

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer
Prof John Morris, Sunday 1st March

1. *Prayers of penitence* : Psalms 4 & 31; Chapter 1: Thou O Lord; Collects: 1,2,3

Welcome to the first of these Lent Complines. In these short addresses before the service we are going to focus on different aspects of prayer - one of the topics Bishop Colin recommends. Lent has traditionally been the time of penitence for the church. So today we start thinking about penitence in prayer; on the next two Sundays we'll look at OT prayers for God to show his power (e.g. Elijah) and for salvation (e.g. Daniel in lion's den). On March 22nd I thought we'd consider Jesus' instructions on prayer, and follow that with Jesus' hard command to "pray for those who persecute you". On Palm Sunday it seems appropriate to consider prayer as praise, then in holy week we'll give detailed consideration to The Lord's Prayer, in Sung compline on Tuesday Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, and on Wednesday the prayer of Jesus on the Cross.

So, today, at the start of Lent - prayers as penitence. Lent has traditionally been attached to and preceded Easter, as a principal occasion for baptism and for the reconciliation of those who had been excluded from the church's fellowship by sin. This explains the characteristic notes of Lent - self-examination, penitence, self-denial and preparation for Easter.

But it is not negative, although often mistakenly thought to be exclusively so. Rather it should be positive - a time of healing; healing that has the prerequisite of penitence. An old Latin prayer dated around 1100 goes "Now is the healing time decreed, for sins of heart and wound and deed, when we in humble fear record, the wrong that we have done the Lord". So, as candidates for baptism (originally all adults) and the penitents to be readmitted to the worshipping church considered their previous lives, the whole Christian community was invited to join with them in study and repentance for 40 days - a period chosen to remind them of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil.

Lent started on Ash Wednesday and, since the middle ages, it has been the custom for worshippers to be marked in ash with the sign of the cross as a sign of individual penitence. Ashes are an ancient sign - ashes on the head, sitting in ashes. But this sign has a very long origin, and one which did not originally - so far as I can tell - have the connotation of penitence. Dictionaries state that sackcloth and ashes have long been signs of penitence, remorse, mourning, but it was the last of these - mourning - with which it was first associated. Wearing sackcloth - a very coarse fabric made from goat's hair or camel's hair (which is terribly itchy and uncomfortable) and literally covering oneself with ashes, showed that the person was enduring a most terrible disaster.

Sackcloth was first woven in Mesopotamia, where Abraham originated. The first mention of sackcloth is in Genesis. When Jacob the patriarch heard that Joseph - his favourite son - had apparently been killed (having been presented with the bloodied coat of many colours) "Jacob rent his clothes and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned his son for many days."

Ashes appear first in the bible as the ashes of the burnt offerings in the very early chapters of the OT. But what about their use in mourning? In the book of Esther (not often read), Haman (the king's vizier), because of a perceived slight from a Jew named Mordecai, gets an order from the king for the murder of all the Jews. Mordecai then 'rent his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes', fearing disaster. A more familiar story is in Job 2. You will remember that Job was a perfect, upright, god-fearing man. At a meeting (which the OT makes sound like a sort of heavenly council meeting), God says to Satan (rather proudly one feels) "have you considered how my servant Job continues as a perfect man although you, Satan, try to destroy him without cause" to which Satan replies "That's OK, but if you touch his bone and flesh, he will curse you to your face", so God allows Satan to smite Job (there's a lot of 'smiting' in the OT) with "sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" and Job "sat down among the ashes". But Job has done nothing needing repentance.

The element of repentance seems to appear first in Daniel 9:3 where the prophet prepares himself by fasting and donning sackcloth and ash, "confesses all the sins of the people" and prays to God for mercy. The sackcloth and ashes enable him to appear sufficiently humble before God, giving him an attitude of proper sorrow and repentance. You'll have noticed too

that, in this passage, sackcloth and ashes are linked with fasting - something that remains in various forms in Lent.

Sackcloth and ashes also feature in Greek mourning culture at the time but, interestingly, as in the earlier old testament texts, there was little link with repentance and confession.

Returning to the old testament Isaiah 66:2 God says he will hear those of a contrite spirit and Joel 2:13 exhorts "Rend your hearts and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness". (As an aside, I wonder if, in the present-day stress on God's loving goodness towards us and care for us, we have rather neglected the anger of God toward all our 'sins and wickedness').

What we see in the old testament is, therefore, a gradual transition from the practice of rending clothes, putting on sackcloth and ashes to denote mourning some disaster that has or is about to befall, to penitence and remorse for our own actions when we have fallen short of God's will for us.

The New Testament has little reference to sackcloth and ashes, but a similar passage in both Matthew and Luke has Jesus say, when he had appointed seventy followers to go in pairs throughout the land healing and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, that towns where their message was not received should "repent, sitting in sackcloth and ashes".

Repentance is certainly a central message of the New Testament, starting with John the Baptist. At the start of Mark's gospel we read that, to prepare the way for Christ, "John did baptize in the wilderness and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins ... and the people of Judaea and Jerusalem were baptized in the Jordan, confessing their sins". So now we have both repentance and confession. And what was John the Baptist wearing when he preached this message? None other than a coat of camel's hair - i.e. sackcloth. And when John was imprisoned, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching "the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel."

Mediaeval monastic tradition used the wearing coarse hair shirts to 'mortify the flesh' especially during Lent and in Holy Week, but this practise has largely died out as we concentrate more on internal aspects of repentance. Similarly, wording and emphasis continue to change to the present day. In 1662, the Book of Common Prayer, the General Confession has us "acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness .. provoking most justly God's wrath and indignation"; "We do earnestly repent our sins", but the prayer then goes back to the self-flagellating "the remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable". Various revisions in the 20th century are much more familiar to us. They stress the mercy more than the anger of God, though some still refer to us as "miserable offenders".

The prayer of penitence which we now use week by week, addresses God as "giver of light and grace", says that we are "sorry, ashamed and repent" and asks for forgiveness, but then ends with the more affirmative asking God to "lead us to walk as children of light". Most confession of specific sins is usually done in private or to God alone in our prayers. We certainly pray the words of repentance every week in our service (and how easy it is to repeat those words parrot-fashion without really thinking about what they really mean!). No-one is suggesting that we should spend all our time "mourning our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness". Such a preoccupation is, I suggest, sinful because it makes us self-obsessed rather than thinking about what our Christ-given mission is to those with whom we come into contact day by day. Lent is undoubtedly a very useful time for self-examination. It is a human self-protective trait that most of us are very good at thinking the best of ourselves, 'giving ourselves the benefit of the doubt' ("dissembling or cloaking our sins before the face of almighty God"). Christ's message was always positive, not negative. It was not that he downplayed the effects of sin, but that he offered to his listeners then, and offers to us now, a way to move forward. I'll end with the example of the woman taken in adultery in John. The law condemned her to be stoned to death, but after her accusers had slunk away having been reminded of their own sin, Jesus says to her "I don't condemn you (to death) either; go, and sin no more." That surely is the real take-home message of our penitential observance of Lent.

