives. The end of verse 18 could effectively be paraphrased: 'Don't take your spiritual heritage (i.e. "what you think you have") for granted. I will bless those who humbly continue to seek me.'

Today, let's give thanks for the freedom we enjoy to be able to study the Word, and for all the many tools available to help us go deeper in Scripture. And let's pay close attention to whatever Jesus is saying to us at the moment: for that attention is always repaid by our generous Lord – helping us to grow, and to bear fruit for his glory.

**Day 38 – Luke 8:19-21 ‘Jesus’ family’**

As most of you know, the early Christians were heavily persecuted. Once they were considered to represent a threat to the authority of the Roman emperor, they were often slandered in particular with two outrageous slurs. The first is that they were cannibals – this was because ‘ate the body and drank the blood of Christ’. The second was that they promoted incest, because they referred to fellow believers as brother and sister, including within a Christian marriage.

Although both of these accusations put many early Christians in fear of their lives, since both were punishable by death, they are both distortions of important truths. Christians do remember the body and blood of Jesus, as they drink quite ordinary bread and wine. They also, from the very beginning, saw fellow believers as more than participants in a common cause: they were *family*.

In part, this incredibly strong and intimate image is theological: when we become followers of Jesus, through the grace of Christ we inherit the blessings of the divine Son – in effect we become co-heirs, and children of God. Therefore, as children of the same divine Parent, we can call each other ‘sister’ and ‘brother’.

But it’s also more straightforward than that, and goes back to this text and Jesus’ own teaching. My family, Jesus says, ‘are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice’ (v21).

Mark’s version of this story casts Jesus’ human family in a more threatening light: ‘When his family heard about this [the growth of Jesus’ ministry] they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind”.’ (Mark 3:21) This not a social call! Rather, they are concerned by what is happening, embarrassed even. And Jesus issues what we can interpret as a pointed riposte to his family: for all that he loves them and no doubt continues to honour them, he has another family, too: the family of God.

We, too, are part of that family. We don’t earn our ‘entry’ to this family, but we can attest to it every day, by living in obedience to Jesus’ teaching. If we do that, then with joy we can claim that we, too, are children of God! May God grant us grace to live as Jesus’ family today.

**Day 39 – Luke 8:22-25 ‘Who is this?’**

‘I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene...’ So goes the grand old hymn – but it touches on a deep truth: how important it is to continue to be *amazed* by Jesus.

‘Who is this?’ the disciples utter in total amazement, ‘he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him!’ (v25) This passage begins what appears to be ‘a day in the life of Jesus’. Over what appears to be one 24-hour period – Luke 8:22-56 – Jesus demonstrates his authority over the four things human beings have no ultimate control over: nature, the supernatural, sickness and death. After just one of these outstanding miracles, the disciples are moved to cry out: ‘Who is this?’ Imagine what they were saying by the end of the following day!

Familiarity breeds contempt, as the old saying goes. And it’s possible for this to happen in our spiritual lives, too. Deep truths which made our spines tingle when we first came to faith seem almost normal now. Great answers to prayer get forgotten; the marvellous privileges of being part of a dynamic community for faith taken for granted.

It can happen to all of us: so this is why today’s passage is so valuable. Yes, we can admire it as a great miracle, an event in history which changed some people’s lives. But let’s also *personalise* it: let’s see it as an encouragement to keep being amazed by Jesus. May the disciples’ awe be ours.

Today, take a few minutes to remind yourself of some things about Jesus which amaze you. And if it takes longer than you hoped, ask Jesus to show you. At the heart of every person of dynamic faith is that childlike sense of wonder: the great saints of old were mostly just normal people who kept being amazed by Jesus. May their faith be ours: and may we, too, keep being amazed by Jesus the Nazarene.

**Day 40 – Luke 8:26-31 ‘Unexpected wisdom’**

One of the most popular films of all time is Forrest Gump. One of the reasons for this is the homespun wisdom of Forrest, and in particular his mama. The film is punctuated with such pearls, though of course the most famous is: ‘Life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you’re gonna get.’ Although actually, with a box Chocolate Brazil Nuts, you *always* know!

Wisdom is often found in the most unlikely places. Much as we like to think that it’s only clever adults who have a monopoly on wisdom, the reality is very different. A great friend of ours who was considering mission work was pointed towards the country where she eventually served by the spiritual intuition of a child she was teaching. She was so overcome she sought further direction from one of our ministers, who confirmed exactly what the child had said. God can speak through anyone!

