

Daily readings

The Unreconciled

Each reading for the Daily Service from Monday to Thursday on Radio 4 will follow the theme introduced in the Sunday Worship programme the preceding Sunday. The readings are set out below with a short explanation of why the passage fits the theme, a question for you to reflect on and a question which relates to the overall theme of this year's Lent journey: the Unreconciled people around and among us.

The readings for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in Holy Week are also included but complete extra resources for these three days are included with the Sunday Lent resources on the CTBI website.

Week 1 - March 7th-10th 2011

Theme of the week:

Order and disorder

Monday 7th March (SS Perpetua and Felicity)

Upside Down World

Mark 13.14-23 KJV

But when ye shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not, (let him that readeth understand,) then let them that be in Judaea flee to the mountains:

And let him that is on the housetop not go down into the house, neither enter therein, to take any thing out of his house:

And let him that is in the field not turn back again for to take up his garment.

But woe to them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!

And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter.

For in those days shall be affliction, such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created unto this time, neither shall be.

And except that the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh should be saved: but for the elects sake, whom he hath chosen, he hath shortened the days.

And then if any man shall say to you, Lo, here is Christ; or, lo, he is there; believe him not:

For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect.

But take ye heed: behold, I have foretold you all things.

Mark 13.14-23 NRSV

'But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. And if anyone says to you at that time, "Look! Here is the Messiah!" or "Look! There he is!"—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

In Jesus' time there was an expectation that God would bring about an ending to the current state of the world very soon. One of the signs of that impending event would be increasing disorder in the world with everything turned upside down. Here Jesus talks in the context of the people's expectations – there will be suffering and disorder. What are God's faithful supposed to do when everything is falling apart? The answer is to hold fast to faith and not get sidetracked and distracted by everything else that's going on. In particular we should not get sidetracked by false messiahs who claim to know the truth, because they're just another distraction away from God.

This passage is particularly relevant for today with the upheavals in the world caused by natural disasters and also in our own society with the economic crisis and the challenge of climate change. There is, and will be suffering, as we try and cope with the mess we've made of our planet and economic affairs. But when we hear that the 'end of the world' is forecast for 2012 and when we hear the voices of self-appointed prophets, we may remember Jesus' words and hold on to the faith which sustains us. One of the things Jesus showed us when he went into the desert was how not to get distracted by all the stuff that tempts us in the world, but stay focused on what God wants, not manufactured signs and omens.

Question for reflection

What kinds of distractions are around in our society today which might prevent people from keeping their attention on God?

Unreconciled?

Jesus paints a picture of an Unreconciled world full of disorder – what do you imagine a reconciled world would be like?

Tuesday 8th March (UN International Women's Day)

Faith or Foolishness

Matthew 14.23-33 KJV

And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.

But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary.

And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea.

And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear.

But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.

And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.

And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus.

But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me.

And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?

And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased.

Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.

Matthew 14.23-33 NRSV

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

How does this passage relate to the theme?

Fishing could be a dangerous and risky business. Storms and high winds could capsize boats and drown fishermen. The best efforts of human beings could still result in everything going wrong when faced by the forces of nature. In this passage, the disciples are in trouble, - their boat is being battered by the waves and they can't get to shore. They also know that the laws of the universe hold good, - no one who goes into the water can rise above it, - they will sink and drown. So when they see Jesus coming towards them they are terrified and think he must be some sort of spirit. When Peter gets out of the boat the laws of nature really do hold true, he starts to sink, yet Jesus saves him and when they get into the boat, the dangerous storm subsides.

This story therefore tells us that there is danger in human living and that even when we try our hardest things can get out of control and our best efforts fail. But faith makes a difference and being in Jesus' presence makes a difference.

Question for reflection

What do you think this passage tells us about the role of Christian faith in human life?

Unreconciled?

We're told that when Peter took his eyes off Jesus and noticed the howling wind he started to sink. What do you think that part of the story wants to tell us?

Wednesday 9th March (Ash Wednesday)***Facing a crisis*****Joel 2.1-2; 12-16 KJV**

Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the LORD cometh, for it is nigh at hand;

A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains: a great people and a strong; there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations.

Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:

And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly:

Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, and those that suck the breasts: let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet.

Joel 2.1-2; 12-16 NRSV

Blow the trumpet in Zion;

 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!

Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,

 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—

a day of darkness and gloom,

 a day of clouds and thick darkness!

Like blackness spread upon the mountains

 a great and powerful army comes;

their like has never been from of old,

 nor will be again after them

 in ages to come.

Yet even now, says the LORD,

 return to me with all your heart,

with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

 rend your hearts and not your clothing.

Return to the LORD, your God,

 for he is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,

 and relents from punishing.

Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain-offering and a drink-offering
for the LORD, your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;

call a solemn assembly;
gather the people.

Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;

gather the children,
even infants at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

The prophet Joel speaks of the 'Day of the Lord', an ultimate apocalyptic event. The priests blow the *shofar*, the ram's horn trumpets, to warn of immediate danger, and nature turns inside out as everything goes dark. Human beings are powerless against such huge cosmic forces, so what are they supposed to do? Joel has an answer, the same answer as we saw in the previous two readings: people should hold fast to faith in God. It is, as in the previous readings, important not to get distracted by human affairs; it is important to stay focused on relationship with God, because even in time of impending disaster, God is faithful to his people and saves them. But that salvation depends on people doing their part and making time for a right relationship with God in their own hearts.

Question for reflection

When things go wrong, people often turn to prayer, even if they don't have a natural or regular prayer life, but when things are going well, it's easier to forget about God. How do you think the people Joel is talking about might have reacted to Joel's prophecy?

Unreconciled?

What do you think the prophet is trying to tell us about God's desire to be reconciled with his people?

Thursday 10th March

Undercover fasting

Matthew 6.1-4 KJV

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth:

That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6.1-4 NRSV

‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’

How does this passage relate to the theme?

Jesus tells his friends that even what looks like ‘proper’ religious practice and worship of God can become disordered. Even praying and giving to the poor can become an excuse for self-aggrandisement, showing off and ‘holier-than-thou’ attitudes. When that happens, people are no longer focused on their relationship with God; they just get a kick out of people thinking how holy they are and enjoy the praise for their piety. They become hypocrites and miss the point about what prayer and giving is all about.

So Jesus tells his friends not to be like that. The relationship with God should come first. You don’t need to be praised or thanked for giving to the poor, because giving is good in itself. Prayer and giving should enrich your spiritual life with God and if it doesn’t then something has gone wrong.

Question for reflection

Suppose you were at church and didn’t put anything in the collection, but then went home and sent an anonymous donation to a charity. How would it make you feel if others saw you didn’t contribute anything ‘in public’? Do you think there are pressures on people to be seen to be contributing publicly?

Unreconciled?

Jesus suggests that the ‘hypocrites’ have become Unreconciled before God. Why do you think it made them feel good to behave that way? Who are the hypocrites in today’s world?

Week 2 - (March 14th - 17th 2011)

Theme of the week:

Self and Others

Monday 14th March

Blinded by Power

2 Samuel 12. 1-7a KJV

And the LORD sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor.

The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds:

But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter.

And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor mans lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him.

And Davids anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the LORD liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die:

And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.

And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul;

2 Samuel 12. 1-7a NRSV

and the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.' Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'

Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul;

How does this passage relate to the theme?

The prophet Nathan tells the great King David a parable about right living and hospitality. A rich and powerful person should never take advantage of a weaker person. The weaker person in the parable with his 'one ewe lamb' deserves kindness, respect and compassion, despite the powerful needs of hospitality. David understands this perfectly well and responds indignantly that the rich and powerful man is in the wrong and must make recompense for his inexcusable behaviour.

But then Nathan turns the story on David's head. *David* is the rich and powerful man who has abused his weaker neighbour. The context for this story is David's scheme to take the beautiful Bathsheba for his wife

and arranging to have her husband Uriah the Hittite killed so that he can have her. This was not just morally wrong; David also failed to recognise Uriah as a person who deserved respect and protection. So Nathan goes on to say that because David behaved like this, God will not recognise *him* any longer. What we do to others affects our relationship with God.

