



Sunday Gospel Readings with *Lectio Divina*

Year A: Year of Matthew

Our springboard into the year of Matthew, year A of the three-year lectionary cycle, has been two remarkable events which took place in 2010. The Edinburgh 2010 Conference in June, marking the centenary of the 1910 World Missionary Conference and the visit in September of Pope Benedict XVI.

Like Matthew's Gospel, the two events remind us that the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ is fundamentally incarnational – rooted in humanity and in the unfolding of human history.


Once again we commend to you this prayerful resource, which invites us, through the ancient Christian practice of *Lectio Divina*, to allow the Word of God to take root in our heart and give direction to our life, so that in all we are and do and say, we will bear witness that Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God; that his word is ever ancient and ever new; and his command to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth is as urgent today as it has ever been.

Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland



These *Lectio Divina* outlines are also available in Albanian, Dutch, French, Greek, Maltese, Portuguese, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish and other languages.

For full details visit www.wordforliving.org



“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instructions for right living, so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17
Good News Bible





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Sunday Gospel Readings with Lectio Divina Year A: Matthew

INTRODUCTION

These weekly outlines combine the Liturgy's Sunday Gospel readings with the *lectio divina* approach to Holy Scripture.

Lectio divina is a dynamic, life-oriented approach to reading Holy Scriptures encouraged by both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. It provides a framework for a faithful and respectful reading of the Bible that is sincere and authentic.

Lectio divina is a blessing for the entire Church as it opens up the rich truths of Scripture for every Christian. Through it believers are invited to read, understand and deepen their appreciation of the Scriptures and to seek guidance for their lives in the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

Our real goal is to meet our Lord as we read his Word and allow him to transform our lives to be more like him through the work of the Holy Spirit.

All the information necessary for you to have a meaningful encounter with God's Word is included in this booklet. These outlines can be used individually or in groups.

The following pages introduce the four steps of *lectio divina* with some extra tips for using these outlines in groups.



ABOUT LECTIO DIVINA

History

Lectio divina dates back to the early Church Fathers around 300 AD. The four steps were first recorded by a monk, Guigo Cartujo, in 1173. These steps Lectio (Reading), Meditatio (Meditation), Oratio (Prayer) and Contemplatio (Contemplation) remain central today although methods differ.

Overview

In essence *lectio divina* is a simple way to meet with the Lord through reflection and prayer based on Holy Scripture. It is not a study method. Background knowledge can be helpful but is not essential.

Used in groups a structure is necessary but for individuals the steps need not be followed rigidly. Our aim is meeting God, not just completing the steps themselves. So when the Lord impresses something on us we need to stop and wait. We can always come back to the steps another time. We don't want to lose what God is saying to us.

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LECTIO – READING

Reading the Scripture passage humbly and prayerfully is the foundation for everything else that follows and cannot be rushed. So begin with a prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to ‘lead you into all the truth’ (John 16:13).

Read the passage slowly and carefully. Avoid being tempted to look at the Lectio comments or any of the other steps at this stage.

Have a notebook and pencil ready. Underline, or make a note of, any words or phrases that stand out to you. Write down any questions that occur to you. Read the passage several times and read it aloud. Give yourself time to understand and appreciate what is being said.

Now read the Lectio comments and reflect on the ways they are similar or different to your first thoughts.

MEDITATIO – MEDITATION

Meditation deepens our appreciation of the passage and helps us to explore its riches. We read in 2 Timothy 3:16 that ‘All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instructions for right living...’ So approach Scripture in faith expecting God to speak to you. He may reveal something of himself to you. He might highlight an attitude or behaviour of yours that needs to change. He might show you a promise to encourage and strengthen you.

Here are some suggested approaches you may find helpful.

Use your imagination. Picture the passage; put yourself into the scene and become part of the story. See things through the eyes of the other characters, listen to what they say, watch their reactions, imagine how they feel. Keep coming back to Jesus. Get to know him; delight yourself and become fascinated by him, his words, his actions, the way he responds – everything about him.

Ask questions. Use your own questions and the questions given to think more deeply about the passage and what God wants to say to you. Ask Jesus why he did and said what he did. Try to understand his reasons and intentions. Allow time to be quiet, to listen and hear his answer.

Let the Word be a mirror for you. As we read the Bible it shows us more of what the Christian life looks like and where ours needs to change. We see how God’s Word applies to our daily life, as an individual, and as part of our community and society. We will find promises and encouragement, challenges and demands. If we are willing God will nurture and free us to be more fully human and fully alive.

ORATIO – PRAYER

Prayer opens up a conversation between God and us. In the Psalms we see how the writers pour out their feelings to God, often mixing hopes and fears side by side. God values our honesty. We can’t hide anything from him anyway. Using the words of the responsorial psalm can help us but we can also use our own words to have a heart-to-heart conversation with a very special friend.

