

Through Suffering to Triumph

Lenten Devotional Readings

By

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These daily devotional readings are the final chapter of an unpublished manuscript covering the life of Jesus Christ, from the annunciation of His birth to His ascension.

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Wednesday, February 18th 2015

Matthew 26:1-5

“When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "As you know, the Passover is two days away – and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified. Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the place of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. "But not during the feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people."”

Closing In On Jesus.

With only two days remaining until He is taken, Jesus tells His disciples, for the first time, precisely how His death will happen. This is the very first reference He makes to being crucified. He would not need to explain to them the meaning of the word or the way in which this viciously cruel execution was administered. Those who walked the roads of Palestine, especially in the vicinity of Jerusalem, which the Romans considered a hotbed of sedition, would have seen criminals and rebels spiked to trees or crosses. Most travelers had probably also heard screams of agony from those who had not yet fainted, or at least listened to those who described the cruel agony which crucifixion involved. From this advice to His disciples we come to realize that Jesus not only knew that He would die, He was also fully aware of the ultimate extremes of agony that His deliberate self-sacrifice would involve. Judas, at this late date, still travels with the twelve, his disillusionment complete. Jesus had no intention to use His divine powers to overthrow the Roman occupation of Israel or to save Himself! Meanwhile, at the high priest's palace the Jewish religious leaders and community officials had moved beyond frustration and irritation to the point where they settled in to make specific plans for Jesus' assassination, with details involving how, when and where, aware that they must be careful or they would lose their grip on power. In the light of Jesus' popularity the situation was already drifting out of their control. Control can mean a number of different things. By every *outward* evidence neither Jesus nor his heavenly Father had any power over events that were about to happen. In retrospect we are now able to see that nothing was out of the Father's control. Suffering and death were at the heart of the long-range program for this Jesus, Messiah, announced as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. Jesus' death was the ultimate Passover celebration. ***When I see the blood I will pass over you.***

Thursday, February 19th 2015

Mark 14: 3-9

“While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume?" And they rebuked her harshly. "It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her." [Parallel passages: Matthew 26:6-13; John 12:2-8; not to be confused with Luke 7:36-50]

A Beautiful Thing

As the day of Jesus' death approached, such an ugly death by human standards, it is preceded by what Jesus identifies as a beautiful act. "She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial." Matthew and Mark cite the location, Bethany, where Mary and Martha lived. They shield or else omit her full identity, but John clarifies that it was Mary who poured the perfume, and that her brother Lazarus was present. John identifies the perfume as pure nard. Superficially, one might suspect that this was the woman who, earlier in Jesus ministry, anointed Jesus feet, wiped them with her hair and was identified by Luke as Mary from Magdala rather than from Bethany. Luke wrote that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene. On the morning of the resurrection both Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, this Mary of Bethany, were on hand. Both of these women whose name was Mary carried beauty in their transformed personalities but in this story, told in truth around the world, it seems important to clarify that they are different people. Judas, in harmony with his character, is identified by gospel writer John as the one who was critical of Mary's beautiful act. Also identified as being a thief, Judas had his hand in the disciples' common purse. Mary's act of devotion is indeed a beautiful thing. Jesus makes it clear that there are appropriate times and appropriate acts of love and devotion, which override the logic of stewardship and reason. Are we able, from time to time, to identify in our own lives and in our financial situations, precisely what can become a beautiful act in the eyes of our Lord?

Friday, February 20th 2015

Matthew 26:14-16

“Then one of the twelve – the one called Judas Iscariot – went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.”

The Point of No Return.

With regard to Jesus and His death on the cross there was no point in His life and ministry where the option of turning back was even up for consideration. With Judas Iscariot the case is different. Options were open to him until he passed a point of no return. So what was it that marked the point of no return in Judas' life? When he accepted the responsibility of handling the petty cash account for Jesus and His disciples, was that temptation too strong for him to resist, or did he even try? Did Judas actually lobby to be treasurer for Jesus and the twelve? Did he have a personal history of pilfering before joining Jesus and the disciples? One comment written by John states that Judas' remarks about wasting expensive perfume were not made because he cared about the poor, but, because he was a thief; "As keeper of the money bag he used to help himself to what was put into it." The point of no return may well have been when he deliberately and consciously stepped out of the fellowship of his companions and went to the enemies of Jesus to negotiate a betrayal with them. "What would you give me if I betray him to you?" In Roman history the Rubicon River marked a point of no return for Julius Caesar. No Roman commander was allowed to bring his army closer to Rome than the Rubicon, and Caesar knew that. When he crossed the Rubicon with his army to march on Rome, his own capital city, his famous statement was *ALEA JACTA EST – the die is cast*. He had passed the point of no return. There are many different paths leading to destruction, greed is one among many. The experiences of Judas may have begun as small and insignificant transgressions, always with the option of repentance, change, and forgiveness. Integrity, personal integrity involving all of these small events, which make up everyday life, is an absolute essential in everyone's life. If left unchecked, successive transgressions lead to a point of no return. Jesus did not condemn Judas, Judas condemned himself. Once those thirty silver coins were in his pocket he had passed the point of no return, because for those last intimate hours, although he still sat and still ate with Jesus and the eleven, his heart was not there. He was thinking, "How and when can I betray him?"

Saturday, February 21st 2015

Luke 22:7-13

“Then came the day of unleavened bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover." "Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked. He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters and say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks: where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there." They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.”

The Upper Room.

When Leonardo de Vinci painted his famous portrayal of The Last Supper as a mural in Milan he set out to portray visually this event in Jerusalem referred to so briefly in Luke's Gospel. His background information was neither more complete nor more scanty than these few inspired words from Luke's gospel at our disposal. The great benefit of art is that it helps us to remember and to visualize events. The drawback of art such as this, so often imitated in tapestries and paintings is that it may trigger thoughts such as, "The Last Supper, yes I know about that." The setting and the event may or may not have resembled the famous mural in all respects. Peter and John were sent on a mission by Jesus. They were to follow a man carrying a water jar. The question, "Which man?", would not have entered their mind since men did not carry water jars, that being woman's work. Their destination was the house where the servant would enter, and their conversation was to be with its owner – a householder who knew Jesus as the teacher, the Master, the Rabbi, and who had the appropriate accommodation. As we reconstruct mentally the entire process we marvel at the way in which the God of the unusual and of the supernatural brings together everyday events in ways that look natural and coincidental to eyes that are not able to recognize that He, the Eternal One, is bringing significant events to pass so that His will and His purposes are fulfilled in human lives. It is very easy to write off as common- place some event, which may have been made familiar by our repeated exposure to a picture or a story. On the other hand, when we pause to reflect it is possible to look back on history and see it as His Story, to see events in our own experience which have come together in such a remarkable way as to be miraculous. On one occasion I personally experienced a sequence that some would call unbelievable tied together Cabinda in Angola with Bratislava in Slovakia. On another, events in Tirana Albania, New York and Washington evolved miraculously, a convergence that a colleague and I experienced personally. This same God of the impossible works in our lives today, and we recognize His doings when our eyes are open in faith and expectation.

Sunday, February 22nd 2015

John 13:1-5

“It was just before the Passover feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God, and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.”

The Last Supper - Part I

All four Gospels contribute to our knowledge of the Last Supper, its events and its teaching. It seems appropriate to begin with this description from John's gospel, informing us that the meal was being served and that Jesus showed the Twelve the extent of His love for them. Luke informs us that they were reclining to eat, so it would be from a low table in the style made familiar to us by the Romans. When Jesus got up from the table to show the full extent of His love for them it was not by words, not by hugs, not in an outpouring of emotion, but by a lowly act of service, normally the work of a servant or a slave. Washing the dusty dirty feet of foot travelers who used sandals was a thankless task. Nobody would even think of saying thanks to a foot washer. It was a notch lower than humiliating, rather, it was done by those who had already been humiliated. That was why Peter, the outspoken one, was so adamant that Jesus must not wash his feet. It was not that Jesus was short on words. Before that evening ended he would have many words, very valuable words for His Twelve. But when he set out to express the depth of His love for them He did not choose words, but an act of lowly service. So how does one express love for the Lord Jesus today? Lesson number one of that evening was that genuine love is demonstrated by service. Kowtowing to the famous and the most influential in society doesn't fill the bill. Jesus actually specified to whom service needs to be directed; He refers to meeting the basic needs of the most humble and deprived. It is very easy to reduce religion to words. When all is said and done there is often more said than done. The other Jesus lesson is that we show love for one another by serving one another, picking up those menial tasks, which one would normally prefer to avoid.

Monday, February 23rd 2015

John 13:21-30

“Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me." His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant.

"It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him, but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the feast, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.”