Question for reflection

Why do you think Nathan told King David a parable rather than just telling him straight?

Unreconciled?

Nathan has come to tell David that he is now in an Unreconciled state before God, but David had already had Uriah killed and taken his wife. What do you think David was supposed to do to make things right with God?

Tuesday 15th March

Dealing with the enemy

Genesis 4. 8-13 KJV

And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?

And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the LORD said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' Cain said to the LORD, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear!'

Genesis 4. 8-13

Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the LORD said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' Cain said to the LORD, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear!'

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This passage tells a story of a murder. Cain and Abel are brothers, they are supposed to care for and look after each other, but Cain's jealousy and anger drive them apart. When this happens, Cain doesn't recognise important family ties any more, as we can see when Cain says: 'am I my brother's keeper?' Cain no longer sees his brother, but the infuriating 'other' who is standing in his way, and so he kills him.

God makes it clear that to take the life from another person wrecks the relationship between human beings and God. God does not kill Cain in return but tells him he is condemned to an Unreconciled state, fleeing from human society and unable to settle, put down roots, or make a home. His actions have cut him off from everyone, - and Cain knows that this is a terrible punishment.

Question for reflection

Why do you think God punished Cain in this way?

Unreconciled?

Abel is dead. Can you imagine any way in which Cain might become reconciled to him – and to God?

Wednesday 16th March

In the Image of God

Psalm 139. 1-6; 13-18 KJV

O lord, thou hast searched me, and known me.
 Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.
 Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.
 For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether.
 Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it.
 For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mothers womb.
 I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.
 My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.
 Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.
 How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!
 If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand: when I awake, I am still with thee.

Psalm 139. 1-6; 13-18 NRSV

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.
 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
 You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O LORD, you know it completely.
 You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This beautiful psalm is a meditation on how God can be at once immeasurably Other to human beings and yet have a close and intimate relationship with creation and with people. The psalmist imagines God poring over the embryo in the womb delicately teasing it into being. He imagines God filling his mind, knowing everything about him. God's love enfolds him and sustains him and this love is intensely personal. The psalmist is not just another of God's creations: he imagines that God has known about him from the beginning of creation, like a wonderful story in a book that is just waiting to come into existence and in which God delights.

At the same time, the psalmist is well aware of God's Otherness: 'how weighty to me are your thoughts!' The creator and master of the universe is beyond human imagination and when we try to think about the way the universe has come into being, and the purposes of God in creation, we soon realise that it is an impossible task. But the relationship with God means that God is not some remote unknowable entity. Despite the extraordinary otherness of the divine life, it is possible for us to have a relationship with the creator of the universe.

Question for reflection

The psalmist offers us pictures of a mysterious Other and an intimate loving God. How would you describe your relationship with God?

Unreconciled?

As a Christian, what would you say to people who think that the creator of the universe, if one exists, must be ultimately unknowable?

Thursday 17th March (St Patrick)

Right and wrong

John 8. 3-11 KJV

And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?

This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.

So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

John 8. 3-11 NRSV

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

How does this passage relate to the theme?

In this passage, Jesus comes across a situation where a sin has turned a person into an object of evil whose life is now forfeit. She is utterly other to those who would stone her: she has offended and scandalised the religious community and according to the law of Moses, cannot now be part of it.

Despite the trap being set for him, Jesus insists on recognising the woman as a fellow human being and still part of the community. He reminds the Pharisees that no one is without sin and so every person needs to be shown compassion, understanding and forgiveness. He also puts his words into practice by speaking to the woman directly, releasing her, and giving her the chance to rejoin the community. This is not a question of letting her off, - this is a new chance for her to start again.

Question for reflection

What do you suppose the woman did after Jesus released her?

Unreconciled?

The Pharisees were right about the demands of the law. Why do you think Jesus risked saying what he did?

Week 3 - March 21st-24th 2011

Theme of the week:

Separation and Unity

Monday 21st March

(Thomas Cranmer; International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination)

Speaking the Language

Genesis 11.1, 3-9 KJV

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.