Through prayer we make our response to the light God’s Word has shed on how we are living our lives. Now we can bring what is happening in our own life and in our community before God. We speak and listen, listen and reflect – it is a conversation with God.

CONTEMPLATIO – CONTEMPLATION

To help us interpret the Gospel reading the Liturgy provides two further Scripture readings. Reflecting on these can both enrich our understanding of the text and bring into focus a response we may need to make to the Lord.

Contemplation gives us the opportunity for an intimate time of communion with God. Be still before God and invite him in. Few words, if any, are necessary here. Enjoy time in his presence. Just be with him and let him love you. Let him refresh your soul.

Review

After you have finished your time of reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation you may want to jot down in a notebook any experiences or thoughts that particularly impressed you. You may find it helpful to look back at these later.



USING THESE OUTLINES IN GROUPS

When *lectio divina* is used in a group a little preparation is needed.

LECTIO:

Try one or more of the following ways of reading the passage. See what works best for your particular group.

Individual reading. To start with give everyone time to read through the passage silently.

Proclamation of the Word. One person reads (proclaims) the Word. This is the traditional manner of reading in the liturgical celebration.

Two readers. Two people read the text aloud alternately.

Each person reads a verse. This is a way of involving each participant, inviting each to read from his own Bible, so that the reading is attentive and dynamic.

Audio version. If you have access to a recorded version of the text you could also use that. You may notice different words are stressed.

With different characters. Approach the text somewhat like a drama, in which one person is the narrator/reader, another takes the part of Jesus, a third takes another character. This can be the most dynamic or engaging method and helps us to identify just what the different characters in the passage are saying.

MEDITATIO:

- In the group setting, it is important that everyone is given time to participate, to share what the Lord has been saying to them. While the Lord speaks through his Word, he also speaks to us through our brothers and sisters. So as we listen to others we need to open our hearts to hear the Lord's voice speaking through them.
- It is important that everyone in the group understands that this sharing is to build one another up and enrich our experience. It is not necessary that everyone agrees about what is shared. You need to be careful to avoid this time turning into a debate or argument. The Lord knows us each as individuals so will have different things to say to us personally at this specific point in our lives.
- You can start with a simple question like "What catches your attention in this passage?" and use the printed questions. The aim is to help everyone feel comfortable to speak and share how the text has inspired them. Gently keep the group focused on the text and what God is saying.

ORATIO:

We suggest you give people time for personal silent prayer before God. You can also give opportunity for people to pray out loud in their own words and use verses from the responsorial prayer. The aim should be to help each person make a personal response to the Lord during this time.

CONTEMPLATIO:

Contemplation by its very nature is an individual exercise and silence is necessary. If you have room it may be helpful to suggest people move so they have their own 'personal space'.



**The Scripture references for the Psalms follow the Hebrew numbering used in many recent Bibles including the Jerusalem Bible but some Bibles use different numbering. If Psalm 23 The Good Shepherd is numbered as Psalm 22 in your Bible, please refer to your church lectionary for all the correct Psalm references for your Bible.*

BE PREPARED

Matthew 24:37-44

³⁷ The coming of the Son of Man will be like what happened in the time of Noah. ³⁸ In the days before the flood people ate and drank, men and women married, up to the very day Noah went into the boat; ³⁹ yet they did not realize what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. That is how it will be when the Son of Man comes. ⁴⁰ At that time two men will be working in a field: one will be taken away, the other will be left behind. ⁴¹ Two women will be at a mill grinding meal: one will be taken away, the other will be left behind.

⁴² "Be on your guard, then, because you do not know what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ If the owner of a house knew the time when the thief would come, you can be sure that he would stay awake and not let the thief break into his house. ⁴⁴ So then, you also must always be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him.

*Other Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5; *Psalm 122:1-2, 4-9; Romans 13:11-14*

LECTIO:

The first Sunday of Advent marks not only the preparation for Christmas and the birth of Jesus but also the beginning of the liturgical year. And the Church chooses to open the year with a big wake-up call: be ready, don't let the world distract you from your real purpose.

Matthew – our Gospel writer for the better part of the coming year – portrays end-time events using graphic language and striking images.

Apocalyptic teaching, as this is known, is usually given in harsh times when people are suffering. The three synoptic Gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke each give this type of teaching. We can also read it in much greater depth in the challenging book of prophecy for the end times, the book of Revelation.

In today's reading Jesus preaches and gives a warning he has given several times as he prepares to return to Jerusalem for his Passion. He again uses powerful images to highlight the unexpected nature of the end times.

He uses three different images to paint the picture of how suddenly the end will come. It will come at a time when people are not expecting it, without any warning, like a flood sweeping all but a few away.

**See note at the end of the Introduction on the previous page.*

But here Jesus also tells us of the gathering together of the faithful by the 'Son of Man', a title first used in the Old Testament book of Daniel and adopted by Jesus, the Messiah.

