

February 17, 2021

Read Genesis 47

“Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly.” (Genesis 47:27)

We all know from experience things aren't always what they seem. Oh, but how easily we can lose sight of this truth. Sometimes it takes our daily rhythms thrown out of whack (*like through a global pandemic*) before noticing how we cling to delusions of personal control. There are also times when only distance from a difficult period in life brings clarity of God's larger purposes.

The Story of the Bible weaves recurring patterns from beginning to end. One of the greatest is of leaving and seeking home. This starts when Adam and Eve leave their garden home in God's presence. And still, to this day, all their descendants long to go home, whether they're aware of it or not. We know this longing for an ultimate homecoming is not satisfied until the end of God's story, and much strife is guaranteed to precede it. But it will come.

Our passage in Genesis looks like a positive turn of events for Jacob's family. Their lives have been spared, and they are given rich pastures and plentiful livestock. Yet, we know that this seeming good fortune inevitably leads to Israel's enslavement. As Jacob approaches death, his longing for home intensifies, and he asks to be laid to rest in the land God promised to Abraham.

Throughout Scripture, the people of God continually settle for something less than what he offers them. This is part of our story too. How often we seek to manufacture an experience of homecoming on the shifting sands of the world. Perhaps this is why our current season has been so hard for many of us and our neighbors? Maybe we've been trying to fashion a home for our hearts in a spiritual Egypt of sorts? With riches and delicacies, and where comfort and convenience reign?

Ash Wednesday is a reminder that things aren't always what they seem. Wherever we try to make a spiritual home for our hearts in this world, it will crumble into dust and ashes. As we have ashes imposed on our forehead, we're reminded that we too are called out of the bondage and slavery of our world, just like Moses and the Israelites were from Egypt. We're reminded that Jesus also came up out of Egypt and ascended the throne our world offered him.

Let this outward sign of Jesus' worldly throne upon your forehead assure your heart once again that the ultimate homecoming we long for is secure with Jesus, now, and always.

Invite the Holy Spirit to help you look back over this past year to give clarity to your struggles.

Fr. Mark Hall

All Saints Anglican Church, Bakersfield

February 18, 2021

Read Romans 3

²³ For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. ²⁴ Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. (Romans 3:23-24 NLT)

With yesterday's Ash Wednesday service, we have now entered into the 40 days of the GLORIOUS Lenten season. "Glorious? What do you mean, 'glorious'?" you may well ask. We just had the sign of the cross placed on our forehead in ashes to remind us of our mortality. We've buried the alleluia to remind us of the more somber tones of Lent. We have been invited 'to the observance of a holy Lent.' We've been enjoined to give up things we love, to examine ourselves with penitent hearts, to pray, to fast, to give alms, to read and meditate on Holy Scripture. Glorious? More like holy, solemn, serious, disciplined, reverent.

So why the word GLORIOUS? Let me tell you. Lent calls me back, as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, to these disciplines of Faith. I must dig in and do them, ...*working out my salvation with fear and trembling...* (Philippians 2:12). But Lent also reminds me of the humbling truth that no matter how hard I try, no matter how fervently I pray, no matter how much I discipline my body, no matter how extravagantly I give to the poor, no matter how studiously I read and meditate on God's holy Word--it will never be enough. Sin will always cause me to *fall short of God's glorious standard*, as the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 3:23.

Lent wants to strip me of any remnants of self-righteousness. The exertion of Lent gets me ready for Holy Week, for Good Friday, for Easter. It lays me bare so I am ready to receive, once again, the joyful Good News that I don't have to EARN God's love by keeping all these spiritual disciplines. *God, in his grace, freely makes us right in His sight...* through His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus did fulfill God's glorious standard and has imputed that righteousness to me. Jesus has paid the full penalty for my sin and justified me in His Father's sight. Jesus has cleansed me by His blood and filled me with His Holy Spirit. Jesus has given me, through faith in Him, the gift of eternal life in heaven in His Father's house.

So, the disciplines of Lent are not merit badges I have to earn in my pursuit of maturity in Christ. They are disciplines to be undertaken that show my gratitude for all that I have been given in Christ Jesus my Lord. They are disciplines designed to deepen my love for and draw me closer to Him. They are disciplines given, not to weigh me down, but to lift me up, preparing my heart for the remembrance of Jesus' once for all death upon the cross for my sin and its validation on Easter morn.

Now that is Good News. And without Lent it would be easy to overlook so great a salvation. But GLORIOUS Lent calls me to stop, reflect, repair, and get ready to embrace, once again, with a grateful heart, the free gift of salvation that will shortly be on vivid display during Holy Week and Easter.

May yours be a Glorious Lent.

Fr. David Miller
St. John's Anglican Church, Petaluma

February 19, 2021

Read Matthew 7

“And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (Matthew 7:3)

The first six verses in Matthew chapter seven teach us not to judge our fellows. We are told that if we judge our fellows we ourselves will be judged by God. Judged by God for being a hypocrite. It is a sin to judge others while ignoring the sin in ourselves, especially ignoring them to the point of thinking we’re not really much of a sinner at all.

You would think having a beam in the eye would be fairly easy to discern. But, in fact, we humans are good at not noticing even our most glaring sins. Satan has done a very good job of blinding us to the evil we unconsciously carry about with us each and every day.

How then, can we remove sin from ourselves if we can’t even see what our sins are? Who will save us out of the body of this death? Jesus will, of course! This is the very reason he came to earth; to destroy the works of the devil, and to heal sick souls. This is the gospel of Christ. What do we do then about the beam that is in our eye? We go to the Lord to be shown our sin and to be healed. Then, once that beam is removed from our eye, we are in a position to help our fellows find their way to the Lord, so that they might have their mote removed also. It’s important to remember that in others we are to see motes, and that in us we are to see beams.

We are to ask, seek, and knock. God will answer our questions, He will guide us to what we need to find, and He will open the door into His presence. But, we must go to Him in sincerity, truly asking, and seeking, and knocking at His door, that we may know our faults and repent of them. Let us pray that God will give us the humility not to look for the faults in others, but to see the faults in ourselves, to know, and confess that we are sinners in need of mercy and salvation from God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Fr. Randy Messsick
Ascension Anglican Church, Bakersfield

February 22, 2021

Read Psalm 122

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’” (Psalm 122)

One of the most memorial verses I learned from my childhood was the first verse of Psalm 122. I was always excited to go to Sunday school and into the “house of the Lord.” For the ancient Jewish people of the time, going to the Lord’s house was a big deal that required planning and, in most cases, a long journey. Today we have a church in almost every town, but there was only one Temple for the Jewish people, and it was in Jerusalem. The people would gather in each village and prepare to pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Before the First Temple, in David’s day, the Ark of the Covenant was placed in a tent where the Temple was later built.

As the Psalm moves into verses 2-4, we see that the psalmist has finished the first part of their journey and has entered the holy city of Jerusalem. They entered the gates and are ready to give thanks and praise to the Lord. They are gathering and praising the Lord as individuals and as a nation. When we gather in our churches, we should remember the same. We worship both singularly and as the body of Christ. In verse 5, the Psalm points out that just like God is righteous and gives just judgment, rulers are also expected to provide such judgment and justice. Let us remember to pray for righteous leaders and judges in our time.

The psalmist writes in verses 6-7, “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. ‘May they be secure who love you! Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!’” Here the tribes of Israel are praying that God will bring peace. This word “*Peace*” comes from the Hebrew word (*shalom*), which means more than just peace from war and implies completeness, soundness, safety, quiet, tranquility, contentment, and friendship. There is a sense the psalmist is not only asking for peace from war but also prosperity that comes from the absence of it.

The Psalm ends with focusing on others rather than ourselves. There is a call for peace and prosperity for the sake of “my brothers and companions.” This call to come into the house of the Lord to worship and pray for the peace of others echoes the words of Paul in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, which reads, “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in height positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” We should also pray for peace (*shalom*) over our homes, communities, states, and nation. Next time we enter to worship and prayer together, let us remember Psalm 122 as an example of how to “enter the house of the Lord.”