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer
Prof John Morris, Sunday 8th March

2. *Prayer for God to show his power* (OT) Psalms 91 & 134; Chapter 2: Come unto me;
Collects: 4,5,6

In our prayers, week by week, we often start “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open ..” and, I guess, we often don’t think about the word “Almighty”. It is a word of power - literally “All or Most Mighty”. The concept of God is very much bound up with the concept of power. The Concordance section of any bible that has one gives lists of where any particular word is used in the bible. If you look up the word “power” there are many references to its use in the bible - the power of prayer, the power of God. Our concept of God has nearly always been associated with power.

We might think of ‘power’ as a human attribute, but power has been important since the dawn of evolution as different creatures struggled with nature and for resources to survive. In essence, power is the ability to overcome some sort of undesirable outcome and achieve desired outcomes. In itself it is neither good nor bad, though it can certainly be used for good or for bad purposes.

Humans often feel very powerless in the face of the forces both of nature and of other humans. There are so many things we can’t control in the external forces of nature, in our internal nature, and in interpersonal relationships. So, the idea of a god or gods that is all powerful or has specific powers goes back to the dawn of time. The ancient Egyptians and Greeks had many gods, all with their own specific power. The particular insight of the ancient Jews was that there are not lots of gods, each with their particular sphere of influence, but one God who is all powerful - literally ‘almighty’. In ancient Egypt the pharaoh Akhenaten (the father of Tutankhamun) instituted the worship of a single god - the Aten - but on his death Egypt went back to worshipping many deities.

So, the concept of God or gods as having great power is ancient. It is bound up with our concept of God as the creator of the universe; or of various Gods with specific powers.

In the early books of the OT you won’t find much reference to people like Jacob or Moses praying to God to show power, but rather God talking to them and showing his power. So, when the children of Israel were fleeing Egypt after the plagues and were held up at the Red Sea, pursued by the Egyptians and berating Moses for leading them into what they saw as a death trap, it is God who tells Moses what to do - “stretch forth your rod over the sea and it will part for you”; and, after the Israelites had crossed, - “stretch forth your rod again”. Time after time the people believe in God because of what they perceive as evidence of his power over nature. The manna when they are starving in the desert was the next sign; victories over neighbouring tribes another.

The concept of God is therefore intimately bound up with the ability to wield a power that is outside human understanding. A little later in the old testament, God’s power is asked for in prayer. In the first book of Kings, when Ahab became king of Israel and started to worship Baal and Asherah (gods of the surrounding tribes) Elijah first flees for his life but is sustained by a widow-woman whose son becomes sick and dies. Elijah then prays to God in a very challenging way “Is this your care for the widow” but then prays for God to show power “let the breath of life return to this child” - the first account of prayer leading to a resurrection. A little later, Elijah is told by God to confront Ahab and the prophets of Baal. He challenges them to pray to their gods for fire from heaven to burn up a sacrificed bull. They fail and, having made the task even more difficult by drenching everything with water, Elijah prays “Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God and that I am thy servant” The fire fell, and the people acknowledged Elijah’s God as Lord. This was very much a prayer of “Lord God, let me win” - presumably Elijah feared for his life if he had lost. The psalms are full of references to gods power - “The Lord’s right hand and holy arm have won the victory”. “I will make your enemies the footstool under your feet”.

We have taken, and I suggest abused, this old testament concept of God fighting our battles against those with whom we are in conflict. In wartime, God is said by both sides to be fighting for their side of the conflict. “Gott mit uns” in the 14-18 war; “Allah Akhbar” in current conflicts.

Early in the new testament, we have two references to God’s power to do something outside human understanding. First for Elizabeth, who had been praying for a child, conceiving although she was well past conceiving age. Second, when Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel and queries

how she can conceive and give birth to Jesus although she has never 'known a man' she is told that "the power of the most High will overshadow you"; much of Mary's song in the magnificat celebrates God's power.

In the temptations, Satan offers Jesus the power to do things contrary to the natural order - to turn stones into bread and to cast himself down unharmed from the pinnacle of the temple - but Jesus resists the temptation to save himself from starvation and a traumatic death. After the temptations we read that "Jesus, armed with the power of the spirit". I think this is the first time that the power is identified as the spirit, and this phrase recurs time and time again. Jesus is quite willing to use this power, God's power, the power of the Spirit, to do things apparently contrary to the laws of nature. We have only to think of the numerous instances of healing illnesses; the feeding of the five thousand; when in the boat at risk of sinking in the sea of Galilee Jesus rebukes the wind and there is calm; the raising of Lazarus.

In all these you will note that Jesus does not use his power for himself, but for others. It is not that he is not aware of his power. In Matthew we read that, when arrested in the garden of Gethsemane and one of Jesus' followers, to defend him, draws his sword and injures the High Priest's servant, Jesus says "Put up your sword - Do you not suppose that I can't appeal to my Father who would at once send more than 12 legions of angels to my aid?"

On the cross, Jesus is taunted about his power "He saved others; let him come down from the cross and we will believe" It is only that in last desperate cry 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me', that Jesus is shown to be not only divine, but also completely human. Jesus always said that it was not his power, but the power of God working through him. And, of course, that power was revealed most gloriously in Jesus' resurrection three days later.

It is that same power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, that we and all Jesus' followers are promised through faith and through prayer.

Early in the Acts of the Apostles the disciples, their minds still on worldly power, ask Jesus "Is this when you will make Israel sovereign again?", but Jesus replies that they will receive "Power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, to enable you to bear witness for me". Power, not for their own advancement, but power to enable them to spread the gospel. In Acts and the Epistles we often read of the apostles praying but always for power to spread the gospel. In 1 Corinthians "the Kingdom of God is not just talk; it is living by God's power" and in Ephesians 3 "Glory to God who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish more than we might ask or think".

So, what should the 'take home message' be from thinking about prayers for God to show his power? First, that we must avoid the "God of the gaps" fallacy. That we use gaps in our understanding of the world as evidence God's existence or power. Every word in the bible was written by a human; by humans inspired by the Holy Spirit questing in their minds for explanations of life and all that they see around them. If you accept my definition of power as "the ability to overcome some sort of opposition or undesirable outcome", perhaps the greatest thing we humans have to overcome is the temptation to think only of our own needs and desires. Teilhard de Chardin's great insight as a priest studying evolution was the development in humans of empathy - being able to see a situation from another person's point of view. One of the most important things my life working in medical science on brain function has taught me is that everything we see, hear and experience alters our brain somehow; that is of course the way we learn. You know that lovely modern hymn "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." That is the way the power of the holy spirit can work in us.

Inevitably we shall encounter times of great stress when we will be very tempted to pray "God - use your power to get me out of this mess". But if we look at Jesus's use of prayer we should realise that this is really a shorthand way of saying "God, give me the strength or power to get myself out of this mess". Also, if we follow Jesus' use of prayer as our model, our prayers for power should primarily be prayer for others, rather than for ourselves - and if for ourselves, prayer for the spirit's power to direct our actions and interactions with others and our environment that will be for their good.