And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

Genesis 11.1, 3-9 NRSV

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This is the story of the Tower of Babel which offers an explanation about why there are so many different people all with different languages. When the world is full of different nationalities each with their own language, it is harder to understand other people and we have to learn other languages in order to be able to talk to them. Inevitably, that also makes it harder to work together in unity and with one purpose. In the story, God is worried about what people can do if they work together as one, and so they are scattered with all their differences over the face of the earth, but it also carries the implication that if only people could overcome the barriers of separation then 'nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them'.

Question for reflection

How would you go about making friends with someone whose language you don't know?

Unreconciled?

The writer of this passage offers an explanation for all the different cultures, nations and languages that were around. In the book of Acts (chapter 2) we find a 'reversal' of this event and a reconciling mutual understanding. What does Acts 2 tell you about how Unreconciled people can come together?

Tuesday 22nd March (UN World Water Day)***A Woman with a History*****John 4. 7-15 KJV**

There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink.

(For his disciples were gone away unto the city to buy meat.)

Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.

Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.

The woman saith unto him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water?

Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle?

Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again:

But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

The woman saith unto him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw.

John 4. 7-15 NRSV

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This passage records a conversation between people from two deeply divided communities. Jews like Jesus did not associate with Samaritans like the woman and you can hear her surprise when she says 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' Furthermore, a religious teacher like Jesus would not usually address women in this fashion in public either. Yet Jesus breaches all the boundaries which would normally keep them both separate, even though they have an interest in common: getting the water that all human beings need.

Once the separation is overcome, a new possibility is created in which Jesus can talk to the woman about spiritual as well as physical needs. He can offer her not just water to drink but 'living water' that sustains

the spiritual life with God. The woman responds to his offer and we later find her going off to tell everyone about the amazing encounter with Jesus.

Question for reflection

What do you think Jesus shows us about the way rules and boundaries keep us apart from others?

Unreconciled?

Many Samaritans began to believe in Jesus after this event. What do you think this tells us about the way Christian faith can make a difference in places with Unreconciled communities?

Wednesday, 23rd March

Enemies Transformed

Luke 23. 4-12 KJV

Then said Pilate to the chief priests and to the people, I find no fault in this man.

And they were the more fierce, saying, He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Galilee to this place.

When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked whether the man were a Galilaean.

And as soon as he knew that he belonged unto Herods jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who himself also was at Jerusalem at that time.

And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him.

Then he questioned with him in many words; but he answered him nothing.

And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused him.

And Herod with his men of war set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate.

And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves.

Luke 23. 4-12 NRSV

Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This passage underlines the different political tensions surrounding the final events of Jesus' life. The players are Pilate who is the Roman Governor in charge of Judaea while Herod is in charge of Galilee. So Pilate is quite pleased to think that it could be Herod who is really required to make a ruling in respect of

Jesus, since Jesus is properly a Galilean. Meanwhile the chief priests and scribes of the Jewish people also accuse and mock Jesus. Jesus himself is accused of stirring up trouble and causing unrest. There are all kinds of resentments, power plays and shifting allegiances. Luke comments, for example, that Herod and Pilate were enemies but after they pass Jesus back and forth between them, they become friends.

This passage therefore encourages us to think about the background to Jesus' arrest and the separating interests and fears which drive the decision to put Jesus to death. In this account Jesus is passed from pillar to post saying nothing. Stories about him circulate – Herod is keen to see if he will produce a sign. When Jesus fails to live up to expectations, everyone thinks they have power over him and mock him. So Pilate and Herod have a question about whose jurisdiction Jesus 'belongs' to so that he can be dealt with. The chief priests insist he does not 'belong' to them because he is a blasphemer and a trouble maker. Jesus no longer 'belongs' to his friends because they have deserted him. He is gradually separated from everyone and will die on the cross, alone, in order to make it possible for everyone to be united with God.

Question for reflection

What do you think the various players thought that getting rid of Jesus would achieve?

Unreconciled?

What do you suppose it felt like to be cut off and separated from your friends and community, mocked and ridiculed?