On Saturday we saw the disciples’ awestruck confusion at what they had just seen and experienced. Jesus had just done something that only God could do, prompting them to cry out: ‘Who is this?’ At this stage they weren’t sure. Someone special, certainly – but was Jesus more than that?

We get an answer in the very next passage (today’s reading), albeit from a most unlikely source. Having crossed to the Eastern side of the shore of Galilee they are immediately accosted (v27). The man who approached them – who had never met Jesus before – knew *exactly* who Jesus was, albeit for somewhat unsettling reasons. He was a tormented soul, and whatever it was that possessed him – which the text clearly indicates was a demonic spirit of some sort – confirmed Jesus’ identity for everyone to hear: ‘Jesus, Son of the Most High God.’ (v28)

Tragically for this man, the demonic oppression he was afflicted with had tortured him for many years, leaving him wild and friendless – and we’ll see how Jesus heals him tomorrow. But today, let’s note the heavy irony that the very first person to truly grasp the identity of Jesus was this spiritually tormented loner. It took the disciples many months more to manage that, and many of the most educated religious people in his culture never got it: but this chap did.

I trust the Lord preserves us all from torment of this kind – but let’s keep our eyes open for wisdom in unexpected places. God is able to speak in surprising ways, and through surprising people: how might he do that for you this week?



**Day 41 – Luke 8:26-35 ‘Hot to handle?’**

Today’s passage is an unsettling one, especially to our modern sensibilities. First, we rarely talk in the West about spiritual beings like demons – although in much of the world such things are still treated as a part of life. Second, we find the idea of the drowning pigs abhorrent. What are we to make of it?

Two bits of context are important – they might not explain everything, but they help to set a backdrop for what’s going on here. First, the ancient world did not have the same emotional attachment to animals as we do. Farm animals were treated well (because they were incredibly valuable commodities), but were there for human usage and sustenance. The loss of these pigs was a financial disaster and a spiritual judgement, but not an emotional trauma at that time.

Second, the keeping of pigs was forbidden to Jews. Pigs were an ‘unclean’ animal, so the fact that these farmers were keeping a large herd of them was a sign of the poor state of their spiritual health. This part of Israel had been colonised around 700-500BC by other peoples, who had mixed their religious practices with the Jewish inhabitants, leading to a hybrid form of religious observance which broke many of the orthodox Jewish laws.

So when Jesus gave permission for the demons to enter the pigs, he was cleansing the people of two unhealthy influences: spiritual beings *and* idolatrous practices. This is why the people were afraid rather than angry. They knew they were doing wrong, and Jesus had called them on it.

A wise commentator once said that Jesus came to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable – and this is exactly what we see here. A tormented man is healed and restored. An apathetic population is challenged.

Jesus is many wonderful things: but he is never safe! Let’s continue to be astounded by Jesus. If we need to be challenged by him, let’s be brave to hear it. And if we are disturbed today, may his wonderful grace grant us deep comfort and rest.

**Day 42 – Luke 8:34-39 ‘Go and tell’**

Not many of us are good evangelists. Most of us are frightened at the prospect of having to ‘defend the faith’, and frankly terrified at the thought of ‘leading someone to Jesus’. Some of us have had bad experiences – others are keen to avoid that being the case!

The good news of today’s passage is that we don’t have to be Billy Grahams or J Johns. *We just need to tell our story.* The man in today’s passage has known Jesus probably for about an hour. That’s it. He has been excluded from all polite society for many years, so probably knows very little about religious belief or practice. And he’s just found a real spiritual friend for the first time in his adult life – and this friend is immediately being forced to leave by rest of the population.

In other words, he apparently has very little to offer to the kingdom of God. Not surprisingly, he’s desperate to travel away from this place with Jesus. But Jesus says no – not because he’s unfriendly, but because he knows that this man has something very precious: his story. His story is enough. God has done something wonderful for him, and the best way for him to practise his new-found faith is simply to share his story with the people that know him. After all, the change will be obvious!

This is great news for us, too. We all have a story of faith. Perhaps not as dramatic – but every bit as real, because it’s *ours*, and we’ve lived it. Take a few moments today just turning over some key moments in your story: times when God has been there, answered a prayer, changed something in your life, brought you a friend when you needed it, given you a task which you undertook for his glory – and more besides.

That is your story. No-one can argue with it, because it’s yours. Why not pray for opportunities to tell your story this season, or this year? It’s all Jesus asked of the man in the passage. It’s all Jesus asks of you.