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer
Prof John Morris, Sunday 15th March

3. *Prayer for Salvation* Psalms 4 & 134; Chapter 3: Now the God of Peace; Collects: 1,3,5

In our Lent Compline this week it seems particularly appropriate, given all we hear about the coronavirus problem, that we think about prayers to God to save; prayers for salvation. This is, of course, closely related to what we considered last week - prayers for God to show his power. Power can be used to save and, last week, I suggested that Elijah's prayer to God, when confronting the 450 priests of Baal, to show his power by sending down fire from heaven on the sacrificed bullock, was not just for power, but also a prayer for his own salvation because he could foresee that, if it failed, he would be joining the ranks of the other prophets slaughtered by Jezebel.

The psalms, which often take the form of prayers, have many cries for salvation. Psalm 60 starts "O God, you have cast us off and broken us; you have been angry and rebuked us cruelly", but then goes on "Deliver those who are dear to you, save them with your right hand and answer", and psalm 86 has "Turn to me Lord, and answer; save your servant who puts his trust in you". Psalm 22, that we say together after the Maundy Service because in some verses it presages the crucifixion, is one long cry for salvation "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? And why are thou so far from my help? O my God I cry in the daytime but thou hearest not" and carries on in this vein for many more verses till in vs 19-21 "Haste thee to help me; deliver my soul from the sword; save me from the lion's mouth". Interestingly, the very next Psalm (23) could not be more different, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want .." Salvation, God intervening to save His people, is a concept that recurs time and again in the Psalms, but it is very much being saved in and for this earthly life: "Be thou our salvation in times of trouble". Proverbs 20 link an instruction and a promise "Do not think to repay evil for evil, but wait for the Lord, he will save you". Jeremiah, not a prophet known for his up-beat view on life, nevertheless has complete confidence in God's power both to heal and to save "Heal me O Lord and I shall be healed; save me and I shall be saved" - again the link between power and salvation, salvation in and for our present life.

Let's think for a moment what humans need to be saved from. Certainly, from all the problems originating from our environment including disease, and from other people who would harm us. This is essentially what all the prayers for saving/salvation in the old testament are for. They ask for a continuation of this life in health, comfort and prosperity. What really does not get much mention in the old testament is prayer to save us from our sins, or from the separation from God that could come at the time of our death. We have known Christ through faith in this worldly life - the last thing we want - the thing we most want to be saved from - is separation from the love of God in Christ after our death. And what, if anything, can separate us from the ongoing love of Christ? It is surely the sins that we commit and indulge in during our earthly life.

My reading suggests that is not really till we get to the New Testament that we encounter the concept that salvation is not primarily for this worldly life (though there are examples) but much more it is salvation from our sins and salvation to eternal life.

To be sure, we obviously wish to cling on to life as we know it in this world; that desire is ever present and it would be surprising if it were not, because it is the only life we truly comprehend. So, in that storm-rocked boat on the sea of Galilee, the disciples ask Jesus to save themselves from drowning; and on the cross one thief crucified alongside Jesus says "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us". In both, it is saving for this life and a rather simple bodily saving at that.

However, from very early in the New Testament, the emphasis changes. When the angel speaks to Joseph in a dream telling him not to be afraid to marry Mary and tells her to call her son Jesus, the angel says "for he will save his people from their sins" - saving from our sins is what is promised. And it is Simeon - when presented with the infant Jesus in the temple as was customary - who exclaims "My eyes have now seen God's salvation." In Luke, Jesus declares his mission of salvation and it is interesting to note the context. It comes after the encounter with Zacchaeus the tax-collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus, then entertained him to dinner (much to the disapproval of the righteous bystanders "Look, he's eating with a

sinner!"). During dinner, when Zacchaeus had repented his tax fiddles and promised to right any wrongs had had done, he is told by Jesus "Today salvation has come to this house. The Son of Man has come to seek and save that which is lost". And there is that similar phrase "I came to call, not the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (and by implication to salvation).

Again and again it is not Jesus' power, but the power of God to save that Jesus emphasizes. You'll remember him saying, "I tell you this, a man who puts his trust in riches will find it hard to enter the Kingdom of Heaven" at which the disciples are amazed and say "But who then can be saved" and all three synoptic Gospels record Jesus' answer "For men it is impossible, but all things are possible for God". Jesus firmly places the power of salvation in God's hands.

A few moments ago we thought about how one of the two thieves crucified beside Christ asked him to save them both from dying. Luke's gospel immediately contrasts this with the repentant thief who acknowledges the wrong that he has done and is told by Jesus not "I'll get us both down from the cross", but rather "Today you will be with me in paradise." Salvation for the life to come.

"What must I do to be saved?" was a question often asked of Jesus. You'll remember the rich young man who comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to win eternal life - so he wasn't just thinking about being saved for this earthly life. This was a young man who, from his answers, had been following all the commandments, but he wasn't prepared to give up the riches he had acquired and follow Jesus; that was the sin he wasn't prepared to forego.

The word "salvation" occurs repeatedly in the letters of Paul and of the other epistle writers. Paul constantly stresses that salvation comes from faith in and public confession of the resurrection of Jesus. And this he stresses is urgent "It is time to wake out of sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed."

Classical Judaism does not see a need for personal salvation; instead it places primacy on individual morality - following the law of God, and God as the source of salvation, provided an individual obeys the law. The Jewish concept of a messiah was not of a divine figure but of a dominating human figure in an age of universal peace.

By contrast, the Christian concept of salvation, which has continually been elaborated since the writings of Paul, is intimately linked with that of redemption and atonement for sin, and is particularly linked with Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice for sin on the cross. Salvation, then is something that should be ongoing in our lives, to be completed only when we stand before Christ for judgement. Variant views on salvation continue to divide the various Christian denominations, but the Christian essence is that salvation is not preservation for this life, but deliverance from eternal separation from God thanks to Christ's atoning death and resurrection.

As we noted last week, inevitably we shall encounter times of great stress when we will pray "O God, save me from this that or the other", meaning "Let me continue with the life I know". Last week, also, I ended by suggesting that our prayers for God's power should primarily be for it to benefit others. By contrast, our prayers for salvation will have a very personal emphasis. "God, save me from the sins that I commit in this life because of selfishness, thoughtlessness, or simple laziness, so that, by your mercy and grace alone, I may finally abide in your eternal presence".

It is therefore entirely appropriate that our compline will start with confession and, toward its end we shall twice pray "Save us O Lord while waking, and guard us while sleeping ..". As we say those words tonight, let us give grateful thanks for the knowledge and love of Christ that is our hope of salvation.

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer
Prof John Morris, Sunday 22nd March

4. *Guidance on how to pray.*

Psalms 31 & 91; Chapter 1; Collects 2,4,6

In our Lent Compline this Mothering Sunday, we continue thinking about prayer. In the past three weeks we thought about prayers of penitence; prayer for God to show his power; and prayer for personal salvation. Today I'd like us to think about what guidance we have on *how* to pray (and, by implication, how *not* to pray). I'm going to leave The Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught his disciples, until next week, because that demands a session - indeed a lifetime - on its own. I'm also going to leave, for now, the instruction in the Sermon on the Mount to "Pray for those who persecute you", which is a very difficult 'ask'. I therefore plan to devote a whole compline talk to that. There are two occasions of prayer that we need to consider. There is our private prayer - our time talking to God one-on-one. Then there is prayer in public - prayer in our church services, when we either say together or listen to prayers written by others, and that's linked with public witness as prayer.

Let's start with public prayers. It's really important that we get this right, not just for ourselves but especially for those who have come to church to find out if what we believe and do seems right for them. Prayer is a very public face of the church and, if we are to be an evangelising church, it is critical that we get this right. As this year's Lent Course booklet ('Pilgrim') puts it "The church in every generation shares in the task of helping others to hear Christ's call to them and to follow him". One thing is certain, there is no one "right way" to do public prayers although there are things we should avoid. We have printed prayers in our service sheets and spoken prayers in our intercessions. We give thanks for all the thought that goes into their preparation week by week, keeping the services fresh and focussing us on particular needs and concerns for others. Those of us who lead intercessions always need to be conscious of Jesus's condemnation of "those who love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogue .. for everyone to see" - it is the words of the prayers that must be the focus. We should, however, pray for guidance and courage when we speak with others about our faith; Paul urges us "Give yourself wholly to prayer in the power of the spirit .. who comes to the aid of our weakness". A little later, we shall all be saying together the well-known and much-loved prayers of our Compline service which have inspired generations.

If we turn now to personal prayer; in the OT we find mostly the prayers of spiritual leaders or kings. In the book of Samuel, the Israelites who had reverted to the worship of Baal and were in fear of Ammonite raids ask Samuel to pray to God to save them. Samuel's answer is instructive: "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord and cease to pray for you." Samuel is not praying for his own safety, but makes the important point that it would be *a sin to cease to pray for others*. Prayers in the Psalms are mostly either for salvation (which we considered last week) or prayers of praise (which we'll consider on Palm Sunday). The Samuel passage also suggests that prayers of particularly holy people are most likely to be effective - in other words, that God listens more to holy people, to 'good' people. That needs a bit of unpacking! In the gospels, Jesus makes the opposite quite clear. It is not that God listens less to sinners, but it is we who, by the sins to which we are prone (particularly those of selfishness), distance ourselves from communication with God.

What does the NT advise us about personal prayer? It is literally teeming with instructions. First, let's look at what must we *avoid* in our prayers.

- While prayers for our salvation are perfectly natural, prayer is not just for emergency use! It is not an Aladdin's lamp for getting what we want although, as is obvious in the Lord's prayer, we can and should ask for what we *need*. Discerning between what we *want* and what we *need* takes careful, prayerful contemplation. I guess we have all been rather shocked at the way supermarket shelves have been emptied by panic buying in the present crisis.

- We must avoid prayers becoming self-centred, except to the extent that we pray that God's will be done in and through our lives. For that we should rightly pray for wisdom, council and direction.
- We are told "Do not go babbling on like those who imagine the more they say the more likely they are to be heard. Your Father knows your needs before you ask him." Notice the importance of the second part of this - it is only prayers for our own needs that we do not need to keep reiterating.

So how should we pray, and for what should we pray? For Jesus, prayer time with his heavenly father was clearly a critical resource - and it should and can be for us all. Christ often drew apart to pray, to draw on the resources of God through prayer.

- "When you pray, go into a room by yourself and shut the door". That does not mean that we should not pray with others - indeed praying communally can often alert us to concerns for others for which we should continue praying and, indeed on which we should act. What it does mean is that it is crucial that we devote some time each day to separate ourselves from all other distractions, so that we can really concentrate on our prayer. (Something I am very bad at!).
- Pray particularly when you need the strength of the holy spirit. At critical points in his ministry, Jesus led by example on this: at the start of his ministry, before choosing his disciples "he spent the night in prayer to God"; before the feeding of the 5000 "Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven"; just two of many examples.
- "Keep on praying and never lose heart". Jesus illustrated this with the parable of the unjust judge badgered by a poor widow, and the parable of the man who had gone to bed when a visitor knocked on his door and asked for his help.
- We should pray for forgiveness for our many lapses. At the start of Compline almost the first prayer is for forgiveness. "We confess to God almighty .. that we have sinned .. : therefore we pray God to forgive us our sins". Jesus condemns the self-righteous Pharisee, but commends the sinner whose humble prayer is simply "God be merciful to me, a sinner".
- However, before we ask for forgiveness for our own sins, we are told we must forgive anyone against whom we have a grievance. Jesus makes it clear that God will not forgive us unless we forgive others.
- "Pray for everything with thanksgiving". Most of us have been richly blessed in our lives; certainly more so than millions around the world for whom we should pray.
- While we have so much to be thankful for, we also have real needs. Our prayer should therefore acknowledge our needs, the inadequacy of our own resources, and God's ability to give us what we need via the Holy Spirit.
- Paul ends his epistles by asking for God's grace, love, and faith among believers. We, too, should pray for strength and God's grace for our current lives.
- Finally, in prayer we should spend less time talking and more time *listening* to allow that 'still, small voice' of God to speak to us.

Our prayers, then, need to be a means of intimate fellowship with, and dependence on God, for every day living, moment by moment. They are a way in which we can claim God's promises and know his will for us. When Jesus knew that his crucifixion was imminent he prayed to God for his disciples "That they may be one, as we are one". The ultimate purpose of our prayers is that we, too, may be caught up in that mystical body of all believers who, through faith, become one in Christ Jesus.

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer
Prof John Morris, Sunday March 29th

5. *The Lord's Prayer*; Psalms 4 & 31; Chapter 2: Come unto me; Collects: 1,2,3

At 10.00am each morning many of us are saying The Lord's Prayer during the daily reflection and our Lent "Pilgrim" course this year focuses on the Lord's Prayer. The prayer is so familiar, so well known, that it poses the danger that we repeat it automatically without considering the meaning of each part. Tonight's talk can only scratch the surface of what needs to be a lifetime study.

What we know as The Lord's Prayer is not in Mark's gospel, but in Matthew as part of the 'Sermon on the Mount' and in Luke when the disciples, having seen Jesus at prayer, ask him how they should pray. The two versions differ slightly; only Matthew has "Your will be done on earth as in heaven", neither have the doxology ("For yours is the kingdom ..."). Some scholars think the Matthew version was said early in Jesus' ministry in Galilee, the Luke version later, when the disciples ask Jesus "Lord, teach us to pray". Others think both are compilations. Jesus was a devout Jew, so it's no surprise that much of the prayer is closely related to prayers in Judaism. Many Jewish prayers start "Our God in heaven, hallow thy name"; "Lead us not into sin" is part of the 'morning blessings'; one website lists where in the Old Testament you can find every phrase of the Lord's Prayer. So, the prayer is not uniquely Christian and it is possibly one that Jesus used regularly.