Thursday 24th March (Walter Hilton, mystic)

Mystery beyond human understanding

2 Corinthians 12. 2-10 KJV

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)

How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christs sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

2 Corinthians 12. 2-10 NRSV

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

In this passage, Paul tells us of a mystical experience in which he glimpsed the reality of the divine life. This experience in which he was ‘caught up into Paradise’ confirmed for him that God’s promises are real and filled him with joy. However, no one can spend their life in a rapture of ecstasy, so Paul says that earthly problems, ‘a thorn in the flesh’, stop him from becoming too wrapped up in the heavenly vision. For now then, we have to live out our lives and take on whatever life offers to us, even if it is unpleasant ‘persecutions and calamities’, but we can be sustained by a hope of our unity with God when our lives are done.

Question for reflection

Why do you think Paul told the Christian community at Corinth about this mystical experience?

Unreconciled?

How do you think the hope of unity with God helped to sustain the persecuted Christians?

Week 4 - March 28th-31st 2011

Theme of the Week:

Speaking and Listening

Monday, 28th March

Careless Talk

James 3.1-5 KJV

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

Behold, we put bits in the horses mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

James 3.1-5 NRSV

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

How does this passage relate to the theme?

Here we are cautioned that those who teach the faith to others have a great responsibility. It is very easy to lead people astray by not thinking properly about what you're saying. Speaking to others then should not be taken lightly because it can influence people so powerfully.

Question for reflection

What do you think this passage tells us about the way we might share our faith with others?

Unreconciled?

How much damage do you think might be done by loose tongues?

Tuesday 29th March

Making Connections

Luke 8. 4-10 KJV

And when much people were gathered together, and were come to him out of every city, he spake by a parable: A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it.

And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture.

And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it.

And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

And his disciples asked him, saying, What might this parable be?

And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand.

Luke 8. 4-10 NRSV

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: 'A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.' As he said this, he called out, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that

"looking they may not perceive,
and listening they may not understand."

How does this passage relate to the theme?

When Jesus told this parable, he also told his disciples that it takes a particular kind of listening to the story to understand its inner meaning fully. The parable is about how people hear and respond to the word of God, so it is a parable about listening, but told in terms of a sower sowing his seed. The fertile ground for the seed represents people who are ready to hear and respond to God's word and to enter into a right relationship with God, but others, who are not willing to make the effort or to give their spiritual development the right attention, will not be able to flourish. The way we listen makes a difference.

So, Jesus says, there will be others who just hear the parable but fail to understand it because they don't listen properly. To them it will just be a story. It takes discipleship and real attention to God's word to recognise that the story has an inner meaning about the ways human beings respond to God which is personally relevant to each person who hears it. Many people though, will just miss the opportunity because, although we may have ears, we forget to listen.

Question for reflection

What do you think Jesus was looking for in those who did listen properly?

Unreconciled?

The parable is also about Unreconciled people who let other things stifle and stunt God's work in them. What do you think Jesus meant by the birds, the lack of water and the thorns?

Wednesday 30th March

Shutting God out

Numbers 22.27-35 KJV

And when the ass saw the angel of the LORD, she fell down under Balaam: and Balaams anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with a staff.

And the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?

And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee.

And the ass said unto Balaam, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? and he said, Nay.

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face.

And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse before me:

And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times: unless she had turned from me, surely now also I had slain thee, and saved her alive.

And Balaam said unto the angel of the LORD, I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again.

And the angel of the LORD said unto Balaam, Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak. So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

Numbers 22.27-35 NRSV

When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?' Balaam said to the donkey, 'Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!' But the donkey said to Balaam, 'Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?' And he said, 'No.'

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. The angel of the LORD said to him, 'Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely I would by now have killed you and let it live.' Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, 'I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home.' The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, 'Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak.' So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This passage dramatizes an everyday event and turns the ordinary business of a man travelling along a road on his donkey into an extraordinary and supernatural event. Because Balaam lives in the mundane present, he forgets to pay attention to God and so completely misses the angel that is standing before him. The donkey is aware of the angel and when it stops, Balaam beats it for disobedience. Balaam then listens to two very unusual kinds of speech. First his donkey berates him for the beating and tells Balaam that he should have worked out that something extraordinary was happening. Balaam then realises that he is in the presence of the angel of the Lord and the angel tells him that the donkey has in fact saved his life. The angel has a message for Balaam, and he is told he must carry God's word. Now that he has begun to listen

he must pay attention to what he has to speak on God's behalf and not seek to change or embellish it in any way. In chapter 24, we discover that Balaam has been given four important messages to speak on behalf of God.