MEDITATIO:

- How do you react to Jesus' teaching that he might return at any time?
- Consider the phrase 'they didn't realise what was happening'. Why not? Does this apply to people today? How might we respond to this?
- Think about the comparison to the flood that came in Noah's day. What can we learn from this?
- God makes the final choice to take one person and not another – even if outwardly they appear the same. What differences might there be?
- What can we learn from Paul's teaching in Romans 13:11-14?

ORATIO:

Prayerfully consider your relationship with the Lord. How ready are you for Jesus' return? Ask the Lord to show you any changes you might need to make.

Pray for the Lord to reveal himself to those who do not know him yet.

CONTEMPLATIO:

Read the prophecy in Isaiah 2:1-5. Spend some time reflecting on these phrases:

'He will teach us what he wants us to do; we will walk in the paths he has chosen.'

'...let us walk in the light which the Lord gives us!'

Consider too these words from 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24:

'May the God who gives us peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being – spirit, soul, and body – free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you will do it, because he is faithful.'

COME TO JESUS

Matthew 3:1-12

¹ At that time John the Baptist came to the desert of Judea and started preaching.
² “Turn away from your sins,” he said, “because the Kingdom of heaven is near!”
³ John was the man the prophet Isaiah was talking about when he said:
 “Someone is shouting in the desert,
 ‘Prepare a road for the Lord;
 make a straight path for him to travel!’ ”
⁴ John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair; he wore a leather belt round his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People came to him from Jerusalem, from the whole province of Judea, and from all the country near the River Jordan.
⁶ They confessed their sins, and he baptized them in the Jordan.
⁷ When John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him to be baptized, he said to them, “You snakes – who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send? ⁸ Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins. ⁹ And don’t think you can escape punishment by saying that Abraham is your ancestor. I tell you that God can take these stones and make descendants for Abraham! ¹⁰ The axe is ready to cut down the trees at the roots; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire.
¹¹ I baptize you with water to show that you have repented, but the one who will come after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. He is much greater than I am; and I am not good enough even to carry his sandals. ¹² He has his winnowing shovel with him to thresh out all the grain. He will gather his wheat into his barn, but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out.”

Other Readings: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17; Romans 15:4-9



LECTIO:

The whole purpose of Advent is laid out before us in the second verse of today’s Gospel reading: turn away from your sins because the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew’s usual expression for the Kingdom of God) is near. John’s message repeats Jesus’ warning in last week’s Gospel message: make sure you are ready for the return of the King.

Matthew uses four powerful images – a road, water, an axe and fire – to remind us that while God’s kingdom offers salvation and deliverance it also brings judgement and division.

This is where Matthew introduces John the Baptist to his readers and he emphasizes his significance straight away. Firstly, he identifies him as the person sent to prepare the way for the long awaited Messiah (Isaiah 40:3). Next, by describing John’s clothing, he draws a comparison with one of Israel’s greatest prophets, Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). The significance of baptising people in the river Jordan would not have been missed either; a thousand years earlier Joshua had miraculously led their ancestors through the Jordan to inherit the promised land.

John’s message touched a nerve. People came in droves and repented. John’s stern rebuke for the Pharisees and Sadducees makes it clear that he wasn’t interested in an outward show of repentance. God is looking for genuine repentance that leads to changed lives – only this is worthy of the King. Relying on their spiritual pedigree as the sons of Abraham wasn’t good enough.

And John was clear, right from the outset, about where his ministry ended and the Messiah took over.



MEDITATIO:

- How would you explain the difference between the ministries of John and Jesus?
- What aspects of your life does God’s grace cover?
- What is the ‘good fruit’ that we should expect to see in our lives as Christians?



ORATIO:

John called for repentance and a turning towards God. What is God saying to you now?



CONTEMPLATIO:

John was preparing the way for Jesus and pointing people towards him. We are called to do this as well – Jesus has made us fishers of men. What practical steps can you take during Advent to prepare yourself and others for the Messiah’s rule?

FAITH IN JESUS

Matthew 11:2-11

²When John the Baptist heard in prison about the things that Christ was doing, he sent some of his disciples to him. ³“Tell us,” they asked Jesus, “are you the one John said was going to come, or should we expect someone else?”

⁴Jesus answered, “Go back and tell John what you are hearing and seeing: ⁵the blind can see, the lame can walk, those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor. ⁶How happy are those who have no doubts about me!”

⁷While John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus spoke about him to the crowds: “When you went out to John in the desert, what did you expect to see? A blade of grass bending in the wind? ⁸What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in fancy clothes? People who dress like that live in palaces! ⁹Tell me, what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes indeed, but you saw much more than a prophet. ¹⁰For John is the one of whom the scripture says: ‘God said, I will send my messenger ahead of you to open the way for you.’ ¹¹I assure you that John the Baptist is greater than anyone who has ever lived. But the one who is least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than John.