Jesus' original words would have been Aramaic; what we have now are modern renderings of early Greek and Syriac versions. The earliest English translation from Greek or Latin was in about 650 from Lindisfarne; the version we are most familiar with is the 1662 BCP. I'll dispense with the BCP "Thy and Thine" and use "Your" because I don't want our thinking to be either terribly formal or antique. It should be OUR way of saying things NOW. If you were talking to Queen, it would be YOUR majesty, not "Thy majesty"!

The prayer starts "Our Father in Heaven", or simply "Father". We often take scant notice of the word "Our", but it does express that we are people who all consider ourselves children of God and who call God "Father". Even "Father" sounds rather formal; "Abba" is actually more like "Daddy". Jesus invites us into the same relationship with God that he himself enjoys. The "Our" also reminds us we are part of one worshipping body; all those who acknowledge God as Father. If we are to call God "Father", it is clear that we should behave as children of God; the words therefore carry a responsibility as well as a claim. The "in heaven" introduces an element of mystery; heaven is beyond our comprehension. The whole phrase implies a sense of closeness, but also of awe.

"Hallowed be your name". We must consider God's name as holy/sacred. It should never be trivialised, but it *can* be spoken unlike in OT Judaism where the word Yahweh could not be uttered. Although we must speak of God with awe and reverence, we should openly speak God's name among our friends and acquaintances. Rowan Williams sums it up as "understand that when you are talking about God it is serious .. even more wonderful .. than we can imagine." This phrase of the prayer gives a lovely sense of intimacy ("Our Father") mixed with awe (Holy God in heaven).

"Your kingdom come" is a direct request. The phrase has its echo in Jewish prayer "May God establish his Kingdom during your life". Jesus often spoke of God's kingdom and his audience would have been familiar with the concept. The Hebrew word "kingdom" refers to a reign and, when used of God, refers to his authority as the heavenly Kingdom. The Jews looked to the establishment by the Messiah of God's rule in this world in the future; the eschatology of the "new age". This is clear from the disciples' question in Acts after the resurrection "Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel" only to be told "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has chosen". Jesus goes on "But you will receive power". This makes it clear that the kingdom is not just something for God to achieve; it for us

to work towards. Following Jesus' commands to feed the hungry and clothe the needy are just part of the kingdom to which Jesus refers. So, let's leave the times and the seasons to the Father, but acknowledge again that the request "Your kingdom come" lays on us a responsibility to keep on following Jesus' commands in this life.

"Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". William Barclay points out that this is virtually the same as "Your kingdom come" because "The kingdom is a state of things on earth in which God's will is done as perfectly as in heaven". The request "Your will be done" is nothing less than God's invitation to us to join him in making things on earth the way they are in heaven. The "kingdom" is both spiritual and intensely practical; it is how we must live in the context of all of God's creation. Put simply, it is our responsibility to establish as far as possible God's kingdom of universal justice in what is at present a very unequal society and world. What a staggering task!! Every time we say this phrase we should consider how we can play our part.

"Give us today our daily bread". I learned recently that the word which our bible translates as "daily" is unique to the Lord's prayer in all ancient Greek writing. Also, I'd never before spotted the apparent repetition "this day" and "daily". I read that the Syriac text is better translated as "give us this day the bread we need". Here we have an echo of a point we considered last week - the difference between what we want and what we need. Note, too, the request is only for one day; this reminds us that each new day is a fresh gift from God. Bread often features in the NT: Jesus broke the few loaves the boy had given before feeding the 5000; and at that Passover meal with his disciples, he broke the bread saying "This is my body for you". Our 'daily bread' is not simply essential nutrition for this physical life, but also spiritual nutrition for eternal life.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us". Anglicans usually say "trespass", but trespasses, debts, sins - all three are commonly used. The original Aramaic can apparently mean either sin or debt. John Wycliffe used "debts" in his 1395 translation; it was Tyndall who introduced "trespass". Because we now use "trespass" and "debt" in rather specific senses (one of property, one of money), for me "sins" is by far the best. Asking for forgiveness from God was a staple of Jewish prayers, which also considered it right for individuals to forgive others, so it was probably commonplace in Jesus' time. We now take a legalistic view of debt and trespass; sin is much more general. Jesus used the parable of the unforgiving servant to show that having *our* sins forgiven cannot be a one-way process. Like all God's gifts it brings responsibility - in this instance to forgive others who have wronged us.

Finally, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The first part seems an odd request - who would think that a benign, father God, would purposely "lead us into temptation"? Pope Francis says it is a poor translation and that "do not let us fall into temptation" is much better. As the letter of James puts it "God .. himself tempts no one." The Greek word often translated as temptation can also mean 'testing' or 'trial' and there is evidence that "do not bring us to the time of trial" - literally "spare us from the last judgement" - may have been Jesus' original meaning. On the other hand, coming shortly after the plea for "our daily bread" it can also be a request for strength not to be caught up in material pleasures. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said to his disciples "Pray that you may be spared the hour of temptation". Whichever is original, we are all well aware of many temptations in our lives and we should perhaps consider what are the particular temptations of this present "time of trial". Finally, "deliver us from evil". Scholars debate whether this means "evil" in general, or "the evil one (devil)" because, in John, before his trial Jesus prays for his disciples, that God will "keep them from the evil one". I suggest that any distinction is of little importance.

As we say The Lord's Prayer in our compline tonight, let's think again about the meaning of each phrase, and about our responsibilities as well as our requests to Our Father in Heaven.

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer
Prof John Morris, Palm Sunday April 5th

6. *Prayer as Praise*; Psalms 134, 150; Chapter 3: Now the God of peace; Collects: 4,5,6

Tonight, we think about prayer as praise. On Palm Sunday we celebrate the Jesus's into Jerusalem on a donkey, surrounded by his hyped-up disciples, and greeted by a cheering crowd of Jerusalem residents waving palms. I guess many of us have been making palm crosses as per Meghann's instructions and it is interesting to see the different versions as they appear on the parish website! When Jesus rode in to Jerusalem, its people must have heard about him, particularly his miracles of healing and the cleansing of the temple, and it's not difficult to guess what they were hoping to happen next - this could be the Messiah!. The people were in subjugation to the Romans who were not noted for a gentle style of government and, at that time, there was a great expectation of a liberating leader to free them from that rule. Some of the religious leaders, who had made accommodations with the Romans which enabled them to maintain their own positions, were not so keen and the gospels tell us that, from Palm Sunday on, they discussed among themselves how they might counter the threat and do away with Jesus. But the crowds had fervent expectations and were heaping praise on the man they hoped would be their salvation, both in an earthly sense and, because they were a very religious people, also in an eternal sense.

Praise as a form of prayer has a long history in the old testament. In Exodus we read that, after the crossing of the Red sea and the destruction of the pursuing Egyptians, "the people feared the Lord, and put their faith in him, and in Moses his servant. Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song of praise to the Lord". It has phrases like "He is my God and I will glorify him". Such words have many echoes in the psalms, which fall into three distinct categories - those that plead for God's help, those that are entirely praise, and those that combine the two. We looked earlier at psalms asking for salvation, such as Ps 3 "Lord, how my enemies have multiplied .. Rise up Lord, Save me." A quick thumb through the psalms reveals that there are a similar number of psalms of praise, such as Ps 19 "The heavens declare the glory of God .."; Ps 33 "Shout for joy before the Lord, ye righteous; praise comes well from the upright ..". Indeed, the final group of psalms all start "O praise the Lord" including that great favourite Ps 150 "O praise God in his holiness, praise him in the firmament of his power" - we'll say that in a moment. Some psalms start with a cry for help but end with praise for the help has been forthcoming: Ps 35 starts "Strive O Lord with those who strive against me" but ends "so shall I talk of thy justice and praise all the day long"; and Ps 61 starts "Hear my cry" but ends "So will I ever sing psalms of praise".

If we turn to the NT, we find the same thing. Jesus speaks of giving praise as thanks after the healing of the ten lepers "has not one of the others who were healed returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" again praise as sincere thanks for a blessing received. In other places the emphasis is slightly different. In Luke, the angels who came to the shepherds announcing Christ's birth were singing praises to God "Glory to God in the highest ..". The Lord's prayer starts "hallowed be your name" - a form of praise meaning 'to venerate as holy', and we usually end that prayer with "for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory" - yet more praise. We've already thought about the hosannas of crowd on Palm Sunday. In Luke, we read that, after the resurrection and ascension the disciples returned to Jerusalem and spent all their time in the temple, praising God. In the same way, after the coming of the holy spirit at Pentecost "all whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common .. shared their meals with unaffected joy, as they praised God". Sadly, we shan't be able to share a communal meal this Maundy Thursday, but perhaps we, as people drawn together by our faith, should

make a point of remembering to praise God as we eat our evening meal next Thursday, if not every time we say grace at mealtimes.

One thing did strike me when thinking about praise. In moving to our current format of worship, we have lost some of the praise that was part of mattins: the Venite “O come let us sing unto the Lord” and the Te Deum “We praise thee O God ..”. Perhaps we need to do more praising?

The word praise comes from a mediaeval root meaning to prize, to count something as very valuable. This is certainly so of our praise of God. But does God *need* our praises? It seems inconceivable that, unlike some human rulers, God has an ego that needs to be stroked by people praising him. Rather, it is we who have a need to praise God. Mike Bennett puts it like this “God doesn’t ask us to praise him for his own benefit; he asks us to praise him for *our* benefit.”

What is that benefit? It is not just thanksgiving though that is clearly a part. I suggest that when we turn our minds to praising God, it gives us better perspective - it takes our mind away from our worldly troubles (a benefit particularly appropriate at the moment as we are bombarded with coronavirus news); the phrase “lift your eyes to the hills, from whence comes our help” comes to mind. Praising God also helps us to focus on the ultimate reality - what’s truly permanent in our transitory lives. The more I read what physics tells us about the nature of physical reality, that I’m made of quarks and dark matter or whatever, the more I feel that these nuts and bolts are not the essential “me”; that the essential of any living being of God’s creation is just a higher order function of our physical bodies given the gift of life. One other benefit is that, when we say or sing the praise of God, we have to think about what are the characteristics of the God that we praise. That thought should lead us to try to imitate those characteristics, to be more a “child of God”. Praise can only originate in a heart full of love toward God; hence the first commandment “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength”. Praise should therefore be an integral part of our prayers, and it may do us good to consider how much of the prayers we have said recently have been praise - preparing this talk made me realise I’ve fallen short on that. When we pray we should therefore pause before we ask God for what we think are our needs and remember all that that our bounteous God has given us and, as we consider all that we have received, we should we praise God for his holiness, mercy, justice, grace, goodness, and kindness.

I’ll end with Ps 103: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, praise his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

I thought also tonight, to stay with the theme, we would say Psalm 134, which is in the Compline booklet, but also Psalm 150, that well-known psalm of praise, in the version we sing (see below)

Psalm 150

O praise God in his holiness; praise him in the firmament of his power.
Praise him in his noble acts; praise him according to his excellent greatness.
Praise him in the sound of the trumpet; praise him upon the lute and harp.
Praise him in the cymbals and dances; praise him upon the strings and pipe.
Praise him upon the well-tuned cymbals; praise him upon the loud cymbals.
Let everything that hath breath, Praise the Lord.

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer

Prof John Morris, Monday of Holy Week, April 6th

7: *Pray for those who persecute you*; Psalms 91, 136; Chapter 1; Collects 1, 2, 3

Tonight, I'd like us to consider those difficult words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount which Matthew 5: 43-48 gives as "You have heard that it was said 'Love your neighbour' and 'hate your enemy'... But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward will you get? Don't even tax-collectors do that? Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." There's a similar passage in Luke 6:27 when Jesus says "I say love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

At first sight this seems a very hard ask. We instinctively feel we want to pray for those who are being persecuted; but praying for, loving, doing good to those who do the persecuting or hating, especially if it's we who are undergoing that persecution/hatred - that's difficult. Indeed, it's against our animal nature. In the OT there are numerous examples of people praying that God will smite their enemies in no uncertain terms. The idea of divinely sanctioned retribution has persisted from time immemorial and has often been the basis of exhortations during war. Indeed, the German philosopher Nietzsche, famous for his saying "that which does not kill us makes us stronger" argued that "to love one's enemies is just weakness and dishonesty".

Jesus was not the first to ask us to love/do good for our enemy. In Exodus we find "If you meet your enemy's ox or ass which has gone astray, you should return it to him". There are similar passages in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. Similarly, in Proverbs 19 "A man's virtue is to overlook an offence" and Proverbs 25 "If your enemy is hungry give him bread, if thirsty give him a drink". And it's not just the OT. An even earlier Babylonian text says "Requite with kindness your evil doer" and an ancient Egyptian injunction reads "Do not react according to a man's evil nature; lift him up, give him your hand; leave him in the hands of God. Fill him with your own food that he may be ashamed." That is similar to the passage in Paul's letter to the Romans 12:14 "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. Never pay back evil for evil". But then in 12:20 Paul does not talk of "shaming" a persecutor but he has the following very difficult phrase "For in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Now that is not what you'd call a friendly, loving gesture! The words are a literal translation of the original Greek. However, one view is that they reflect an Egyptian ritual of the period in which a guilty person, as a sign of repentance, carried a basin of glowing coals on his head. In other words, making the persecutor feel ashamed of their actions.

Those people who would persecute us, those we might see as enemies, are also children of God, our brothers and sisters, created in the same human form as Jesus. They, like us, may not be doing God's will, but they should never be a personal target of our aggression. We are told "Hate the evil deed, not the doer". Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us "Always treat others as you would wish to be treated".