Question for reflection

What do you think this story tells us about how we should discern the word of God?

Unreconciled?

What do you think this story tells us about how God can use the human abilities of speaking and listening?

Thursday 31st March (John Donne Priest and Poet)

Finding a Voice

Mark 7. 31-37 KJV

And again, departing from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, he came unto the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the coasts of Decapolis.

And they bring unto him one that was deaf, and had an impediment in his speech; and they beseech him to put his hand upon him.

And he took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue;

And looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened.

And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain.

And he charged them that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published it;

And were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.

Mark 7. 31-37 NRSV

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This healing miracle relates directly to the ability to hear and to speak being restored to a deaf man, who, because of his deafness also cannot speak properly. These abilities are restored to the man. The healing miracle has a personal and private intimacy as Jesus touches the man's ears and tongue, asking God to make them work. Despite Jesus' request for the miracle not to be talked about, the healing releases a torrent of speech from those around, proclaiming what has happened.

So this story contains within it a question about right use of the ability to communicate. Jesus gives hearing and speech back to the man, but these are important gifts which should not be squandered. How the miracle is talked about matters. What it is likely that Jesus did *not* want is for people to think of him as a magician or wonder-worker. It would not help for the man to become a celebrity or a curiosity either. The point of healing would be so that the healed man could give praise and thanks to God.

Question for reflection

What do you suppose the healed man wanted to talk about afterwards?

Unreconciled?

His friends consider the man one of the Unreconciled through his disability, but his healing is just the start of new possibilities for his life. What do you think would Jesus have wanted him to do next and what might the healed man have felt about it?

Week 5 - 4th April -7th April 2011**Theme of the Week****Wounds and Healing****Monday 4th April*****Saved From Death*****Exodus 12.21-27 KJV**

Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel, and said unto them, Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families, and kill the passover.

And ye shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the bason, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the bason; and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning.

For the LORD will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the LORD will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you.

And ye shall observe this thing for an ordinance to thee and to thy sons for ever.

And it shall come to pass, when ye be come to the land which the LORD will give you, according as he hath promised, that ye shall keep this service.

And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service?

That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the LORDS passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses. And the people bowed the head and worshipped.

Exodus 12.21-27 NRSV

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, 'Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. For the LORD will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down. You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, "What do you mean by this observance?" you shall say, "It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" And the people bowed down and worshipped.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This passage describes how God spared the Israelites from death in Egypt when they put the blood of the sacrificial lambs on their doorways. The Passover thus becomes a powerful ritual of Jewish observance, at which they remember how God spared them from death and saved his people. The power of the Passover for Jewish memory and ritual becomes identified with salvation and life and God's faithfulness towards his people. This passage is therefore informs Christians what the Passover meant in terms of being saved from death, so that when Jesus offers his own body and blood at the Last Supper we see that he is offering himself for wounding and death in order to save human beings.

Question for reflection

Why do you think the passage stresses that the Passover ritual should be passed down and explained to the generations to come?

Unreconciled?

How do you think the Passover ritual relates to being reconciled to God?

Tuesday 5th April

A Wounded Healer

Isaiah 53.4-9 KJV

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

Isaiah 53.4-9 NRSV

Surely he has borne our infirmities
carried our diseases; and

yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

In this famous passage from Isaiah we are given a picture of a human being who has taken on the sins of the people. He is a scapegoat for everything that is wrong although he has done no wrong himself. In this sense he is the wounded healer who brings new life to the afflicted people. He does not resist but goes like a 'lamb to the slaughter'. This vivid picture of an innocent person who willingly is punished for the sins of the community without defending himself has therefore often been used as an image of what Jesus did on the cross, because through Isaiah's words we can also recognise what the gospels tell us about the crucified Christ, the suffering servant of God.