Other Readings: Isaiah 35:1-6, 10; Psalm 146:6-10; James 5:7-10



LECTIO:

Today’s reading focuses on John the Baptist again, not this time in his role preparing the way for the Messiah but rather as a witness to Jesus’ Messianic ministry.

John the Baptist is in prison but has been told about what Jesus is doing. He is puzzled. Jesus’ actions don’t seem to match up with the axe, fire and judgement John had told people the Messiah would bring (see last week’s reading in Matthew 3:7-12). Had he made a mistake? Was someone else ‘the one who is to come’? So he sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus directly.

Jesus doesn’t give a direct answer but tells John’s disciples to report the evidence – people are healed, the dead raised to life and the Good News is preached to the poor. He wants John to understand that he is indeed the Messiah and is bringing in the Kingdom of heaven as foretold by Old Testament prophets like Isaiah (see Isaiah 35:5-6, 61:1).

We are not told John’s response but Jesus commends his integrity and confirms that John is indeed the ‘messenger’ sent to prepare the way for the Messiah as prophesied by Malachi (3:1).

John’s prophetic role was to denounce sin and call for repentance. The message was the same for everyone – kings, religious leaders, ordinary people – and he was not afraid to speak out. It got him thrown into prison for condemning King Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife and ultimately cost him his life (Matthew 14:3-12).

MEDITATIO:

- Jesus wants us to grasp who he is for ourselves. Write down who you think Jesus is. You may want to add to this from time to time as Jesus reveals more of himself to you.
- Why do you think people who have no doubts about Jesus are ‘happy’ (v6)?
- How did John respond when he did not understand what Jesus was doing? What can we learn from this and the answer Jesus gave him?
- John was no blade of grass blowing in the wind. How does the cold wind of criticism or mockery affect you? Can you stand up for your faith?

ORATIO:

God continues to intervene in history and individual lives to bring healing, help and peace. Read Psalm 146 to remind yourself of God’s goodness and faithfulness. Use this to offer him your thanks and praise.

Wait before God in prayer. He may prompt you to pray for specific people who need his help and intervention in their lives right now.

CONTEMPLATIO:

Time after time in scripture we read accounts of how God intervenes in people’s lives bringing forgiveness, healing and guidance. Spend some time reflecting on the ways God has intervened in your life.

ANGELIC INTERVENTION

Matthew 1:18-24

¹⁸This was how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they were married, she found out that she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Joseph was a man who always did what was right, but he did not want to disgrace Mary publicly; so he made plans to break the engagement privately. ²⁰While he was thinking about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. ²¹She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus – because he will save his people from their sins.”

²²Now all this happened in order to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, ²³“A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel” (which means, “God is with us”).

²⁴So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to do.

Other Readings: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24:1-6, 7, 10; Romans 1:1-7

LECTIO:

We are now in the days leading up to Jesus’ birth. In the preceding verses, Matthew has set out Jesus’ lineage through King David, right back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. God promised Abraham that through his descendants God would bless the whole human race (Genesis 12:2-3).

We are familiar with Mary’s encounter with the angel Gabriel as told in Luke 1:26-38 but Matthew just chooses to say that ‘she found out she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit’.

Matthew focuses instead on Joseph’s angelic encounter. Joseph is engaged to be married but his fiancée Mary has told him she is pregnant. He knows he is not the father and so is planning to break off the engagement. At that time in Jewish society an engagement was legally binding; it could only be broken by a formal act of divorce.

Joseph clearly cares for Mary and wants to end the engagement privately to minimise the disgrace to her. While he is thinking about this an angel appears to him in a dream and tells him not to be afraid to marry Mary. The angel confirms to Joseph what Gabriel had told Mary – that the baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit, would be a son and they should name him Jesus.

Sunday Gospel Readings with Lectio Divina Year A: Matthew

Jesus was a popular boy’s name at the time, which in Hebrew means ‘the Lord saves’. It reminded people of their great ancestor Joshua (whose name had the same meaning) who led the Israelites out of exile in the wilderness and into the promised land after the death of Moses. But, the angel adds, this ‘Joshua’ will save people in a very specific way, not from physical exile but from ‘their sins’.

Matthew interprets these events as a direct fulfilment of God’s promise in Isaiah 7:14 to send Immanuel, ‘God is with us’. So this baby not only has an ordinary everyday name but another very special name given to no one else.

Joseph, like Mary in the Gospel of Luke, believes and acts on what the angel tells him and they get married. After the birth of their baby, it is Joseph that names him Jesus. In doing so he identifies himself as Jesus’ legal ‘father’ and, as a descendant of King David, he gives him royal lineage.

Joseph faithfully plays his part along with Mary in God’s salvation plan. He helps provide a home for Jesus to grow up in before he fulfils his mission on earth.



MEDITATIO:

- Think about Joseph. How must he have felt when Mary told him an angel had told her she would be the mother of God’s son? Or that she was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit?
- What lessons can you draw from Joseph’s willingness to act quickly when he knew what God wanted him to do?
- Jesus came to save people from their sins. What does this mean for you?
- God gives grace and strength to cope in impossible situations. Where and when has he helped you?