So, let's look at what Jesus commands us to do for those who persecute us. We are told to pray for them; to do good to them; and to love them. Let's start with praying for them. Our prayer is to God, so this makes God a critical part of this endeavour. As we pray to God we can of course ask for strength for ourselves, but we should pray as if God loves the persecutor as much as he loves us. Therefore, we should pray that our 'enemies' will come to know more of God's love in Christ Jesus, and will wish to do his will; and that they, like us, may be forgiven their sins. Whether they take up that opportunity is between them and God. We have to accept that we cannot control the responses

of others. Praying for them may not bring about the change that we hope for, but what it will do is to stop the negative consequences of retaliation in us. Our newspapers show daily that the world is full of people repaying evil with more evil. But all that this does is to increase the amount of evil in the world. Often, people who persecute or abuse others are expecting or even hoping for some sort of retaliation. Turning the other cheek and praying for their good is the last thing they expect. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in "The cost of discipleship" wrote 'If our enemies take to cursing us, our immediate reaction must be to bless them; their curse can do no harm except to themselves'.

So finally, what about the injunction to 'love' our enemies? When Matthew was writing, the early church was facing great persecution under Nero. The word Matthew uses for love is *agapan*; this word, in distinction to our current use of 'loving', doesn't have any connotation of 'liking'. To 'love' in the *agapan* sense means 'to seek the highest good for' the person concerned. So, we are *not* asked to *like* those who persecute us or do us harm; but we *are* asked to hope that they will enjoy that 'highest good' which is the 'fruits of the spirit' (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians)); in short become more like Christ. As the Lord's Prayer makes clear, forgiving our enemies is part of that perfection to which we are all called and, as Paul writes to the Ephesians (4:31) "Let all bitterness, malice be put away; forgive one another even as God in Christ forgave you". We can't truly be "children of our heavenly father", unless we do. Martin Luther King summed it up this way "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer

Prof John Morris, Tuesday of Holy Week, April 7th

8: *Prayer in Gethsemane*; Psalms 4, 31; Chapter 2; Collects 3,4,5

Tonight, I'd like us to think about Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, the site of Jesus' agony, betrayal, and arrest. I find it interesting that, whereas in many other places the four gospels differ quite significantly in the detail and focus of the narrative, in this section they are almost identical. I'm going to leave out the cutting off of the ear of the high priest's servant because it tells us little except that violence against an innocent bystander should never be a reaction in times of stress.

The word Gethsemane is derived from the Aramaic word for an "olive oil press", so Gethsemane was clearly an olive grove. It was situated at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem which is separated from the Temple Mount by part of the Kedron valley. This explains why Luke refers to the place simply as the Mount of Olives and why John refers to it as 'a garden across the Kedron valley'. Four different locations have been claimed by the various religious groups in Jerusalem, but the exact location of the NT Gethsemane is unknown. Whatever its exact location, possible sites have been places of pilgrimage since at least AD 300 and three of the olive trees in one garden have recently been dated as more than 900 years old. Furthermore, those ancient trees are genetically all derived from the same parent plant, which could indicate an attempt to perpetuate an even older olive tree from the time of Jesus.

Why did Jesus go to the olive grove? It was apparently a place that he and his disciples, including Judas, often visited, away from the hub-bub of the city. So, it was a very familiar place. On the way to the garden, Jesus told the disciples that they would all desert him. This was the point at which Peter asserted that, even if all the others deserted Jesus, he would not; only to be told that, before cock-crow that night, he would have disowned Jesus three times. Peter, so sure of himself, persisted "Even if I must die with you I will not disown you" at which, all the others, shamed by Peter's bravery and insistence, said the same. This certainly has a message for us all, not to over-rate the strength of our own faith. I can only really speak for myself when I say that there have been few times when my faith has been really seriously challenged, and it has never been challenged to the point where I risked losing my life by maintaining my beliefs. I guess, however, that for most of us the same may be true.

When Jesus and the disciples reached Gethsemane the first thing Jesus did was to make most of the disciples sit down while he took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee with him. The choice of Peter is obvious. The two sons of Zebedee are the James and John who ask Jesus if they can sit at his right and left in his kingdom, who were present when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter, and who were with Peter at Jesus' transfiguration. These three, then, were the inner, inner circle of the disciples and perhaps the strongest and most proper to witness Jesus' agony. It may also be important in the gospel writers mind that three was the number of witnesses required for certainty in a Jewish civil trial. Having moved apart from the other disciples Jesus told Peter, James and John that his heart was ready to break with grief, and to stay awake while he was praying. Two things in particular stand out for me in this passage. First that Jesus' heart was 'ready to break with grief' – this made me ask why "grief" rather than "terror"? Terror would seem the more natural emotion in this situation. What was Jesus grieving for? – presumably all the sins of the world which weighed so heavily on his divine shoulders. Second is Jesus' command to "stay awake". Humans can't stay awake 24/7 so I think of this as "stay alert" – stay alert both so that we can spot and resist temptation, and also so that we can hear what God is asking of us. And, when alert, to pray that we might recognise both the temptation and God's quiet call.

Returning to Peter, James and John after his fervent prayer, Jesus found them asleep and chided them “Could you not stay awake with me for one hour”, adding “Pray that you may be spared the test”. This, some gospels suggest, happened three times. In his prayer, Jesus asks “My father, if it is possible, let this cup (this test) pass by me” but, after this request, he continues “Nevertheless, not what I will but as thou wilt”. In these two phrases Jesus shows both his humanity in his terror of what was to come, but then his divinity by his complete acceptance of the will of God his father. Only Luke says that, in his agony, an angel appeared bringing additional strength to Jesus’ human body, and that the added strength he gained from the angel’s visit made Jesus pray even more urgently. We could have a long discussion about angels at some point, but this is not the moment. It was immediately after his final wake-up call to the disciples that Jesus says “Enough, the hour is come, The Son of Man is betrayed. Let us go forward” So, for Jesus, even the time for prayer had ended and it was time for action. Sincere prayer should always lead us to rightful action.

So Judas appeared, with a crowd armed with swords and cudgels, sent by the religious hierarchy. At the last supper Jesus had already told the disciples that one of them would betray him. Both Matthew and John tell us that Jesus identified Judas as his betrayer by giving him the piece of bread dipped in wine, but the other disciples did not catch on. In Luke’s account, Jesus’ statement provoked a debate as to which of them it might be; and in Matthew they all exclaimed “Surely not me, Lord?” I note that this is a question rather than a denial; they didn’t say “It’s not me, Lord”. It seems that, even after spending so much time with Jesus, the disciples were then still unsure, and it was not until after the resurrection, ascension and the coming of the holy spirit that they were prepared to and often did die for their faith. This must lead us all to question the strength of our own faith – most of us have never been so severely tested – and pray for the strength of the holy spirit when we are tested.

The last point I’d like to consider is that Judas identified Jesus to the guards with a kiss. How would the guards have known which of the group in the garden was Jesus? Even a pointed finger could have been misinterpreted in the melee. According to Matthew it was a prearranged signal. But why a kiss? A kiss on the cheek was, in 1st century Israel, not a symbol of love, but a common greeting (much as in modern France) and also a sign of deep respect and honour; something that one might well expect of a disciple to his revered teacher; a sign of trust among friends. So perhaps it was a signal that was not only unmistakable but also one designed to reduce the disciples’ suspicion because they commonly greeted their master in that way. For us, now, it seems an indication of the worst sort of treachery. Jesus, however, was well aware what was coming; he even says to Judas “Friend, do what you are here to do”.

Gethsemane, I conclude, teaches us that, whatever challenge we face, we must pray earnestly, we must hold fast to our faith and must continue to be guided by the Holy Spirit in all our actions.

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer

Prof John Morris, Wednesday of Holy Week, April 8th

9: *Prayer and the cross*; Psalms 91, 134; Chapter 3; Collects 1,2,3,7

Tonight, we have to move on from the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus' arrest to his trials and crucifixion. Unlike the gospel accounts of Jesus in Gethsemane, where there is really very little difference between the various gospel accounts, even a cursory reading of the gospels reveal many discrepancies in the accounts of Jesus' trial(s) and crucifixion, particularly the trial or trials. This is hardly surprising: none of those who were close to Jesus, or those who later writers might have sought information from, were present at any of the trials. Furthermore, in most accounts, it seems that Jesus said very little during either the trials or crucifixion, so we have few of his own words - words which might have been deeply etched into the minds of his followers - to guide our thinking. We do know, from contemporary writers such as Josephus, that Jesus was condemned to the Roman form of execution - crucifixion - by Pilate, and I suggest that the best approach to the gospel accounts of the words of Jesus in the last hours of his earthly life is to understand that the gospel writers were trying to present what the early church considered especially important aspects of Jesus life and teaching.

As I've already said, in most gospels Jesus says almost nothing during his various trials. In fact, interrogations might be a better word for the encounters with the high priests and Herod, because it was only the Romans who could pronounce a sentence of crucifixion. In the oldest gospel, that of Mark, it is only when Caiaphas asks "Are you the messiah, the son of the blessed one? (Caiaphas cannot of course speak the name of God) that Jesus answers "I am", then continues "and you will see the son of man seated at the right hand of God (literally 'the Power') and coming with the clouds of heaven". In Matthew and Luke, it is only the first part of Jesus' response to Caiaphas' question that differs: in Matthew Jesus says "The words are yours" and Luke "It is you who say that I am". So here, either directly or obliquely, Jesus is clearly stating his claim to be the messiah. And not only stating it, but continuing with a phrase that the Jewish authorities regarded as blasphemy and deserving death by stoning. Previously, you will remember that, when Peter blurts out that Jesus is the messiah, he is told not to say it openly. Luke's gospel has an additional interrogation by Herod, sent by Pilate because Galilee was in Herod's jurisdiction. Herod had clearly heard of Jesus and, apparently, hoped to see Jesus perform a miracle, but here again Jesus did and said nothing. What we learn from the Jewish trials is Jesus' clear statement that he is the messiah, one seated at God's right hand.

Of course, it was only in interrogations by the Jewish authorities that the question of Jesus' messiahship would be at all relevant. Pilate, to whom Jesus was taken in chains by the Jewish authorities, was only interested in worldly power and the possibility of a Jewish insurrection (an ongoing problem in Palestine at the time). It is only when Pilate asks him "Are you the king of the Jews" that Jesus speaks, saying "The words are yours". Otherwise in Mark, Jesus is entirely silent. In John, when Pilate asks the same question Jesus gives a similar brief answer "Is that your own idea or did others suggest it to you", to which Pilate blusters "Am I a Jew?", and John continues with a lengthy speech by Jesus saying that his Kingdom is not of this world. The Romans were clearly only concerned for their own power and authority. They weren't concerned about messiahship - they had their own pantheon - and having one itinerant preacher crucified was, in their minds, no price at all to pay if civil unrest could be prevented.

So Pilate had Jesus flogged and led away to be crucified, a bystander being forced to carry the cross.

On way to Golgotha, we have just one account of Jesus speaking briefly to the wailing onlookers; "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me. Weep for yourselves and your children". We, too, do not need to weep for Jesus, but for our sins and the sins of the world that led him to the cross.

Before being nailed to the cross Jesus was stripped, and all four gospels report the soldiers gambling for his clothes – here, there is no uncertainty because everyone watching could see. Crucifixions clearly drew crowds of onlookers and we are told that at least some of the disciples were watching at a distance. Before being nailed to the cross Jesus was also offered, but apparently refused 'wine mixed with gall' i.e. drugged wine. The 'gall' may have been hemlock, which Socrates used for his suicide, and which is known to dull the sensation from the hands and feet, or myrrh, which Roman soldiers often added to wine to deaden pain and help them endure the discomforts of military life. Why did Jesus refuse the narcotic drink? – perhaps so that he could keep praying to his Father; perhaps because in his divine nature he felt the need to experience the extremes of human pain. John Keble put it like this "Thou wilt feel all that thou might'st pity all" Jesus, deliberately choosing to experience the pain of crucifixion as the price for our redemption – his last selfless act of love.

When he was being nailed to the cross Jesus said "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Most rank and file Roman soldiers given this task would have had no interest in the religious beliefs of the Jews – so in terms of history, there is little to learn. In contrast, we can take comfort from this prayer of Jesus that we, too, may be forgiven our sins, but often we do not have the excuse that we did not know what we were doing – we were just either too weak or too selfish.

On the cross, Jesus speaks with the criminals crucified on either side, who appear to know one another, but who react very differently. One says "If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us" – a simple "Save me". But the other "Have you no fear of God; we're being justly punished for our crimes, but this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come to your kingdom" to which he receives the assurance "today you shall be with me in paradise". How often, when we are in trouble, are we guilty of thinking solely of our own safety, rather than asking for Jesus's help?

Jesus' concern for his disciples is probably never more clearly shown than when he saw his mother and the 'disciple who he loved' and he said "Here is your mother" and "Here is your son". We should have no doubt of Jesus' love for us and, if we aspire at the end to be with him in paradise, we should respond by acting out our discipleship.

And, finally, just before he died, Jesus says two very different things. "My God, my god, why have you forsaken me?"; the truly human cry of the Jesus' humanity. Would we not feel just the same? But also we see the divine aspect of Jesus, with his total confidence in God as his father "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit". All we can aspire to do, through faith, is to develop that same deep sense of God as our father that, when our own end approaches, we can commit ourselves trustingly into his eternal care. And we can only develop that deep sense of God's fatherhood with the help of the holy spirit and by prayer, deepening our faith in Jesus, so that we can echo, with confidence the words of the watching centurion "Truly, this man Jesus was God's son".