Question for reflection

Why do you think the afflicted person submits to this suffering?

Unreconciled?

How does Isaiah make it clear that this person has willingly become one of the Unreconciled?

Wednesday 6th April

Learning to See

Mark 8 22-26 KJV

And he cometh to Bethsaida; and they bring a blind man unto him, and besought him to touch him.
And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town; and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw ought.
And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees, walking.
After that he put his hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw every man clearly.
And he sent him away to his house, saying, Neither go into the town, nor tell it to any in the town.

Mark 8 22-26 NRSV

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.'

How does this passage relate to the theme?

As we saw in the readings for last Thursday, Jesus often healed in a private and intimate way. Here he takes the blind man aside and heals him by touching him and putting saliva on his eyes. The man has to get used to seeing and Jesus checks that he is able to see clearly before sending him away. The blind man is healed. Again however, Jesus tells him not to go back to the village or tell anyone about what has happened.

Question for reflection

How do you think the blind man felt as Jesus was healing him?

Unreconciled?

Why would a blind person be Unreconciled to his community in Jesus' day and what would being healed do for him?

Thursday 7th April***Healing a wounded world*****Revelation 22.1-5 KJV**

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.

Revelation 22.1-5 NRSV

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This passage is part of a vision of eternity. In this part of the vision all hurts are healed in the presence of God and there is nothing to cause pain or suffering any more. The heavenly vision is one of eternal life with

God where the 'healing of the nations' can take place. The book of Revelation (Apocalypse) was probably written to encourage severely persecuted Christians and so it offers encouragement and hope to those who might be suffering, with its message of a final peace with God who in the end will reconcile the whole creation.

Question for reflection

What encouraging words about God's promises would you send to Christians persecuted for their faith?

Unreconciled?

This is a picture of a final reconciliation of the faithful with God. How else do you think might God make it possible for Unreconciled people to achieve a final healing?

Week 6 - 11th April-14th April 2011

Theme of the week:

Heaven and Hell

Monday 11th April

A Matter of Choice

Genesis 3. 8-13; 22-24 KJV

And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.

And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?

And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?

And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.

And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.

And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever:

Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

Genesis 3. 8-13; 22-24 NRSV

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I

commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' Then the LORD God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'

Then the LORD God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever'— therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

How does this passage relate to the theme?

The story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden follows a picture of a perfect life with God. But when the human beings yield to temptation and start to make up their own rules instead of resting contentedly in God's will for them, they become separated from God and have to begin to make their way in the world. The point about the story is that what is done is done. There is no way for Adam and Eve to retrace their steps. They are the Unreconciled and have to carve out a new journey to be reunited with God.

Question for reflection

What does this story tell us about how human beings use blame to excuse their behaviour?

Unreconciled?

What do you suppose it was like for Adam and Eve to become Unreconciled? How did they decide what to do next?

Tuesday 12th April

Guests at a Banquet

Luke 14.16-24 KJV

Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many:
 And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready.
 And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused.
 And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused.
 And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.
 So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind.
 And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room.
 And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.
 For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.

Luke 14.16-24

Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and

bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” And the slave said, “Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.” Then the master said to the slave, “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.” ’

How does this passage relate to the theme?

Jesus tells this parable to paint a picture for people of what God’s kingdom is like. Everyone is invited to a marvellous celebration and feast, but there are plenty of people who don’t want to respond to the invitation. People receive the invitation from God but there are so many distractions and other things going on that they turn down God’s hospitable call. These people are the chosen ones, the people of Israel in whom God has especially invested his call. In the story, God then rejects the ones who have been specially invited in favour of all kinds of others who have not enjoyed the privilege of being the chosen people. *They* will respond to the invitation with gladness. The story is both a picture of God’s eternal kingdom as being like a great feast and a warning that in order to be present at that feast, we need to respond to God’s call and not treat our privilege as people of faith casually.

Question for reflection

How would you feel if you invited all your best friends to a dinner you had specially prepared for them and they all made excuses why they couldn’t come?

Unreconciled?