Fr. Michael Bush +
Christ Church Anglican, Oakhurst

February 23, 2021

Read Matthew 9:18-34

18 While he was saying these things to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." 19 And Jesus rose and followed him, with his disciples. 20 And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, 21 for she said to herself, "If I only touch his garment, I will be made well." 22 Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. (Matthew 9:18-26)

In this passage we see two individuals. The first person is a Ruler, Jairus whose daughter was at death's door. Jairus was most likely a lay person who worked in the Temple. He approached Jesus head-on, then kneels before Jesus. A sign of humility. The second person we are introduced to is a woman who had an issue of blood for twelve years. She approaches Jesus from behind, not willing to face him. It should be pointed out that this was not due to a lack of humility, but to an overabundance of shame due to her physical condition.

Both individuals have commonalities. They have a problem that, to most, would seem hopeless, and they have faith that only Jesus can help them. At the same time, their situations are very different. The Ruler would have been in good standing with the people and would have been considered religiously clean. The woman, on the other hand, would have been a social outcast and seen as religiously unclean. Therefore, anyone who even touched her would have also been considered unclean.

Not wanting to make Jesus unclean she decides that if she could only touch the hem of his garment, she would be healed. While she had faith Jesus could heal her, her guilt and shame kept her from approaching him face-to-face. Reaching out, in a weakened state and touching his garment, power went out of Jesus and she was healed. She was made clean. The amazing thing is that Jesus knew, in spite of the crowds around him, who had touched him. He turns to the woman and says, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well."

Maybe today you find yourself in the same situation as the woman in our passage. You feel the weight of sin past or present keeping you from approaching God. You know he will forgive you and cleanse you of unrighteousness, but the feelings of shame have weakened you. Maybe you are like the Ruler. You serve in the church, in whatever capacity that might be, but you have a need that none other can resolve. In either case know that God waits for you.

During this Lenten season, it is my prayer that we will be made keenly aware that as ones who have accepted the sacrifice of Christ on the cross for the atonement for our sins, we come boldly, yet humbly, before the throne of God knowing that we have been forgiven. There is no need to sneak up from behind. Knowing that we are now clean by the blood of the Lamb.

Deacon. Ron Christolear
Trinity Anglican Church

February 24, 2021

Read Acts 1:15-26

“And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”” (Acts 1:24-25)

How do you pick up the pieces in the midst of betrayal? When the damage has been so significant that lives have been fractured and broken and, in some cases, even lost, what is there to do? Wounds like this do quickly heal and if left unattended will fester and bring more pain and death.

When I was in college, I was serving as an intern at a non-denominational church that faced such a situation. There was a heartbreaking betrayal and sin committed amongst and against the leadership in the church, and as can happen all too often, sin begat sin and soon there were hardly any who could claim innocence in the matter. Different members of the leadership tried to cover over things and assume control of the church and ultimately, the poorly covered over sin resulted in the collapse of the church. That small seed of destruction that Satan had sown in the hearts of two individuals, ultimately ended in the demise of the whole church.

The feast of St. Matthias in some ways can signify what God does in the midst of working through a sinful people. While Judas had gone the way that was appointed for him, as Luke so graphically depicts in verse 18, the apostles strove to walk in the ways of the Lord, submitting themselves to the word of God as they meditated upon the Psalms. The sins of Judas were not covered over, but rather stood condemned, while the Church sheltered herself in the freshly shed blood of her Christ upon the cross. And now, just as Jesus had risen from the grave only weeks before, now new life was being breathed into the apostolic witness of the newly birthed Church.

After seeking the wisdom of God in His word, the apostles put forth two men who were of eligible status, having *“accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us”* (vv. 21-22). These men were then prayed over and offered up to the Lord to choose, by sacred lot. While we do not hear of Matthias again in scripture, we are left to infer that this decision was blessed by the Lord as the Church exploded in the sending of the Spirit shortly thereafter.

Certainly the wounds of Judas would not be forgotten, as they are recalled each year during Holy week, but this did not leave the Church paralyzed or, worse yet, desolate. When we face betrayal or destruction in the wake of crushing sins, how will we live? Shall we cover things over in shame, seeking some means to control the situation in turning from bad to worse? Or ought we to seek the Lord, laying it plainly before Him that He may guide us into the paths of His life giving word? He will not leave His children in shame or desolation. May we strive in the tough moments of sin or division, to walk in the light of His word.

Fr. Steve Braun
Trinity Anglican Church, Bakersfield

February 25, 2021

Read Matthew 10:24-end

“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

My first day as a chaplain intern on the psyche ward of a VA hospital tested my resolve for ministry. Without any training in psychology, I stepped into the locked down floor equipped only with my knowledge and love of the Lord. The door locked behind me as I set off to pray with paranoid schizophrenics and share that love of Christ. There was no going half way.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus sends off the twelve disciples to minister giving them specific instructions and authority to work miracles. There had been no supervised internship to try out their new vocations, no training wheels for ministry. So it's understandable that Jesus saw twelve pairs of eyes with deer-in-the-headlights looks as they received his charge. He meets their apprehension head-on challenging them to follow his example and step into ministry with a boldness that proclaims truth from the rooftops.

Jesus recognized that the biggest obstacle to ministry is fear. So often we chart our lives out to avoid risk, avoid uncertainty, avoid discomfort. We dare not venture into the unknown because we might come up short. We might stumble. We might fail. We seek to hang on to the life and routine that we know because it's safe.

But can you have faith without trusting Jesus and his promises? He does not call us to fulfill our potential, to build our castles, to be all that we can be. Instead, he calls us to follow him and do the works he did. For some, that might mean traveling far off lands to spread the Gospel. But for others it might mean something as mundane as washing feet. It means taking the risk of taking on something new that might hold no discernible benefit for you, but will serve the Lord's purpose. It might mean making an open ended commitment to a church ministry that just might end up crowding out other activities in your life because the Lord has need of your ministry. It's losing your life for his sake and that's risky. Is it worth the risk?

Luke reports that Jesus sent out seventy-two disciples on a similar mission. They took the risk and made the commitment. They got a taste of losing their life for Jesus' sake. They returned from their mission overjoyed from the remarkable things they had experienced empowered by God. It's that same joy that he offers each one of us if we will take the risk, lose our lives for him and make a commitment to ministry. No going half way. It is in that ministry for him that Jesus promises we will find our lives.

Fr. Gordon Kamai
Christ Church Anglican, Oakhurst

February 26, 2021

Read Matthew 11

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

We are a tired people. We are tired of the pandemic and all the issues created by it; tired of politics and the never-ending vitriol that is considered debate in our country, and tired of life in isolation and sameness. These words of Jesus are for us, each of us, whatever we are facing today. We would agree that these words of Jesus have never been more meaningful.

The Prophet Isaiah wrote of the Savior “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:4 New International Version). Jesus carried all the sins and problems of the world to the Cross, including our current weariness and troubles. As we read the account of the Transfiguration on the Last Sunday of Epiphany, we remembered that the though the glory of God was revealed in Christ on that day, He still had to go through the darkness of Calgary.

Father Mark Hall told me a story about Gerald Sittser, a pastor and professor, who had a recurring dream. In the dream he is rushing on a long beach to get to the water line before the sun sets, but he can never make it. The man had lost his family in a terrible accident, and he would awake from this dream without reaching the water. Finally, his sister told him rather than chase the sunset, he should turn to the darkness and wait for the sunrise. Our hope as Christians is that though the dark can consume us, through the Son we will rise and be with Him in this life and the next.

Let us pray “Father, when we are weary and overburdened, let us go to Christ, for the promise is sure that we will find our rest and our sunrise in Him. May our lives dazzle with the brightness of His mercy and love, so that whatever we face, His glory will be seen in our lives and in the world.” Amen.

Dcn. Leslie Arbegast
All Saints Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 1, 2021

Read Psalm 146

“Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose help is in the Lord his God...” (Psalm 146:3-5)

Before entering the seminary my career was in politics. I served as a manager and consultant on many races. I won some races and I lost most. This was due, in large part, to working for a party and candidate that was drawn into a gerrymandered district that favored the other party. The benefit of working for candidates who were generally guaranteed a loss was that I always knew politics was never an end in itself. My many losses forced me back to my faith in Jesus Christ as my ultimate hope for salvation. With the psalmist, I was reminded to “Put not my trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.” The psalmist knew that it is too easy for people like you, and me, to be drawn away from our devotion to God by a candidate’s plans and promises of salvation. There is a very strong likelihood that had I won more races than I lost I would have slipped further away from my faith having put my trust in those princes. That would be idolatry. Thank God for the losses!

The Season of Lent is a time for deep introspection when we invite the Holy Spirit to come and reveal the manifest ways that we have put our trust in princes. “Princes” may be actual politicians or they may be a stand in for any idol. There are any number of things, or people, who we think provide salvation to us. It could be health, money, sex, status, a child, a spouse, or career. Anything that we look to as the source of our ultimate joy, hope, and peace (even if they are good things in and of themselves) other than God is by definition an idol. How do we know when we have made anything an idol? The telltale sign of idolatry is our response once the idol has been taken away from us. If we are crushed by its absence, driven to despondency, and begin making choices according to its loss we will know we looked to something other than God as our source of salvation. Over the past two presidential election cycles there are two images that wreak of idolatry (there are others of course). The first image was from 2016 when some followers of the losing candidate were weeping and wailing in “safe spaces.” The second image was from this past January when some followers of the losing candidate stormed the US Capitol. In both cases, these are people who have been driven to despondency, and have acted accordingly, because their prince, their idol, was taken away and their false sense of salvation was lost.

For the disciple of Jesus Christ, Lent is a necessary reminder that there is one Prince, there is one Son of Man, in whom there is Salvation. When Jesus breathed his last he returned to the earth like every other prince. The difference is that Jesus was raised and with him his plan for your salvation. Let each of us this Lent let go of the idols that we have held so tightly, whatever they may be, so that we can embrace Jesus all the more tightly and completely.

Fr. Noah Lawson
Saint Alban’s Anglican Church, Los Banos

March 2, 2021

Read Matthew 13:24-43

“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.” Matthew 13:33

*“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast [leaven] that a woman took and hid [mixed] in a large tub [Greek: three sata; about fifty pounds] of flour until it made all the dough rise.”
(Expanded Bible)*

The Word of the kingdom of heaven, like yeast, has great power to change us. The yeast doesn't grow, it permeates, and has its inevitable effect, despite the small quantity which was hidden in three measures of flour. Leaven in an unground grain, like whole corn, does not work. There, in souls not yet humbled and broken of sin, the Word of the gospel grinds the heart. But when the heart is broken and contrite, the Word leavens it.

There are three measures of flour, about fifty pounds, a large quantity compared to a little leaven mixed in with the whole lump. As the dough must be kneaded to receive the leaven, so must our hearts be moistened, and pains be taken to be prepared for the Word. The leaven must be hidden in the heart, not so much for secrecy, for it will show itself, but for safety. There, it will do its work and make the dough rise. So, too, you must treasure up and hide the Word in your souls, that you may be sanctified by it. The leaven mixed in the dough works powerfully, speedily, silently, and insensibly. Likewise, the Word gradually, but continually, does its work without noise, for so is the way of the Spirit, who does not fail to work in your heart.

When the gospel comes into your soul, it works a universal change. The dough is the same, but the quality improves. It becomes something to savor, with flavors it never had before. It diffuses itself into all the powers and faculties of your soul, and alters the property even of the members of your body. This change causes your soul to become like the Word, as the dough and the leaven act as one.

Like dough, you rise as in a mold, changed into the same image. The gospel flavors of God, Christ, free grace, and another world, of faith, repentance, holiness, and love are wrought in your soul by the Word. When leavened it is put into the oven of trials and afflictions, but in time you are to be the enriched bread for the Master's table.

Dcn. Gregory Statezni
Trinity Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 3, 2021

Read Matthew 13:44-58

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field...” (Matthew 13:44)

Jesus often makes similes in order to illustrate an aspect of the kingdom of Heaven. Here in Matthew 13, we get several similes that help us to see a clearer picture of the message of Jesus Christ. The kingdom as a treasure is a familiar simile to those who know the Gospel according to Matthew. However familiar it is, there is one aspect that is overlooked. A professor of mine brought it to attention in the midst of a troubling year at seminary. The one who finds treasure in the field now has the responsibility to take care of the field that he has purchased in addition to the treasure.

The treasure of Jesus Christ is priceless to us. He is the one who unites us to the Father through Himself and with it comes all the heavenly riches that are our inheritance. Our inheritance is much more valuable than gold, silver, or fine jewels. It is the everlasting gift of being in the presence of God almighty where there is no shame and darkness. It is pure and holy. We have only shadows of our inheritance in this life on earth. Shadows that are cast on the rocky, cactus ridden field that has come along with the treasure.

What is this field? The field is everything that comes along with being adopted into a family. That means that not only do we have this beautiful gift, but we have the messy and often unpleasant task of walking with other people through problems and sins. We can not simply ignore them or deal with them halfheartedly. We have to meet them head on and take care of every aspect because they are as precious to the Lord as you are to Him.

The task of caring for the body of Christ is equally as important as obtaining the hidden treasure. It is part of our responsibility as people who belong to a wider body of people. That means that we must be willing to think and act outside of what we're familiar with. Not only are we to *be* challenged but to *challenge* other in holy living. The community that comes forth from these interactions gives life to us. This relationship ultimately glorifies God in whom it is all possible through the precious treasure of Jesus Christ.

Fr. Fabien Pering
Christ The King Anglican Church, Ridgecrest

March 4, 2021

Read Matthew 14

“On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother she said, ‘Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.’ He was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John’s disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.”
(Matt. 14:6-12)

It’s all there if you care to read the full account. “*Right out of Hollywood*” one might say. Or “*Pulled from the pages of some racy novel*” another might observe. Does anyone say, “*racy*” anymore? Yes, it’s all there, *covetousness, adultery, hatred, drunkenness, lust* and finally *murder*. Yet possibly a fleeting tinge of *regret* on the part of a besotted, hedonistic king but soon to be forgotten. “*Repentance*”? Absolutely nowhere to be found. But, let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that we *moderns* and *post-moderns* are somehow any different or immune to these aforementioned passions and temptations.

There is a book in my library that I need to pick up and read again. It is written by an old Bulgarian Orthodox Priest who reposed in 1993 and it is called, *The Forgotten Medicine, the Mystery of Repentance*. In the chapter by that same title the priest wrote, “*The Holy Sacrament of Confession can rightly be called ‘The Forgotten Medicine.’ The whole world is lying in evil. Every one of us is infected with the deadly disease of sin, and one can be healed from this disease! The medicine is provided, and it is miraculous at that*” and yet too few Christians avail themselves of such a powerful remedy because they view it as something more befitting ages past and not for the civilized *modern*.

The first words that our Lord preached were, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*”. Our Old Testament scriptures absolutely overflow with God’s call upon His people to *repent* and return to Him. In the second and third chapters of Revelation Christ calls five times for the churches to *repent* and in the remaining chapters of that same book God’s wrath and judgment falls upon this sinful world with the call to *repent* but it says, “*that they would not*”. It is very clear that not only the Christ rejecting world refuses to turn from her sins and *repent* but also the Church is woefully lax and even disobedient in this area.

I am not sure if our Anglican tradition and teaching was done any favors by the *aphorism* concerning the Sacrament of Confession when it says, “*All may, none must and some should*”. *Confession* is no less a Sacrament than Baptism and Holy Communion. The *General Confession* of the BCP is not *sacramental confession* and does not instruct in the art of self-examination and so what better time than the season of Lent to acquaint ourselves with the twin mysteries of “*The Forgotten Medicine*”, confession and repentance. Amen.

Dcn. John La Mar
Trinity Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 5, 2021

Read Phil. 1:1-11

*“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer for you all...
And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge ...*

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is known as the Epistle of Joy. In four short chapters the word joy or rejoice is written more than sixteen times. One would assume that he was living a stress-free life somewhere along the beautiful Mediterranean coast. Paul is in fact writing from a very precarious situation. He is a prisoner in Rome, awaiting trial and likely execution for following Jesus.

How can someone whose life and liberty are in jeopardy write with such joy? A study of Philippians is a study of joy under stress. Stress is something we all are familiar with on our journey through this life. The world is designed to heap stress upon our heads day by day. Throughout this past year stress has been taken to a whole new level with the onslaught of a plague of Biblical proportions. Daily routines have been turned upside down, jobs lost or put in jeopardy, sickness in our family, uncertainty and fear have ruled the day. In a sense we have been taken captive by the pandemic, cut off and imprisoned in our own homes. Much the same way Paul was imprisoned. How then the joy?

Paul writes with joy, because he is living in joy - a joy that cannot be touched by the circumstances of life or the stress from the world. His life is not grounded here in this world, his life is found “In Christ.” He has knowledge of a particular kind, heavenly knowledge. It is not that he just believes the truth of the gospel, but that he knows the person who is truth – Jesus. This knowledge transforms him; this knowledge sustains him; this knowledge is a fountain of joy within his soul. How then does he access this fountain? In a word – Prayer.

We are privileged to have on record Paul’s very own personal prayers. Much can be gained by paying close attention to these passages where Paul breaks into prayer. In these first verses of Philippians he gives us the key to opening the door of joy under stress, showing his heart of prayer for the church, “I am always offering prayer and thanksgiving for you all.” How wonderful if we follow his example in praying for one another.

He moves on at end of the passage to prayer for them specifically. It is this prayer that I will leave you with for your devotions this week. For when we take the word of God and pray it for ourselves, a powerful connection results. Here is an example of Paul’s Prayers, personalized for you. Your spiritual assignment – pray this prayer daily for the week ahead.

*Lord Jesus I pray,
That my love may abound more and more in real knowledge
and all discernment. So, that I may approve the things that are excellent,
So that I may be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ. May I be filled with the fruit of
righteousness, which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.*

Fr. Jack Estes
Ascension Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 8, 2021

Read Matthew 17:1-23

This passage of Scripture is filled with many aspects of the power and presence of Jesus.

First we witness, from Saint Matthew's account, the Transfiguration of Jesus. Up until now, the Apostles have only experienced Jesus "in the flesh". While they have witnessed numerous miracles – Jesus has remained in appearance among them as a man of flesh & blood. Now His face shines with the Glory of God as He speaks to Moses and Elijah on the mountain.

Next we read that Jesus heals a young boy and casts out the demon which has possessed him. It seems that the Apostles are unable to.

Finally – Jesus speaks prophetically about His coming Trial, Death and Resurrection.

Something to note about each of these events is the response of the Apostles. After seeing the incredible display of the Transfiguration - they come to a better understanding of Jesus' role in the "heavenly" scheme of things. As they move down from that mountaintop experience and begin to be faced with a different set of circumstances – both with the boy who is demon possessed and then with Jesus prophesying His death and resurrection – both doubt and distress set in to their hearts.

And we can be just like that. We have that experience on the Mountain that changes our lives and draws us closer to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and we are all the better for it. In fact we can't wait to tell others. But then, Life confronts us, just like it did for the Apostles 2000 years ago; and we can become quickly deflated and "in the Valley".

Lent can be a Valley experience that we are purposefully called to as we take a deep look at our inabilities and imperfections and hold them up to God – not for comparison - but for healing, restoration and reconciliation to Him and those around us. Speak to Him from that place of need and receive the blessing of His excellent Love.

Dear Lord, today I come to you breaking and broken. So often have I allowed my faith to only be strong on the Mountain. Meet me in my Valley with your Grace that I might begin a journey of healing, restoration and reconciliation as I prepare my life to remember Your love for me on the Cross and the Gift of Your resurrection. Amen.

Fr. Gerry Grossman
St. Nicholas Anglican Church, Atwater

March 9, 2021

Read Psalm 19

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord,
my rock and my redeemer. Psalm 19:14*

CS Lewis' once wrote that Psalm 19 is "the greatest poem in the psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world." What is so beautiful about this psalm? I would suggest that it is so beautiful because it is dripping, like honey from the comb, with grace!

Psalm 19 begins with a beautiful declaration of the way in which creation, the stars and moon and sun, all give glory to God. They point to God's power and beauty and creativity. "Their voice goes out through all the earth" declaring God's glory.

And just as the sun shines and "nothing is hidden from its heat," so the "law of the Lord is perfect" and searches us. God's ways are "more to be desired...than gold...sweeter also than honey."

I remember an Old Testament professor once saying that there were two things at which the Hebrews never ceased to marvel: Creation and the Law.

Why? Because both were manifestations of God's gracious love.

The Law, like the stars and the sun, point us to God and show us how to stay close to Him. But the Law also exposes our hearts. "Who can discern his errors?"

The funny thing is, the more we fall in love with God and the more we seek to live in accord with His perfect will, the more we become aware of the fact that we simply cannot do it. We become aware that not only do we knowingly disobey God in "presumptuous sins," but we unknowingly sin through our "hidden faults."

And so we pray.

"Declare me...keep back your servant also from" sin, "let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight." God knows we cannot fully keep the Law and invites us to join in the prayer of Psalm 19, that God would cleanse our hearts of all our hidden faults, and give us grace to manifest our love of God in word and deed.

Has Lent made you more aware of your sinfulness? More aware of your failing before God? If it has, that's good! You are in the right posture to receive His grace! Look to the heavens and behold the glory of God's gracious love for you, and allow His grace, like honey from the comb, to cover and sweeten your soul.

Fr. Karl E. Dietze
Trinity Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 10, 2021

Read Philippians 4

*“Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown,
so stand fast in the Lord, beloved.” (Philippians 4:1)*

The letter to the Philippians testifies to the immeasurable goodness of God towards His beloved people, the Church. Beloved brothers and sisters in the Diocese of San Joaquin, this includes us! In the midst of our trials and sufferings the Lord is with us and we are with one another in that mystery which is the Body of Christ, united to our head Jesus Christ and to one another.

Paul gives a simple direction to his readers: standfast in the Lord. This direction to standfast is just as applicable to us today as it was to the Philippians. Our hope is not in the changeable world – it is in the unchangeable love of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Let us be not afraid.

Lent is a time for practicing that steadfastness in tangible ways and the rest of the fourth chapter of Philippians gives concrete directions to believers on how they will be able to stand fast.

First, rejoice in the Lord always. Rejoicing is not ignoring the difficulties and pains of our lives – it is reminding ourselves of the Lord’s love for us and of His goodness which sustains us through trials. We are not to rejoice in our own strength or power, but in the Lord’s strength and power.

Second, be gentle with ourselves and one another. We can be gentle in all our doings because we are always in a state of safety – safe in the palm of our Lord’s hand. Roughness, which is the opposite of gentleness, frequently arises from anxiety or hurrying. We have no need for either when we remember that we are safe and always in God’s perfect time.

Third, avoid anxiety. How? Paul advises us to bring everything directly to the Lord by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. This practice of taking our requests directly to the Lord allows every aspect of our lives to be guided by the Lord and His Wisdom.

Finally, Paul presents the real key to our ability to stand fast: center our thoughts on the Lord. How? Paul counsels us to think on good things. In the end, Paul is advising us to meditate on the Lord because only He is good. Bishop John-David used to say that it is useless to tell someone not to think about bananas – suddenly bananas are the only thing on the person’s mind. Instead, tell the person to think about oranges. St. Paul offers similar counsel.

Rather than trying to avoid anxiety-provoking thoughts, fill that space with the Lord. Read His word daily. Pray the prayers of the Book of Common Prayer, such as the Great Litany. Sing hymns, especially those which remind us of God’s provision in distress. Beloved brothers and sisters in the Diocese of San Joaquin, may we stand fast in the Lord this day and always.

Dcn. Erin Giles
Jesus the Good Shepherd Anglican Church
Henderson, NV

March 11, 2021

Read Psalm 27:13-14

*“I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD.*

For the past year, confidence and patience for most people has been wearing thin.

When I first heard of the virus spreading over the world, the first thought that came into my mind was from Luke 21:26 King James Version (KJV);

²⁶ Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken.” However, I did not experience this fear. Despite the chaos and uncertainty in the world due to the Pandemic, I have not been fearful. According to the experts, I should be concerned because of my medical history. Instead, I am confident, and careful!

Today I heard about the increase in the number of people who are clinically depressed and suffering from anxiety. Everyone’s life has been disrupted; many suffer from the isolation and uncertainty that are part of the things that must be done to be safe. But God is a God of hope, not condemnation. He desires all of us to take heart, regardless of what is going on around us.

Lent is a time of reflection and yet a time of anticipation. It is the time to take inventory; to evaluate our relationship with God, and to make sure that all is right in our relationship with Him. By doing what Jesus did (spending time abiding in the Father), we too can have the peace that passes understanding, just as He did, as He anticipated that first Easter. He knew what He was facing and tried to prepare his disciples as much as He could, but they just could not comprehend.

We do not need to be fearful as we consider what He faced! as so many do who do not trust in Christ. We can allow God to reassure us through His word and sacraments that we indeed can be confident, regardless of what our future holds.

*¹³ “ I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD*

Dcn. Skip Hill
Ascension Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 12, 2021

Read Matthew 19:16-20:16

From the Gospel readings for this day we hear from Matthew 19: 16-20:16 a couple of striking phrases from Jesus; first the parable of the Rich Man asking what he must do to inherit the Kingdom of God. Added to this is the parable of the Householder and the Laborers.

To receive understanding of these parables we must first be reconciled to God; otherwise we will be trying to figure out how these examples actually apply to us in this worldly life of today. However, with the Holy Spirit in our lives these passages tend to leap out at us.

To the rich man he doesn't say it's impossible to access the Kingdom, but he had better check his priorities. To the laborers or disciples Jesus tells them they all have their assignments, although not all equal but all the same necessary to spread the Good News to the world.

From Colossians we acknowledge the following: Paul's letter to the Colossians speaks to us today just as it did so long ago to the Colossians. "And you, who once were estranged...he has now reconciled." It says, "He has now reconciled." It doesn't say, "He will reconcile us." It doesn't say, "He reconciles us in the by and by when we get to heaven." It says he reconciles us now, right now where we are in this temporal material world with all its trials and tribulations. God's loving presence is here with us in the midst of this life. We don't have to wait until we get to heaven to know the abundance of God's glorious blessings. Oh, we will see God's glory in an even greater way in heaven. But we now have earthly communion with our heavenly Father.

In Proverbs we hear we hear echoes of righteous living examples. In Psalm 31 the sounds of encouragement that the Lord is faithful and preserves us that rejoices in our hearts. Especially in Verse 24 we hear the words that gives us hope, "Be strong, all of us who wait for the Lord."

So the passages today should aid us in our Lenten period as we wait the glorious day of the Lord.

Dcn. Chuck Kendall
Christ Church Anglican, Oakhurst

March 15, 2021

Read Proverbs 14

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” (Proverbs 14:12)

It’s easy to get turned around sometimes and lose our way. I remember taking three high school students backpacking. We began planning the trip a few weeks earlier in the small group I led. We chose a location suggested by our priest and got the appropriate map to chart our path. The goal was to make our way to the Upper Kern, set up camp, and go fishing.

The Book of Proverbs is a map of sorts that charts a course through this life. Yet, throughout the book, there is a contrast made between the only two available paths: Wisdom and folly. The wise travel the path that consists of trusting in the Lord. The fool, on the other hand, wanders after his whimsical desires. One leads to life, while the other death. The book does not provide a third alternative.

Yet, in our daily lives, things don’t always seem so clear cut. As we left the car and began on the trail, there was much excitement. We had the map handy, and the path was clear, for a while at least. I’m not even sure how we lost the way, but we did. Before long, we were scrambling down a field of boulders. This was before GPS, and none of us had a compass. Fortunately, we still had a general sense of where the river was and headed in that direction. We eventually made it safely there.

Fortunately, the way that I thought seemed right didn’t end our death. The only injury was my bruised ego, and we had an inconvenient trek over boulders. I imagine that if you are reading right now, you are already on the right path. The path of wisdom and trusting the Lord. Or at least you’d like to be. In the New Testament, we learn that Jesus alone is wisdom, and so it naturally follows that he is also the Way, the Truth, and the Life (1 Cor 1:24,30; Jn 14:6).

Lent is a gift the Church offers us to reexamine our journey so far. To look back and see where we may have veered from the course and to explore why. We may have got turned around, missed a signpost, or were too engrossed in the passing sights. The Good News is that it’s the direction we head, not the speed, or even our ability to follow the trail that matters. Sometimes the trail is washed out or grown over. At those times it’s about keeping our focus on Jesus, to keep leading us in the right direction.

*Has the Holy Spirit ever guided you in the right direction in uncertain times, like a GPS?
Ask the Spirit to guide you in this way through the Word or by self-examination.*

Fr. Mark Hall
All Saints Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 16, 2021

Read Matthew 22:1-33

“The wedding feast is ready, but those who were invited are not worthy.” (Matt. 22:8)

St. Matthew would have us imagine the kingdom of heaven as a king who gives a wedding feast for his son, but struggles to fill the seats around his table for the stubbornness of his invited guests. These guests “paid no attention” to the king’s messengers, preoccupied as they were with their farms and their businesses (22:5). For whatever reason, their sense of necessity led them to believe that it was more prudent or worthwhile to spend the day attending to these matters than honor their intention to attend this wedding feast.

By this point in his gospel, Matthew has already emphasized Jesus’ promises that “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (19:29) and that it is not only difficult, but literally “impossible” for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (19:26).

Knowing this, the Lord prepared Israel to honor their invitation to the wedding feast by requiring three annual convocations: “Three times in the year, you shall keep a feast to me” (Exod. 23:14). On the first, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Lord has Israel commemorate their deliverance from Egypt. Likewise, on the Feasts of Firstfruits and Ingathering, the Lord mandates that “None shall come before me empty-handed” (23:15). These three feasts ground Israel’s history and economics—they remind them who they are and what their labor is for. Going through the trouble of traveling to Jerusalem every year was a liturgical reminder to Israel that all of them were all on a journey to the kingdom of heaven, and that all that they were and all that they did was founded on the Lord’s gracious delivery out of slavery and into the new land.

Moses sternly warns Israel to “take care lest you forget the Lord your God... when you have eaten and are full and built good houses and live in them” (Deut. 8:11-20). He foresees this morning’s parable: there will come a time when the Lord’s people are so well blessed that they care more for their own houses than for the divine fellowship in the household of God, and even neglect the wedding of the king’s son.

We keep this Lent to prepare for the Easter Feast, which happens to fulfill the Feast of Firstfruits. Today, we remember humbly that even if we attend too much to our houses and businesses, the Lord will fill the seats around his table, with or without us: “Those servants went out and gathered all whom they found, the bad and the good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests” (Matt. 22:10). At the end of the day, the Father calls us simply to have the bandwidth to make the trip and raise a glass and join in the joy of his precious Son at the appointed time.

Mr. Jack Franicevich
Candidate for the Holy Orders
Nashotah House Theological Seminary
St. John’s Anglican Church, Petaluma

March 17, 2021

Read Matthew 22:34-23:12

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” (Matthew 22:36)

Most Christians know the answer Jesus gives to this question, and especially if they are Anglicans. The summary of the law, as it is called, is read at every celebration of the Holy Eucharist. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22: 37-40)

What does it mean to love God with all our hearts and all our souls and all our minds? I suppose it means to love Him with our whole selves, to put Him above all other interests in life, to put Him first in all of our considerations, thinking and acting in accordance with His will, not begrudgingly, but out of sincere love for Him. There is, of course, much to love God for, not the least of which is that He so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life!

What does it mean to love our neighbor as ourselves? I suppose one way to answer this would be to think of what it is that others do towards us that make us feel loved by them, and then do these things for others. Being loved by others is a wonderful feeling that truly does cover a multitude of sins. It can heal serious wounds and make life so much more joyful. Often it is when someone shows kindness to us by doing something to help us. That is, by taking thoughtful actions that require them to give of themselves.

Paul says we should “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” (Rom. 12:10) Our fallen nature wants others to honor us, but in the Kingdom of God we are to concern ourselves with honoring others. Saint Peter says “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.” (1 Peter 1:22) Our fallen natures are polluted by sin and so we don’t earnestly love others from a pure heart, in fact, we refuse to love others because of our self-centered fears and desires. And the Lord said to Moses “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” (Lev. 19:18). On the contrary, our fallen natures live in resentment and the desire to punish others.

Obedying then the summary of the law, given to us by Jesus, requires that we be reborn, that we die to self and become new creations in Christ. Thanks be to God that we are born again by believing in Jesus and living in newness of life, to the honor and glory of his name. Amen

Fr. Randall Messick
Ascension Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 18, 2021

Read Ephesians 1:1-14

“In Him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7)

It has been over 155 years since the end of institutional slavery in the United States of America. The word “*redemption*” would have meant something very different for a slave on a plantation in the pre-civil war south than it would to us today. In Paul’s day, slavery was part of society. If we read Ephesians 6:5-8, we see this as Paul gives slaves and masters instructions on treating each other as Christian brothers. In this context, Paul uses the word “*redemption*” from the Greek (*apolutrōsis*), which refers to buying back a slave. It can also be translated as freeing someone from payment of a ransom.

So, what was the price of this payment for our ransom as slaves to sin and this world? It was the very blood of Jesus, the Son of God. Most of us have heard the famous verse in the New Testament, John 3:16 (ESV), which reads, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” When we believe in Jesus, we do not perish because his blood is our ransom, and we are no longer slaves to sin. We are forgiven and shown grace through the redemptive act of the cross.

What does Paul mean when he finishes Ephesians 1:7 with the words, “according to the riches of his grace?” God has paid our ransom according to the “*riches*,” which can also be translated as abundance, of his grace. This abundance of grace implies God’s favor on us. We see this favor pointed out in verse 5, “he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.” Here we see God’s favor; we are sons and daughters of our heavenly Father through Jesus. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit has sealed our adoption. We have become temples as 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 points out, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

Let us not forget that we are now God’s favored possessions bought by the blood that poured through the nailed hands and feet of the Word made flesh.

Fr. Michael Bush
Christ Church Anglican, Oakhurst

March 19, 2021

Read: *Matthew 1:18-26*

21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:21

If you were to ask a group of individuals, "Who is Jesus?" You would get the following answers. "He was a good teacher." "He was someone who taught love." "He was a prophet." Of course, this isn't an exhaustive list, but it's fairly representative of how most people, even some who profess to be Christians, view Jesus. There are two problems with the preceding answers. First, these answers don't even begin to scratch the surface of who Jesus is and why he came. Second, the question *asked* uses the present tense *is* while the answers *given* use the past tense *was*.

For most people, and even some Christians, Jesus *did* things in the past. They see him as a person who lived two-thousand years ago and who has very little to do with their life today. Matthew 1:21 tells us that Jesus will *save* his people from their sins. The word *save* is an active verb. It carries with it the idea of *keeping or preserving*. When Jesus saves us, he also *keeps us*, and he also *preserves us*.

Jesus' death on the cross was not the end of the story. As we continue through the season of Lent, we focus not only on His death, but his resurrection. Jesus is as alive today as he was two-thousand years ago. He is as active in the Father's purpose of saving His people as he was while he walked upon the earth.

The act of Jesus saving us is not a one-time thing. In our own lives Jesus continues to save us. As I said earlier, the word *save* is an active verb. We are saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. Jesus said,³⁹ "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day." John 6:39

So, am I suggesting that we bear no responsibility in our journey of salvation? No! Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (2:12-13). Paul is saying to put one's salvation into practice. We are not saved to then go about our business and be comforted in the fact that we have obtained our "fire insurance." Neither is Paul saying that salvation is something that we can earn by our works in addition to what Jesus has already accomplished. We are saved by Grace alone, through Faith alone, in Christ alone. At the same time, we are commanded to abide in Christ. This is not an option. John 15:4-5, John 8:31, and 2 John 1:9.

It is Jesus who saves us, and this salvation is worked out as we abide in Christ. How do we exhibit that "working out of our own salvation?" We do so as we Love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind; and as we Love our Neighbors as ourselves. This includes prayer, meditating on scripture, worship, fellowship, and outreach. Amen

Deacon Ron Christolear
Trinity Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 22, 2021

Read Matthew 25:31-end

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” (Matthew 25:31-32)

Sifting, sorting, separating things into their proper place and compartment; bringing something from chaos and confusion into clarity and order. The Lord has been at this work from the beginning. We see this in the book of Genesis, as the Lord creates and brings things into their proper order and place when God created light and separated darkness from it and brought order to an earth that was without form and void (Gen 1). Likewise, God is in the business of bringing His new creation from chaos and confusion into clarity and order.

If any of you have been a part of a church for more than five minutes, you know that it can be a messy place, full of messy people. Not everyone who enters through the doors, or in our current circumstances, logs in online on a given Sunday, will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. If one of the twelve was cast out into utter darkness how should we expect any less from those who are in our own midst. I am sure that as you are reading this, even as I wrote this, there is an uncomfortable feeling when we look at this topic in the face. But the fact is that Jesus speaks numerous times in the gospels, and the prophets bear witness to this truth in the Old Testament, that not all who offer lip service to God are a part of His flock. There are goats among the sheep.

Sometimes this is plain and obvious. We can look at certain popular figures in our culture who claim to be Christian but whose lives simply do not match up with the call of discipleship. Perhaps we can think of examples in our own personal circles of family or friends who fall into this pattern. To take things a step further, perhaps we can think of aspects of our own lives, where we simply do not live up to the call of discipleship. There are goats among the sheep that is the flock of our own hearts. This is what Paul is all too keenly aware of in his letter to the church in Rome: *“For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Rom 7:21-22).*

So what is taking charge of your heart? Who is working to separate the sheep from the goats in the battle that is being waged over your own soul? What dominion has the King of Kings laid hold of in your own heart? When He creates something and brings clarity and order to it, He speaks over it that “it is good.” May God sift and separate the sheep from the goats in our own lives this Lent, that we may find the new creation of our hearts on Easter Sunday, with the proclamation, “It is good. Press on that you may inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for you are blessed by my Father.”

Fr. Steve Braun
Trinity Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 23, 2021

Read Matthew 26:1-30

*“When she poured this perfume on my body,
she did it to prepare me for burial.” (Matthew 26:12)*

I once heard the definition of a “religious fanatic” as someone who loves Jesus more than you do. Ironically, that definition might apply to Jesus’ disciples when they complained about the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with her expensive perfume. They suggest a better use of her gift; sell it and give the money to the poor. How generous they are with someone else’s treasure.

Matthew does not say much about this woman, but her act was unquestionably excessive. Indeed, the perfume was valued at a year’s wages! We might even wonder about her emotional stability as she interrupts a meeting of men in a culture where women were always to defer to men. Yet in her act of extravagance, she silently models Jesus’ command to love with all that she is and has. And though some might question the woman’s economic or mental balance, Jesus honors her devotion by giving her burial-anointing rights. In the face of the disciples’ reproach for the woman, Jesus steps in to save her self-respect.

Matthew has strategically placed this story at the beginning of the Passion Narrative and between two accounts of hatred of Jesus. It follows the priests’ plotting in the High Priest’s palace to kill Jesus and precedes Judas’ treachery of conspiring with the chief priests for Jesus’ arrest.

We live in a day when the current events clamor for our attention and that clamor is amplified on social media. The causes and concerns can easily work to push Jesus out of the picture and to distance ourselves from his command to love God and love one another. The rebukes can even come from our fellow Christians as they prioritize their particular social welfare concerns over devotion to Jesus. In the midst of all of the social unrest and conflicting prescriptions for remedies, the woman of extravagant devotion calls us back to worship. She reminds us of the gratitude we owe to the one who made an extravagant offering of himself so that we might enjoy eternal life.

The poor we will always have with us, the woes of the world never cease. So let us never neglect to love our neighbor, but let us never let the woes of the world distract from the extravagant devotion we rightly owe our Lord. We can do that by keeping our gaze on heaven and our glance on the world.

Fr. Gordon Kamai
Christ Church Anglican, Oakhurst

March 24, 2021

Read Ephesians 4:17 - end

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)

N.T. Wright categorized the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians into two sections. Chapters 1-3 he titled “Ephesians and the Mission of God.” Chapters 4-6 he called “Ephesians and the church of God.” Verses 4-32 gave specific instructions of how the life of a Christian should appear. St. Paul began by saying followers of Jesus were not to live as the Gentiles lived. *“They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts” (Ephesians 4:18 New International Version).* St. Paul then wrote that they had *“lost all sensitivity” (Ephesians 4:19 NIV).* This was a sad commentary on the culture in Ephesus, as well as on our culture today. The loss of empathy, respect and sensitivity toward others breeds objectification and cruelty. St. Paul continued that the follower of Jesus was *“to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24 NIV).*

Forgiveness, another virtue of God, is mocked by the those who do not know Christ or who have rejected His call. Throughout the world vengeance and retaliation are called for to find justice when in fact, the opposite occurs. When we are unwilling to forgive, St. Paul said we give the devil a foothold in our life, making us unable to continue God’s work for the Kingdom, and can lead to *“bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice” (Ephesians 4:31 NIV).* The followers of Jesus are called always to forgive, not making exception for individuals or institutions who may throw the forgiveness back at us.

As we continue in Lent, may we truly assess our lives and ask for the grace to live in kindness and compassion *“forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32 NIV)*

Dcn. Leslie Arbegast
All Saints Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 25, 2021

Read Psalm 138

*“For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly,
but the haughty he knows from afar.” (Psalm 138:6)*

I have worn eye glasses for most of my life. I remember as a child going to the optometrist for my annual check-up. On one particular visit, the doctor sat me in the chair and asked me how my vision was. I shared that even with my glasses I still had blurred vision. The doctor asked to see my glasses. He took one look at the lenses and said that they were absolutely filthy. He took a bottle of eye glass cleaner and washed away my finger prints and dust. The doctor gave the glasses back to me and asked how my vision was. Amazingly, I could see! All that I needed for clear vision was to take the time to clean my glasses regularly. Who knew it was that easy!?

Like my eye glasses, the human heart is a sort of lens that allows us to clearly see God, our neighbor, and ourselves for who we really are. It is a daily task to wipe away all of the grime, all of the sin, that builds up in our hearts and prevents us from seeing clearly. When we let even one day go by without maintaining the cleanliness of our hearts we find ourselves walking blindly and getting into more and more trouble. So what is the key to maintaining a clean heart and clear vision? The psalmist tells us that we must maintain a lowly heart. Speaking to his disciples in Matthew 5:8 Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Within the context of the beatitudes having a pure and lowly heart means to be free of possessiveness, be capable of mourning, to hunger and thirst for what is right, to be merciful and loving, and not be divided. The key to each of these characteristics is first to be poor in spirit. This means that you are completely dependent on the grace and mercy of God because you have recognized that there is nothing in you that makes you worthy of God’s regard. An impoverished, lowly, and pure heart is one that clearly sees God for who God is and sees itself for what it really is. Conversely, to be haughty means that you see yourself as already being worthy of God apart from His grace. The psalmist reminds us that God will have nothing to do with a haughty heart and instead that God embraces the lowly heart.

Our pride cuts us off from God. Our arrogance blinds our hearts. How is your heart’s vision today? If you are like me, you know all too well that the heart must make room for the Holy Spirit to come and wipe away the blinding filth that has prevented a clear vision of God, our neighbor, and ourselves. Invite the Holy Spirit today to lovingly restore the vision of your heart, enabling you to embrace your poverty and receive His loving, merciful, and gracious regard in and through his son Jesus Christ.

Fr. Noah Lawson
Saint Alban’s Anglican Church, Los Banos

March 26, 2021

Read Mathew 26:51-78

And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. Matthew 26:78

Jesus had warned Peter that before the rooster crowed, he [Peter] would deny Him three times. Peter had vehemently protested the statement of Jesus declaring that he would die for the Lord. And yet later, we find him weeping bitterly. Jesus had warned him that his flesh was weak.

Why is it that we start out thinking that we are super-saints from the planet Krypton, that we are strong and will defeat the powers of darkness singlehandedly, while thinking that others are weak? We must beware of boasting in our flesh or having any confidence in it. Paul said, "I know that in me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing." Paul writing to the Philippians declared "We glory in Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh." A wise man also wrote, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

I am glad the story of Peter doesn't end with him failing beside a Roman fire! That night, as he sat there, he received a *wakeup call* from a strange source. Just as Jesus had predicted, a rooster crowed to announce to Peter that he was in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing with the wrong people. When this happened, Peter began the process of coming back.

What happened in his life may need to happen in your life. When he realized where he was spiritually, it literally broke his heart. He next sought to make his heart right with the Lord.

We need to understand how our sins affect more than ourselves? Sin has an impact on the family, the community, and the church. Sin deeply grieves our Lord Jesus Christ. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to shine His spotlight of the Word of God into the deepest recesses of our soul and expose all the sin in our life. We must be humble and honest before the Lord so that He will bless us and work revival in our lives.

After Peter's fall and repentance, he later met Jesus early one morning beside the seashore. There, Jesus reminded Peter of His love for him and renewed His call on Peter's life. In other words, Jesus took Peter's failure and put it behind him forever and restored him to the place of blessing. This is what He wants for you!

Dcn. Gregory Statezni
Trinity Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 29, 2021

Read Matthew 27:57 - 28 end

“And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock.” Matthew 27:59-60b

In the icon of the nativity, you'll find that Jesus is wrapped in a white cloth while lying in a manger, surrounded by Mary and Joseph in a cave. The icon is interesting in light of the gospel reading today because they are mirrored images of one another with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as the mirror line of our perspective.

On one side of the mirror line, Jesus' birth initiates the reality of God's presence among his creation. His coming reveals that God is up to something and fulfilling His promises He made to those in the days of old. He promised to make the seed of Abraham a blessing to the nations and that a righteous branch will shoot out of the stump of Jesse. Those promises are revealed in the person of Jesus Christ as shown in the icon of the nativity.

On one other side of the mirror line, Jesus is twice being laid in a newly hewn tomb and swaddled in a clean linen shroud. The obvious reality of his death is apparent, for no one else is laid in a tomb other than those who have died. Joseph of Arimathea took care of Jesus by wrapping and laying him in his own tomb. Only to then be the first born of the dead from the virgin tomb despite the best effort of the Jewish authority in Jerusalem.

These two mirrored images highlight a beautiful reversal of life through death and ultimate fulfilment of the promises of God. We are given new birth, like that of a newborn baby, through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Fr. Fabien Pering
Christ The King Anglican Church, Ridgecrest

March 30, 2021

Read: *Mark 1:1-13*

“And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” (Mark 1:4,5)

This same narrative appears in Matt. 3:5,6 saying, *“People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the **whole region** of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized in the Jordan River.”* Pretty big turnout wouldn't you say? *“all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan”*. I have to ask, “Why can't our churches, our pastors and preachers get a turnout like that?” We preach baptism, repentance, forgiveness of sins and we even do John one better; we preach the name of Jesus.” So, where are they? Was the majority of them just uneducated *country bumpkins* who were easily swayed by a charismatic preacher? Did he frighten them with pictures of hell and burning brimstone? Or possibly, was the Spirit of God at work among them, convicting them of their sins and drawing them to repentance and baptism?

In the play, *Death takes a holiday*, the writer tells the story of the dark angel taking three days off from his *work* to walk bodily among humanity that he might understand them better. When we look upon the plight of this world and the decline of western Christianity one might wonder if the Holy Spirit has taken some time off as well. The Church, particularly here in the West, is in great need of *revival*, which translates as *“bringing to life **again**”*. Our country experienced three or four *Great Awakenings* in the life of the Church here in America and we are in great need of *awakening*. This world, our country and the Church is long overdue for *repentance* but how can that take place unless there is a *mighty* conviction of sin? Concerning the “work of the Holy Spirit” our Lord said, *“When he comes, he will **convict** the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me;”* (John 16:8,9). Again, Jesus says, *“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil”* (John 3:19).

How can there be *repentance* and *confession of sin* if minds are so darkened and hearts so hardened that the convicting work of the Holy Spirit cannot penetrate? The penitential season of Lent is an appropriate time to reflect upon our lack of zeal for the things of God. Broken and convicted hearts should accompany our bent knees when we submit to the imposition of ashes with the accompanying words, *“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return”*. Let true *revival* accompany our *repentance* and let it begin first in our own hearts. Amen.

Dcn. John La Mar
Trinity Anglican Church, Bakersfield

March 31, 2021

Read Mark 1:14-31

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;
Repent, and believe the good news."*

As we are following Jesus through this season of Lent, we find ourselves back at the beginning of his ministry with his first words found in the Gospel according to Mark. His opening declaration sets the stage for all that follows. In these words, we find the description of his message and mission: "The Kingdom of God has come near." The kingdom of heaven arrived on earth in the person of Jesus Christ. A fundamentally new reality has come into being, now present and beckoning for all to come and participate. This is the gospel – the good news. We no longer must live in bondage to sin, under the oppression of the world, the flesh, and the devil. We are invited to live in the realm of light, in righteousness peace and joy, in the Holy Spirit. Jesus mission was to proclaim the kingdom and call everyone to enter in. How? Repent and Believe.

The gospel according to Mark is compelling. Affecting all whom it touches and accomplishing the purposes of God. In Jesus, the kingdom has arrived and moves outward into the world, calling for participation. All who encounter him are compelled to action. A decision must be made to either follow him, or to turn away. The kingdom of God has come near. He teaches with authority, the sick are healed, the demons are cast out. How must you respond: Repent and Believe. In other words, take action. It is important to note these are both verbs. Repent literally means to turn around and go in a different direction. The original word we translate believe is properly rendered "act with faith." The kingdom is here compelling a response - turn from the world, activate your faith in God and enter in. Will you continue to live in the world, according to the ways of the world? or, Will you live in the Kingdom of God, following the ways of Jesus? He is the express revelation of what it means to live in the kingdom.

The proclamation of the kingdom by Jesus continues to be as compelling in our day as it was in the beginning. We are called to repent, believe, act in faith, and to enter a different reality – a realm of light and life. As we near the end of our Lenten journey, the gospel according to Mark takes us back to the start. Before we enter Holy Week, let us carefully consider our own answers to the questions: "Am I living in the world and visiting the kingdom?" or "Am I living in the kingdom and visiting the world.?" "Am I bringing the world and its ways with me into the gathering of God's people?" or "Am I bringing the will and the ways of God out into the world?"
The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near!

Fr. Jack Estes

Ascension Anglican Church, Bakersfield

April 1, 2021

Read John 13:1-17

In the Gospel Lesson chosen for today, Jesus washes the feet of the Apostles at their last meal together before the terrible events of what we now know as Holy Week. Even though He knows what lay before Him, Jesus does not ask for sympathy or pity. He takes this final gathering with His closest circle to teach them about the deepest meaning of service, servant-hood and love.

And His teaching is not wrapped around a worldly understanding of affection about who and how to serve. Jesus doesn't tell the Apostles that they get to pick and choose who to serve. Rather, by His example of washing their feet, Jesus takes on the role of the lowliest servant in the household – the one who washes, with his bare hands, the dust and grime from the feet of those who have gathered together by the Master. And Jesus even washed the feet of the one who would betray Him.

Picture the scene: we read the Jesus has taken off the outer garments that He is wearing in order to perform this service. He then washes the dirty feet of twelve men – 24 feet! I'm certain He had to dump out the dirty water basin and refill the clean jug more than once. This was not the modern scene that many of us have experienced during the Foot Washing that takes place in church.

Many years ago, the Bishop that ordained me said, "If you want to know if you are really a servant – be aware of how you act when you are treated like one."

Are you serving in all love and not just a worldly affection for some?

Dear Lord, please give me a heart to see the opportunities for servant-hood.

Let my eyes be opened.

My hands be strengthened.

And my spirit be renewed.

Amen.

Fr. Gerry Grossman
St. Nicholas Anglican Church, Atwater

April 2, 2021

Read John 18

“[Pilate] told them, ‘I find no guilt in him. But you have a custom...’ John 18:38-39

We find one of the most devastating in existence upon the lips of Pilate: but. We all know that word well. Someone takes a pause after saying something positive and we wait for it... “but.”

Upon the lips of Pilate, it gives voice to the ultimate way of the world. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent. Pilate knows that Jesus’ adversaries will do anything to get rid of Him, to have Him killed. Pilate knows he has the authority to do whatever he wants. “I find no guilt in him, but...”

But what?

It is a sentence that should not ever be said. “I find no guilt in him.” Period. Full stop. End of sentence.

But. “But I’m willing to give you what you want. I’m willing to look the other way. I’m willing to let a man die instead of upsetting you.”

What would make a man utter those words?

While scholars differ in their opinion as to why Pilate caved in, the explanation that makes the most sense to me is that Pilate knew his power was fragile and he didn’t want to lose it. Rome wasn’t thrilled with him and these people could jeopardize what power he had. So rather than lose what he most valued, even at the cost of a human life, Pilate found a way around the issue.

But.

There’s a little bit of Pilate in all of us. That’s part of the challenge of Good Friday. No one gets to stand at the foot of the cross of Christ without knowing that they put Jesus there. All of us has a part of our heart that utters “but.” I know it is wrong, I know I shouldn’t do it, but...

The good news is that our sinful “but” is met by God’s gracious adversative. “*But* God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4-5).

We don’t deserve it. But God gives it anyway. As we keep this Good Friday and look over the sin of our lives, our lives of “but,” may you see, in the cross of Christ, God’s great mercy washing over your life.

Fr. Karl E. Dietze
Trinity Anglican Church, Bakersfield

April 3, 2021

Read Hebrews 4

“Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.” (Hebrews 4:11)

A blessed Holy Saturday to all the saints of the Diocese of San Joaquin! The last of the forty long days of Lent has arrived. The days have lengthened and tomorrow (or even tonight at an Easter Vigil) the great joy of our Savior’s glorious Resurrection will come to us once again.

But not quite yet. Today we are still on the way, in the journey, not quite arrived. And, as is often the case, the last mile requires the greatest discipline, the most perseverance.

Chapters three and four of the Letter to the Hebrews tell a cautionary tale. They remind us of those Israelites – an entire generation save Joshua and Caleb – who were denied entry into the Promised Land. They were denied this gift because of their failure to hear the voice the Lord, because of their hardness of heart.

These are the verses which cause me to breathe deep, to sit up straight, to squirm uncomfortably in my chair as I read the Holy Scriptures. The Israelites had seen the glory and power and might of God in all the miracles of the Exodus. They were sustained by God’s miraculous provision in the wilderness. And yet their hearts were hard. Uh-oh. What hope is there for me?

My prayer for us this day is that our hearts will be soft towards the Lord. That our forty days of fasting, of prayer, of almsgiving will have been met with grace and produced in us the miracle of a heart, tender towards the Lord and open to receive the rest which He offers us.

It is perhaps counter-intuitive to think of being diligent to enter into rest as Hebrews 4:11 invites. And yet we know that in our daily lives the temptations to be constantly busy are ever present. This Holy Saturday, when Christ rested in the tomb, offers us an opportunity to seek His rest diligently by setting aside those cares and occupations of the world. We can cease from our works as Christ has done from His.

Let us take time today to be with the Lord through His word – which is living and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword and which discerns the thoughts and intents of our hearts. Let us remember that there is no creature hidden from the Lord’s sight and confess to Him anything that remains between us and Him. Let us be diligent today so that tomorrow, on that joyful Easter morning, we will be prepared, by the free gift of our beloved and loving Lord, to come boldly to the throne of grace and obtain mercy and grace to help in our time of need.

Dcn. Erin Giles
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