

FROM MY HEADMASTER'S STUDY

VOL. VII



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*Selected Sermons of Matthew Cammish,
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Mentor & Preacher*

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FOREWORD

It is quite amazing that there is the great demand for yet another volume of sermons by Matthew Cammish. This great person of God who has gone to glory continues to inspire and be an inspiration through the sermons he preached. The preacher can lose their voice, be turned out of the pulpit, banned from preaching the gospel, cut off from the people of God, imprisoned, laid aside by sickness and yet the God of infinite initiatives will find some way to use the preacher. Revd Dr W E Sangster, one of the great Methodist preachers of the past delivered powerful, superb sermons, but there are those who would testify that he was at his most eloquent when, almost paralyzed, he could barely lift a finger to communicate with those who came to visit him. They went to comfort him and left instead with their faith renewed. Matthew Cammish is no longer with us in this world, but his words printed for us continue to inspire and renew our faith.

Revd Dr Richard J Teal

INTRODUCTION

In chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel, in the aftermath of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem, shaken and confused by those dramatic events, we read about two disciples travelling to Emmaus. But when the risen Lord Jesus drew alongside them and pointed to the Scriptures that showed how it was necessary for Christ to suffer and on the third day to rise from the dead, they found saving help and enlightenment.

In chapter 16 of 'The Acts of the Apostles' we read of Paul and Silas in a prison worshipping God when, at around midnight, there was a great earthquake which shook the foundations, loosening chains and opening doors. Awakened from his sleep and believing the prisoners were escaping, the prison keeper, equally shaken and confused, was about to take his own life when Paul came alongside him and reassured him that no prisoner had fled. No doubt gratefully impressed by what he had witnessed, he asked Paul what he needed to do to be saved. Paul's response was immediate and left no doubt about what he should do: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."

Since the time of Jesus and Paul, motivated by the Holy Spirit, the baton of explaining to others the truth concerning the saving work of Christ has been handed on to expositors with their same authority, as we have seen in the six sets of sermons that have already been issued. I am therefore delighted to endorse this seventh set of similar quality, which I commend for your attention.

Lord Mackay of Clashfern

I AM NOT BETTER THAN MY FATHERS

I Kings 19:4

*"It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life;
for I am not better than my fathers."*

I have not chosen to talk about this particular period in the life of Elijah because it is a lectionary reading for today and a most dramatic story, though it is both. I have chosen to speak on it because of all the old testament stories it is probably the most relevant to us. This incident gives a late twentieth picture and its message is completely relevant to YOU.

"It is enough... take away my life."

Notice, first of all, that this is a cry of weakness and despair. Physically Elijah was 'dead beat and all in.' Throughout the previous three years he had been a fugitive. The king had searched high and low for him in Israel and all the neighbouring countries. Two days earlier Elijah had re-appeared. He had faced the king. He had challenged the people, the priests and all the prophets of Baal, and in that famous struggle on mount Carmel had, apparently, been victorious. The climax of that day came with rain - the first in Israel for THREE years. As it began Elijah advised king Ahab to hurry back to his palace and we read that the prophet ran in front of the king's chariot - a distance of seventeen miles in pouring rain: a tremendous feat of physical endurance and sheer foolishness!

When he returned home he had hardly begun to relax and recover his strength when a messenger reached him, from Queen Jezebel. "By tomorrow at this time you will be as dead as the priests of Baal, or I'm not the Queen!" Here is the breaking point: the last straw. The remaining strength of this giant of a man gives way. His courage fails and he runs away.

It is the same, mentally and spiritually. Not only had he struggled long and hard against evil, but he had come to feel himself alone in the fight. He felt he was carrying the whole burden of this task single handed. Now, he could carry on no longer. He was finished. He wanted to die.

What a very modern picture! Every now and then we open our newspapers to see that some famous film star, some nightclub hostess, some business executive or some other celebrity has committed suicide. These are tragic cases. Yet they are not odd incidents. For some years after we came to Swindon, I used to receive two weekly newspapers, one from N.W. Lancashire and one from E.Yorkshire. During any one years there were a number of suicides reported, cases of little people of whom even their own little districts would never have heard, save for one thing: they could carry on no longer. They wanted to die and they succeeded in taking their own lives.

This modern world of ours puts great burdens and pressures on all manner of folks, big, little and in between. Every year in this land hundreds upon hundreds reach the point of physical, mental and spiritual exhaustion at which they say..."It is enough."

Forty odd years ago Professor Aird, famous not only as the man who separated Siamese twins, but also as a man whose skill, compassion and kindness had saved many lives, reached that point. He wanted to die. He took his own life and died with a bible in his hand. Such a great and good man.

Yes, indeed, a good man, even an Elijah, can reach this depth of human experience if he is consistently overworked, and if he comes to feel that he is carrying his burdens alone. What a great responsibility we bear. We must pray to have eyes, minds and hearts to see and understand so that no one associated with us ever carries such burdens and he or she cries... "It is enough".

"Take away my life: for I am no better than my fathers."

Notice, secondly, that there is something a little noble in this request... "not better than my fathers"... this, as well as weakness is the reason.

This, too, is a twentieth century picture. Yes, I know, in so many ways we are better off than our fathers and grandfathers. We have houses which are more light, airy and comfortable with 'all mod cons' as the advertisements say. We have gadgets to make work easier, entertainment to ward off boredom, hours of work which our forefathers didn't dare dream about, wages and salaries which would have been beyond their wildest hopes and so on. Yet the average man seems no more happy, far less contented, and there are probably more people in debt today. Are we better than our fathers?

It's the same in so many of our churches. We struggle hard to present the gospel to those outside. There's never been more thought given to reaching them. We decorate old premises, put up new buildings, establish youth activities, do our utmost to encourage 'outsiders' to come and worship, and after all our efforts it seems that all we've succeeded in doing is to keep the building open. The preacher, who has preached year after year, notices all too often that congregations have dwindled slowly over the years: it's hard work preaching to wooden pews. Perhaps there is a physical, mental and spiritual limit. He may not wish to die. It may be very human to feel, "It is enough." No more! I'm finished!

But now see God's reaction to Elijah's request. He is not angry. He doesn't condemn Elijah for lack of faith. He doesn't upbraid him for his weakness. God could have reminded the prophet that He had always looked after him: He had never let him down. But God does none of these. He lets him rest. He gives him food and lets him rest again and in that heavenly food Elijah finds new strength! Yes, God gives rest and food. It is needful for the body of man. Even so, there is food which is essential to the spirit of man. There is a sentence in the Communion Service which runs..."Feed on him in your hearts by faith, and be ye thankful." How much, today, we need to learn again, to 'feed on him'... on the one who is "The bread of life."

See also how God at last comes to Elijah. The peace of the mountain is shattered by a terrible wind: God is not in the wind. An earthquake shakes the hills, rocks are smashed and the very earth is rent by its awful power: God is not in the earthquake. Fires break out and devour all nature with an insatiable hunger: God is not in the fire. Here are three powerful forces in each of which the man of God looked in vain for God.

Now this reminds me of what we sometimes feel in moments of depression when we see so little result from our efforts for God. We say to ourselves, perhaps, "If only I had the money: if I was a rich man, what a difference it would make. The church could be redecorated. I could set up our Youth Club so that it doesn't look a poor relation, of the Education Clubs: we could extend the premises: the money would make such a difference." Or we say to ourselves, "If only I had an important position in the firm: if I was the manager or the foreman, what a real example I could set." Or maybe we wish we were clever and think, "If only I had the brain for it, how much better I could teach in the Sunday School. If I'd had the education, what a lot of good I could do as a preacher." Friend, remember: only when he listened to the 'Still small voice' did Elijah feel the presence and the power of God!

Finally, see what God revealed to Elijah. "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him." Seven Thousand! Seven thousand even in this land of Israel who had remained faithful to God. What an achievement! Think how hard it was in this Israel not to worship Baal. Baal and the Baal gods were believed to be harvest gods. If you worshipped Baal he would be pleased with you and give you good harvests: if not, your crops would be poor. You'd never get rich if you didn't worship Baal. Baal had so many priests and prophets pressing the people to worship him. Baal had royal patronage, and not only the Queen but all the important and noble families worshipped him. The pressure for ordinary folks to do it was very great. How very, very hard it must have been for those seven thousand. But how impossible it might have been but for the example of Elijah.

Have you ever realised how hard it is for young people today to stick to their Christian principles when they leave school and begin work? So often in commerce and industry the pressure is on them from the very first day.

It may be hard for some women sitting here now, at work among girls and women whose talk seems constantly to be about men and sex in a low, crude way. It may be hard for you to retain a purity of speech, thought and action. Somewhere in that workplace there may be a girl who is finding it very hard. If you give up, she may find it impossible.

It may be hard for a man in a factory to keep his speech clean and to maintain a sympathetic, Christian attitude to others, when all around are men who day in and day out curse and swear use filthy language and stoop to all manner of tricks to get on. It may be hard for you. But if you give up, for some young lad who's still sticking to his principles and hanging on to his beliefs, it may well become impossible.

So one could go on, because it's the same for parents, for Sunday School teachers, for Youth

Club leaders, for Preachers and for anyone else who count themselves servants of God. We may come to feel that we're fighting a losing battle: we may be ashamed of our feeble efforts, but the fact that we are still there may be what someone is hanging on to: our feeble faith may be the sole anchor for some drifting soul: for one, perhaps even for one only, our faltering words may be the only guide to the Father.

Brothers and sisters, come what may, we dare not, we cannot ever say, "It is enough."

Let us pray :-

Give us strength good Lord to serve thee as thou deservest, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do thy will through Jesus, our Lord.

BROTHERS, PRAY FOR US

1 Thessalonians 5:25

“Brothers, Pray for us.”

Paul’s ideas and language are so often very difficult for us to understand, so it is a pleasure for me to bring to your minds one of his very simple requests, “Brothers pray for us.”

It will be easier for us to appreciate the importance of this request if we note that he was not asking the Thessalonians to “say prayers for us.” The making of prayers is not an easy task. It involves the extensive use of words. It is, indeed, an exercise in the use of vocabulary. It is a task in which, with great reverence, we try within the limitations of human speech, deliberately to ascend to what our forefathers called ‘the throne of God.’ It is no coincidence that some of the finest of all English prose is found in the great prayers of the orthodox Christian Churches. They are splendid, truly magnificent and sometimes almost meaningless to the reader.

But, a great man of prayer once said, “Prayer is not a multitude of words”. The shortest prayer in the New Testament is “Lord save me.” It was spoken by Peter as he felt himself beginning to sink in the sea of Galilee, and if Peter had stopped to say his prayers he would have been under for the third time before he even came in sight of the ‘amen’!

Yes, indeed. “Lord save me” marks a moment of true prayer, for it marks the moment when a man’s experience is so fear filled that he cannot help but break into the very presence of God himself.

It is the same when a man’s broken body is taken from a train crash, when a doctor examines, shakes his head and a young wife - now widowed - screams out, “Oh, God. Not that.” This is prayer, for it is the moment when the experiences of loss and bitterness so overwhelm the human spirit that it cannot help but break into the very presence of God himself.

It is equally the same with the patient whose eyes have been bound, whose time has been spent in darkness for long weary days, who, when the bandages have been removed and careful examination completed hears the surgeon say, “It’s alright”, cannot prevent himself stating, “Thank God, Thank God!” - OR with the man, not in the best of tempers with himself or the world in general, who sat one lovely Spring day in an English city park, and who, as the scent of flowers and the song of the birds played upon his senses, suddenly found himself saying aloud, - because in “Oh God, the world’s a nicer place than I realised.” Each case out of living experience there came such a sense of joy and thanksgiving that a human spirit could not help but break into the very presence of God himself.

What I am saying is simply this. To ‘say prayers’ is to make extensive use of words in addressing petitions of praise or intercession to Almighty God, but, ‘TO PRAY’ is to come into the very presence of God himself through the intensity of human experience. Prayer IS the burden of a sigh; prayer IS the falling of a tear: it is the upward glancing of an eye, when none but God is near.

Real, vital prayer is the action of a child of God coming into the presence of its Father, being driven or drawn to Him by an overwhelming need.

That need may be roused by fear, or frustration, by loneliness or despair, by love or joy or any other feelings. It may even, perhaps, be just an uncontrollable desire to say, “Thank you Father.” But whatever the motive, the fact remains that to pray is to come into the very presence of God through the experiences which we meet in our daily lives.

It follows then that prayer (for the Christian) is a constantly recurring act of daily life. This is what I like to think Paul is asking from the Christians of Thessalonica. “Brothers, bring us into the presence of God. Keep bursting in on God on our behalf. Brothers, our great need is that you should be continually bringing us before God.”

In making this request I think Paul was conscious of his time in Athens. It weighed heavily upon him. The preacher is only human, but his message must be divine or else it has no real purpose. He writes elsewhere to his Thessalonian friends, “For our good news came not unto you in word only, but in the power and the spirit of God.”

But Paul, looking back over his weeks in Athens could see that in the early days at least he had spoken in word only. He had longed to visit that city. He had been impressed by the fact that in entering it he was coming into the world’s greatest centre of learning. His famous sermon on Mars Hill was obviously tailored to suit what he felt would be the taste of a learned and sophisticated audience. And when he finished it. “Some MOCKED and others said, we will hear thee again of this matter.”

Brothers, he says, bring us continually into the presence of God so that we may preach the word of life as from the Father himself.

Paul knew that the public performance of the musician depends almost entirely on his natural ability, the extent to which he practises and the effort and concentration he makes during his concert.

He knew that the success of the politician depends on his ability to string words together so that they amuse, interest and inflame the passions of the listeners through the power of the ideas he puts forward. Paul also knew, however, that the words of a preacher, however pleasingly strung together, however cultured and however interesting, will mean nothing - just nothing unless “the spirit breathes upon the word and brings the truth to sight.”

It was in Athens for the first and perhaps the only time that Paul knew the heartache of a preacher who has studied, prepared, given his all and then felt that in his preaching he had lost touch with his Master and that the power of God unto salvation was not being contained in his words.

“BROTHERS, PRAY FOR US.”

Note that Paul says “for us”, ‘us’ being Paul himself and his two traveling companions, Silvanus and Timothy.

Paul was also conscious that they were preachers of the Gospel who also lived and worked in heathen surroundings during the week. Day by day the three preachers worked in communities which at best were indifferent, and at worst, hostile to their beliefs and their way of life. Life was difficult. Tempers could fray in moments of anger. Fellow women and passers by could be cruelly quick to notice a difference between the sermon speech of the sabbath and the workday action of the Christ men. Paul knew (as I believe you know) that it was absolutely essential for the Christian gospel to be seen in their lives as they went about the trivial round and the common task!

“Brothers, pray for us.” When some experience in your life causes you to burst into the presence of our Father, take us with you. Each and every one of you, brothers, when you draw near to your Heavenly Father, make sure you carry us with you.

Try not to forget from time to time, because Silvanus gets very upset when he feels his preaching hasn't touched the hearts of his congregation. Don't miss us out on the odd occasion. That might be the very day that Timothy finally loses his temper and hits that old scoundrel of a fruit seller who cheats us whenever he can.

Brother, did you forget one day last week? Ah, that could have been the day I swore at that little lad who's always hanging around begging bits of skin to make a tent for himself. I've usually managed to find the odd bit for him, but that day everything seemed to have gone wrong. I really was down in the dumps and I swore at him. I'll never forget the look which came over his face. It said as plain as if he had shouted it 'Paul, I never expected that from you - you who call yourself a Christ-man!'

"Brothers, Pray for us."

Here in our methodist circuit, most of us (probably all of us) from time to time knowing the despair of preaching which seems to have lost its power. Some of us even doubting our call to preach.

"Brothers (and Sisters) pray for us."

Every one of us finding it so difficult to match daily living with sermon speech. Finding it is almost impossible unless you sustain us with your prayers - not just in a few minutes before the Sunday service, but frequently during the week.

This is our great need: that you will pick out those preachers you know by name and bring us by name into the presence of your Heavenly Father. Tell him of your concern for us, perhaps even of your deep love for us. Ask Him to guide and inspire us. Don't miss any of us out.

I could go on and on about this because this is a great work for you to do and it is our greatest need of you. But, if the Spirit of God has breathed through these words, then your present preacher has said enough already. If he has spoken ONLY with the voice of a man, he has already wasted too many words. So let me add only this. Next Sunday morning (God willing) a preacher will stand here and invite you to Worship God. This will happen in many of our churches. Many men and women will come before God's people 'standing in the need of prayer.'

Don't wait until next Sunday. In the days between take to yourselves this request from St Paul...

"Brothers and Sisters, Pray for us."

QUIETNESS AND CONFIDENCE

Isaiah 30:15

"In quietness and confidence shall be your strength."

I suppose that when we think of Palestine in the time of the prophets, most of us imagine that such men as Isaiah lived in a peaceful, slow moving agricultural community where the only worries were connected with rainfall and drought, fruit crop diseases, harvest failures and so on.

Certainly such economic problems were always present yet, in addition, Isaiah lived in a period of great excitement, unrest and fear. War and invasion by a powerful, ruthless foe was threatened. The Assyrians were preparing to invade and would surely overrun the whole land. Death and destruction was at hand. The people were in daily fear and terror stalked the land. But in the midst of it all the man of God gives his counsel, In quietness and confidence shall be your strength."

In their own way those times were not unlike the ones in which we have lived. There are differences of course. Instead of horses, chariots, spears and bows, we contemplate tanks, planes, bombs and missiles. One thing, however, is unchanged - human nature. People are still afraid of the "terror by night" and of the "destruction that wasteth at noonday." People are afraid.

Everyday politicians, commentators, radio, television and newspapers bring us such stories of horror and prophecies of doom that instead of enjoying God's world around us, so many wonder if it's even worth living.

It is time for us, as the people of God, to focus on the words of our God as spoken through his prophet.

"In quietness and confidence shall be your strength."

Oh, my friends, how much we all need the quiet moments in our lives. We may not want them, but how much we need them - the quietness meant by the psalmist when he said, "Be still and know that I am God": the moments of quietness which our Lord meant when he greeted his disciples with, "Come ye yourselves apart and rest awhile." Moments when we do not simply remove ourselves from the world, but moments when we manage to remove the world from ourselves.

There are those whose moments of quietness are concentrated in an hour of worship on the Sabbath, and they leave God's house with truly renewed strength until the next Sabbath comes along. And I wonder if that sabbath strength lasts through the intervening six days.

There are those who will set aside their moments of quietness for the morning. In prayer they seek His strength for the day, then set off on their own into the hustle and bustle of the trivial round and common task. And I wonder if that morning strength is exhausted before evening comes.

The hymn writer said:-
Moment by moment I'm kept in his love.
Moment by moment there's life from above.

Just so. The strength which comes from our quiet moments with God must be fitted into each and every day.

The day may bring good news - then in a quiet moment we must give him immediate thanks. It may bring a time of sorrow - then in a quiet moment we must join with him who "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." The day may bring an opportunity, but before we seize the opportunity we should ask him to help us to use it alright. It may bring a moment when we have to make a decision, perhaps one which will affect others. We must not take that decision until we have waited upon the Lord in the quiet moment. Whatever a day may bring, it is in this kind of quietness that we shall receive the strength to face it.

"In confidence shall be your strength." This is undeniably true. Any man who has confidence has also the strength to tackle what lies before him. The trouble is that failure saps confidence, and once man's confidence in his own ability begins to slip it is like any falling object. It goes with ever increasing speed. And so many folk have lost confidence in themselves and in the future.

But our confidence is in God, the God who in Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, today and forever." Our trust is not in systems, in Governments, in arms or in nuclear disarmament. It is in a person. It is in God Almighty, he who "hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and meted out heaven with the span", and who has "weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance."

Our confidence is in the love of God, love which was incarnate in a stable: love which flowed from a little hill called calvary: Love which rolled away a stone and rose triumphant over the envy and hatred and power of men. It is in a love that So loved that it gave everything "that whose ever believeth on him should not perish but have everlasting life." It is in a love so wide, so deep, so high and SO beyond our comprehension "that while we were yet sinners HE died for us."

"In confidence shall be your strength" - confidence in an "immortal love, for ever full, for ever flowing free: for ever shared, for ever whole, a never ebbing sea. It is in a love which will never let us go. It is in the love, so uniquely portrayed in human speech, of a Father who, While he was yet a great way off, was moved with compassion and ran out and fell on his neck and kissed him."

If we believe that "the word of our God shall stand forever" then fear of the future has no place in our lives. Our love may be faltering and oftentimes unsure, but his "perfect love casteth out fear."

Our confidence lies also in the fact that this God of love "was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself" and that we may, nay, by faith in him, we are,"reconciled to God" and that we are made "joint heirs with Christ."

Does that sound too learnedly theological? Let me put it very plainly. Would you be surprised if her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II were to adopt you as a son or daughter, and thereby make you a member of the Royal House of Windsor and a brother or sister of the Prince of Wales? Just a little surprised!

That IS what it means - only infinitely more. The Royal House of Windsor may one day disappear as did its predecessors. Impossible though it may seem to us now, the United Kingdom may one day cease to exist. But he shall reign for ever and ever and 'of the increase of His government there shall be no end.'

Confidence? Strength? If we believe - if our faith begins no bigger than the grain of mustard seed - we, by the grace of God, are in that kingdom. In the words of Paul "our citizenship God, may be in heaven" but we live here and now in that eternal kingdom.

Glory be! We are members of an eternal kingdom. We may be citizens of the United Kingdom for seventy, eighty or even a hundred years. By the love, mercy and grace of God who is king of kings - and our dear Father - we are sons and daughters of the eternal kingdom here and hereafter. Beloved now are we the sons of God and it doth not yet appear what we shall be!

Our confidence, finally, lies also in the assurance that "nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

The author of those words listed the threats, fears and powers of his day. None could prevail then. None could tear the love of Christ from them. Today, we can be equally sure. No force of material might and power can tear his love away from us:-

From Him who loves me now so well,
What power may soul shall sever?
Shall life or death? Shall earth or hell?
NO I am his forever.

Indeed, neither life nor death can separate us, for even in the face of the latter, then, in St Paul's words:-

"We know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

And if these words of the apostle appear too complicated listen again to those of his Lord... "Let not your hearts be troubled. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so I would have told you."

"In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength" not the strength of material might or earthly power: not of 'the earthquake, wind and fire' but that which comes when he whispers in the quiet moment and we become enfolded in the peace which passeth all human understanding.

It is the strength which comes with our realisation that he who formed the stars those heavenly flames, who counts their numbers, calls their names; is also he who says "Lo I am with you always even to the end." It is the strength of one who still says "Come unto me and rest I will give you rest." It is the strength which guarantees that, "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee."

So... my friends, read your newspapers, switch on your radios, watch your televisions and have no fears, for yours is the strength of a Father who has pledged his word "I will in no wise fail thee, neither will I in anywise forsake thee"... and this is all the strength you will ever need!

DEPARTED WITH FEAR AND GREAT JOY

St Luke 24:2
"They found the stone rolled away from the tomb"

St Matthew 28:8
"And they departed with fear and great joy"

If you read carefully the Easter story as recorded in the gospels, you will notice one word which is repeated constantly throughout in one form or another. That word is FEAR.

Matthew

28:4 - For fear of him the watchers did quake and become as dead men.

28:5 - And the angel said unto the women Fear not.

28:8 - and they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy"

28:10 - Then saith Jesus unto them "Fear not."

Luke

24:37 - But they were terrified and affrighted and supposed they beheld a spirit.

Now it is a fact that there is no country in the world which does not have a religion. There has never been a race of people, of any age or in any place, which did not worship some god or gods.

Psychologists and theologians have long studied the origins of religion, and they have come to the conclusion that the first and essential reason for the beginning of any religion is FEAR: man's inborn fear of the unknown: fear of the mysterious and unexplainable.

It is not that fear created God or gods, simply that fear created religions - organised religions. Fear created systems whereby men attempted to placate a god by giving him a name and setting aside a special place which bore the title 'Holy': a place to which gifts might be brought and where sacrifices could be made in his honour. In a word: fear attempted to Imprison gods: to keep each God in a safe place.

There is something very attractive in the idea of an idol. Man could say "There is god. We may go to him whenever we please. We may take him with us wherever we go. But, at the same time, he is there, fixed and immovable if it so please us!"

You know - you and I would be more than amazed if tonight we heard a mysterious voice saying to us, "take your shoes off, you are standing on holy ground." Not so, Moses, he would automatically assume that he had stumbled unawares onto the sacred territory and holy place of a god!

Now - the message of the great prophets and psalmists is one long cry against this fear-born desire to keep God in such places as he could be visited or neglected at will.

Listen to a psalmist:-

Whither shall I go from thy spirit,
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence.
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there,
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold thou art there.
If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

Yet the people of the prophets tried to confine THIS God within the walls of a temple at Jerusalem, even to an inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies. God was to remain hidden behind a screen! Oh, Yes! He could be worshipped in synagogues which sprang up in the towns of Palestine or in foreign cities which had Hebrew communities - BUT - there was only one place where sacrifice might be made. Jerusalem.

Only in Jerusalem could it be said... "The name of the city from that day shall be - The Lord is there. He is THERE: there and nowhere else with the same completeness.

But, we must not smile at the simple minded efforts of the people of bygone days to 'keep God in his place.' There are still too many today whose great comfort is to feel there is a definite holy place in which to present their children in baptism: to come for marriage and God's special blessing: a place to which they can be brought for burial. Many would be upset if God were not in his church to be prayed to in emergency or calamity on national days of prayer.

Yes, indeed: a twentieth century man is still prepared to say, God's in his heaven - all's right with the world; so long as he is sure that God is safely tucked away in some far off place.

We will still echo the old text "Prepare to meet thy God" so long as we can put on our Sunday suits and do the job in the right place. We won't object to plaques on the wall, saying "Thou God seest me" - only he must not creep up on us from behind in the workshop, the school, at the factory or the County Ground! There is a time and a place for everything: and the time for God is on Sunday and the place - inside a church! This is fine, so long as God will accept that: if only he will be content to be put in his proper place! Ah! but "they found the stone rolled away from the tomb."

Now, Good Friday and Easter Day are the climax of the story whose real beginning is recorded by St Mark as "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, THE SON OF GOD.

St Matthew begins with the record of the birth of "Emmanuel - GOD WITH US"

There is the challenge of the Jesus of history. If he is not God, then he is an imposter, a crank or a madman! The matter is simply this: - EITHER God has broken all the rules of man-made, fear-born, organised religion and is actively and positively involved in human affairs or he is not.

SO! The Easter fear is widespread! Good Friday should be the end of the story: the final full stop. There must be a cross: there must be a tomb and the world will place the body in that tomb with great reverence. We will pay homage to the dead man's memory. We will weep by the graveside. We will be filled with bitter grief that the story so ended. We will extol his majesty, admitting that he was great and good. We will admit to his human perfection, even his utter sinlessness. ONLY there must be a full stop. The body must remain there, the stone unmoved and the seal unbroken. That is the only ending which will give peace of mind.

BUT.. "they found the stone rolled away from the tomb."

Yes! So many would feel much more comfortable had that stone remained in its place. But the empty tomb and the moved stone ARE facts of history. Yet that is not all. Man's fear is not just that God may have broken the natural laws of physical death at one point in history but that he has revealed the natural laws of spiritual life as they operate at every point in history.

If death cannot hold this man who claimed to be the VERY Son of God, then what he said about the necessity of being holy, and about the punishment of sinners could well be true... we shall be subject to a judgment beyond and above earthly law. There are many who do not wish to be shown that purity and righteousness are beyond the reach of mortal corruption.

Even more do not wish to be shown that mortal man must, one day, face divine judgment.

Yet for all who love the Lord this IS a day of great rejoicing: a day of unconfined joy! For this is the day when a crucified Messiah was shown to mankind to be a living Lord, alive for evermore. It is the day when feet which trod the green hills of Galilee so long time ago, were set free to walk the Marlborough downs in the county of Wiltshire.

When hands which reached out in loving tenderness to the majestic city of Jerusalem were empowered to reach out to humble folks worshipping in an insignificant Methodist Chapel in Ermin Street, Lower Stratton in the Borough of Swindon.

Let fears begone, for on this Easter day we celebrate the day when words spoken by a Galilean prophet - where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them - became the promise of the Christ who is our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rejoice and be glad. No longer is it the carpenter from Nazareth who says..."Come unto me and I will give you rest, My peace I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. In my Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am there ye may be also." From that day and forever those words are the guarantee of the risen Christ, now our Lord of Glory.

On this day we do not celebrate a stupendous event in the past history of mankind. We rejoice in the victory which says, for all time, the idea that "death is the great leveller" is a LIE. We hear a voice saying "He that believeth on me though he were dead, yet shall he live and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die." Those words are no longer the words of the Son of Man who hungered in a wilderness. They have become the promise of the only begotten Son of the Father, sitting at his right hand in Glory.

What room have we for fear on this triumphant day? For all who count themselves as His followers, Easter day is the victory day of God's love, and though our love may be poor and weak, yet his love is perfect. And perfect love casteth out fear for it is the love which declares "I will not fail thee, neither will I in anywise forsake thee."

And, in this is our victory. We have seen the stone rolled away from the tomb and we depart with great joy."



Jonah

THOU HAST HAD PITY

Jonah 4:10/11

"Thou hast had pity on the gourd for which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it to grow..."

There is a story that many years ago, a lucky man discovered almost untold wealth in a strange place. Searching for diamonds in South Africa he came, after much fruitless searching, to a little native village. As he rested he paid little attention to the native boys and girls. They were playing a game which seemed to be very much like the English game of marbles. However, as he was moving off, he suddenly stopped and - to cut the story he saw that these children were using diamonds worth thousands of pounds in their game. They had a treasure trove and they dug up the riches of nature to throw about like common stones!

History is full of stories of treasures rescued from strange places: Priceless pictures from filthy attics: Symphonies from piles of tattered music sheets: ancient manuscripts from the waste paper baskets of monasteries: rolls of banknotes from rubbish tips: and so on. But nothing is more thrilling to me than find-ing the precious gem which was pushed aside and lost for centuries in the belly of a whale! That is the gem of truth which Jonah discovered three or four hundred years before Christ came, that God loves everybody, everybody without exception: that God will strive to the utmost to save even the wickedest of the wicked: for that IS the story and message of Jonah.

Yet ask any man, "Who was Jonah?" and I'll almost guarantee that if you get an answer it will be "He's the fellow who was swallowed by a whale." What a tragedy. And what a far greater tragedy that some people still seem to want it to be the story of a man in a whale. Listen to a quotation from a letter in the Radio Times some years ago, "Apparently none of them knew of the two well authenticated cases of men having been swallowed by whales and subsequently disgorged alive and not a good deal worse for their experience."

Miracles! I believe in miracles! This book of Jonah is the story of a miracle: not a miracle of a man and a fish, but THE miracle, the well nigh unbelievable miracle, that God is a God of incomprehensible love and infinite mercy towards sinners!

Let me remind you of the story. Jonah is called by God to go and preach to the people of Ninevah. Now Ninevah was a name which was hated throughout the world. Its people -they were the Assyrians - were savage butchers. They were people who lived for the joy of fighting, killing, looting and wholesale slaughter, and the enslavement of any or every nation near or far. They were called the Nazis of the ancient world. And to this Ninevah, Jonah was called.

He is horrified at the very thought of it. He WILL NOT go. He runs away from God and takes passage on a boat, but such a tremendous storm arises that the crew become suspicious of their passenger. Jonah tells his story and, at Jonah's own insistence, they throw him overboard, where he is swallowed and kept for three days in a great fish (a great fish NOT a whale). At length he is brought back by God and at the second call he goes, albeit with great reluctance, to Ninevah. It is a wicked city. The prophet preaches. He warns of the coming punishment of God. He exhorts the people to repent, to turn to God and to seek forgiveness. And this savage, sinful city is moved by the message. They repent: truly repent. They turn to God, and by the labours of this prophet the city is saved, its citizens being brought in penitence to God.

It is then that we learn why Jonah first refused to preach to the people of Ninevah.

It was not that he could not bear to carry a message of destruction. It was not because he was afraid he might lose his life for uttering such a message. It was not that he believed his work would be in vain and he would be wasting his time.

No! It was because he was afraid he would succeed. He was afraid that Ninevah WOULD repent. He was terrified that his God was ready to forgive these heathen. He was terrified beyond words that God was longing to show his love to the ungodly, and when all his fears are realised, and the city is spared, he prefers death for himself.

Now there was no cause for wounded vanity in the case of a man who has 'converted' a whole city. His reputation as a prophet is not damaged. He has not failed. No but his very success enraged him. Jonah was a Jew, jealous of his God, proud of his country and with a fierce hatred of the heathen foreigners, a hatred which he expected one day to be satisfied.

Listen to a typical Hebrew verse (Psalm 2)... "Ask of me and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron. Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Such was the ancient Jewish vision of a gloriously avenging God. Alas it was not to be... "And shall I not spare?"

Abraham's God would have destroyed Ninevah as he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. The God of Moses would have shown his power as he did in Egypt. Sanel's God would have 'devoted' all these people with the sword and with fire. The God whom Jonah wanted to know would have exterminated the lot... but, "should I not spare?"

Jonah condemns God for his weakness in showing mercy and kindness, but then, still hoping that God will be moved by his prayers, he goes and sits on the hillside overlooking the city.

Perhaps, even at this late hour, God will do what he ought to have done already.

Now it is hot, very hot sitting there. Jonah makes himself a tent and it gives him a little shade from the heat. But he is even more grateful for the cool shelter of the large leaves of a tree growing there. In a typically selfish and human way he develops a loving affection for those leaves which have brought him a small measure of comfort. Next day God causes the leaves to wither, and as he endures the heat of the long day, Jonah's anger at God becomes worse than ever. How dare God destroy those leaves!

Jonah. Jonah. Have you any right to be angry because the leaves have been destroyed? Was there any good reason why you should wish to save them? Did you make them? Did you do anything to make them grow? Did they belong to you?

Jonah. Jonah. In that city are six score thousand souls. I made them. I caused them to grow. I laboured over them. I suffered for them. They are mine - all mine... "and should I not spare?"

My friends, if ever, any man prepared the way for a later Son of Man to "show us the Father." It was this lovely character who bears the name, Jonah. He reveals the whole basis of God's love for mankind: he made us and having lost us he will go to any lengths to get us back.

Some of you will remember the old story of the boy who made his own boat, lost it and had to buy it back again. You're mine! You're mine twice over. You're mine because I made you and you're mine because then I lost you I bought you back again... "and should I not spare?"

Alas! The Jew of ancient times lived by one rule. God will punish the wicked. The wicked are those who do not belong to his nation and who, therefore, do not worship him. But he will reward the good. The good are those who do belong to his nation and who do worship him. So, Jonah's message of the seeking and saving Love of God was necessary to the ancient Jew, and I suggest it is necessary also today.

I believe it is necessary in a nation where there appears to be a deeply rooted feeling that it is superior to others. It is surely needed in those sections of the community where a man can be turned away because his skin is 'not the right' colour. Jonah's message is still to be learned in communities where strangers can live for ten or twenty years and still feel like strangers. It is needed in Churches who seem to act as though they have reached their goal when they are financially solvent: where a man is welcomed more for what he can give to the church than for what he can get from it. This message from the old testament has never entered the heart of the man who has never prayed and prayed and prayed again for the saints and martyrs of the mission field. It has been lost on those who have never trembled at the very thought that they have, or even may have, missed a chance of stretching out a helping, saving hand to one of God's lost children who has never known the Father's love.

Jonah tried to fill the Jewish nation with a love for lost souls. He failed. His message came to a people satisfied with their own self righteousness, and, had it not been for a few noble souls - humble, devoted men and women - the Son of God himself would have failed to the same spirit of self righteousness. Jonah preached in vain to his own people! Shall we too fail? Will this church fail?

Yes, this church and any church will fail, unless in the hearts of its congregation, the message of this man is not a flaming fire. We merit nothing from God by our own efforts.

He has given us his love because he made us: we are his own: and for this, we are called to make his love known to all - all without exception. Outside the family of God is the world of Mr Everyman and, by and large, it is a hard world. It is a world of work, of play, of sin, of ugliness, of poverty, of vice, of evil in many forms. That world is our Ninevah. And this is the word of the Lord... "Arise and go to Ninevah!"

So, the Lord allows a few leaves to wither and die in order to show a little of his immeasurable, incomprehensible love to his unwilling servant...

"And when they came unto the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him"... and he said, "Father, forgive them."

A few leaves wither and die on a little hill outside Ninevah: on the green hill far away the only begotten Son of God dies, that we might see just a little more of that immeasurable, incomprehensible love.

"Amazing love! How can it be That thou, my God, should'st die for me!"

How can it be, you ask? You who came into this house today, weighed down with guilt: you who even now are filled with remorse at the hurt you have done to one who loved you too well.

How can it be, you ask? You who stand at the open door of life and are a little fearful of passing through it; you who have already come to the eventide of this life, looking back on wasted time and talents.

How can it be? Why! Because he made you. He caused you to grow. He laboured over you. He suffered for you. You are his - his alone. You may be of little worth in your own estimation: you are very precious in his sight.

And, because today, the church lectionary bids us to think about miracles, then take this miracle with you, the miracle that the God you have worshipped here this day not only spares and spares and spares, and not only loves and loves and loves, but SO loves that come what may, he gives you his promise. "I will in no wise fail thee, neither will I in anywise forsake thee. I have loved thee with an everlasting love."

HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON

John 3:16

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

When I first began to preach I was very wise. In my wisdom I realised that there were certain great texts (and this probably the greatest of them) from which I could not and dare not preach.

When I began to preach I was very foolish. I imagined that after fifteen or twenty years I should have such an understanding of the love of God that I really should be able to show a congregation the God who so loved that he gave his only begotten Son.

Well, more than fifty years have passed. My friends, if that great God should give me one thousand and fifty years upon this earth, I tell you, I should still be able to set forth only a mere shadowy image of such love.

Yes, more than fifty years have passed and what years! They have been momentous years, sometimes anxious, sometimes almost glorious: sad and happy: bitter and carefree. They have taken away. They have given. I believe I have gone some way to knowing the height and depth of human love in these years.

“Greater love than this hath no man that man lay down his life for his friends.” It’s true. I lived and feared not to die in the uniform of the Royal Navy, not because I hated a ruthless enemy or because I had false ideas about being noble and heroic: No! But simply because, “Greater love hath no man than this.”

The giving of oneself is the essence and perfection of love. Real love cannot give less than itself - its full self. And in willingness to give oneself the love of man has reached its limits. Ask yourself. Ask any lovers. Human love can go no further than to give itself

Passing years brought to me the gift of family life in the love and joy of a wife and the blessing of two sons. Who among you could ever be in such distress and need and despair that you would dare to ask that even one of two sons might be given for your safety. Yet God so loves that he gave his only Son! How could I in the name of friendship ever dare to hope that even one of a hundred sons might be sacrificed for my sake. Yet, “God commendeth his love in that while we were yet sinners enemies of God - Christ died.”

Some years ago a young missionary died in the mission field of India. His Bishop wrote to his parents. It was a letter of appreciation for the life and work of their son, a letter of sympathy for the feeling of loss which his death would cause. The reply was immediate.

“We have other sons to send!!

“To send” - those are the limits of man’s love.

“To give” - that is the only limit of God’s.

And to what was the gift given? What should we expect? “Where is he that is born king?”, asked the wise men. Because they were wise men, they asked that question in a king’s palace! “Thou didst leave thy throne and thy kingly crown” - that’s well nigh beyond belief.

I once had a class of backward fourteen year old boys and girls at school. Just before Christmas they were writing a nativity play.

This appeared in a scene with Mary, Joseph and the Innkeeper’s wife. Mary was trying to explain her vision:-

Mary: Just before I was married, The Angel told me I was going to have a child and he would be the Son of God.

Wife: The Messiah! Well, I never! What next!

Mary: I don’t think she believes us, Joseph.

Joseph: Don’t worry dear. It seems impossible, even to me!

Impossible? Of course: by all human reason and by all the laws of logic it is impossible that anyone could so love. And if that seems impossible, what about this:- “Foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head”. You couldn’t truly grasp the love behind that in fifty-thousand years: its understanding is only in eternity.

You will find this gift in the manger of the stable, but don’t expect to find it looking like a Christmas card scene. It looks pretty in a Nativity play. In reality you find this babe in the filth and squalor of an eastern stable cave. There are no halos: there is no angel: there’s just a weak, weary mother, a fearful father, proud perhaps, but above all very anxious and there’s a new born male child for whom, while he was not yet born, there was no room in the inn.

I want you to pause here for a moment. “No room in the inn.” It’s a simple statement. Probably there is a simple explanation. It is a good explanation to say that Mary and Joseph had arrived too late and all the rooms in the inn were already taken up, but it is only a good explanation if you are thinking of hotels, inns and boarding houses in England in the twentieth century. In the inns of first century Palestine no one booked a room. There were no beds in the village inn. The travellers paid for a sleeping space on the floor. At night time they pulled themselves up, each in his blanket, and slept side by side with the others on the floor. If someone arrived late they simply edged up to make a bit more room. On that basis it was almost impossible to be full up.

It is certain there could have been room for Joseph. There would, no doubt, have been room for Mary - except for one thing! This was not just any young woman, but one who was expecting a baby, and obviously it might be born at any time.

Most awkward. Even the most kind hearted innkeeper has a duty to his other guests. The baby might be born that very night - such an upset for everybody. So... ‘there was no room’ - but it was no room for The Saviour of the World, as yet unborn.

So she brought forth her first-born son and laid him in a manger.

No wise man casts his pearls before swine, but God gave this unspeakable gift and it was given in the middle of cattle in the filth and squalor of an eastern cave stable. He gave him up to the suspicion, envy, greed, hatred and malice of evil men. They spat upon him, mocked and scourged him and crucified him and at his death railed upon him, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Even so, God gave him up to that.

We sing, and truthfully sing, Unsearchable the love that hath the Saviour brought. The Grace is far above or man or angels thought! This is true. You and I may believe, we may know that God loved. We may try to grasp, we may may dimly believe, but we shall never really know - not here - not on earth - God so loved!

And to whom was the gift given? What should we expect? You know, you could make quite a list of those who just might be worthy: prophets, priests, the righteous, the merciful, the meek, peacemakers, the pure in heart, wisemen, shepherds, apostles, disciples...

Yes, it was to all these, but it was also to many more. I wouldn’t stand much chance if that were the full and complete list. Are you included? But that isn’t the full list.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever...”
It was to whosoever!

Did you ever see the famous recruiting picture of the Great War? A magnificently pictured soldier pointed an accusing finger above the words. Your country needs you! There was something strange about that picture. It didn't matter where you stood - left, right, above, below or in the middle - as soon as you looked at the picture, the finger pointed at you.

That's the extent of whosoever... to Nicodemus, a good man: to Peter, a waverer: to Judas, a traitor: to Paul, Pharisee and chief persecutor of Christ: to Mary, a prostitute: to a thief upon a cross: to the most high and mighty of emperors: to the poorest of beggars: to the most loathsome and evil criminal...to me! To you!

I would love to linger over this wonderful word 'Whosoever' but the text calls us on.

“...that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Perish - what an awful word! Not die, but perish. The picture is of a slow decaying away. Here is an apple gradually going bad. Just now only a little need be lost. Now only a small part might be saved... at last all is putrefied and lost! Here is the story of a human soul, a man's spirit, a person's finer feelings - call it what you will - perishing. Only the body may die quickly. The spirit of a man can only perish slowly!

Hatred and bitterness, greed and envy, lust for material things, carelessness indifference to others... these so easily enter in and by them finer feelings slowly perish. Like the creeping spread of leprosy in the body, so these in the soul of man cause him to perish.

But, “Whosoever believeth in him should NOT perish.” How much more wonderful... NOT perish.

This gift is offered so that by His earthly life we might be drawn to God, there to find a life of joy, peace, gentleness, goodness and love: to talk day by day with a Father, to know him and feel him in all life's joys and sorrows, to know he has forgiven our sins, that they are completely blotted out: to be sure that nothing can separate us from the love of God: for me, even me to know beyond all doubt that all the wonder and happiness and joy of this frail human life is but the shadow of the glorious radiance of my Father's other home of love.

The free gift of the one who SO loved. Could you ever have imagined such a Christmas gift? But, my friend, have you ever accepted it? Do you want to take it. It's there for you to take, for “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son for you, that you might have everlasting life.”

HE HATH MADE MY MOUTH LIKE A SHARP SWORD

Isaiah 49:2

“He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me; and he hath made me a polished shaft, in his quiver hath he kept me close.”

The first six verses of this chapter make up the second of the passages in Isaiah which are called ‘The servant songs.’ The first song contains the well known words ‘a bruised reed he shall not break and the smoking flax shall he not quench’, while the last of them has even better known sentences such as, “he was despised and rejected... as a sheep before her shearers is dumb yea he opened not his mouth.” Those two songs give a picture of a gentle, meek and suffering servant of God. However, in this verse from the second song, the servant himself speaks and gives a contrasting picture. His mouth is like a sharp sword and he is an arrow, a specially prepared weapon, kept always at the ready for use by God. He says that his God has equipped him to be a fighter and a hunter!

Now the Christian church has always associated these songs with Christ. At the same time it has also insisted that ‘the servant should be as his Lord.’ This means, for example, that the words of our text are telling us what the followers of Christ should strive to be. Consider then the four distinct parts of the verse.

First, the Christian's mouth should be “like a sharp sword.” This is difficult to understand unless we remember that in those far off days a man's sword was something to be used in the service of his king. So, our mouths are instruments with which we must serve God, and not in a quiet, passive way. That was not the function of a sword. Straightway, then, I may say “If you claim to be a follower of Christ and a servant of God, you are not entitled to become one of that well known silent majority.” Your mouth is to be a weapon serving your God. And, also straightway, I can say that unless we have made ourselves very familiar with the word of God, our mouths will be of little use in his service.

We are never surprised, are we? When we see how well the political activist knows his party's policy and program. We are not taken aback to learn that the dedicated communist knows his Carl Marx and the Communist Manifesto inside out and back to front! It's not easy to catch him out.

But how do you react when you hear, “Jesus said we were all God's children, so what does it matter what religion you believe in?” Would you be able to say, right off the cuff, “Friend, Jesus actually said, Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you, that ye may be the sons of your Father which is in heaven.”

Then could you add, for good measure, “When people talked to him about his brothers and sisters he said, Whosoever shall do the will of my Father, the same is my brother and sister and mother”, because that statement alone explodes the pious, sentimental idea that Jesus said that all men and women are God's children. His creation - yes! His children - NO!

Would you be struck dumb at the challenge “You don't have to go to church to be a Christian?” Would you have to grope around for a reply to, “I do unto others what I expect them to do to me. That's the golden rule Jesus gave in his sermon, and it's all that's needed?”

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews said, “The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword! But if we are to use our mouths in his service then we must KNOW the word. We must be more than just familiar with the word of the Lord. We must search the scriptures and study the word. We ought to become eager to read and discuss it in the fellowship of our friends and neighbours in Christ.

But the verse continues as the servant goes on to say, “in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me.” Now there is a lovely thought! It may remind you of an earlier verse from this prophecy: “A hiding place from the wind: and a covert from the tempest: as rivers of water in a dry place; as the show of a great rock in a weary land.” Or it may suggest a word from the proverbs of Solomon, the wise one. “The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous runneth into it and is safe.” Even if you aren’t biblical experts, I guess a few of you are almost singing to yourselves, “Hiding in thee, Hiding in thee. Thou blest Rock of Ages I’m hiding in thee.”

It is a beautiful thought, to feel that we can curl up in God’s hand and be comforted and safe like a child nestling in a father’s arms and being shielded from the other nasty little children who taunt us and make us afraid. But, be quite clear on this. God is NOT a convenient ‘funk hole! He is not a coward’s refuge. He is not a cosy little shelter from the big bad world. Jesus said to his disciples, “In me ye may have peace: in the world ye have tribulation.” And, my dear friends, be sure of this one without the other.

The Lord hides his servant in the shadow of his hand so that the servant may recover and renew his strength. The servant is like the soldier who has wielded his sword in the battle. He repairs to his Lord’s castle to sharpen his sword, to rest and re-prepare to serve that Master. While he is there he does not sing, “Hiding in thee.” He asks, “Father hear the prayer I offer. Not for ease that prayer shall be. But for strength that I may ever, live my life courageously.”

Now the text continues with its military language, changing from sword to arrow. “He hath made me a polished shaft.” Here we enter into the world of the archer in days when skill with the bow was important. In everyday life it might mean the difference between eating or going hungry. In days of war it could mean life or death. So, both the bow and the arrows were made and kept with care.

Yet not all arrows were equally important. Even in battle, for example, it was not always essential that an arrow wounded or killed an enemy. It might be sufficient just to keep him at bay. In hunting, more often than not, it was not a disaster if an arrow missed its quarry. But there were times when it became essential to obtain immediate food. There were times in battle when a situation became ‘kill or be killed.’ At such times the skilled and careful archer used his special arrows.

Such an arrow was constantly tested for its straightness. Its tip was kept sharp. Above all it was polished and kept polished so that when fired it would fly straight and fast. When it struck home, because it was polished, it would penetrate deeply. It would make a kill. It was a special instrument. To give you a modern picture, I would have to say it was the equivalent of the present day game hunter’s ‘elephant gun’ designed to stop anything and everything.

The servant of God, the Christian, is to be a polished shaft. He is a special arrow, carefully prepared for special tasks. But there is a difference between the arrow and the servant. The arrow is used by the archer and has no need to know when, why or how. The servant does need knowledge. We do need to know what we have to do, how to do it and when. We have to know the will of our God and Father before we can serve him well.

Like the special arrow we may need to get to the right place and to hit the target with no time to waste: to do the right thing or to speak the right word without delay.

The arrow does its job because it is a polished shaft. The polishing which the servant needs can only be done with prayer. Of course you know that. I know it, yet how often we fail because we neglect prayer! We do this, that and the other and as often as not feel, afterwards, to have used a lot of energy and effort for naught. Perhaps we are left with the poet who exclaimed:

“I shot an arrow into the air. It fell to earth, I know not where.”

However, a finer poet said:

“The path of prayer thyself hast trod.
Lord, teach us how to pray.”

Why do we so neglect this polishing? The one who, humanly speaking, should have needed it least, used it most. “He went out into the mountain to pray: and he continued all night in Prayer to God.”

Now the servant brings our verse to a close with “in his quiver hath he kept me close.” An arrow is no use to the archer if it’s somewhere, but he’s not quite sure where. It must be in the soldier’s quiver if it is going to be available for instant use. Of course this is his responsibility. The arrow has no responsibility. It is put in the quiver and if for any reason it cannot be drawn out to be used in time, then it bears no responsibility for failure.

And here again the analogy between the arrow and the servant breaks down, for, unlike the arrow, the servant had a choice. He may remain available for use by his master if he so prefers. By his own free choice he can, at any time, be ‘not available.’ We may sing, “O use me Lord, use even me. Just as thou wilt and when and where”, and let our subconscious add quietly, “but not when there’s something good on the Tele”. An arrow which occasionally gets stuck in the quiver is not much use.

We may go through an annual ritual and say, “I am not my Own, but yours: Put me to what you will. I freely and whole-heartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal” - So long as it doesn’t cost me too much in time, money and talents!

The hunter will certainly lose his quarry if the polished arrow sticks in the quiver. It is equally certain that one day our Father in heaven will one day lose a child if the servant is not always ever-ready.

We have looked at this... at a strange verse. It is rather military in an archaic way. But its message to us as followers of Christ, is plain. In God’s service:-

1. We must search the scriptures that we may have command of the word of God.
2. We must be continually strengthened by him and in him.
3. We must seek always to learn his will, that we may reach and serve those he needs to serve and reach.
4. We are of real us to our God only if we are ready at all times to do his will.

THOU ART NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM

Mark 12:34

“Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.”

I want to speak this to those within this building who are not far from the kingdom: who are not far from allowing God to set up his rule and reign in their hearts: and we must dwell on the words “not far from” for if some are NOT FAR FROM it, it should follow that some are IN it. Yes, that is clear. They are men and women who have answered his call to come to him. Now these are NOT saints. They are NOT perfect. They have faults. They are SINNERS. They often give a poor picture of Christ and his kingdom. They often fall - but they can never fail. They have given their lives to Christ, by their own positive decision and have entered the kingdom - and because they ARE in the kingdom, this world is a better and happier place to live in and they - slowly, maybe, but surely are happier and better men and women themselves.

But if some are NOT FAR FROM the kingdom it could well follow that some ARE far from it. Yes, indeed, and in no spirit of judgment, we must say that even in this town of ours, today there are men and women who ARE far from the kingdom. They have no time for Christ: if they ever mention his name, it is in the act of cursing and swearing. They have no use for the Bible and such humbug and cant. They never kneel in prayer.

They have no time for things unseen. Money, position and power are what they seek and Love, kindness, forgiveness and the like are merely weaknesses to be looked for and exploited in sentimental simpletons. My friends, it is un-Christlike, but I have great sympathy with you when you meet them and feel that you wouldn't touch them with a bargepole! They are a LONG, LONG way from the kingdom but think carefully: they were not always far from it: and some were once VERY near!

And there are those of you who are not far from the kingdom. You are NOT in it you would be the first to admit that: but you are very close. You are attracted by the life and personality of Jesus. From time to time you feel his challenge as it comes to you in this place. You don't have to be persuaded to come to the service because you rather enjoy the atmosphere and fellowship of worship - yet you sometimes go away feeling that there is something more that you are missing. You pray - and often wonder if it does any good. You sometimes read your bible and find it puzzling and dull - and wonder why some speak of it as “the word of life.” You dislike the company of those whom the Psalmist called ‘The ungodly.’ You would hate yourself if you should find yourself becoming like them.

Of course you would, my friend, for you see, at present, “You are NOT far from the kingdom” and it is because of this that I want YOU to see why Jesus said to this young man, “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.”

In the first place, it was because AS A SCRIBE this man must have had a good home and a good upbringing which had helped him to try to live a clean, honest life. He was well educated and thoughtful. He had chosen this particular job in life because he was not coarse, greedy and grasping. He realised that morals were more important than money and that service to others was greater than helping oneself. It is probably true that he was not filled with an all powerful passion which drove him always to a single, fixed goal.

Nevertheless, as a scribe, he looked for the respect of his fellowmen in an honest, sincere life.

Is that true of you? Then if so - if, so far, you have had great and high ideals which have helped you to try to live a decent, clean, straightforward life: if you conscientiously strive to do good and help others when you can: if these, then your life is like... a perfect engine with cylinder, piston and valve in order: with no flaw in body or in wheel but with NO steam supplied to drive it along. ONE thing only is lacking and it may be that in this moment Christ says to you “You are NOT FAR from the kingdom.”

Secondly, this man was interested in religion. It had a real place in his life. He went regularly to the synagogue. He kept the religious festivals. He read the law carefully and tried to do his duty as a member of the Jewish faith. Yet he obviously realised that the studying of his law books and keeping to the written rules were not enough. There were questions which his books could not answer. What was the most important thing in life? Law or Love? Should he ‘render unto Caesar’ or should he give to God?

That is true of many today! They are trying to take their religion into their daily lives. They long to take their Sunday faith into their working week and they don't seem to have the power to be what they long to be! Is that true of you? Then it may well be that only one thing is lacking, and if you will but listen, you will, THIS DAY, hear Christ say, “You are not far from the kingdom.”

The third reason was that this man knew that Jesus was right, and he had the courage to say so. Are you convinced, too? Do you believe that Jesus is right? In spite of all you've heard other people saying about ‘religion and business not mixing’, do you still feel that his teaching is true? In spite of all the claims of politicians, do you still feel that FOR YOU the simple, idealistic, impractical way of Jesus of Nazareth is the right way? You do!

Then, my friend, I can say to you this morning, “You are not far from the kingdom.”

“Not far from the kingdom.” Not far away because YOU have given Jesus Christ a place in your thoughts and in your life: because you even believe in his claim to forgive man's sins and in his power to help men and women to realise their hopes and ambitions. But not quite in the kingdom because you have never claimed that forgiveness for yourself and because you have never offered to him YOUR gifts, your powers and your possibilities. Think again of those who are now a long way from the kingdom: they, too, once were very near. Just now YOU are so very close that your very nearness may keep you out.

The Hindus believe that whosoever drinks the waters of the sacred river Ganges must enjoy and inherit eternal life. Two pilgrims who came from afar, reached the sacred river together and one ran immediately to lap up the precious water. The other stood on the bank and said, “I'm in no hurry. You must go back home tomorrow but I shall build a hut and stay here and drink as often as I please”. And every day he would say to himself, “I shall be here tomorrow. I shall drink then.” So he lived by the sacred river, so close, for many years and one day he died never having tasted its waters!

Not far from the kingdom. My friend, that is a dangerous position to occupy, because it means being not far from the king. Now he may not always wait: He may not always call. Then it will be too late to answer and enter in.

Years ago a friend of my father was standing one day on the promenade at the seaside resort of Scarborough. A Salvation Army meeting was in progress and, joining in the singing, he was having a lovely time. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder and a voice said:

"You're having a grand time, Dixon."

He turned and saw a man he knew well, the station master of a nearby village.

"Yes" he replied, "and so could you."

"No: not me. I'm afraid it's too late for me."

"Nonsense. It's never too late for anyone."

"For me, Dixon, I believe it is too late! Listen. Twenty one years ago I sat one night in a chapel which you know well. The preacher was an old Local who was droning on and on and on. It was boring. Yet, suddenly, I heard another voice. I heard God calling to me. I'm as sure of that, as I'm sure I'm now talking to you. HE called to ME. I was being called to give my life to Him. I only had to walk down the aisle and kneel at the little communion rail and my life would never be the same again. I didn't answer his call. I wouldn't - not just then. That's twenty one years ago and from that day to this I have never heard that voice again. Dixon, I've gone to scores and scores of meetings. I've listened to great and famous preachers. I've tried. I would give every penny I possess even to hear a whisper of that voice. If I heard him now, I would go to the ends of the earth to answer but, for me, it's too late now."

Very close to the kingdom - but not quite in because, so far, you have not offered yourself to the king.

In one church a missionary meeting was held. Gifts were asked to help extend the kingdom of God. The plates came in and the gifts were counted: banknotes, silver and pence and one small white card. Who put it in? A young man sitting right at the back of the congregation. He had written on it just one simple word, "MYSELF."

That, my friend, is the only way INTO the kingdom. Not 'Just like that ! far from it? Then will you come in?



The keys to the Kingdom of Heaven

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

A sermon by Sir Revd Dr Richard J Teal

What is a Christian?

It isn't an easy question. But our reading today about the Call of the first disciples begins to suggest an answer.

What is a Christian?

A Christian is one who hears the call. In my teens when I became a Christian, this story always fascinated me and puzzled me. I couldn't understand how it happened. Jesus came along, saw Simon and Andrew said, Follow me. And off they went, just like that. Or was it just like that? The absence of any biographical or psychological background in Mark's account doesn't mean that there wasn't any. A study of the other gospels, John in particular, and the use of a little sanctified imagination allows us to surmise that this wasn't the first time they met. These young men had probably stood in the crowd and listened, and perhaps stayed behind. To talk with Jesus when the rest of gone. For his part, no doubt Jesus had already got his eyes on these young men and found out enough about them to realize their potential.

So, when he met them on this occasion, he said, "Follow me" and they knew what they had to do. But why doesn't the evangelist give us any background?

I think the answer is that Mark wanted to highlight the importance of call and response.

We can't overstate the importance of call. As somebody says, Christianity stems from and continues through the call of Christ to a person to follow.

The Indispensable something of discipleship is the call. For some it comes like as a knock on the door-- for others it's a nagging feeling that won't go away. Both the knock and the nag have about them, a divine insistence, a compulsion and irresistible something that can't be escaped, though the call of course can be refused. God does respect our right to say no. But for all that his call is insistent. And when we put up our objections, he argues with us as He did with Jeremiah, "don't say I'm a child, going out to those to whom I send you. Don't be afraid of them for I am with you to protect you. It is the Lord who speaks" and that is it. In the call, we come face to face with the mystery of the God who speaks and speaks insistently to secure our response before he will leave us alone. In the Methodist Church, at least as far as its preachers are concerned, great emphasis has always been laid on the call of God. That is, right. As long as we don't expect it to come in a stereotyped way and look for a stereotyped response. For no person can preach without a sense of call. I certainly wouldn't be in the ministry today but for an overriding sense of call that has kept me in the ministry and the faith. Fail though I do. Frustrated and faithless, though I often am. Follow I must. But the primary call is not to be a minister or a preacher, but simply a Christian. That is to follow Christ wherever he may lead. It's significant that our Methodist service for receiving new members includes this reading about the call of the disciples. And those of us who have been received into membership will remember the words "you will have heard the voice of Jesus saying to you, as he said to his first disciples, follow me." You have already responded to his call and have come now.

What is a Christian?

One who hears the call and responds. A Christian to is one who joins the band, the band of disciples who follow Christ, that is the church. For some while there's been a marked reluctance to join the church. Nationally we have made new members but not enough to replace those who die and those who ceased to meet with us.

The young have been reluctant to commit themselves to the Institutional church. Those of us who are older need to realize that the young, so disillusioned by our society, have been very suspicious of all institutions, not least the church. That doesn't surprise me. As far as they are concerned, our buildings, and indeed our denominations, so often seem to get in the way. The church, in other words, needs to be reformed, renewed. And it may well be that only when we're prepared to leave our nets, and follow with a certain abandon, will the church rediscover itself?

One thing that we have to relearn is that the church is not a building but a People. A band of disciples who follow Christ.

And that the church is not to be identified with our churches, our denominations, but with the one people of God. But, having said that, I still believe in the church. It is not an addition to the gospel, but part and parcel of it. To be a Christian means following Christ, but following him along with others. When Jesus said to the disciples, follow me, he called them into a fellowship. To be in Christ is to be in his church, Christ and his Church are one-- only in fellowship with other Christians can we find true fellowship with Jesus? There's a rather lovely legend about Zacchaeus after he had been converted, so the story goes, he used to get up early every morning and leave his house. His wife was curious not to say suspicious. And one morning she decided to follow. At the town well, she saw her husband lower a bucket, fill it with water, and then go out through the city gate till he came to a sycamore tree.

There he set the bucket down, and began to clear away the stones and rubbish that lay about the foot of the tree. Then he poured the water on the roots, and gently caressed the trunk with his hands.

He's amazed wife came out of hiding. And to her questions, he replied. 'This is where I found Christ'. For twenty centuries, people have borne the same tender, affectionate witness, concerning the church. This is where I found Christ. A Christian is one who hears the apostolic call, often within the Christian community itself, and joins the Apostolic Church.

What is a Christian?

And finally, a Christian is one who shares the apostolic task. As Mark tells us later on, Jesus called His disciples to be with him. That is to join the band, this fellowship, "this mutual society of help and comfort" to quote the marriage service and to send them out to preach. Indeed, right at the outset, he said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people". Fishermen they were, and no doubt they got the message. They would be drawing men and women out of the waters of this world, into the net of the life of the age to come. I said earlier that the primary call is not to be a preacher or a minister, but a Christian. But that primary call involves all of us in this fishing business. Christ may not want you to be a fully accredited local preacher or an ordained minister. But he wants you to fish for him. And fishing is a very time-consuming patient trying business. But fish we must.

Every Christian is a witness. That was a phrase that was constantly on the lips of Bishop Azariah of India. "It was absolutely necessary" He used to say that every convert should at once bear witness." On one occasion in Madras as he drove this home in his own vivid way, "It was" he said, "by the witness of the common person, that the gospel spread in the early church from slave to slave, from soldier to soldier, from artisan and to artisan and as I have gone round among the churches."

He went on, "I've had the baptized members, placed their hands on their heads and repeat after me—" I am a baptized Christian. Woe is me. If I preach, not the gospel".

I'm not going to ask you to put your hands on your heads. But I am going to ask you to say to yourself, I am a baptized Christian. Woe is me. If I preach not the gospel.

That is the apostolic task. What is a Christian? Well, it may not be the complete answer. But the Christian is one who hears the call and responds to it, joins the church and shares the apostolic task.

Let us pray we are part of that of this wonderful calling and to God be the praise and glory this and every day. Amen

Revd Dr Richard J Teal



THE GREAT COMMENDATION

A sermon by Godfrey Nicholson

Did you notice the words of commendation that Jesus – eventually – spoke to this woman? True, she had to wait before she got any sort of response from him. And even that first response seemed like a harsh, rude rebuff. But she persisted; and in her persistence won this great commendation.

O woman, great is your faith! Which of us, whether man or woman, wouldn't wish to be addressed like that? But would any of us dare to claim it for ourselves? Can we even imagine Jesus saying it to us? Isn't it the case that he would more likely address us in the same way that he had to address his disciples several times, "O ye of little faith..."

We sing confidently the hymns of faith. We join with a hearty 'Amen' at the end of the prayers. We are comfortable standing fairly inconspicuously in the crowd at Open Air events. We try to support the work of God and the witness and service of the Church. But there is that awkward, nagging suspicion that our 'faith' is not all that it should be.

In the gospels only one other person is singled out for the quality of their faith. Just two people share the gold medal, pass with top marks. In chapter 8 of Matthew's gospel a Roman Centurion begs Jesus to heal his servant. He has recognized the power and authority of Jesus.

He instinctively knows that a word of command from Jesus will prove sufficient to bring healing to the servant. That's how authority works. Authority speaks, and it is done. He understood. And he trusted that Jesus had that sort of authority.

It's quite striking that the only two people who are praised by the Lord Jesus for their faith are these two 'outsiders', these foreigners. A woman from a pagan background, and a representative of the occupying army. They had no hang-ups about Jesus. They weren't worried about the Scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees breathing down their necks. They didn't consider what their neighbours might think, how "They've got religion." But while we feel rather ashamed that our own faith doesn't match up to theirs, even with all the advantages we have of years of worship, of Bibles readily available, of finding the encouragement of Christian fellowship; let's try to answer three simple questions.

What does Jesus mean by the word "faith"?
How did this woman show that she had faith?
How does a faith like this develop?

If we want to be people of faith, we can learn from this story. We learn best from those who are the best examples. So, let's explore these questions.

What does Jesus mean by the word "faith"? The word gets bandied around rather freely, and in the process picks up various shades of meaning. Some people claim to have a lot of faith, and when you press them, it means that they are cheerful, optimistic people. The glass is always half full. The sun is always shining. Everything in the garden is rosy. Their "faith" appears to be little more than saying that life has run smoothly and comfortably for them. Others will tell you that they can recite the great creeds of the Church. "Faith", for them, is just the content of what the Christian Church holds to be central. Believing the correct things is all that matters.

It may have as little bearing on their everyday life as the multiplication tables they learned all those years ago in junior or infants' school. The creeds are for them just facts, like lists of Kings and Queens from bygone centuries; true, but not affecting our lives today.

There are people who say they have faith in God, but it is limited to believing that there is a God. They are like people on a ship, who are glad that there are lifeboats, but they hope they never have to use them! The thought that God is real is their comfort; but they don't want him to make any claim on their lives.

And there are others who are quick to tell you that they were christened (though the proper word is 'baptized'), and they pin all their hopes on that, or on their church membership or other rituals. To point out that Hitler and Stalin, for example, were both baptized may feel a trifle insensitive, but is enough to demonstrate that much more is required. Unbelievers often mock us, saying that "Faith is believing what you know isn't true", as if faith has to be irrational and unreal. And there are the people who say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you're sincere." That doesn't work if you get on the wrong bus. It can be disastrous if you decide to take the wrong medicine. Sincerity is not enough, not if your belief is wrong.

In winter-time, when ponds freeze over, some people will venture out on the ice. Some of them are there almost as soon as the temperature drops below zero, while others wait till it has been there for days. But how safe they are doesn't depend on their belief; it depends entirely on how thick the ice actually is. Faith, as Jesus uses the word, is a reliance on the goodness and loving-kindness of God. Who, or what, we put our trust in is the key thing. God has made promises. God has loved us. God has come among us in Jesus Christ. God our Maker knows what is right for us, and we may follow his wisdom. Faith knows the worth and the reliability of the one we have chosen to follow.

It chooses to depend on the goodness of God, to trust in the reliability of his love for us. He promised, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." Jesus said, "I am with you to the close of the age."

Faith is not like a slot-machine, where you put in your coin (or you rattle off a prayer) and out pops what you want. Our heavenly Father exercises a deeper wisdom than to let us have whatever we want as soon as we want it. Faith trusts his loving wisdom, to get it right and at the right time.

How did this woman show this faith? For her in her desperation, faith had to be far more than simple cheerful optimism. A sterile creed would not make any difference. It was her actions that gave expression to her faith, that demonstrated its reality.

First, she approached Jesus. This meant that she ignored the prejudices that create barriers. She was a Gentile and he was a Jew. Most Jews thought of Gentiles as 'dogs', which was what Jesus picked up on. And Gentiles were just as quick to hold Jews in contempt. What is more, back then, men did not speak to women in public, particularly a woman they were not married to. Still less might a woman start a conversation with a strange man. Here was another prejudice and tradition she had to overcome. At first Jesus did not answer her at all. She persisted, to the point where his disciples pleaded with him to send her away.

Next, he told them that his mission at this point was "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She must have heard this, but still knelt before him so that he could not ignore her. There she begged him simply to help her and her daughter.

The next rebuff was when Jesus told her that it was not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. He was echoing the common Jewish prejudice. What we don't know is how he said it. Did he say it harshly, or did he say it with a twinkle in his eye? Was he – in effect – saying, "You know what prejudices might divide us.

Are you willing to set them aside? Do you trust me enough, that I will set them aside too?"

Secondly, we have noticed her persistence. Faith is not faith when it gives up at the first set-back. She was not discouraged by the attitude of the disciples. (Incidentally, how often do outsiders find us unwelcoming and a discouragement? They sit in our seat. They don't know the hymns. They ask difficult questions.) She ignored them, so that she could address Jesus directly. And when he reminded her of all those traditional prejudices, she still persisted. Faith is neither discouraged nor deterred. She did not give up at the first sign of difficulty.

And thirdly we notice how quick-witted she was. Instead of accepting the label of 'dog' she turned it round. While the children's bread is not thrown to the dogs, yet the puppies eat what falls from the table. There is a blessing to spare, even if she is not in the normal sense entitled to it. This was an expression of her faith; for Jesus did not say, "Clever is your argument" or "I appreciate your quick wit," or "Great is the love for your daughter," but "Great is your faith." The writer of the letter to the Hebrews wrote that "without faith it is impossible to please God." This woman pleased him by the bucket-full!

How does a faith like this develop? Since faith is faith in or trust in a person, the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, then faith grows and develops in the same way as any relationship is built up. It is kept in good order as attention is given to it, as we devote time to him, and as we consider what behaviour is pleasing to him.

We are not told how or when her faith began. We don't know what had influenced her to bring her request to Jesus, or how she had developed this confidence that he would listen to her and help her. Very likely she had heard stories of what he had done, how many people he had healed, how he had shown compassion on so many sufferers. It seemed, too, that his blessings were not narrowly confined. It wasn't just 'good' or 'virtuous' people he had helped. Outcasts and

those despised as 'sinners' were blessed by him. When the 5000 were fed he didn't check which of them were worthy; it was enough that they were hungry.

Since she addressed him as "Lord" and "Son of David" we may guess that she had identified him with the Messianic hope, the one in whom God's purposes were to find fulfilment. Centuries earlier Isaiah had spoken of a light for the Gentiles and of foreigners coming near. She might have known these Scriptures, but whether or not she knew them, a strong instinct drew her near to him. Earlier still, God had promised Abraham that through his descendants all the earth would be blessed: she was certainly included in that.

We feed our faith by familiarity with God's word. Just as we can't get to know another person if we never listen to them, we will never know God well enough to trust him if we neglect his word. And equally, as human relationships thrive on conversation, so our faith builds as we talk with him in prayer. An entry in the Guinness Book of Records for how rapidly we can say the Lord's Prayer is not prayer. Reciting a list of our requests or demands is not prayer. There is a place for those requests, but they are only a small part of prayer. Make time to listen. Make time to pause in wonder that this great God loves you. Find room to ask what he wants of you, your life, your service.

When Paul wrote to the Romans he included the question, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" and provided his own answer. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" We look at the cross of Calvary, and tell ourselves, "That is how greatly God loves me. He would do that for me, however little I deserve his love and care. If he loves me like that, surely I can trust him, and give my heart to him."

Indeed, you and I can trust him, now and forever.

Godfrey Nicholson

THE COMPASSION OF JESUS

A sermon by Godfrey Nicholson

Mark 6:34

"He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

A few verses earlier the disciples have returned from their first attempts at mission. They are full of excitement over all that they have witnessed. They still have much to learn, and Jesus wants them to take time alone with him. As has been observed, if you don't come apart and rest awhile (v31) you'll just come apart!

But although they seek a lonely spot, the crowds soon follow. They want more of what Jesus offers, whether healing their sick or teaching them about God's coming Kingdom. And "He had compassion on them." He did not just see the gathering crowd. What he saw reminded him of lost sheep, of a leaderless flock.

How did he express his compassion for them?

He taught them - Verse 34

And although all four gospels record this incident, none of them tell us what he taught them. But his consistency means we can be sure that he taught them of what life would be with God as King. He must have begun many sentences with, "The Kingdom of God is like...." He set that vision before them, and invited them to be part of it.

It wasn't the demoralizing demand to try harder, or do better (like my school reports). Rather, it was the inspiring message of a power that transforms, that makes lives new.

At the same time, he would not allow them to become complacent. God accepts the sinner, but calls for repentance. Changed conduct is the certain sign of a changed relationship with God. There is a new centre to life, a new aim and purpose.

Jesus set before them the challenge of true righteousness; a healthy relationship with God. We don't go to the Doctor unless we feel unwell. And we won't go to Jesus unless we feel our need of a Saviour.

An old Andy Capp cartoon shows him visiting his doctor. The doctor tells him, "The best advice I can give you is to give up drinking and stop smoking." Andy's reply was, "If that's the best advice, what's the second-best?" Jesus will not let us off that easily.

He fed them - Verse 44

How striking this must have been! They would tell their grandchildren about this memorable occasion. I often think what a compelling speaker Jesus must have been, that at the end of the day some lad (John 6:9) has still not eaten his picnic. Most boys I have known would have wolfed it down long before lunch-time!

Just as a Good Shepherd would lead his flock to abundant pasture, so this Good Shepherd will feed this flock. The complete person matters. He does not choose between soul and mind and body, but provides completely. He who refused to turn stones into bread for his own benefit in the wilderness, now turns loaves into a feast for others.

Mark notes that they sat down on the green grass – not surprising, since it was spring-time, nearly Passover. Surely there is an echo here of the Shepherd-Psalm, and "He makes me to lie down in green pastures." Undoubtedly, he was restoring their soul.

General William Booth told his Salvationists, “If you want to give a hungry man a tract, give him it wrapped in a sandwich.” A church where I was minister had a stock of Food Parcels to give to those who needed them. Ever practical, they included a tin opener. And just as important, we included a Gospel-message booklet.

For those with eyes to see, Jesus was dropping hints of his divine status. “The eyes of all look to you (i.e. God) and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.” (Psalm 145:15, 16) He was doing the work that God does. And these signs are recorded in order that we might believe.

He prayed for them - v46

At last, he managed to find some isolation. Having sent his disciples across the lake, and dismissed the crowds, he can now pray. So many things can distract us from prayer. Background noises from TV or the phone. The sudden remembering of a job. A child's interruption. The thought of next Sunday's sermon!

Time to take note of the Psalm: “Be still, and know that I am God. Or, to paraphrase, Relax, and remember that I am God. Jesus took the trouble to find that place where he could be still. After the demands of the day, he needed to refresh himself by communion with his Heavenly Father. To be the channel of blessing was exhausting, and his soul needed restoring too.

Equally, having blessed the crowd with healing, with teaching, and with food, he could not forget them. They still needed his prayers. And so did his disciples. They had been witnesses, and they had been partners in the work.

As he prayed for the crowds and for his disciples, it was surely much more specific than a vague, “God bless them.” What blessing would prove appropriate? For the crowds, he surely prayed that they would see not only the sign, but where the sign was pointing.

For his disciples, he surely was praying that they would not get swept away by the drama of the sign, or their recent experiences, but deepen their faith in him. And he prays that for us too.

Doubtless, too, he was praying about the completion of his ministry. Later he will break bread again, but that time anticipating his body given up on the cross. Later a different crowd will be screaming for his crucifixion. And – much later, for it is still to come – instead of their wanting to take him by force and make him king (John 6:15), he will be universally acclaimed as king. And in the meantime, he will pray that many will discover new life in him.

During the war, a French evacuee met an English girl and fell in love. In due course they married, and settled in England. He became naturalized as an English citizen. When the newspapers caught onto the story, he was asked what difference it had made. He replied, “Now I was on the winning side at Waterloo.” And those of us who have asked Christ into our hearts find ourselves on the winning side at Calvary.

The Lord, who “ever lives and intercedes” for his own, will pray that faith may be strengthened, that love may be deepened, that guidance in service will be given (and followed), that they will grow in grace. He is still praying that for you and me. Are you looking for it to be answered?

He came to them - Verse 48

His prayer for them did not mean he was in a bubble, cut off from ‘the real world’. It made him more aware, not less. “He saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them.” At night the wind on Galilee tends to come from the west, and can get quite violent. Perhaps the moon shone through a gap in the clouds. But he knew. He cared. He could help. And “he came.” They were not forsaken in trouble. The storm will not overwhelm them (Isaiah 43:2)

They had experienced this once before, when he had been in the boat with them. On that occasion he had rebuked the storm, and it meekly submitted to him. Then they had asked with amazement, “Who is this, that even the wind and waves obey him?”

In 1989 Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev met at Valletta Harbour, for talks aimed at reducing East/West tension. They arrived aboard warships. The news broadcast that first evening told us that they had not been able to meet that day, “because of the wind and the waves.” The next Sunday I was going to be preaching on that part of Mark chapter 4, and noticed the precise wording. The two most powerful men on earth could not do what the Lord Jesus had done.

As he drew near to the boat, he would have passed by. It should have been sufficient that he was Master of the situation. However, they had been on that lake many times, and never encountered any pedestrians there. “It's a ghost!” they scream. His reassuring reply might be translated, as, “It's me.” Literally, it's “I am;” the name of God. God is here. God is with you. The one who will say, “I am with you always,” is here with them now. Just as he had prayed for their safety, so now he was the answer to his own prayers.

Is there a clue about our own prayers?

A twelve-year old boy was in some distress about a situation facing him. I asked him, “Is God in control in your life?” I knew that he had a real Christian faith, and he answered, “Yes.” I then asked, “Is God in control in that situation?” This time he replied, “I suppose so.” And I asked him, “So, what's the problem?” Many times I have rebuked myself for over-simplifying it. And many times I have been challenged with those questions when I have been facing difficult situations too.

He healed them - Verse 56

When they reach the western shore, they are recognized. Another crowd quickly gathers, bringing their sick with them. They expect Jesus will, in his compassion, heal them. Wherever he went, in towns and villages, or out in the country, it was the same. This was his reputation, and this was his nature.

His miracles of healing were too many, too frequent, to be mere ‘coincidences’ or shams. And although the healing may have been all that the crowds wanted, for Jesus it meant much more. For him they were signs of the Kingdom. They were a first instalment of how the world will be when he is King. They were like the free samples we are offered as an inducement to buy, or a test-drive before you buy that new car.

When Peter met the crippled Aeneas at Lystra in Acts 9, he told him, “Christ Jesus makes you whole.” A life without Christ is woefully incomplete. Whether physical healing comes in this life or the next, we need him to make us whole. As St Augustine wrote, “You have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” There is a hunger in the human heart that cannot be satisfied even by miraculously broken loaves and fish, but only by Jesus Christ himself.

The Jesus who we have observed in these verses is the same Jesus today. He is still marked by compassion. As Peter puts it in his first letter, “You can cast all your cares on him, because he cares for you.” (1st Peter 5:7)

Godfrey Nicholson

THE SIN OF ENVY

A sermon by Revd Dr Sir Ralph Waller KBE

Envy is perhaps the only deadly sin which has no element of fun in it.

And it is deadly because it destroys other people and it can always destroy the person who is envious. The psychotherapist Melanie Klein described envy, as resulting in an angry feeling that someone else possesses and enjoys something desirable, giving rise to an impulse to take it away, or spoil it. She goes on to say that envy can also result in a desire to spoil things for other people.

The Bible has many stories of envy, but not more powerful than that of Naboth's vineyard, which so clearly demonstrates that envy can so easily end up destroying other people. Here is King Ahab who has plenty of everything but he looks over the wall of his garden and he begins to want Naboth's vineyard. Some years ago, a friend, who was a partner of Goldman Sachs, told me half jokingly, that his wife was the only person he knew who, when given an unlimited budget could exceed it. Of course he was joking, but it illustrates so clearly the human capacity to always want more.

Ahab is determined to get this vineyard, which sadly in the end results in the death of Naboth. In our modern world envy is more often associated with destroying a person's reputation or their prospects.

Secondly, envy does not only destroy the other person, but it can so easily destroy the person who is envious and certainly always takes away their happiness. Jesus told the parable of the workers in the field. Each one strikes a deal with the master, and they are happy with the result, until they find that those who came later in the day receive the same pay as they did. GK Chesterton once remarked that it is not familiarity that breeds contempt, but it is comparison. The workers were happy until they compared what they had received, with what was given to the others.

There is a story of a boy who many years ago got a pen knife for Christmas. I doubt if you would give a child a penknife these days, but it made him very happy and there was no doubt that he was delighted with his pen knife. He sharpened his pencils. He carved some wood, and then he went round to see his friend next door. In no time he had returned in tears. What had happened? Had he lost the pen knife? Had he broken the blade? Had a bigger boy stolen the pen knife? None of these things had happened. It was simply that the boy next door had been given a pen knife with two blades.

It is one of the most foolish things in life to allow the things which others have to destroy our own happiness. Charles Kingsley once told his tiny congregation at Eversley: if you want to be miserable, think about yourself, think about your place in society, think about what others think about you, and think about what others have got, and in next to no time you'll be as miserable as sin.

The artist Giotto captured this so well in the fourteenth century, when he was commissioned to decorate the interior of the chapel at Padua, not far from Venice. Among his many beautiful paintings, he also included representations of virtues and vices. The scene depicting envy is represented by a woman clutching a bag of money who has completely destroyed herself through envy. As a result, her soul has shrivelled up.

She is against God, and against life, and unable to love and seek the best for others. Envy has completely dried up the flow of love within her life. And that is what it will do for all of us, if we allow it to.

One of the miracles of the early church was when the first disciples looked back on the life and death of Jesus, they did not blame God for allowing a good man to die, but somehow in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, they saw a new way of overcoming sin, and bitterness, and hatred, and envy, and they said, God must be like that. Not only that God must be like that, but that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

In the life of Jesus, we see the antidote to envy; he took the bread and the wine and he gave thanks. Living thankfully is the greatest antidote to envy. If you want to grow and develop as a person, you need to live thankfully, you need to enjoy things, and share things with other people. Living, thankfully, is one of the greatest characteristics of a Christian life. Whereas envy stops the flow of love; living, thankfully releases the streams of love in our lives, and through us into the life of the world. Living thankfully also puts life back into its proper perspective.

There was a great moment in the 16th century, when the Emperor Charles V renounced his empire, and retired to make peace with God. He had ruled a mighty empire and in a crowded church in Brussels the Imperial Herald read out all the proud titles that he was giving up. Titles which must have made others very envious. Titian, the artist, later painted the scene and he put the brilliant assembly of nobles against the background of God, the Holy Trinity. Somehow in the light of the Almighty, God, pride and envy, fall away, and our only response is thankfulness.

Living in the presence of Almighty God, life takes on an eternal perspective, so that even in the moments when things appear to be going wrong, we can still see life in its wider perspective, and be thankful.

And indeed, even the end of life can be seen in the broader and eternal perspective, whereas response is one of thankfulness.

This is clearly shown in one of the most moving scenes in English literature, which comes from Dickens's Tale of Two Cities. You will remember that Sydney Carton changed places with his friend and is in the Bastille awaiting execution, when a young girl, seeing his kindly face, comes over to him, and says: May I ride with you on this last journey. I am not afraid, but I am little and weak. So the two of them ride together, hand-in-hand in the open cart, through the cobbled streets of Paris, and amid the jeering crowds. And when they come to the place of execution, she turns to thank him, and says; "I know that you were sent to me from heaven."

Love and kindness and generosity and living, thankfully will always be seen as coming from heaven, and from God and will banish envy. Amen.

Revd Dr Sir Ralph Waller KBE

JESUS, LOVER OF MY SOUL

*Jesus, lover of my soul,
let me to thy bosom fly,
while the nearer waters roll,
while the tempest still is high;
hide me, O my Savior, hide,
till the storm of life is past;
safe into the haven guide,
O receive my soul at last!*

*Other refuge have I none;
hangs my helpless soul on thee;
leave, ah! leave me not alone,
still support and comfort me.
All my trust on thee is stayed,
all my help from thee I bring;
cover my defenseless head
with the shadow of thy wing.*

*Plenteous grace with thee is found,
grace to cover all my sin;
let the healing streams abound;
make and keep me pure within.
Thou of life the fountain art;
freely let me take of thee;
spring thou up within my heart,
rise to all eternity.*

Charles Wesley