Jesus suggests that God searches out Unreconciled people and calls them too. How do you think such people might react to being called to the feast?

Wednesday 13th April

Hell on earth

Job 19. 13-27a KJV

He hath put my brethren far from me, and mine acquaintance are verily estranged from me.
 My kinsfolk have failed, and my familiar friends have forgotten me.
 They that dwell in mine house, and my maids, count me for a stranger: I am an alien in their sight.
 I called my servant, and he gave me no answer; I intreated him with my mouth.
 My breath is strange to my wife, though I intreated for the childrens sake of mine own body.
 Yea, young children despised me; I arose, and they spake against me.
 All my inward friends abhorred me: and they whom I loved are turned against me.
 My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.
 Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me.
 Why do ye persecute me as God, and are not satisfied with my flesh?
 Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book!
 That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!
 For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:
 And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:
 Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.

Job 19. 13-27a NRSV

'He has put my family far from me,
and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me.
My relatives and my close friends have failed me;
the guests in my house have forgotten me;
my serving-girls count me as a stranger;
I have become an alien in their eyes.
I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer;
I must myself plead with him.
My breath is repulsive to my wife;
I am loathsome to my own family.
Even young children despise me;
when I rise, they talk against me.
All my intimate friends abhor me,
and those whom I loved have turned against me.
My bones cling to my skin and to my flesh,
and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth.
Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends,
for the hand of God has touched me!
Why do you, like God, pursue me,
never satisfied with my flesh?

'O that my words were written down!
O that they were inscribed in a book!
O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock for ever!
For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This passage records the suffering of Job, whose life has become a living hell. He is suffering physically and also endures the mental suffering of estrangement and abandonment. He feels isolated and utterly alone. Yet he refuses to blame or curse God for his suffering. He clings to a vision of salvation and of God restoring him.

Question for reflection

What examples can you think of where people are living in a state of 'hell' today?

Unreconciled?

Job experiences the state of being Unreconciled. How does he manage to avoid despair?

Thursday 14th April

Strange visions

Revelation 4.1-8 KJV

After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, LORD God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.

Revelation 4.1-8 NRSV

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,
'Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.'

How does this passage relate to the theme?

This passage, like the one a week ago, comes from the vision of God's eternity that is set out in the book of Revelation to encourage persecuted Christians to hold fast to their faith. The vision is one of great beauty, richness and splendour, but the writer of Revelation is also filled with tremendous awe and amazement. The four living creatures (which have since become emblematic of the four gospel writers) offer unceasing praise to God's glory.

Question for reflection

What do you imagine heaven is like?

Unreconciled?

Why do you suppose the writer of Revelation wanted to tell the persecuted Christians about the vision of glory and a reconciled existence with God?

Holy Week

The readings and themes are given here for you to follow. If you would like to study the texts in more detail, you can look at the extra resources on the CTBI website for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in Holy Week.

Monday 18th April

Punishment and Liberation**Mark 15. 8-15 KJV**

And the multitude crying aloud began to desire him to do as he had ever done unto them.

But Pilate answered them, saying, Will ye that I release unto you the King of the Jews?

For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy.

But the chief priests moved the people, that he should rather release Barabbas unto them.

And Pilate answered and said again unto them, What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the King of the Jews?

And they cried out again, Crucify him.

Then Pilate said unto them, Why, what evil hath he done? And they cried out the more exceedingly, Crucify him.

And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified.

Mark 15. 8-15 NRSV

So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Tuesday 19th April

Condemnation and Forgiveness

Luke 23.32-35; 39-43 KJV

And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death.

And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.

Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.

And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Luke 23.32-35; 39-43 NRSV

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.']] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!'

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

Wednesday 20th April

Victims and Victimisers

Genesis 22.5-12 KJV

And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.

And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

Genesis 22.5-12 NRSV

Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.'

Thursday 21st April***Love's truth*****John 13.2a-14 KJV**

And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simons son, to betray him; Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.

After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.

Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet?

Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.

Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.

Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all.

For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean.

So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you?

Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.

If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one anothers feet.

John 13.2a-14 NRSV

The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.'

New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright 1989, 1995, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved."