

Matthew the Tax Collector**Matthew 9: 9-13****Sunday 7th April**

Tax collectors were among the most despised people because they not only worked for the Romans but they also collected more than was needed in order to line their own pockets. They became rich off the back of this and this made them very unpopular. There were many kinds of taxes - besides income tax and poll tax (*paid by men & women*) there was tax on using main roads, wheels on carts, animals and certain food products to name a few. It was easy to abuse this system and they were notorious for this. The Pharisees, particularly, despised them, clumping them together with other criminal activity.

Read: Luke 18: 9-14 The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

The Jews saw God as their King and to pay taxes to a mortal King who wasn't their ruler was in violation of God and a transgression. They were fanatical in their loyalty to the letter of the law.

Jesus comes along and shows favour to this tax collector, and even dines with him. This must have really riled the Pharisees. However he tells them that it is the sick who need healing. He clearly sees the Pharisees as like a doctor who won't touch a person they see as infected or ill but he was there to come to all who needed his help, who needed help to see past their sins and to find a way to being truly whole again. Jesus could clearly see the potential in Matthew to be released from his transgressions, to find his true calling. And this is the sign, surely, of a true physician, someone who can see beyond the disease, to the person you can potentially be.

When you can see the potential in this story for our salvation, it has a real depth to it. How wonderful it is to know that when we fall by the wayside, when we are led down a path of temptation, leading into selfish ways, to know that God can see the potential in us to repent, to seek forgiveness and to return to follow him, is truly humbling. And I think this is how Matthew saw the situation. He clearly saw, in Jesus, a potential for a better life. After all he had a wealthy living, he could afford to throw parties such as the feast he put on for Jesus, but was he truly satisfied, on a deeper level? I would suggest not. He clearly saw, in following Jesus, the chance to have a deeper, more meaningful life which brings its own riches; that of a fulfilling loving relationship with the Lord, and friendships that mean something. Surely this is much more valuable? Surely this is something to celebrate?

So what can we learn from this story? Well surely we all seek to have a life that is fulfilling, that is full of love and not hatred that is whole and enriching? When we are struck by times of selfishness and lose sight of the Lord, it isn't long before we realise that we are not truly fulfilled, that we are being led by our own greed, our need to meet our own interests. This never leads to true happiness. We need to rise up, like Matthew, to seek the Lord's forgiveness and guidance and likewise to follow him. We, too, will feel like celebrating or revelling in our deeper connection with the Lord.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we thank you for this opportunity to have time to be with you and to be in your presence. Help us, like Matthew, to hear your call and to respond. Lord, we are easily led. We know that, and we stumble at times. Be with us as we work through times of doubt, as we work through times of temptation and as we come to feel enriched in living a life of service to you. We thank you that you are there with us on our journey. Your faith in us means so much. May we, too, put our faith in you and walk with you through all life's ups and downs and so feel truly blessed by your presence in our lives now and always. Amen.

Palm Sunday - What about the Donkey?**Matthew 21: 1-11****Sunday 14th April**

It probably seems incredible, doesn't it, that Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem, that day, on a donkey? A donkey seems such an insignificant animal to us, but in biblical times it was not so. It was seen as

traditional for a king to ride into his capital city on a donkey. This simple animal was seen as a sign of peace. However, it was rather different if you were seen riding on a horse. This was seen as a symbol of war.

Jesus had been preaching and performing miracles and building up interest among the crowds. Just prior to arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. We heard, then, that many people put their faith in Jesus. And so we come to Palm Sunday.

We hear how Jesus sent two of the disciples to fetch him a donkey to ride. Have you ever wondered what the reaction of the owner of the colt was, when the disciples came and asked for his donkey? Was he surprised when they said, **'The Lord has need of them'**, or was he honoured to think that this man, called Jesus, wanted to ride his donkey? This is something that has always intrigued me. It has always surprised me that when the disciples went, as instructed, there sure enough, was a donkey tied up as if put there, specially, for this occasion. And the owner appears to accept this and lets them take the donkey. We have no way of knowing whether the owner felt any animosity towards this or whether he questioned it at all. In the Bible it appears he simply let them take the animal.

I wonder - had he known the outcome of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem and the events to follow – whether he would have been so willing? We will never know. In the scheme of things it probably seems such an insignificant action, but that donkey may have meant a lot to the owner. In Jewish times it was quite something if you could afford to have your own donkey. Most people would have hired a donkey as they were expensive to buy.

So what about the donkey? A donkey is a stubborn animal and it signifies natural reason – our common sense if you will. We go along in life with our eyes on the natural world, following our own selfish path and we don't always like to admit that it would be better to be unselfish. And so, like a donkey, we stubbornly refuse to accept, that the Lord's way, following an unselfish path is better. I might be hell bent on spending my time in leisure pursuits, when it would be better spent on helping out a friend who is struggling or caring for an elderly relative who is sick. Now Jesus, being connected to the Divine or heavenly life is able to subdue the donkey. He is Truth itself. So if we act, with the Lord ruling us, then we reason that it would be better to be selfless, to help our friend or relative rather than to be selfish. So in this instance the donkey here stands for obedience. The donkey is serving the will of its rider and is obedient to his will, that is, the Lord's. So we need to act with the Lord's guidance and be obedient to his will.

We can certainly see this trait reflected in the owner of the donkey who showed willingness in allowing the Lord to use his donkey to ride into Jerusalem. And we, too, can show our willingness to share what we have with the Lord, to obey his will and to act selflessly, sharing what we have with others.

So, like the donkey, we can be stubborn and follow our own path, but in order to bring about a change we need to let the Lord in, let him rule our hearts and minds and help us to see a less selfish path - sharing with others and putting the Lord first. And, remember, it is not about how much you do, how big a change you make. What is more important, more significant, is your willingness to change - your willingness to allow the Lord into your life and to make a difference.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we are selfish creatures, ever focused on our own needs and wants. Come into our lives, Lord, and help us to be willing to see the broader picture, to be able to look outside ourselves and to act with love in our hearts, putting others first as you would wish us to do. Lord, when we find ourselves focused on self and stubbornly following our own motives, be with us, guide us, help us to see beyond ourselves, to open our hearts to you, allowing us to be willing to follow a more selfless path. Amen.

I wonder how the women were feeling that morning when they came to the tomb to anoint their Lord. It seemed that no matter how much time Jesus spent preparing his disciples, preparing the people, none of them had taken in that his death was going to happen. It went in one ear and out the other. Just as our parents endeavour to prepare us for life, for what is to come as we grow up - but do we always listen? Of course not! And this is how the disciples reacted. They either didn't want to hear or they couldn't believe what they heard.

So the women must have been feeling somewhat bewildered, upset, lost without the man they saw as their Saviour. But instead of simply mourning their loss, they decide to come to the tomb and anoint his body. But arriving at the tomb he is not there. The stone has been rolled away and they are told by an angel that he is risen. Can you believe it? It must have been so hard to take in – this man whom they had followed, this man whom they had loved – firstly dying on the cross and now gone.

You may remember that 'stone' stands for 'truth'. Now there are all sorts of truth and in the case of the sepulchre that Jesus was placed in, we are talking about facts – Jesus was rejected, he was crucified, the people did not want someone who would not fight like a king for their country. They did not want to know about their spiritual life and so they were cold like the stone sepulchre that they buried Jesus in. And we can be like this when we refuse to believe that the Word of God is inspired, when we refuse to follow the Word. None of us is perfect and we can easily betray the real truth and so bury the Lord, as he was buried on Good Friday.

So the women come to the tomb; despite being upset, their love for the Lord is clear; they come to anoint him. It was their love that allowed them to believe what they couldn't see. And it is our love for the Lord which guides us too. We can take in the Lord's truth in the Bible when we love him, when we are open to him. We don't have to see everything all at once, to believe. We simply trust what the Lord tells us.

If you think about the resurrection it is the proof we have that Jesus exists. It is unlikely we would have heard anything about Jesus, but the resurrection story is a really strong case for this. It is like modern day news. We don't hear about things that are ordinary, everyday news but anything that is out of the ordinary, sensational or dramatic is splashed all over the paper. In Jesus' time they didn't have reporters as we do today but they had scribes who wrote down the stories, and something like this was a real story - a story which the disciples did not believe at first. They needed some convincing to believe that Jesus had risen (**read further into Mark 16 to find out**). When are we like this, when do we not believe, when do we need real hard evidence?

The women, however, come to the tomb and seeing the empty tomb and hearing the angel tell them, 'He has risen! He is not here', they believe. The women represent the simple innocence, that which is there with us right from when we are young, before we are influenced by outside forces. The simple truths which are with us all the time, and when we doubt, when we struggle to believe, we need to draw on these, we need to remember this and to trust, trust that our love in the Lord is all we need to lead us forward.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we thank you for this Easter time when we hear of your Resurrection. Help us to remember your presence is always with us and when we feel doubtful, to draw on your strength, your love to guide us, to remind us that you are always there. You never leave us. We thank you for this opportunity to reflect on the women, who came to the tomb, determined to show their love by anointing your body and who, instead, find you have risen. We thank you for their innocent belief in you. Help us to learn from their example and to find true comfort in your love for us. Amen.

How many of us are affected by doubt? How many of us can say, that with absolute certainty, we totally believe all the time? People tell us things and sometimes we can't help ourselves. We don't always accept what we hear. We have to see it for ourselves. We have to witness it first-hand. Even seeing things for ourselves doesn't always dissolve the doubt completely. In nature flowers die, fields become bare and there is the appearance that the freeze has caused the earth to die; but in spring new growth emerges, new shoots appear on trees, flower buds bulge and there is an abundance of new growth on the earth. I became aware of this through a couple of small trees that I have growing in pots in my courtyard. During a bad spell of windy weather the leaves disappeared. One of the trees still had green buds so I believed it still to be alive; however the other tree looked like a dead twig and I doubted it still had any life in it at all! So I was completely amazed when spring arrived, to find new leaves growing on this tree. A typical example of only believing what my eyes could see. The cycle of nature is well known and despite knowing this, I still didn't trust it.

In the aftermath of the Lord's death and resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples. They, too, needed to see to believe. They would not accept the word of Mary Magdalene. It is interesting to note that on some of his appearances to the disciples he is not immediately recognised, even though they have spent a lot of time with him. When he appeared to them as they were fishing, having not caught anything that night, Jesus stood on the shore but the disciples did not recognise him. It is only after he tells them to cast their net onto the right side of the boat and they haul in a large number of fish, that recognition dawns. How often are we slow to realise the Lord at work? How often do we need a nudge in the right direction - just as Peter did? Thomas went one step further. He didn't only need to see him to believe; he wanted to touch his wounds. He wanted extra proof that it was him. He doubted what the others had come to believe. As I said previously, Jesus had prepared them but it had 'gone in one ear and out the other', so to speak.

Anyone who is sceptical could find all sorts of excuses to say that the events recorded in the Bible never took place. The child born with no human father, water changing to wine, miraculous healings, a man brought back to life after four days and even Jesus himself rising from the dead. Can we believe these things really happened without physical or scientific proof? Certainly Thomas could not, despite the fact that he had been with Jesus for several years and had been taught so much. If Thomas couldn't believe without seeing for himself, how hard is it for us two thousand years later? Can we believe in the existence of God and the Spiritual World when science cannot prove their existence? I am sure we have all asked this of ourselves at some stage or another. I guess most of us here have decided in favour of God, or we wouldn't be reading this. We each need to find our own way to this belief. Unlike science, which tries to be objective, our spiritual beliefs are deeply personal and linked to our experience.

Read v29 of John again.

This is generally interpreted to mean that it is blessed to believe in Jesus, despite not fully understanding him nor knowing how he really works in our life. What Jesus is trying to say is that belief is about seeing with our spiritual eyes and that accepting what we see with our physical eyes is not true faith. It is the inner sight of the spiritual eyes that leads to true faith. Therefore faith is not about believing that which we do not understand. This is blind faith. Faith is about seeing and understanding the Lord - opening up the inner sight. Doubt is, in essence, an essential part of our journey of faith - a journey to discipleship and to deepening our relationship with the Lord.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we do not always believe as we should. We too, like Thomas, find ourselves doubting, wanting irrefutable proof before we dare accept what we are told. Help us, when faith is hard, to put our trust in you, knowing you will not fail us. You are always faithful to us Lord, and we thank you. Amen.

Home Worship for May 2019 – Revd. Bruce Jarvis

5th May – The Steadfast Love of the Lord never ceases

Read Lamentations 3, focussing especially on verses 19-41

There are 5 chapters or poems in the Book of Lamentations. Chapters 1, 2 and 4 are mainly what we might call funeral songs, used in the funeral rituals, and probably sung by professional female mourners. No.5 is what we might call a prayer for the community, reliving the horror of its present plight, and acknowledging the reasons for it – the sins of the nation. It acknowledges, however, the healing power available from God to deal with tragedy and grief. The 3rd poem falls into a different category. As you read it, it seems oddly familiar, and that's because it's very similar in style to many of the Psalms, those psalms which are intensely personal laments about crisis experiences, about grief, about despair, about darkness – the pit! If you read the whole chapter you also pick up a feature of many of the Psalms, when sometimes it's talking about "I" or "me", and at other times about "we" or "us".

Chapter 3 is 66 verses long, containing a series of pictures or images, all accusing God of being responsible for the suffering. The God of Psalm 23 leads not into light but into intolerable and unceasing darkness. The protecting rod of Ps. 23 is now the rod of his wrath. He waits to pounce like a bear or a lion. And so on and so on. The writer is baffled and despondent; he suffers not just physical pain but wrestles with a real crisis of faith. If it's **not** God who is responsible, then who is? If it **is** God who sends the suffering, how can that be squared with a loving, caring God? This is the age-old dilemma.

The answer is given in the middle section, vv.19-41. The poet provides his own answer in the beautiful reflections. The writer focuses on three of the Lord's qualities or characteristics.

- There is **steadfast love** – the Hebrew *hesed*. This is a constancy which means he could never desert His people.
- There is his **mercy** or warm compassion – the Hebrew *racham*, from which "womb" is derived.
- There is his **faithfulness** – that dependable support which never lets anyone down.

It's all reminiscent of Moses' words when he received the stone tablets with the commandments: *The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*. This God is not one of the past, of history, or of a national collective memory. This God is a God of today, active and involved.

At the deepest level, which generally escapes most Biblical commentators, the subject of all these experiences is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. That's why the emotions expressed are so deep and intense, way beyond our normal human experience. The Lord's life and glorification process are set out for us (and for the angels) within these outer levels of Scripture.

At another level, the Word is dealing with personal spiritual development. Our crises and temptations are by no means as deep and intense as the Lord's because he was dealing with the redemption of the human race, so the whole power of the hells was directed against him. But the parallel is true, and so Lamentations and all the other inspired literature of the Old Testament is describing the process of regeneration that we experience – if we are following the Lord, and aiming to enter his kingdom.

Let's focus briefly on the verses which speak three times about the lot of the person who is seeking the Lord's way.

- *The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.*
- *It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*
- *It is good for a person that he bears the yoke in his youth.*

We're being told how important it is for us to wait for the Lord, not passively but eagerly looking forward to the fulfilment of God's purposes for us. Jesus himself commended his followers to be alert and to watch out for the Lord's coming.

Secondly, there is that quiet but unquenchable hope or optimism that looks forward, which believes that ultimately there is nothing that can prevent God's purposes from being fulfilled.

The third "good" stresses the element of discipline in life and the way God deals with us – the sense of *bearing the yoke* during the earlier part of our spiritual life. There is a divine order about it all that we often cannot see very clearly. We do need to learn the value of obedience to God's laws, to go with the grain of the wood and the flow of the current. Little by little the Lord carries us, until we come to see that, though the way ahead seems rather obscure, nevertheless the future – our future – is secure in the Lord's hands.

It is so wonderful and beautiful when we can feel and hear the Lord speaking to us in this way through his Word, even in passages like this one which, at first, seem to bear no relation to us.