ORATIO:

Read over today’s verses from Psalm 24 several times. Use them to bring your praise to the great king.



CONTEMPLATIO:

God promised to send a Messiah to save his people. Think about his faithfulness. Marvel that Jesus came to earth as Immanuel, ‘God is with us’. What does this mean for you?

A PROMISE FULFILLED

Luke 2:15-20

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them back into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us.”

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and saw the baby lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When the shepherds saw him, they told them what the angel had said about the child. ¹⁸ All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said. ¹⁹ Mary remembered all these things and thought deeply about them. ²⁰ The shepherds went back, singing praises to God for all they had heard and seen; it had been just as the angel had told them.

Other Readings: Isaiah 62:11-12, Psalm 97:1, 6, 11-12; Titus 3:4-7



LECTIO:

Today we celebrate our Saviour’s birth and remind ourselves of another angelic visitation, this time to shepherds. To get the full story take a look at the first 14 verses of Luke 2.

What an amazing encounter this is. The shepherds on that lonely hillside must have been shocked to the core of their being when suddenly an angel appears and speaks to them. He is joined by a great army of other angels from heaven.

These men were on the bottom rung of Jewish society. Shepherds were poorly educated and had little time for religious observance as a wandering life with their flocks kept them from attending the synagogue. But the news that countless Jews through the centuries prayed for and longed to hear – the arrival of the Messiah – is given to them first!

They see not just one angel but a whole army of angels and ‘the glory of the Lord shone over them’. No wonder they leave their sheep and go to the town in search of this baby. They find the newborn baby in a manger just as the angel said. Bubbling over with joy and excitement, they cannot stop praising God and telling people about what has happened.

How many people believed what the shepherds told them? We don’t know. For Mary and Joseph it must have reminded them of their own angelic encounters nine months earlier.



MEDITATIO:

- Why do you think God chose to proclaim the news of Jesus’ birth and reveal its significance to such lowly regarded shepherds?
- What do you think Mary and Joseph might have felt about these rough shepherds bringing this news from an angel about their newborn son? Was it a shock or perhaps a confirmation of what they already knew?
- Mary and Joseph pondered, the shepherds rejoiced, the angels sang and the crowds were amazed. How will you respond today?
- How do you tell the wonderful events to those around you when they ask why or how you celebrate Christmas?



ORATIO:

Luke tells us that the angels invited everyone to rejoice over the birth of Jesus. Psalm 97 leads the way for us. Verses 1 and 12 are below:

‘The Lord is King! Earth, be glad!
All you that are righteous be glad
Because of what the Lord has done!
Remember what the holy God has done,
And give thanks to him.’

Use these words to inspire your praise to God and give thanks that you too have heard the wonderful news of Jesus’ birth.



CONTEMPLATIO:

As you celebrate the birth of our Saviour today, reflect on these words from Titus 3:4-7,

‘But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour was revealed, he saved us. It was not because of any good deeds that we ourselves had done, but because of his own mercy that he saved us, through the Holy Spirit, who gives us new birth and new life by washing us. God poured out the Holy Spirit abundantly on us through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that by his grace we might be put right with God and come into possession of the eternal life we hope for.’

GOD'S PROTECTION

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

¹³ After they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph and said, "Herod will be looking for the child in order to kill him. So get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you to leave."

¹⁴ Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and left during the night for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until Herod died. This was done to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, "I called my Son out of Egypt."

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go back to the land of Israel, because those who tried to kill the child are dead." ²¹ So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went back to Israel.

²² But when Joseph heard that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as king of Judea, he was afraid to go there. He was given more instructions in a dream, so he went to the province of Galilee ²³ and made his home in a town named Nazareth. And so what the prophets had said came true: "He will be called a Nazarene."

Other Readings: Ecclesiasticus 3:2-6, 12-14; Psalm 128:1-5; Colossians 3:12-21



LECTIO:

The visit from the Magi is still fresh in Mary and Joseph's mind when an angel speaks to Joseph in a dream, this time giving a warning to leave the country as the family is in danger. (We'll look at the Magi's visit in more detail next Sunday.)

Herod the Great, who ruled on behalf of the Romans, was worried. His rule was harsh and at the slightest whiff of a threat to his reign, he took action. This time he is looking to kill a young king – the newborn child the Magi have told him about.

God intervenes for the Holy Family. They flee to Egypt – a journey of several hundred miles. The family leaves quickly that night and stays in Egypt living quietly until Herod's death.

God then sends his messenger to speak to Joseph again. This time the angel tells him to return home. Joseph is obedient and sets off immediately for Palestine.

But along the way Joseph realises that although Herod's kingdom had been split up, Archelaus, one of Herod's crueler sons, now runs Judea. Joseph is nervous and unsure about what to do.

A third dream helps Joseph make the decision to go to the small town of Nazareth, in the northern province of Galilee, which is ruled by Herod Antipas, who later beheads John the Baptist.

Two more prophecies are fulfilled through Joseph's obedience to God. Jesus, like Israel, is called out of exile in Egypt as prophesied by Hosea 11:1, 'I called my Son out of Egypt.' Matthew also attributes prophetic significance to Jesus being brought up in Nazareth. He may have in mind Judges 13:5-7 or Isaiah 11:1 where the Hebrew word *nezer* (which is similar to Nazarene) means branch. Isaiah says a new branch will grow out of the root of Jesse. A new beginning will emerge from the royal house of David bringing deliverance and salvation, which Jesus offered and continues to offer to everyone who will follow him.

MEDITATIO:

- How do you think Mary and Joseph felt as they arrived in Egypt and set about finding a new home, work and an income? What can you learn from this?
- God gave Joseph specific directions that shaped human history. How do you feel God intervenes today?
- Think about the times you have experienced God's protection or guidance.
- How do you discern between your own good ideas and a word from God to direct you?

ORATIO:

Psalm 128 commends us to fear and obey God. This fear is not about being terrified but rather a respect and holy awe for who God is. Bring some of the large and small decisions you have to make to God so he can lead you. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you act on what God tells you.

Spend some time praying for members of your family today.

CONTEMPLATIO:

Colossians 3:12-21 speaks about relationships, firstly with God and then with our families and others. Spend some time pondering on these verses and let God speak to you through them.

A KING FOR EVERYONE

Matthew 2:1-12

¹Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterwards, some men who studied the stars came from the east to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him.”

³When King Herod heard about this, he was very upset, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. ⁴He called together all the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and asked them, “Where will the Messiah be born?”

⁵“In the town of Bethlehem in Judea,” they answered. “For this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶‘Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
you are by no means the least of the leading cities of Judah;
for from you will come a leader
who will guide my people Israel.’ ”

⁷So Herod called the visitors from the east to a secret meeting and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem with these instructions: “Go and make a careful search for the child, and when you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹⁻¹⁰And so they left, and on their way they saw the same star they had seen in the east. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹¹They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him.

¹²Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod.

Other Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13; Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6



LECTIO:

Today’s narrative focuses on Jesus, Herod, and ‘some men who studied the stars,’ or Magi, after the term in the Greek text. The fact that these men came from a distant country was another indication of the worldwide significance of Jesus’ birth.

The Magi follow a new star that had appeared in the sky and arrive in Jerusalem, the seat of power for the Jews in Israel. They must have been disappointed not to find the new king here.

As they make their enquiries about this new king, people are upset. Every Jew knew that Herod would deal ruthlessly with any threat to his rule.

Herod is anxious about the Magi’s search too. He takes advice from the religious leaders. The scriptures pointed towards the Messiah, a descendant of King David, being born in David’s home town, Bethlehem (Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2).

Herod invites the Magi to a secret meeting so he can learn more about the threat and tells them to report back to him after they have found the young child.

Once the Magi set out on the last stage of their journey, the star guides them again. They are full of joy. The star leads them right to Jesus, where they kneel down, worship him and present their gifts.

God knows Herod’s true intentions so warns the Magi not to return to Herod but to go home by another route.



MEDITATIO:

- How did you find Jesus? What helped guide you to him? Did God use other people that you didn’t expect?
- In what ways is Jesus your leader and guide?
- Think about the different ways you can worship Jesus. What ‘gifts’ can you offer him today?



ORATIO:

God made use of the Magi’s study of the stars to lead them to Jesus. Look back at the ways God led you to Jesus and how he has guided you through your life. Thank him for each step. Now ask God about the year ahead. What priorities does he want you to set? Lay your plans and hopes before him in prayer. Ask him to guide you to do what pleases him.



CONTEMPLATIO:

The liturgy comments upon the mystery of the incarnation in Isaiah 60:1-6 and Ephesians 3:2-6. Spend some time reflecting on these texts and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus to you.

ANOINTED FOR MINISTRY

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ At that time Jesus arrived from Galilee and came to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ But John tried to make him change his mind. "I ought to be baptized by you," John said, "and yet you have come to me!"

¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires." So John agreed.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. Then heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ Then a voice said from heaven, "This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased."

Other Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Psalm 29:1-4, 9-10; Acts 10:34-38



LECTIO:

Based on what we read in the Gospels, Jesus' ministry begins with his baptism by John in the river Jordan. John had been baptising the crowds for some time as a sign of repentance for their sins and turning back to God.

From the preceding verses, (Matthew 3: 10-12, which we looked at on the Second Sunday in Advent) John clearly believed the Messiah would bring in the Kingdom of heaven, and judgement with it. So there was an urgent need for repentance. The Messiah would bring a different baptism, not with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire.