The Last Supper - Part II

When Judas went out it was night, and it was very clearly the dark night of his soul. He walked away from those companions of three years. He walked away from Jesus the healer, Jesus who had shown that he could feed the multitudes, Jesus who was his personal hope, though Judas did not recognize it. Judas definitely had hope, but it was the wrong hope, one that he himself had designed and built. He hoped that Jesus would come through with power that would overcome Rome's military might which held Israel in bondage. Betrayal is an ugly thing – to have accepted privileges, then to walk away from the responsibilities; beyond that, to sabotage what one was openly working toward. Those who investigate crimes have a slogan, Follow the money. Yes and Judas certainly followed the money. This betrayal had a very ugly face. The other side of the coin is that God can and does use evil plans, plots and acts, turning them into elements of His plan and His will. In this case God's program was that Jesus, whom He had identified through John the Baptist as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, would shed His blood there in Jerusalem, that very weekend, at the feast of Passover. Matthew, Mark and Luke all affirm that Jesus had to die as God's intended sacrifice for sin, but woe to the one who was His betrayer. For each human there are free choices; to accept and move with God's purpose, His plan, His will for His world, or to betray it. Jesus said, I am the way. Refusing The Way does not frustrate the will and purpose of God, it only leads to the destruction of the one who is the betrayer, who has opted for his own destruction.

Tuesday, February 24th 2015

Luke 22:17-20

“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you"”

The Last Supper – Part III

The profound significance of this last meal Jesus ate with his disciples lies in the watershed announcement which He made, and the memorial act which He instituted so that His followers would forever remember that His death established a new basis on which the Lord God would henceforth relate to His people. Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." A covenant is an established agreement, in the same way that a contract spells out the established relationship between two parties. This is the most binding of all contracts because one party is the Lord Jesus, representing God the heavenly Father. The Israeli nation, until that moment, had functioned on the basis of ten commandments given by God through the instrumentality of Moses. The ceremonial procedure which Jesus instituted that night carries an impact similar to the burning of a mortgage, or the tearing up of an old agreement. It was a watershed event. In North America there is a continental divide and from that divide water flows east or west. In the Congo DRC as one drives north toward and beyond the town of Bwatsinge there is a stretch of road where water which falls on the right side of the vehicle flows north through the Nile to the Mediterranean, while that which falls on the left side of the vehicle flows into the Congo River basin and into the Atlantic Ocean. A watershed is that drastic, that dramatic! Some three years earlier Jesus had broken onto the local scene in Palestine with a message repeated again and again, The kingdom of God is at hand. John the Baptist had announced at that time, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." There, in the upper room, Jesus brought it all together, announcing the new agreement, the new covenant, the new contract with God, which would be sealed with His own blood scant hours away. A few years later the apostle Paul wrote of another dimension to this central celebration, which Christians share, around the globe. Paul wrote that as often as we participate in the ceremony we remember the Lord's death until he comes back again. We are never to forget the Lord Jesus' death, His body broken and His blood shed for the remission of our sins.

Wednesday, February 25th 2015

John 13:33-36

"My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: where I am going, you cannot come. a new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."

Final Guidance - Part I

Jesus had been preparing the little flock of a dozen, less one, for three years – preparing them for the time when He would need to leave them. Now that the time of His destiny was fulfilled He left with them certain guiding principles. The first of these He had demonstrated in person. They were to be humble servants, in the same way that He had washed their feet. Then He spoke to them of this new commandment that He was giving. Since Jesus called it a commandment we can scarcely look at it as mere guidance. It is more than that, much stronger. Success or failure in making Jesus known hangs on this commandment. First, a new covenant is announced which abolishes rules and traditions in favour of grace. Then Jesus proceeds to give them a new commandment to replace those that have been fulfilled and laid aside, a commandment different in nature from the ones which had previously guided them. They were to love one another, we are to love one another with a sacrificial love just as He loved them with a sacrificial love. The Greek word used clearly calls for sacrificial love as opposed to just filial or fraternal love which would have been conveyed by a different word. Jesus does not call his people to be a fraternity, in the mould of service clubs or social gatherings. There is a different dimension required. This new command even takes precedence over acts of service to the needy world around us, vital as they are. The very point of this new commandment is that we be a living demonstration of sacrificial love for one another. The apostle Peter, often a spokesman for the group, shows us how easy it is to miss the point, and to get sidelined. Instead of asking how they would be able to fulfill this new and strange commandment, in view of the complexity of human personalities, Peter chose to ask Jesus where he was going. It always seems easier to focus on the hope of being with Jesus some day in the future than it is to zero in on this first and basic commandment of the new covenant to love one another.

Thursday, February 26th 2015

Mark 14:21-31

"You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today – yes, tonight, before the rooster crows twice, you yourself will deny me three times." But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

Final Guidance - Part II

All four Gospels record aspects of Peter's denial of Christ, providing us with a range of detail. Jesus, in His guidance session that final night, laid out the following stages in sequence: they would all fall away, He would rise from the dead, He would go ahead of them, from Jerusalem back to Galilee, and they would follow. What the disciples denied and contested vehemently was that they could ever betray Him as Judas had done, or deny Him. They were so adamant in this refusal to accept Jesus' prediction that they would fail Him that the promise of His resurrection from the dead seems not to have even penetrated their awareness at the time. They were living in a state of denial, unable to accept that their Master who had shown such evidence of power would let events get out of hand. Peter was not alone in his vows of faithfulness even unto death. The others all said the same. And all were totally serious in their intentions. Life produces similarities to that scenario for each and every one of us. Even on a day, which begins well, when the day itself is acknowledged as a gift from God and then promised to Him as an offering in return, events unfold in ways that are unexpected. It becomes easy to excuse ourselves: "Oh but it took me by surprise." "I didn't know it was going to happen like this." "It was so sudden and unexpected." Those comments apply to so many different situations in which we disappoint ourselves and our Lord, falling short of our best intentions. The best protection available is for us to grow more and more into the likeness of Jesus, in thought and in action. Early stages of development in the new life promised by Jesus, being born again, involve seeing differently through new eyes; the unfolding of a new understanding, looking at the world as Jesus would see it. This involves learning to hear and discern, learning to speak, learning to take baby steps in following the Master, learning to think analyze and evaluate as Jesus would do. It involves more than just good intentions. It involves a growth into maturity, with stumbles, bruises, and spiritual injuries occurring along the way. There is probably no better goal than the one stated years later by the apostle Paul: "Let the same mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

Friday, February 27th 2015

John 14:1-13

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am"... "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"... "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father"... "The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work."

Final Guidance - Part III

Jesus' instruction of His eleven remaining disciples intensified in those final hours among them before He was taken into custody. The master was concerned about their state of mind, and His urging to them, in their uncertainty, was twofold. They were to trust God and they were to trust Him. That formula has not lost its validity with the passing of two millennia. However easy it is to repeat or to write that brief formula, it never becomes easy to implement when one is thrown into situations of stress and uncertainty. While these affirmations and this instruction have relevance for life in general, Jesus was preparing His eleven for the few days immediately ahead. They were to look beyond violence and death to see that God was in charge; they were to understand that He and God, while separate and distinct, were one and the same. His teachings, all of them, still held validity even though Jewish and Roman force, working together, would take His life. What Jesus had been teaching them was a teaching from God himself, in no way invalidated by His imprisonment and death. Above all, they were to look to Him and to look at Him, to study Him, who He was, what He said, and what He did. Looking at Jesus was looking at the nature of God. It still is precisely that. Living in the Western world, many have the luxury of wealth, investments, retirement plans, medical insurance and other provisions to care for our needs. It is easy to slip into a mode where we see these as our primary security. Worldwide, whether believers have such resources or not, Jesus still instruct us not to let our hearts be troubled, but to believe in God and believe also in Him. Regardless of resources, technology, or influence, none of us is ever fully in charge. Jesus remains the way, the truth, the life, and the way to the father. This has come to be known as the gospel, the good news, and it is accessible universally, to all who trust Jesus and trust the heavenly father.

Saturday, February 28th 2015

John 14:15-31

"If you love me you will obey what I command, and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" ... "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" ... "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" ... "Come now, let us leave."

Final Guidance - Part IV

It is worthwhile to pause and note the context of this treasure trove of promises exposed by Jesus. The closing words to that upper room supper gathering where they shared their last meal together were, "Come now, let us leave." They would be walking to the Mount of Olives. The mixture of emotion to which Jesus was speaking would range all the way from something close to panic on one hand to trust and assurance on the other. All the questions that children ask must have been crowding into their minds: Why? When? How? What are you doing? What is God doing? Note the simplicity of what Jesus chose to reveal. "If you love me you will obey what I command. I'll ask the Father and he will send you the Comforter to be with you and in you. Do what I have said and taught, you will be loved by the Father as by me. The Holy Spirit will lead you into truth and understanding." The words of Jesus, His promises given that night, are a treasure in any and all of life's moments of uncertainty, tragedy, and confusion. When the answers to questions about meaning and direction in life are not forthcoming, a return to the simplicity of faith and obedience lead back to Jesus' life, His words, teachings and attitudes. The chorus of a well known hymn urges, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way." About the Holy Spirit who was to come, Jesus revealed these factors: He would be sent by God in Jesus' name, He would live in believers, His work would include reminding what Jesus taught, He would be the comforter. That much of the basics having been shared with them, the Lord said, "Come now, let us leave."

Sunday, March 1st 2015

Matthew 26:30

“When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”

John 15:1-17

"I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" ... "My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command" ... "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you what ever you ask in my name. This is my command: love each other."