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven.

Take a few moments now to rest in the Lord's presence, gently reflecting on those three "goods".

Prayer. *Lord, grant me the inner peace of mind that can accept your infinite presence in every aspect of my life. Discipline me so that my thoughts and actions more and more reflect my conviction that you will never withdraw your Love or Mercy or Faithfulness from me. Amen*

12th May – De Profundis – Psalm 130:1

Reading

Psalm 130

I've always loved this psalm, mostly, I think, because within its short compass there is so much power. The depths of the first two verses with their cry for mercy, evoke our own human experience when we are desperate. Then in verse 4 we have the sense of God's endless mercy and compassion. The feeling of waiting, of being willing and prepared to wait, in verse 5 is a familiar state for us. Waiting is a condition which seems to be built into life here. Then finally, in verse 7 comes hope in the Lord's unfailing love. He it is who will bring us to safety. This hope or trust is like an anchor holding us fast, preventing us from drifting into hopelessness and despair.

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." "Out of the depths" – in Latin those first four words "Out of the depths" read as "de profundis". What are these depths? Well, surely, they are the depths of our own self-centred consciousness. We experience the heights of emotions and the depths. Sometimes we're up, sometimes we're down. Sometimes we're "up in the clouds", sometimes we're "down in the pit". When we're down in the dumps and suffering, it seems that our God does not hear our cries for mercy. That's what the psalmist is saying. We feel we're too far down for our voice ever to reach God.

But remember, this psalm is a psalm of ascents. Symbolically speaking, it's all to do with making our pilgrim way up to Jerusalem. It's a cry, admitting our wrongdoing, confessing our faults, and acknowledging that we are our own worst enemy. We recognise that we cannot put the clock back and undo what we did, or unsay the nasty words we said, or unthink the thoughts we harboured. Nor can we put the clock back and do the things we ought to have done.

Next comes the remarkable, the brilliant, the profound realisation by the psalmist that, in actual fact, our loving Lord doesn't keep a tally of our sins. He doesn't keep a record of our failure to obey his law. On the contrary, each time we fall away, our Lord sees it as an opportunity to show his infinite kindness and

forgiveness. More than that, he goes down into our individual hell to rescue us, just as he descended into the hells to redeem the human race.

When we are in the depths of despair, whether it's lying awake in the night or perhaps during daylight hours, whenever it happens, we are called to wait for the Lord, and to do so with our whole being – our soul. "My soul waits for the Lord." Mercifully, whereas we so easily see wrongs and condemn other people, our Lord doesn't see our evil and simply condemn us. On the contrary, he sees yet another opportunity to pour on the oil of forgiveness, and to find a way of bringing good out of evil. Rather than reject us, he invites us to join with him in a new and deeper way.

As our psalmist says, with the Lord there is always steadfast love, always hope, always unfailing mercy. Remarkable though it may be to us, our Lord never changes how he feels about us.

De profundis – "Out of the depths have I cried to the Lord."

Prayer. *Lord, experience teaches me that when I cry out to you, you always respond, though I don't always know that until sometime later. I praise and thank you, that you don't keep a record of my failings. May my readiness to forgive others grow to resemble your eternal grace. Amen.*

19th May - Angels Ascending and Descending – Genesis 28:12

Read Genesis 28:10-22

Let's think for a moment about Jacob's dream. I remember on one occasion toiling up a steep ascent on a Scottish mountain when we unexpectedly came across a kind of rough stone staircase built by members of the Scottish National Trust to reduce erosion. Apart from anything else, this is much easier to walk on than loose stones and gravel. As I stood there, looking up at the stone stairway zigzagging upwards, the image of Jacob's dream came into my mind.

The Hebrew word used in Jacob's story is derived from the concept of a pathway or highway. It was on this ladder or stairway that Jacob saw angels ascending and descending. And, please note: these angels were ascending and descending. They were going up and then down - not the other way round. The Word is giving us a very clear pattern for our spiritual life. All those angels seen ascending and descending represent the whole range of the Lord's Divine Truth. As we men and women put into practice what we have been taught and learned and accepted, however simplistic and mundane these ideas and principles might appear to be, they are, as it were, glorified. They're raised up to the Lord, who stands at the head of the stairway. Nothing is too lowly for the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life to use in our development.

The angels of God going up and coming down the stairway is speaking of an infinite and eternal communication, and the resulting joining together. In a nutshell it is talking of a going up, so to speak, from what is lowest, and after that, when the order has been reversed, a coming down to it.

[From Heavenly Secrets 3701]

This is the order of things. What may be relatively lowly is raised up and re-ordered by the Lord. It is a process which is mostly beyond our awareness but it happens. And there is then a descent as we go out into the world with our inner life strengthened for use and expression. The angel of the Lord at the head of the stairway represents this process of an endless action of the Lord, inspiring us to go on growing and giving.

Jacob's dream had a great impact on him. He realised that there was a power at work. The vision is also true for each one of us. Our Lord is steadily working within us to bring us into his presence, and into the life of heaven. This vision of him at the head of the stairway is yet another image for us to hold on to. It gives us a sense of how in him all things begin and end, and move and have their being. The cycle of life begins and ends with him.

We are eternally in his presence, and yet, like Jacob, we're barely aware of it. But there are moments when a breakthrough is made. The Lord blesses us with new states of enlightenment, and suddenly, like Jacob, we perceive things in a fresh way. At those moments we are blessed with a sense that the Lord is working in us and for us, and we are being raised up into heaven.

Jacob's experience is put this way: *When he awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."* Maybe, when from time to time we have an experience of inner change, of a breakthrough, we can acknowledge that the Lord has been working in us to join together the truth we understand with the good intentions in our hearts – to make us a little more holy.

Prayer. *O Lord, how I love your Word, especially when my mind is raised up and able to understand more of your providential care for me. I know I have a long way to go. Take my hand, merciful Father, and lead me where I may not yet be ready to go. Amen.*

26th May – The Lord's Ascent

Read Acts 1:1-11; See also: Mark 16:19, Luke 24:51 and John 20:17

This coming Thursday (30th) is Ascension Day. Luke tells us in Acts 1 that it was forty days after Christ's resurrection that Jesus was taken up into heaven. Perhaps you would like to reflect on the significance of this event for you and for the human race today and over the coming days.

The teachings we have in the Heavenly Doctrines concerning the Lord are right at the core and heart of our religious life. His incarnation and conquest of evil meant that from being Man in first things, he became Man in ultimate or last things. With his Human united to the Divine, he could now be directly present with every human being for all time. You and I have an open line to him. He is never too preoccupied or busy to be bothered with us. His love is infinite.

In the forty days after Easter the risen Lord appeared frequently to his disciples, as the Gospels illustrate with some examples. You might like to read those final chapters over the coming days.

Unlike men and women, the Lord glorified his whole being, and from having a material body, he now inhabited a body which our teachings describe as Divine substantial. Hence, when he appeared to his disciples, he was able to eat bread and fish but was also able to move about without physical restraints. When Mark describes the Lord as sitting at the Father's right hand, the Word is telling us that our Divine Father has all power in heaven and on earth. Again, unlike men and women, the Lord's use of Divine power is totally loving and wise, caring only for our eternal happiness and fulfilment. To contemplate that this is the character of our Heavenly Father evokes wonder and joy and reassurance. Let me add this short quotation from our teachings:

*Every person who is saved ascends into heaven. But the Lord alone ascended of Himself.
Men and women do not ascend of themselves but of the Lord. [Doctrine of the Lord 35.11]*

Prayer. Eternal Father, I wonder at the love which brought you among us, overcame human evil, and rose to be our eternal Saviour. As I struggle to remain faithful, strengthen me, enlighten me, and lead me in the way of your commandments. Amen.

Home Worship June 2019 – Jan Millar

June 2nd

Read John 14: 15-27 Jesus promises the Holy Spirit.

Here the Lord explains the vital necessity of his Holy Spirit coming in his place. He promises to send it so that each and every one of us can experience God in a deeply personal and intimate way. We need to remember that up to this point Jesus had been living and working with his disciples and they had witnessed first-hand all the miracles he had performed, the people he had healed and the wonderful teaching he had given. He knew, however, that he would not be with them physically for much longer. Jesus the man had accomplished the work he had come to do and now it was time for the Lord, in the form of the Holy Spirit, to take over that work in the hearts, minds and actions of ordinary men and women like us.

So what is the Holy Spirit? It has been described as a Counsellor, the breath of God, the Divine in action in the world today. The Greek word is *parakletos* which has been variously translated as *Comforter, Helper and Advocate*. The Lord's Holy Spirit is all these and more. It enables our spirit to move, think and act and is in fact the Lord himself at work. It is the creative power that is in everything and lives within the hearts and souls of mankind. It acts as a sort of Divine go-between that bridges the gap between God and human beings.

It wasn't just there for the disciples 2000 years ago, it is also here for us today. It is acting in us, inspiring us, enlightening us and urging us to action in so many different ways. But we have to be prepared to open our hearts and minds to listen to the still small voice speaking within us. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to continue the Lord's work here on earth – that we are able to spread his message of love, joy and peace not only by what we say but above all by how we live our lives in service to other people, truly loving our neighbour as ourselves.

So whatever spiritual gifts you have been given, whatever talents you may have to offer, use them, and through the power of his Holy Spirit, go out into the world and share with others his wonderful message of love and peace.

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to share with others the joy, enlightenment, love and peace that comes only from communion with you, so that our lives may reflect your glory in everything we say and do. Amen

June 9 Whit Sunday

Read Acts 2: 1-41 The Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost

The events of Pentecost occur 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus and mark the birth of the Christian Church. What a transformation we see in the disciples. Think back to the time of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. With the exception of John all his disciples deserted him and it was the women who gathered at the foot of the cross. Even after the resurrection they hide away behind locked doors for fear of the Jews [John 20: 19]. Yet only a few weeks later they are utterly transformed and go forth fearlessly to carry out the Lord's Great Commission "*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*" [Matthew 28: 19-20]

Suddenly in the space of a few moments nothing was beyond them as they were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter, who had been a broken man and who had denied his Lord three times at the time of his arrest, now raised his voice and spoke out to the crowd. He explained that what had occurred that day was the fulfilment of the words of the prophet Joel and then went on to speak of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and finally exhorted them to repent and be baptised.

What a transformation indeed, and one that we too can experience if we open our lives to the Lord's Holy Spirit. We too can be empowered to go out and preach the gospel, because Pentecost is not about one day but it is about every day. The gift of the Lord's Holy Spirit is a continuing experience available to all who are open to receive it. It is about how we continue to have a living faith in action in serving the Lord by serving others.

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to remember not just what you did and said during your earthly life but what you are doing and saying in our lives today through the work of your Holy Spirit. Amen

June 16

Read Revelation 21 The New Jerusalem

Here we have a wonderful description of the New Jerusalem. This heavenly city as described in Revelation is a picture of the Lord's church, both as it exists among those people who recognise and receive him and also as it has the potential to be with each and every human being.

The new heaven and the new earth that John saw was not just a vision but is the New Jerusalem descending from God right here and now. It is built on the infinite love and wisdom of God. There is no temple in the city for he is at the centre of it *"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God"*. [Revelation 21: 3]

At the beginning of the Word in Genesis we read about the Garden of Eden and here at the end of the Word in Revelation we have the description of the Holy City. Between these two we have what Swedenborg calls the journey between 'the innocence of ignorance' and 'the innocence of wisdom'. The Garden of Eden depicts the opportunities the Lord gives us and the Holy City pictures the highest that we as human beings can attain.

The Lord's revelation is an ongoing process as he is constantly giving us new insights to enable us to understand and know him better so that his infinite love and wisdom become a real integral part of our lives. This enables us to create our own heaven here on earth: where we experience the inner joy and peace that can only be found through communion with the Lord. The gates of the city of the New Jerusalem are always open but only we can choose to step inside.

Prayer

May the vision of the New Jerusalem burn bright in our hearts as a constant source of comfort and inspiration as we continue our journey through life. Help us to reveal your love in our lives so that we may create heavenly conditions here on earth. Amen

June 23

Read Matthew 7: 24-27 The Wise and Foolish Builders

1 Peter 2: 4-7 The Living Stone

In this parable the Lord says that those who hear his Word and then act upon it are like a wise man who builds his house upon the rock. We are all in the process of building the house that we shall live in to eternity and the Word is full of the materials we can use to build that house, but what is key is the foundation upon which that house is built. It needs to be built upon the rock.

Swedenborg tells us that 'rock' corresponds to Divine Truth and therefore to the Lord himself as he is Divine Truth. He is, as Peter describes him, the stone that the builders rejected but which has now become the corner stone. So the wise man builds his spiritual house on the rock that is the Lord God the Saviour, Jesus Christ.

By contrast the foolish builder takes the easy option. The stretch of sand may look inviting and easy to work on but this builder fails to consider that it will be washed away when the winter rains come. He couldn't be bothered to dig into the rock so has no solid foundation to stand on when the storms come. He represents those people who build their lives without principles and who lead hedonistic lives always putting themselves and their own wants and desires first. When the storms of life come they have no strong foundation on which to rely and their whole house metaphorically comes crashing down.

We all experience the storms of life both externally and internally and we need the truths of the Word which have been implanted and strengthened in love in order to be able to withstand the storms which assail us. But it isn't enough just to have learned these truths and understand them intellectually unless they are acted upon. Hearing and understanding the truth is important but it is only a means to an end. The Lord reveals his truth to us so that we may take it and remain firm and strong living it every day of our lives. For what matters is not what we believe but how we put our beliefs into practice in our daily lives.

We are the living stones in the walls of the New Jerusalem and every stone has been formed and made alive by the Holy Spirit. But as John Donne said, 'No man is an island'. We can only be held truly firm by the other stones that surround and support us. We all need to 'fit together' as it is through our interactions with other people that we play our part in building the Lord's Kingdom.

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to stand on our own two feet and accept the challenges life brings in the sure knowledge that you are always with us giving us the courage and the strength to face whatever storms may beset us. Help us also to play our part in building your kingdom here on earth. Amen

June 30

Read Psalm 46 God is our refuge and strength

Three things stand out in this psalm: *“God is our refuge and strength”*; God is in our midst; and *“Be still, and know that I am God”*. It is the knowledge and practice of these three things that help us to deal with all the problems of life.

Even those among us who appear to lead charmed lives have times of real stress and difficulty. Psalm 46 describes vividly the way trouble can come. The psalmist talks about the earth being removed and the mountains being carried into the sea. This reminds us of an earthquake that can happen suddenly out of the blue. Sometimes trouble comes with the sheer finality of an earthquake – it comes without warning and there seems to be no resisting it. So in order to learn how to overcome it you need to apply the principles that are found in this psalm.

It opens with a statement of utter trust in the Lord. Realise when trouble comes that God *is* a refuge for his people - we have someone to turn to in times of need. Then we are told *“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God”*. Here we see a wonderful picture of the activity of the Lord’s Holy Spirit working among us. We are reminded that God is within the city, he is resident among his people and therefore in the midst of us sharing whatever we are experiencing and supporting us through it. He calms all the warfare within us and enables us to cope with the problems of life.

Finally we are exhorted to *“Be still and know that I am God”*. We need to learn to ‘let go and let God’. We need to surrender our will to God’s will thus opening the door and experiencing the fullness of all the Lord wants and has for us. We can only truly *know* him by having an intimate relationship with him. That does not come from knowing *about* Him, but rather getting to know him personally, not only by what he says to us in the Word, but also by recognizing the things he does in our lives in and through the work of his Holy Spirit which comes to guide, comfort and inspire us.

Prayer

Dear Lord, calm our minds when we are troubled and soothe our spirits when they are in turmoil. Teach us to put our trust in you and by your Holy Spirit create us anew so that our lives may be truly filled with the knowledge and experience of your saving love and power. Help us to focus not on who we are or what our limitations may be, but rather on what you can achieve within us if we open our hearts and minds to you. Amen