To The Mount of Olives - Part I

Those who are singers can readily picture how the words and music that Jesus and his disciples sang as they finished the Last Supper would ring in the ears of the eleven for the rest of their days, reminding them of Jesus' teaching which continued as they walked together to the Mount of Olives. Nor would they be able to forget the command, given and repeated emphatically, to love one another. This was the new commandment that He had given them earlier, one which could in no way be ignored or laid aside. The disciples came from mixed backgrounds, but none of them, the fishermen or even the tax collector, would be ignorant of vineyards, pruning, and the productivity of the vine. The lesson He was teaching them was self evident, crystal clear to all of them: Jesus is the vine, His followers are the branches which exist to bear fruit and must be productive. God is the one who does the pruning. Life flows through the vine to the branches, and fruit emerges naturally. Sever the flow of life from vine to branch, and there remains no possibility of fruit; the branch atrophies and dies. Jesus was preparing them for His departure, but asking them to continue to abide in Him. Small wonder that they did not readily grasp, or understand. Jesus had already begun telling them of the Comforter who would come, the Holy Spirit, who would be the ongoing link with Jesus, so that they could abide in Him and in His teaching. They must not neglect that link, either with Him or with one another.

Monday, March 2nd 2015

John 15:26-16:15

"When the Counsellor comes whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me; but you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning" ... "Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth; it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me, by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you."

To the Mount of Olives - Part II

As Jesus and His disciples walked from the Last Supper to the Mount of Olives He told them first that they must abide in Him, using the imagery of the vine and the branches. Linked with that He commanded them firmly to love one another. They were not to become separated from Him, nor to separate, either, from one another. Now he proceeds to tell them about the Comforter, who would come as His replacement, to maintain continual contact, so vitally important. Jesus tells them it is to their advantage that He go, so that the Comforter may come. While Jesus was present in the flesh they were still relatively few in number. Through word, act and example He was able to bind them together. By going away and sending His Holy Spirit, also known as the Comforter, they would be able to multiply, expand to the corners of the earth and His Spirit would continue to bind them together as one, leading them into truth, convicting of sin, righteousness and judgment. The Comforter is sent by Jesus. The Holy Spirit's emphasis will be Jesus, His life, His work, His teaching. Jesus said, "He will testify of me, but you also must testify." Jesus makes it clear that the Comforter does not act as a new and different or autonomous agent, but as one who draws attention to the Lord Christ. Jesus departs so all this can happen. The diversity of ways in which Jesus would work through His Spirit would only begin to become evident some weeks after His resurrection, on the day of Pentecost.

Tuesday, March 3rd 2015

John 16:33-17:5

"I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world." After Jesus said this he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."

Jesus' Prayer of Transition.

How does one go about processing the big transitional events, which happen in every life? Consider this brief model, left for us in the apostle John's record of the closing hours of Jesus' life on earth. Jesus' prayer is for His disciples, but also for Himself. Most of our own personal transitions have an impact on others: birth, starting school, beginning employment, marriage, death itself – all these can plunge the lives of those closest to us into uncertainty. Jesus spent much time preparing the disciples to face the days of trauma and uncertainty, which lay ahead of them so that in Him they would have peace. From there he went on to give all of us the model of how to pray for oneself. Jesus was about to come in from the cold. He was returning from the harshness of this world to the bosom of the Father. He addressed that issue of returning to the warmth of fellowship with the Father which he had enjoyed before the world began – the Eternal Jesus returning to be one with the Eternal God; but His prayer did not address his own comfort or well-being in the hours of suffering that would immediately follow. Rather, His prayer for Himself was that the transitional process would be for the glory of His Eternal Father. The glory of God is the core of the prayer. His mission on earth had been to give eternal life to all those whom God had given him. That task had come to an end – almost. He looked to the end, saw it as completed and pronounced it as such, though the cross and the tomb were still hours away. How beautiful is this, the Lord's definition of eternal life: it is to know the only true God, and Jesus the anointed one whom God has sent. If you know the Lord. This, the theme of a gospel song, is a most relevant issue because knowing Him helps to equip us to handle life's transitions, in the context of those we love, even that transition from life here to life eternal.

Wednesday, March 4th 2015

John 17:6-25

"I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours." ... "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I'm coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one." ... "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one." ... "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I in you. May they also be one so that the world may believe that you have sent me." ... "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

The Prayer of Jesus for All His Followers.

Isolating certain statements in this powerful prayer does not do justice to its unity, so it is vital to begin by reading it as a whole. Here, once more, we are given a glimpse of the heart of Jesus, what He desires and hungers for in His followers. By extension, we are glimpsing the very heart of God. This prayer related directly and immediately to the core group of eleven who heard the very sound of Jesus' voice, but He proceeded beyond that to reveal to them that He was praying for future generations of believers as well, a prayer reaching to our own age, to us, to you, to me. The record of Jesus' very words is clear on this point: the Master says He prays not for their removal from the *kosmos*, from the world as it organizes itself apart from God. Rather, Jesus prays that His followers may be protected from the evil one. One most blatant theme is the prayer for unity among His followers, "that the world may believe". Can we afford to neglect this prayer because of discomfort over how to sort out and process the differences in belief and practice among those who affirm that they follow Him? From this prayer we can begin with three certainties:

*Jesus intercedes with the heavenly Father on behalf of those who are His followers.

*He prays that believers may be protected from the evil one, so we must be vigilant not to be led astray.

*He prays that those who are His followers may be united.

But how? It would be sheer folly to propose in a few sentences how to fulfill in specific terms all that Jesus is advocating in this prayer. A very simple beginning would be to resolve that one will personally *abstain from opposing or neglecting* Jesus' prayer, and that we will be attentive to fulfilling it.

Thursday, March 5th 2015

Matthew 26:36-46

“Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.”... "Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." ...”When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting?" ... "Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer."

In Gethsemane

Reading the parallel account from John's Gospel we learn that Gethsemane was an olive grove across the Kidron Valley. Matthew, who penned these words was an eyewitness and a participant. He and the other seven paused while Jesus took Peter, James and John as His supposed prayer companions a little distance beyond. "to keep watch with me," Jesus said. There, in great sorrow, Jesus prayed and agonized as He faced not only the pain of tomorrow but also the pain of betrayal that night. Luke records that His agony brought sweat like great drops of blood. Jesus was carrying the load of sin, sins and sinfulness, not His own but ours – mine. He was living out the implications of John the Baptist's announcement, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Twice Jesus returned to check on Peter, James and John, His best hope of support among the remaining eleven. "Could you not even watch with me for one hour?" Jesus' prayer to the Father highlights the reality that He was indeed human. His question, in prayer, could be paraphrased as, "Father, my dear Daddy, is there not an easier way than what I face tomorrow? Please!" Yes, it is fair to suggest the concept of Please, Dad, because he prayed that request three times. No words of the master have had a more profound impact on this writer than the conclusion of Jesus' prayer in the garden, facing such pain and agony. Jesus concluded, "Yet, not as I will, but as you will." One of the greatest paradoxes we face is that of holding in balance the need to pray with profound faith and belief, while continuing to live daily with a commitment to this statement by Jesus, "Yet, not as I will, but as you will." The despondent attitude of the disciples between the crucifixion and the resurrection would have been heightened by awareness of how they had failed Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Still more failures lay ahead. "Come, let us go now. My betrayer arrives." Judas was approaching. His name lives on in infamy.

Friday, March 6th 2015

Matthew 26:47-56

“While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for." Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him.”

Jesus Arrested

How differently many of us would have addressed a betrayer like Judas, when the moment arrived which brought face to face and eye to eye contact. The minimal response would be to call him out, name him for what he was. Not only did Jesus refrain from that kind of response, He who had taught, love your enemies, said to Judas, "Friend, do what you came for." He did not even hint at the leverage a teacher would have over one who had been his follower and pupil for three years. Issues relating to Jesus' mission and His destiny had been settled within the Godhead before time, as we know it, began. Issues relating to human pain and anguish had been settled the night before, under the ancient olive trees of Gethsemane. Not all of Jesus' party were so restrained. John's Gospel identified the sword carrier as Peter, and Peter was not skilled in its use. Missing his target, Peter cut off the ear of Malchus, a servant of the high priest. "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." Jesus then pointed out to His disciples, as He restrained them from violence, that the prophecies of Scripture, the pronouncements of God's servants the prophets had to be fulfilled. How did Judas know where to find Jesus and where he should lead this violent mob which, writes John, included a detachment of soldiers with its commander along with Jewish officials? John informs us that Judas knew the place where Jesus had often met with His disciples. We who cannot know in advance the details of our personal destiny do know, however, that we are called to be faithful followers and servants of the Lord Jesus. We carry personal responsibility for our decisions and actions day by day. The Judas episode reminds us that betrayal can take many forms. It can be what is said or what is not said. It can be what is done or what is left undone. Betrayal can attempt to hide under the kindest of actions, such as a kiss. The sad final observation made by Matthew, the eyewitness, was this: "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled." Mark closes this episode with what may have been his own experience. "A young man wearing nothing but a linen garment was seized, fled naked, leaving his garment behind."

Saturday, March 7th 2015

John 18:12-23

“They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who advised the Jews that it would be good if one man died for the people. Meanwhile the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. "I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied, "I always taught in synagogues or at the Temple, where all the Jews came together. I said nothing in secret. Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said." When Jesus said this one of the officials nearby struck him in the face. "Is that any way to answer the high priest?" He demanded. "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?"

The Mock Trial of Jesus Begins

The tension between the Jewish religious and ethnic community leaders on the one hand, and Jesus on the other, had been building for three years. It actually began with the wild man of the desert, John the Baptist, who heralded Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, while condemning the present religious elite at the same time. The tempo of the prosecution which had built so slowly suddenly changed. The Passover was at hand, the focal point of the religious calendar year, when great crowds flocked to Jerusalem, crowds with whom Jesus had become increasingly popular. Opinion polls were not officially commissioned but the word on the street and in the market was that Jesus held a strong edge over the religious leaders. His preaching, teaching, healing and feeding of the multitudes were greatly feared by the leadership. They had to get rid of this Nazarene. They wanted a quick clean handling which would be carried out by, and blamed on the Romans. The leadership had to keep their hands clean, ritually speaking, so they hurried Jesus off to last year's high priest. Luke informs us that they went to his home, and this was in the dark of night. John wrote this gospel years later, with the benefit of hindsight. He points out the irony of how even Caiaphus, the high priest, made a prophetic announcement that it would be good if one died for the benefit of all. From this sham pretext of due process we are reminded that the God of the universe is able to incorporate into His divine purposes even the malicious and aggressive attacks of those who deliberately stand in opposition to those purposes. Much human worry and grief are experienced in fretting over our concerns that somehow God has lost control, and events have overtaken Him. In such moments we need to remember Jesus' word of **Peace!**

Sunday, March 8th 2015

Luke 22: 54 & 55

“Peter followed at a distance. But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them.”

Good Intentions, Poor Performance

The relationship between the apostle Peter and the Lord Jesus makes an intriguing study. Jesus' resurrection from the dead brought a radical transformation in Peter, after which Peter did indeed become the rock Jesus had suggested at the time when the Lord changed his name from Simon to PETROS--ROCK. Again and again, before the crucifixion and the resurrection, we read of Peter's puppy-like eagerness to be quick off the mark, eager to do the right thing, impulsive, and spontaneous. His suggestions and his reactions to situations may have fallen short of the mark, but there is no shadow cast over his good intentions. On this tragic evening Peter's activities are in line with his established pattern of good intentions and quick speech, however flawed his actual performance. He followed the Lord at a distance. This point is mentioned by all three synoptic Gospels. For a follower of Jesus to warm himself at the enemy's fire is always a questionable undertaking, but again we remember that Peter was there with every good intention, however slippery the slope down which he was sliding. As with life in general, one thing led to another, until at length he eventually denied his Lord verbally, as Jesus had predicted that he would do. There is great hope for all the rest of us, found in this glimpse into Peter's personality and his on the spot reactions to life's situations. We see that incorrect reactions do not write us off as a lost cause in the eyes of our Lord. This leads us to the need to accept one another, overlooking those personality traits in others which may lead someone to speak or act far too quickly, almost without thought, while the reactions of another may be far too slow and reluctant. From the fourth Gospel we learn interesting additional insights. John is, himself, probably the other disciple he writes about, who was known to the high priest Annas. He was not only known to the high priest, but was known to the servants, indicating that his visits there were frequent enough that he was given direct access to the courtyard. Then, when he came back to the gate his word was enough to gain admission for Peter. The fire crackled and flattered. Peter was surely thinking, "What can I do in support of my Lord?"

Monday, March 9th 2015

Matthew 26:57-68

“The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the Temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"...“Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: tell us if you are the Christ, the son of God." " Yes, it is as you say", Jesus replied.”...“He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses?”...“He is worthy of death," they answered. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. "Prophecy to us, Christ, who hit you?"

Despised and Rejected

Isaiah's prophecy that the promised Messiah would be despised, rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, was now reaching its fulfillment. Considering the various phases of the pretend tribunal where the verdict was decided before the hearing took place, we see the full meaning of that description from John's Gospel, that the Word, who was with God before time began, came to His own creation and His own people did not receive Him. The Sanhedrin was a religious body holding the highest authority in that succession of priests and people who prided themselves in their Jewish history, back through the prophets to their lawgiver Moses, and to Abraham the patriarch. Theirs was the corporate expression of Jesus' own people, and they were emphatically putting their stamp of rejection upon Him, to be sealed by His death. The fists that hammered Jesus were bad enough, but they were only physical. The words of rejection and condemnation were more cruel, but it was a spitting in Jesus' face which was the ultimate insult. What must not be overlooked is the fact that the rejection and the suffering of this innocent God-man was deliberately administered, yet it was accepted in silence, on behalf of the sins of the world. The gift of God is eternal life. To reject the gift secured at such great price represents horrendous waste and becomes an additional slap of rejection to the gracious giver. To the high priest who charged and challenged: "Tell us if you are the Christ, the son of God," Jesus replied, "Yes, it is as you say." In response to that reality each reader/hearer is challenged to register a personal verdict.

Tuesday, March 10th 2015

Matthew 26:69-75

“Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. But he denied it before them all.”...“another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.”

Triple Denial

Judas betrayed Jesus, whereas his fellow disciple, Peter, denied Jesus, but denied him again and yet again. To Judas Jesus actually said, "Friend, what you do, do quickly." To Peter Jesus said nothing. But Luke's account tells us that Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter just before the cock crowed, and Peter remembered. Jesus was profoundly aware that He was moving toward His purposeful death, and He accept the role Judas played, leading up to that death. There are very evident differences between Peter's denial and that of Judas. The betrayer ended his own life by hanging, whereas Peter had opportunity for genuine repentance and service, which gave validity to his repentance. A more significant difference lay in the purposes and intention of each. Judas set out on a deliberate path of betrayal, and for personal gain, even if he never got to spend his reward. Peter's following his Lord, even though it was from a distance, was out of loving regard for Jesus and his well-being. The intentions of the two were poles apart. What lessons lurk here for today's followers of Jesus? One lesson is that if our intentions are genuine and pure, then lapses, even multiple lapses, are forgiven by the One whose very purpose was to open the path of forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and restoration. When one is in a most difficult situation and senses that a friend or loved one has failed to be supportive, the Jesus way is not one of condemnation, no matter how deeply the wound is felt. Part of Jesus' suffering lay in His awareness of the weaknesses of His followers.

Wednesday, March 11th 2015

Luke 22:66-23:1

“At daybreak the Council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. "If you are the Christ," they said, "tell us." Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." They all asked, "Are you the son of God?" He replied, "You are right in saying I am." Then they said, "Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard from his own lips". Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate.”

Formally Condemned

"Why was Jesus crucified?" That question was asked a number of years ago by Indonesia's ambassador to Canada. The setting was a very private conversation in a very public event held in Ottawa, in the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, where we were sitting side by side. The question was genuine, simple and direct, requiring a simple and direct answer. "There were two reasons: the religious leaders of the time were jealous of Jesus and afraid; God sent Jesus to die for the forgiveness of our sins." That friendly conversation continued for another half hour and was willingly heard, absorbed. Court cases can drag on and on, but this trial of Jesus was moving with tsunami swiftness because the Sanhedrin and elders wanted Jesus out of the way, and fast, that very day. Moving through the courtyard on their way to the Roman governor's palace, that would be the moment when Jesus looked at Peter, and Peter remembered his denial of his Lord. This hastily called meeting of the Sanhedrin, just before daybreak, was not in pursuit of justice. Rather, they were driving for legality as they themselves had defined it, and of course legality is not the same as justice. Only the Roman authorities had the right to conduct executions, and the Sanhedrin wanted Jesus done away with legally. The verdict of the Sanhedrin would be sufficient. The final evidence that they required, sought and secured, came from the mouth of Jesus Himself. It was His own affirmation that He was the Son of God. The train of events was a long one, reaching from eternity to eternity, with significant stops at Nazareth, Bethlehem, Alexandria, Cana and many other towns and villages along the way; reaching Jerusalem, and now headed for Calvary. As that new day broke none of the key players apart from Jesus Himself knew that they were breathing the air of the turning point in human and divine history. Jesus was now on his final approach to the cross.

Thursday, March 12th 2015

Matthew 27: 3-10

“When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners.”

Judas

The Judas act of betrayal has become one of the most infamous acts of all time. The name itself has become anathema, worldwide, perhaps surpassing the infamy of Hitler, Stalin or Genghis Khan. Judas was a thief, but thieves can be forgiven. Judas was a turncoat, a betrayer, but betrayal can also be forgiven. However many wrongs he did, and however serious, Judas arrived at the point where he did the right thing when he repented with genuine remorse, confessed that he had betrayed innocent blood, and proceeded to attempt a corrective reversal as he took the coins back to the chief priests. It was the right thing but it was too late, far too late. If there is a lesson to be learned it is surely that the today which we still have is the time to do what is right – now! His sin was particularly grievous because it was deliberate in nature, far from being an impulsive spur of the moment act. And his betrayal was betrayal of all that was good, righteous and just. Even so, Jesus did not condemn Judas. It was Judas who condemned Judas, and slammed the door on all hope for forgiveness and reconciliation by hanging himself. Suicide may be an ending but it is never a solution. Rather, it is an act which eliminates all possibility of solutions. The Old Testament prophet Zechariah, (11:12-13,) made direct reference to thirty pieces of silver as being the price of a man, even referring to throwing those coins into the house of the Lord, to the potter! In so many different ways Jesus' death and the events surrounding it fulfilled multiple Old Testament prophecies. The potter's field was where the artisan threw broken and rejected remnants of his work. In this world of broken pieces and shattered remains, Jesus' followers need to be alert to doing the Master's will while we still have our today in which to act for him.

Friday, March 13th 2015

Mark 15:1-5

“Very early in the morning the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of." But Jesus made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.”

Taken Before the Roman Governor

It is remarkable that Sanhedrin leaders were successful in rousing the resident Roman governor for a hearing at daybreak, but Pontius Pilate was attentive to them. All four Gospels describe the hearing, shedding light on various aspects. Luke records the charge of insurrection, which the Sanhedrin had mentioned, and that was probably what got the governor out of his bed. John mentions that those bringing charges, wanting to remain ceremonially clean so that they could eat the Passover that evening, stayed out of the Roman palace, so Pilate came outside to hear them. The hypocrisy of the religious leadership is blatant. They were quite willing to use whatever means were necessary to kill Jesus, yet they were meticulous in sticking to the details of ceremonial requirements. John records the predictable interaction between Pilate and the Jewish leaders when they brought up charges with religious connotations. "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law," said Pilate. "But we have no right to execute anyone," they replied, and therein lay the dilemma. They wanted Jesus killed but were dependent upon Romans to do the killing legally. This put Pilate in a quandary. Rome was reputed for its justice, however harsh and brutal. Pilate saw that this was not really a case for Roman jurisdiction, and he thought he had found a way out. Luke records the religious leaders' insistence: "He stirs up the people all over Judea, he started in Galilee and has come all the way here." This word Galilee seemed to provide Pilate with the escape he needed. Galilee would fall under Herod's jurisdiction and he knew Herod was in Jerusalem for the Passover, so the case got referred to Herod. The prediction Jesus had made concerning his own death indicated that it would be by crucifixion. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life," (John 3:14 & 15). This was a time of anguish and fatigue for Jesus. It was a time of utter distress for His followers. It would seem to them that their world was falling apart. But when things are at their worst God is still in control.

Saturday, March 14th 2015

Luke 23:8-12

“When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies.”

Jesus Sent to Herod Antipas

The Jewish religious leaders were right there on hand with their accusations, eager to get rid of Jesus by whatever means required. That was their agenda. Herod was not in a hurry. He had been hearing about Jesus for some time, and was hoping for a private showing, some little miracle for his own entertainment, perhaps something in the nature of what a magician would perform. That was Herod's agenda, but Jesus was not cooperative, no matter how many questions Herod asked. Jesus had a different agenda, God's agenda. He was the sin-bearer of the world, and not to be manipulated as a toy, for entertainment, although he was being treated as a joke – the object of ridicule. The prophet Isaiah had written about the suffering servant:

He was oppressed and afflicted yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before her shears is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. (Isaiah 53:7&8)

These very serious moments were treated as a joke, time for a moment of light distraction, as they dressed him up and sent him back again to Pontius Pilate who had hoped to have the Jesus issue removed from his shoulders. Pilate tried to avoid a confrontation with those troublesome religious leaders of the people that he was sent to govern. Both Herod and Pilate wanted to protect their careers while handling the sensitive Jesus problem, bouncing him back and forth between them. They had been enemies but became friends – at such great cost. In the ebb and flow of world issues, negotiations between leaders, God is still at work moving toward His goals and His purposes in ways that are not apparent.

Sunday, March 15th 2015

A composite reading from **Matthew chapter 27, Mark chapter 15, Luke chapter 23 and John chapter 15:**

"I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve that. Therefore I will punish him and release him." [Pilate]

"Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him." [Pilate's wife]

“Now it was the governor's custom at the feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas...But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered. "What shall I do with this Jesus who is called the Christ?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!"...“When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar had started, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood."...“All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.”

Pilate's Second Opportunity to Administer Justice

Jesus was not the only person on trial that day in the Roman praetorium at Jerusalem. Pontius Pilate was on trial, as the person responsible for administering Roman justice. He failed miserably in that he pronounced Jesus innocent, yet had him flogged to please a screaming crowd. Roman flogging was in itself a horrendous punishment and could even lead to death. Jesus was not alone in his suffering that day. Justice itself suffered tragically, overwhelmed by noise and public opinion. These companions, noise and popular opinion, and the people who manipulate them skilfully for their own personal purposes, do not serve justice well. But on a larger and less obvious stage God's justice was being administered as the one innocent person there, the God-man Jesus, was carrying on His shoulders the sin of a very sinful world. The administration of justice is the process of putting things right; making things right, the way they should be. That is precisely what Jesus was doing that day without words and at a staggering cost. Justice, that day, was not in Roman hands at all. It was in the hands that would be spiked to a cross.

Monday, March 16th 2015

Matthew 27:27-30

“Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, King of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.”

Jesus in the Hands of the Military

However little they understood it on that morning, a world-class event, as infamous as it was cruel, was taking place in Jerusalem. And it has just been passed into the hands of the military. When is it a solution to handover the management of really significant events to the military? There may be a range of answers to that question, but whatever the conclusion reached, there are often abuses when power is in the hands of those who are primarily answerable only to themselves. The soldiers proceeded from one form of abuse and humiliation to another, as they amused themselves to relieve the boredom of daily military life, stationed in a far country. Consider the agony Jesus faced. He was stripped naked, probably in the eyes of jeering crowds. The scarlet robe was not for his comfort, it was a mockery of the King of Kings as they braided his crown of thorns and jammed it on his head. The staff for his hand was a temporary prop while they mocked and taunted Him, to round out the imitation of his royal status, then they used the staff to beat him. Even from the mouth and the pen of the prophet Isaiah this treatment did not sound so extreme as that day's reality, neither the physical abuse nor the mockery. He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. By his stripes we are healed. Somehow it seems that the entire abuse came to a climax as they spit on Jesus. That act summarized spite and rejection. Rejection by religious leaders was very early. They excited the crowd to a mob rejection. Rejection by the military arm of the conquering power may have been more understandable, but the ultimate rejection still lay ahead. Jesus, as our sin-bearer would carry on our behalf temporary rejection by even the loving Heavenly Father.

Tuesday, March 17th 2015

Luke 23:24-31

“So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will. As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children, for a time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed!'"

The Road to the Cross

In reality the road to the cross began a generation earlier, in nearby Bethlehem, for Jesus was born to die on the cross, and by the time he matured into his years of ministry Jesus had come to know that. When the soldiers led him into the streets, headed for the Place of the Skull, so named because the cave entrances gave it a skull-like appearance, it was between seven and eight o'clock in the morning. Having had no sleep, and already the subject of much abuse including a Roman flogging which often brought men to death's door, Jesus was physically weak. The soldiers who had no patience with delays or stumbling commandeered a man who happened to be passing to carry the cross. Simon was from Cyrene, North Africa, one of the earliest recorded African followers of Jesus. We know he became a follower because his sons Alexander and Rufus are mentioned in Mark's Gospel as a means to identify him. Women were prominent in the crowd who followed Jesus, weeping and wailing. It was to these women that Jesus spoke, the only people he is known to have addressed on His way to the cross. They should not weep for Him, but for themselves and their children, for hard days lay ahead. Nowhere do we find Jesus expressing the kind of regret, which would imply that He was holding back from this His path of destiny, as the Saviour of the world. Earlier Jesus had said to His followers, "If anyone will come after me let him take up his cross daily and follow me." Being one of Jesus' followers demands, each day, a willingness to say no to self-indulgence, to the easy way, and to choices that put self first. Jesus teaches us to live each day as a fulfillment of God's will and purpose.

Wednesday, March 18th 2015

Mark 15:22-26

“They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, (which means the Place of the Skull). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was the third hour and they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

Jesus On The Cross - Part I

All four Gospels record Jesus' crucifixion, with varying degrees of detail. The reading from Mark is like a bare outline, the gaps are filled in by the others. John informs us that Golgotha is an Aramaic word. John also adds that the charges were written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. Aramaic was the language Jesus used with His disciples but it would have been Latin in which He spoke to Pontius Pilate, whereas interaction with the Pharisees and high priests was most likely in Hebrew, the language of the Scriptures. There at the place where Jesus was to be crucified He was given the option of wine mixed with myrrh, to diminish the pain. The sedative was declined. Anguish and pain were endured in full consciousness. This mode of execution involved suffering beyond description. Counting the time in Jewish fashion, beginning at 6 AM, they placed Jesus on the cross at the third hour, which would be nine in the morning by our reckoning. He would be on his back, the cross under him with no consideration of comfort as spikes were driven through his feet and wrists. We are spared the ring of the iron Hammer driving spikes, and spared the agonizing details of how the soldiers lifted the cross with its burden, then dropped it in a prepared hole. Those jarring agonies are appropriately remembered privately when Holy Communion is celebrated in remembrance of the body which was broken and the blood which was shed on the most memorable of days. Mark records the charge written above Jesus' head. John informs us that the chief priests contested that sign, but Pilate responded with his now famous pronouncement, "What I have written, I have written." Gospel writers point out how various aspects of the crucifixion fulfilled prophecies recorded in the Old Testament. Jesus was indeed King of the Jews, but not in the Roman sense. "My kingdom is not of this world" – Pilate had heard those words. Pilate admitted that he saw truth as a relative thing. However, the caption, which Pilate had commissioned was an absolute. It was the King of Kings who was spiked to a cross that day.

Thursday, March 19th 2015

Luke 23:34

“Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Mark 15:29-31

“Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself!"

Jesus On The Cross - Part II

We who read this account of Jesus' sufferings and death on the cross have no way of knowing, nor will we ever know, in this life, the degree to which God answered Jesus' prayer from the cross – "Father forgive them," those responsible for His abuse and His death. It was a powerful prayer. It continues to be a very revealing prayer, laying bare the heart of Jesus for an erring world. How many from among the high priests, Pharisees, members of the Sanhedrin, beyond Joseph of Arimathea who contributed his own garden tomb? What of Nicodemus? What about the centurion in charge of the military detail, the one who would recognize that surely this was the son of God? There is little sense in speculating about these questions, but there is great value in lingering over that prayer of forgiveness. The death of Jesus on the cross was itself about the forgiveness of sin. The benefits of forgiveness are only sensed and appropriated in the life of the person forgiven when forgiveness is accepted and acknowledged. Judas Iscariot cut himself off from any benefit from Jesus' prayer when he ended his own life in suicide. Those who continued to hurl insults at Jesus and taunt him on the cross would be among those for whom Jesus prayed, saying, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Now we pause to consider two specific challenges hurled at Jesus "Save yourself." "Come down from the cross!" The two phrases could not and would not sound very much alike, differing in the English language by only one letter, but they are significantly different. Jesus would not come down from the cross because he identified with His mission to atone for sinful humanity. He would not save himself, for it was by remaining there that he saved others. Forgiveness of wrongdoing was the theme of that day of utter agony. Acknowledge and receive the forgiveness that has been secured.

Friday, March 20th 2015

John 19:25-27

“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary of Magdala. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on the disciple took her into his home.”

Jesus On The Cross - Part III

With the burden of the world's sin on his shoulders, with His hands and feet nailed to the cross, Jesus was in the depths of anguish, the very extreme to which human suffering can go. Yet He looked down at His mother there, and had time to be concerned for her well-being. We have no indication of how many of Jesus' followers were present there at the cross, how many of His disciples. John was certainly there, standing near a cluster of four women, three of whom were named Mary. Fixing His eyes on his mother, and seeing the disciple John nearby, He addressed her, indicating that from that day onward she should consider John to be her own son. To John the disciple Jesus give the charge to look after Mary His mother as a son would do. John, who records the speech of Jesus from the cross is also the writer who reported the wedding at Cana in Galilee, on which occasion Jesus also spoke directly to His mother Mary. The Greek word, which records the term of address Jesus, used is identical in both cases. Not disrespectful, as it would be in the English language, Jesus simply addressed her as *Gunai*, which translates as "woman". In his Messianic capacity as God's representative on earth, Jesus did not address her as mother, but he cared very much for her and one of his last human act was to bestow upon His disciple John the responsibility for her care and her well-being. Does this relate in any way to the century in which we live, now so far removed? It indicates that no matter how weighty the burdens we carry in life, concerns for parental well-being deserve our love and our attention. That word falls heavily on this writer, trapped as I was behind a rock fall and a landslide in the Andes Mountains of Bolivia and unable to even communicate with my own mother the week when my father died. It weighed heavily then and is strong in memory now. Jesus showed the way. God's will must be done. When circumstances are beyond our control we still do our best to meet our parental responsibilities.

Saturday, March 21st 2015

Luke 23:39-43

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Are you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God?" he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus On The Cross - Part IV

Luke's description indicates that the two brigands who hung on crosses beside Jesus on that day hurled insults at Him. The records written by Matthew and Mark also indicate that they heaped insults on him. The inference is that the abuse went on for some time, and what we have recorded by Luke is only a portion. One of the two robbers had a clear perspective and an accurate evaluation of what was happening. He observed that they, the bandits were getting what they deserved, whereas Jesus had done nothing wrong, and was being executed unjustly. This was truth, recognized and pronounced from the mouth of a criminal, while religious leaders who considered themselves righteous and pure stood by unmoved, purveyors of falsehood and injustice demanding the death of an innocent man. The conditions of a sin-bearing sacrifice were being fulfilled, on behalf of the sins of the world. The appeal made by one of the brigands was simple and memorable: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Belief is there, acknowledgment of Jesus as Messiah, acceptance of His kingdom proclamation. The response Jesus gave to the criminal was equally simple, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Such words have given hope to criminals sitting in cells on death row, waiting for their execution – people who have come to faith in Jesus. But they are also words of hope for all of humanity. Destiny hangs on the answer to this question: "What will you decide about Jesus?" Was he an impostor, or a deluded maniac, a harmless starry eyed innocent? Or was Jesus of Nazareth the Son of God, come in the flesh to make atonement for the sins of the world? We the masses, have all fallen short of the glory of God. Our degree of relative guilt or relative innocence is not what defines our relationship with God. The deciding factor is how we respond to Jesus.

Sunday, March 22nd 2015

Matthew 27:45-51

“From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "ELOI, ELOI, LAMA SABACHTHANI" – which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ... “Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.”

Jesus On The Cross - Part V

Although the days and the years of our lives fly by with what seems to the elderly to be an incredible swiftness, there are times and circumstances in which even one single minute is like an eternity. A diver underwater without breathing apparatus finds that even seconds become long as the lungs seem to scream for air. Those three hours from noon until mid-afternoon, as Jesus hung there spiked to His cross were a very very long time. Darkness hung over all the earth as Jesus suffered in agony, bearing the sins of the world so that those who by faith believe in His atoning sacrifice would have suffering and condemnation lifted from them. Great symbolism was unfolding that day. The veil in the Temple at Jerusalem was split from top to bottom. That veil shielded the Holy of Holies from human view. The presence of God, until that moment, was not accessible, but the sacrificial death of Jesus opened the way freely into the presence of God Himself. For generations the Jewish people had known that without the shedding of blood there was no forgiveness of sin, (Hebrews 9:22). That requirement having been fulfilled by the sacrificial death of Jesus, blood sacrifice never needs to be repeated. It was offered once, for all. In those hours of darkness the very face of God was hidden from Jesus. God was unable to look upon sin. All those references are symbolic language, since God does not have a face, but the realities are genuine. It is through faith that we understand the reality of what happened in those cruel moments at Golgotha. Jesus' cry about being abandoned by God is similar to what we call a rhetorical question. He knew the answer to His question, "Why have you abandoned me?" It was because in those hours He suffered the abandonment of God on behalf of our sins and sinfulness. As we believe, we no longer face the condemnation of being separated from God. Jesus cried, "It is finished," and gave up His spirit, the human spirit which had defined his earthly existence.

Monday, March 23rd 2015

Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47; John 19:31-35

“And when the Centurion who stood there in front of Jesus heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the son of God."

“The Centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man."

“Now it was the day of preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.”

Jesus On The Cross -Part VI

Jesus had given up his spirit, His redemption mission on earth finished, now it was clean up time, and the Jewish leaders got right after Pilate to get the crucifixion mess out of sight, for it was only hours until the special Passover Sabbath began, at sundown on that very afternoon. The soldiers with their iron hammers came by to break the leg bones of the crucified, in order to hasten their deaths – but Jesus was already dead. His side was pierced instead, fulfilling two Old Testament prophecies about the Suffering Servant Messiah: no bone was broken, and they looked upon the one they had pierced. The Centurion, head of the Roman military detail, stood before the cross, and appears to have become one of the first of an eventual flood of Romans who would believe. To believe in the reality of Jesus' death that day was not difficult. This Roman's belief was more, he had glimpsed Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. When the gospel writer John puts the story to pen and ink years later, he makes it clear that he was there in person as an observer and that the central issue is belief in this Jesus, Son of God, and Saviour.

Tuesday, March 24th 2015

Mark 15:42-47

“It was Preparation day, (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.”

From The Cross To His Tomb

Jesus taught his disciples to pray this prayer to the heavenly father: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." By His death on the cross Jesus had just proven His absolute willingness to fulfill that prayer, doing so in order that redemption and forgiveness would be available to all who are willing to receive it. Now, as the details of Jesus' remains being moved from His cross to what Pilate would think of as disposal, all four gospel records are required to get the picture of how the pieces fit together to represent God's redemptive program which reached its culmination on the morning of the resurrection. Today's reading from Mark reveals that Joseph was from the Judean town of Arimathea. He was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, and he was himself "waiting for the kingdom of God". Luke adds that Joseph was a good and upright man. Furthermore, he had not consented to the execution of Jesus. Both Matthew and John make the further comment that he was actually a disciple of Jesus, John adding that his discipleship had been kept secret, because he feared the Jewish leaders. But the man who was afraid of the Jews went without fear to the Roman Governor and secured permission to remove Jesus' remains to his own freshly cut tomb in a garden nearby. In this, John tells us, Joseph was helped by Nicodemus who had come to Jesus by night. Joseph bought the linen, Nicodemus brought about 34 kg of myrrh and aloes, about all a man could carry. So the active agents that God used, in this male-dominated world, were two prominent and influential males from Judea, where the power lay, and two powerless females from Galilee who, according to Matthew, sat opposite the tomb keeping track of where the body had been laid, so that they could come to complete the embalming with loving care. Joseph rolled the stone to cover the entrance, and the stage was set.

Wednesday, March 25th 2015

Matthew 22:34-40

“Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these commandments."

Law and Prophets in Capsule Form

Mark's Gospel also relays this interaction between a prominent Pharisee and Jesus, adding the Pharisee's word of commendation, after he heard Jesus' reply. Jesus then remarked to him that he was not far from the kingdom. Is being close to the kingdom good enough? Ask Mexican economic immigrants wishing to enter the USA, arriving at the fence along the frontier, whether being close to their destination is good enough to meet their needs! Pharisees were trapped by their belief that the law of Moses was passport-with-visa, granting them kingdom access. One of them, Nicodemus, had come to Jesus and was instructed about the need to be born again, as a kingdom entrance requirement. This Pharisee-lawyer, whose own specialty is the law of Moses asks Jesus to scrutinize it, and identify its key component, which Jesus did. He then introduced His own agenda, the human and compassionate factor, calling for His followers to interact with others in a way that is in **their** best interest – for **their** well-being rather than our own. That is the core component of the sacrificial AGAPE love to which Jesus refers. So Jesus places side-by-side these two statements as his summary of the law's requirements: – love the Lord your God with the totality of all that you are; – Love your neighbour as you love yourself. This Pharisee who had studied the law in depth saw that Jesus got it right, and told him so. His opinion of Jesus did not carry the day for the rest of the Pharisee community who were even now closing in on Jesus for the kill. The struggle was between Pharisees, on one hand, who insisted on the letter of the law, meticulous details about how to live life according to their rules; and on the other hand, Jesus' revelation that the heart of God is not to be won by rules and rituals. Jesus taught human interaction in terms of those virtues summarized as justice, mercy, grace and love. That very week, beside the grave of Lazarus, Jesus had said, "Whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Believing in Jesus involves committing oneself to Jesus as Lord and to Jesus' portrayal of the nature of God as a way of life, a pattern for all that we do and all that we are.

Thursday, March 26th 2015

Read Luke 24:13-32

“Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem...Jesus himself came up and walked along with them but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"...Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself...When he was at table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"”

Our Private Conversations.

Without question it does make a difference what we discuss with one another, whether sitting, walking or otherwise interacting. Two of Jesus' followers, a certain Cleopas and another not identified by name, were walking toward Emmaus discussing the redemptive events of Friday. They had heard reports circulating that very day, Sunday, that the body of Jesus was missing, but an angel had informed women of their acquaintance that Jesus was risen from the dead, alive! How could that be ?

The matters which they were discussing prepared their hearts and minds-- Jesus appeared, walking along with them. When He nudged their conversation with a question designed to draw them out they confessed that He had been their hope, the one who would redeem Israel.

By what they had chosen to discuss between themselves, and through discussing that hope of redemption, however imperfect their understanding, they opened the door for Jesus to enlighten them. The blessings of the risen Lord still happen today, by His Spirit, in the midst of those who, in belief and expectation, speak together about the incarnation and its significance; about Jesus and His redemptive ministry.

Later, when Jesus accepted their invitation and ate with them at Emmaus, these two men reflected on how they had sensed a remarkable heartburn, not related to acid reflux, as they listened to Jesus along the road and absorbed His description of how God the Father had sent Him to redeem His people as foretold by the prophets. Their hearts burned within them. There is no topic of conversation more noble than to review among ourselves our personal experiences as well as reports from others about how God is at work in our midst.

Friday, March 27th 2015

Read John 20:3-17

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there, but did not go in. Then Simon Peter who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth.”...“Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)”...“But Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not recognize it was Jesus.”...“Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my father and your father, to my God and your God.”

Belief and Understanding Grow in Stages.

We often make reference to news that is too good to believe. In the case of Jesus' inner group, on that Easter morning, His resurrection seemed so impossible that at first they dare not even think of the empty tomb as being good news. As we reconstruct events from four Gospel accounts, the women from His inner group of followers went with spices for embalming. It seems that Mary Magdalene hurried ahead, found the incredible surprise of the stone rolled away, the seal broken and the guards gone. Assuming the body had been stolen she hurried to tell Peter and John as the other women proceeded. John, as eyewitness, readily admits that he and Peter had not grasped the Old Testament Scripture imperative that the Messiah must of necessity be raised from the dead. What cannot be overlooked is the central role given to women by our Lord as He made Himself known to His followers in His risen state. This risen state appears to have been different in some way from the Jesus they had known. He appealed to Mary Magdalene, the very first person to whom He revealed Himself, not to try to hold on to the experiences of how He was remembered in His earthly existence. Her task, as Jesus addressed her with the same term in which he spoke to His mother from the cross and at the wedding in Cana, was to share resurrection news with His family, His disciples. That was her assignment and it became the assignment of the early church. When we study the Acts of the Apostles we see that resurrection news was indeed the very heart of the message of the early church.

Saturday, March 28th 2015

Read Mark 12:41-44

“Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of the penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.”

A Widow's Temple Offering.

In that last dramatic week of His life on earth Jesus took a moment out to just sit in the temple and watch His family. There were many who brought large and impressive offerings. If they were *throwing* in their offerings it would be to enhance the noise, the jingle and clang of significant coins minted from silver and gold. Without doubt this would bring joy to the guardians. There would be showmanship involved, along with appropriate devotion by other contributors. By being there at just the right time, for the best effect, some would say the rich were just getting the biggest possible bang for their buck. The poverty-stricken widow who put in her two small and insignificant copper coins could have come up with very convincing arguments why she need not feel obliged to present any offering at all. Why give two cents when someone has just contributed a half million dollars? These two little copper coins were really very insignificant in their purchasing power, in the face of costly temple maintenance, yet hers became an offering of worldwide significance. Why? Because the Lord noted her offering. Because the widow was also demonstrating, not visibly, and not demonstrating to impress people-- her demonstration was to the God who sees and knows. Because she has encouraged others across the years. Because the Lord takes small offerings of many different kinds and does significant things with them. Because her offering showed that all she was and all she had were under God's management. Many people become famous because of how much they are able to accumulate. This nameless widow has become famous for what she did *not* have – no husband, no significant resources, yet what she did have was at God's disposal. Then from time to time we hear of those who have amassed great wealth, and make their resources available for a wide range of ministries in God's name. Thank God for them too. Most of us fall between the two extremes, God sees the motivation under which we make our offerings and our financial decisions. He sees the motivation, which governs our daily lives.

Sunday, March 29th 2015

Luke 21:5-7

“Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down." "Teacher," they asked, "when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?"

Events To Come – Part I

Putting together the writings of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we have an extensive narrative of Jesus' teaching about events to come, triggered by Jesus telling His disciples that the Jerusalem Temple would be destroyed, followed by their response, "When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?" Much ink is dedicated to this prolonged discourse by Jesus, including His response to the fears of His followers. This was probably on Wednesday and Thursday of the week of His crucifixion. Matthew records more detail than the others, in chapters 25 and 26 of his gospel. The evidence that Mark's chapter 13 and Luke's chapters 21 cover the same *seminar* can be found in identical phrases and in content common to all three writers. Jesus is aware of the threats to His life and the traps that await Him there in Jerusalem to ensnare Him. The disciples were distracted and sidelined by their admiration of the temple and the dazzling precious stones embedded in its construction. It is very easy to be distracted from major concerns by the details relating to the beauty of a place of worship! The Master does not chide them for their distraction, nor for the questions they ask, their wish to get a handle on just what would happen, when it would happen, and how they would know that such events were imminent. Placing Jesus' teaching in a historical context, more than a generation later the Roman Emperor Nero died in the year 68, Vespasian succeeded him, and Vespasian's son Titus broke through the walls of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Titus levelled the Temple, sacked the city, slaughtered thousands, took thousands as slaves and thousands more were dispersed under unthinkable circumstances. Those and many more events lay in the future. That was the context of Jesus' teaching relating to what lay ahead. Are we, in our time, likely to be distracted from a future which is in God's hands? Undoubtedly. Are we to be condemned if we hunger for details about future events - the how, the why, and the sequence? Apparently not, for we are encouraged to pay attention to the signs of the times. How are we to respond to the signs? Jesus has things to say about all that in readings that follow.

Monday, March 30th 2015

Read Matthew 24:3-14

"Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?" Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death." ... "But he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

Events To Come - Part II

As Jesus continued with His response to the questions His disciples were asking about future events we switch over from Luke's record to that of Matthew. Mark records in his chapter 13 the same conversation, many of the phrases being identical. What is Jesus telling them about events to come? The twelve wanted and hungered for a messianic triumph immediately, in Jerusalem, that very week. However, Jesus was preparing them and their successors in the faith for steadfast belief, perseverance, endurance, over the long haul. He spoke in general terms and the list of tragedies and suffering that they would face was not comforting. The key phrase was the last one in today's reading: "But he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." In the interim, according to these three gospel records, Jesus advised them of political upheavals including war, medical crises such as we would now recognize as having occurred in the black plague, AIDS, SARS, and Ebola. Persecution and imprisonment would come; family divisions and fierce animosity would emerge even within families. Jesus' word to the disciples and to us is that we must persevere, faithful until the end. The warnings are various. Mark records Jesus' warning to be on our guard. All three record His specific alert, "Watch out that no one deceives you." Deception can even be unintentional or well-intended. For more than six decades this writer has listened to good people with the highest intentions of serving our Lord, proclaim their personal convictions about the signs of the times, a majority of the predictions being inaccurate. After His resurrection from the dead Jesus continued this very same theme, "It is not for you to know the times or the dates the father has sent by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Tuesday, March 31st 2015

Read Luke 21:20-27

"When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

Events To Come - Part III

As Jesus continued his discourse on events still to come, in answer to questions from His disciples, much of what He said that day is not included in this the shortest of three summaries, the one written by Luke. Additional content is recorded in Matthew chapter 24 and Mark chapter 13. Evidence that ties the three passages together comes in reading three specific references, and what surrounds them: Luke 21:20; Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14. Serious attempts have been made to establish study charts to harmonize details into a flowing prediction of what will happen and when it will take place. Taking into account the nature of Old Testament prophecy which frequently combined events which in fact were separated by great distances, and met its culmination in the birth of the Messiah, it is highly plausible that Jesus combined descriptions of the destruction of Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70's predictions of other future events, in prophetic style. What then is the purpose of prophecy, and the utility of it in our lives if one is unable to pin down time, place, sequence and event? Surely it is to keep God's people alert to the security of knowing that when world circumstances proceed from dramatic to apocalyptic, believers are not to lose hope or give up in despair. However else they are interpreted, Jesus' words assure us that the final chapters of human history on Planet Earth are in the hands of a loving and righteous God. Beyond that, there is an age to come. The Jesus story ties together the present age, and the age to come, which may be in another dimension and beyond our ability to comprehend. Jesus said, ***I am the way, the truth and the life.*** That is a foundation to stand on.

Wednesday, April 1st 2015

Read Mark 13:26-37

"At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: he leaves his house in charge of his servants, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you I say to everyone: watch!"

Events to Come - Part IV

In those few days preceding the Passover, the week in which Jesus Himself would surrender His life as the Passover lamb, Jesus gave this long discourse about events to come, given much space in three Gospel narratives. Of these, Mark is chosen here as the most concise and the most focused. It would be presumptive to give a dogmatic interpretation of these events, one by one in sequence. Some appear to have been fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem. Others which lie still in the future may even be conditional, dependent upon human obedience to His command, or disobedience. "This Gospel," Jesus said, "is to be preached to all nations, and then the end will come." When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, one of the mysteries lies in not knowing just how much Jesus laid aside when He became human. For here He tells His disciples concerning this, His second coming in the clouds, that no one knows about that day or the hour, not even He Himself, the Son – only the Heavenly Father. One message is clear; that it will happen! And one instruction is without doubt or question: ***Be watchful, be ready.*** That is indeed the main message – Jesus will come again, be watchful, be ready, keep one's house in order. The other Gospels' parables all carry that same theme, so that when the Master returns He will find that His people have been obedient, diligent, and responsible, expecting and awaiting His coming.

Thursday, April 2nd 2015

Read Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all his angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another...."

"The righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'"

Events to Come - Part V

It is important that this rather well-known teaching of Jesus be seen in its context as part of Jesus' response to questions from His disciples, inquiring about events to come. Important it is, because it refers not only to Jesus and what He will do, it also refers to His followers and what they, what we, will do or fail to do. This relates to us today, to the reader in whatever year it is read. This is gospel, but it is a *good news and bad news* announcement. It is good news because it clears away any mystery about what God is like, what God expects from us, what is pleasing to Him. It is good news because it clears away any doubt about God's will, and it shows how each of us can serve Him, regardless of our vocation, regardless of whether we are rich or poor, relatively speaking. Pleasing God does not require pilgrimages to distant shrines or acts of flagellation or self-punishment. The bad news is evident. Failure to live and act as Jesus the Lord has instructed, in relation to those who are needy and vulnerable, is the equivalent to failing, rejecting and snubbing Jesus himself. Jesus teaches us that there will be a future day of reckoning, described as a king sitting on a throne dispensing judgment. The final exam is to be based on these criteria, which have been passed out to us in advance. We now know how we are to live lives pleasing to God. We know how we are to live out our lives until that day.

Friday, April 3rd 2015

Read Matthew 27:62-66; Luke 23:56; Mark 16:1

“The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, after three days I will rise again. So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.”

“But the women rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.”

“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might anoint Jesus' body.”

That Devastating Day

Following the shocking death of one who is dearly beloved it is common to face an emotional numbness and a bewildering emotional state in which the dominant thought, if there is a dominant thought, would be, "What do I do now, What can we do now?" In such a state the women went home and rested. Friday, by our calendar, was called the day of preparation. It ended when the Sabbath began at sundown. So, after the Sabbath ended at sundown on what is our Saturday those devout women went and purchased spices to anoint Jesus' body. Luke's gospel record indicates both spices and perfumes. Meanwhile, on that same Sabbath day which the women respected by resting, the Jewish religious leaders were scurrying to make sure that what they considered the Jesus problem was securely laid to rest. When they appealed to Pontius Pilate his word was, "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." In this the full resources of the Roman army and the Jewish religious establishment came together in a common interest. They both wanted *finished and done with* clearly stamped on the troublesome *Jesus of Nazareth* case. But in the end all those resources proved to be insufficient, and they would need to throw into gear a cover-up operation. Neither the combined forces of the Jewish and Roman establishments, nor death itself were adequate to capture and hold securely this Jesus who was the very giver of life, and who had power over death itself.

Saturday, April 4th 2015

Read Luke 24:35-49

“Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."... "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have."... "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish."... "This is what is written: "The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Mysteries and Realities.

Mysteries and realities can break upon us in tandem, and it is our responsibility as mature followers of Jesus to sort out how we process them. The appearance of Jesus in the midst of ten disciples is a prime example. Given the vast range of human personalities and dispositions, some will probe mysteries for details and explanations while others grasp the realities and call them sufficient. Neither approach is necessarily superior, neither is to be condemned. Faith is reached by many roads and expresses itself in many ways. The disciples were only ten in number that day because Judas had turned renegade and Tomas was absent for reasons unspecified. Mysteries surged to the fore: with the doors locked, as John's Gospel specifies, how did Jesus appear in their midst? Was this real? Was Jesus real? The realities were confirmed for them immediately. His voice, His reassuring words, as we read in John's account: "Peace be with you." "Listen." "Look." "Touch." Everything was a mystery, yet everything was real.

What is the nature and composition of a resurrection body? Will our resurrected bodies have similar characteristics to these earthly bodies? Did Jesus really hunger for food, or was His eating fish just to reassure them that they were not dreaming? What is the relationship between space, time, and resurrected bodies? Even Thomas who vowed that he would never believe without feeling and touching was overcome by the presence of the Lord one week later. It was enough to see and hear Him. His response was, "My Lord and my God."

Sunday, April 5th 2015

Matthew 28:2-4; Luke 24:1-8

“There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.”

“On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.”...“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, he has risen. Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day raised again.'”

Jesus Has Risen.

The message of resurrection morning is *life and light*. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life". He also said, "I am the light of the world." The guards had seen a blinding light when the messenger sent from God, the *Angelos*, came and rolled away the stone. It was now the third day. The day of Preparation, when He was crucified, as well as the Sabbath, were both behind them. Reading all four Gospels we learn that Mary Magdalene was swiftest and arrived at the tomb first. She observed the stone rolled away, assumed grave robbers had taken the body and ran to Peter with the news that was not yet seen as good news. The good news of **Life** was first announced to women, no less, and in the form of a question: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, he has risen." That was the good news which became the fulcrum, the tipping point in world history. Within the hour Peter and John, then the other disciples would be let in on this news that they should have seen coming, because Jesus had given them His promise. It was such astounding news that they only grasped the full impact after the Lord's several appearances to them. As the news gathered momentum it would change the world. The celebration of Easter need not be as gradual as was the dawning of reality on Jesus' followers that morning. It is quite appropriate that we burst forth in glorious song: "Up from the grave He arose," or, "Christ the Lord is risen today". It was God's own way of demonstrating to humanity that death is not the end, and that the dark forces of sin and death do not hold the final word. Let the world ring with this triumphant sound: "Christ the Lord is risen," and, "He is risen indeed."