So when Jesus comes humbly for water baptism John initially protests. He recognises Jesus' Messianic ministry. John is 'not good enough even to carry his sandals' (Matthew 3:11). Yet Jesus, instead of acting in power and judgement, identifies himself with everyone else who is stepping forward in repentance.

Jesus acknowledges John's objection but insists this fulfils 'all that God requires'. Through this act of obedience, Jesus demonstrates his priorities for the rest of his ministry – doing things God's way rather than his own.

After Jesus comes up out of the water he sees the Holy Spirit come down on him like a dove and stay with him. God the Father confirms that Jesus is his 'own dear Son, with whom I am well pleased'. Here we see the Holy Trinity working together in unity.

It isn't clear from Matthew's account whether others saw the vision of the dove and heard God's voice too. However, in John's Gospel it is clear that John the Baptist also saw the Spirit come down on Jesus and that God told him this meant that Jesus was the Messiah (John 1:29-34 which we will read next Sunday).



MEDITATIO:

- Jesus didn't need to repent of any sins. So consider why God wanted Jesus to be baptised by John publicly along with everyone else.
- Jesus and John show us clearly that we need to obey God even when others may misunderstand our actions. Are the opinions of others hindering you from obeying God in any way? Take a few moments to reflect on this.
- Few people hear God speak to them with an audible voice or see a sign from heaven like a dove. How does God speak to you?



ORATIO:

Think about how much God loves Jesus. Now think about how much God loves you – sending Jesus to die in your place so you could be adopted into his family. Take some time to give thanks to your heavenly Father.

Ask God if there is anything he wants you to do for him. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Jesus was empowered for his ministry by the Holy Spirit. How significant is the Holy Spirit in your relationship with God? Among other things the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to us and equips us to serve God. Consider the work of the Holy Spirit and invite him to help and guide you.

A SAVIOUR FOR THE WORLD

John 1:29-34

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming to him, and said, “There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘A man is coming after me, but he is greater than I am, because he existed before I was born.’ ³¹ I did not know who he would be, but I came baptizing with water in order to make him known to the people of Israel.”

³² And John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and stay on him. ³³ I still did not know that he was the one, but God, who sent me to baptize with water, had said to me, ‘You will see the Spirit come down and stay on a man; he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ I have seen it,” said John, “and I tell you that he is the Son of God.”

Other Readings: Isaiah 49:3, 5-6; Psalm 40:1, 3, 6-9; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

LECTIO:

These verses in the very first chapter of John’s Gospel present John the Baptist bearing clear witness that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah.

John the Baptist was a prophet and his mission was to prepare the way for the Messiah. He preached the need for repentance from sin and a turning back to God. This was demonstrated publicly by baptism in the river Jordan.

The apostle John doesn’t describe the details of Jesus’ baptism like the other Gospel writers. Instead he chooses to focus on one key detail and its significance. The key point is John the Baptist’s statement, ‘I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and stay on him.’ (verse 32).

John the Baptist goes on to explain the significance of this. God had told him that the person he saw this happen to is the ‘one who baptises with the Holy Spirit’, the one he was preparing the way for – the Messiah. It was this special mark of the Holy Spirit that marked Jesus out from everyone else.

God also inspires John the Baptist to proclaim that Jesus is the ‘Lamb of God’. This gives us a hint that Jesus might be a rather different sort of Messiah to the one most people at the time were expecting. This Messiah was not coming to deliver the Jewish people from the Romans but to deliver them from sin and empower them to live in a new kingdom. And his mission was not just to rescue God’s people in Israel but was to include the whole world.

So John points us to Jesus as the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy about the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, where in verse 7 the Suffering Servant is compared with ‘a lamb about to be slaughtered’. Part of Jesus’ ministry is that of the sacrificial lamb offered to God for the forgiveness of sins.

In verse 30 John the Baptist also makes another revealing comment, ‘he existed before I was born’. In physical terms John was born before Jesus. In Luke 1:36 the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would give birth to Jesus and that Elizabeth, John’s mother, was six months’ pregnant. But the apostle John opens his Gospel by stating that Jesus existed in the Godhead before the world was created (John 1:1-3).

MEDITATIO:

- If the presence of the Holy Spirit was essential for Jesus’ ministry, what does this tell us about our need for the Holy Spirit’s presence?
- What is your experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in your life?
- What can we learn about Jesus from his description as the ‘Lamb of God’?

ORATIO:

Pray through Psalm 40 and see what insights it gives you about Jesus. Then pray it again and put yourself into the psalm. Let God speak to you through it.

Give thanks that Jesus came to take away your sin so that you can enjoy fellowship and peace with God.

Thank God that Jesus is ‘a light to nations so that the whole world may be saved’ (Isaiah 49:6). Pray for those that Jesus lays on your heart.

CONTEMPLATIO:

Read through Isaiah 53 and reflect on the image of God’s Son as a lamb. Spend a little time with God and allow the wonder of what you are reading about Jesus to sink deep within you. Let it be a source of hope for this coming week.

A GREAT LIGHT

Matthew 4:12-23

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he went away to Galilee. ¹³ He did not stay in Nazareth, but went to live in Capernaum, a town by Lake Galilee, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. ¹⁴ This was done to make what the prophet Isaiah had said come true:

¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
on the road to the sea, on the other side of the Jordan,
Galilee, land of the Gentiles!

¹⁶ The people who live in darkness
will see a great light.

On those who live in the dark land of death
the light will shine.”

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach his message: “Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!”

¹⁸ As Jesus walked along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two brothers who were fishermen, Simon (called Peter) and his brother Andrew, catching fish in the lake with a net. ¹⁹ Jesus said to them, “Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people.” ²⁰ At once they left their nets and went with him.

²¹ He went on and saw two other brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were in their boat with their father Zebedee, getting their nets ready. Jesus called them, ²² and at once they left the boat and their father, and went with him.

²³ Jesus went all over Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the Good News about the Kingdom, and healing people who had all kinds of disease and sickness.

Other Readings: Isaiah 8:23 – 9:3; Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17



LECTIO:

We begin with a mini geography lesson to help us understand who was where and why. John the Baptist preached in Judea where we find both Jerusalem and Bethlehem, in the southern part of Palestine. John ministered in the east near the river Jordan.

Herod Antipas had John the Baptist put in prison because he publicly criticised him for living with his brother Philip's wife, breaking Jewish law (Leviticus 18:16). Eventually Herod's wife engineered Herod to have John put to death (Matthew 14).

Matthew doesn't explain the connection but simply says that after John's arrest Jesus moved north to Galilee. Jesus doesn't return to Nazareth where he grew up but chooses instead to live in Capernaum. Matthew interprets this as a fulfilment of Isaiah's Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 9:1-2.

At that time most of the people living in Zebulun and Naphtali were Gentiles, so by choosing to start his ministry in this region Jesus gives a clear sign of the universal nature of his mission.

In this passage Matthew tells us about two aspects of Jesus' ministry. Firstly, he preached the Good News about the Kingdom and healed people of all kinds of illness. Secondly, he calls the first four of his disciples in order to train them to 'catch people' rather than fish.

Matthew gives us very little detail about Jesus' encounter with these four fishermen. Jesus must however have made a remarkable impression on them because they were willing to leave their jobs so they could follow him.



MEDITATIO:

- Why do you think Peter, Andrew, James and John were prepared to leave their jobs to become Jesus' disciples?
- What qualities do you think Jesus saw in these four men that led him to choose them to be his disciples?
- What is the Good News of the Kingdom? What does it mean for you personally?
- How would you feel if Jesus appeared in your workplace? In what ways is Jesus calling you to follow him? Are you prepared to obey him, like the disciples, whatever the cost?



ORATIO:

Psalm 27 offers many words of encouragement, not least to hold firm to the Lord and hope in him because he is our light and stronghold. Invite the Holy Spirit to minister to you using the words of this Psalm to build faith and confidence in God.

Jesus still brings healing to broken hearts and bodies today, although we don't always understand the way he works. Ask him to help those you know who need his healing touch.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Consider the 'great light' in verse 16. What makes Jesus a great light for all people and for you personally?

KINGDOM PRIORITIES

Matthew 5:1-12

¹Jesus saw the crowds and went up a hill, where he sat down. His disciples gathered round him, ²and he began to teach them:

³“Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor;
the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!

⁴Happy are those who mourn;
God will comfort them!

⁵Happy are those who are humble;
they will receive what God has promised!

⁶Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires;
God will satisfy them fully!

⁷Happy are those who are merciful to others;
God will be merciful to them!

⁸Happy are the pure in heart;
they will see God!

⁹Happy are those who work for peace;
God will call them his children!

¹⁰Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires;
the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!

¹¹“Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. ¹²Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven. This is how the prophets who lived before you were persecuted.

Other Readings: Zephaniah 2:3, 3:12-13; Psalm 146:7-10; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31



LECTIO:

Scholars believe that Mark's Gospel was written before the other two synoptic gospels, enabling Matthew and Luke to draw on his material when writing their own accounts.

But Matthew and Luke also draw on other sources especially concerning the teaching of Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus' teaching is drawn together from different times and places and presented in five extensive teaching sections. Today's passage, often referred to as the Beatitudes, marks the beginning of the first of these – the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1 – 7:27).

Jesus' teaching centres on what it means to live under God's kingship on earth. So a clue to help us understand this passage appears in the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples in Matthew 6:10, 'May your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.

Jesus' ministry is to bring God's rule to earth. God's kingdom is very different to worldly priorities and values. The worldly view is that money, success and power are good news. But here Jesus teaches that the people who are truly on the right course are those who are dependent on God and are seeking his priorities for their lives.

The word translated as 'happy' could also be translated as 'congratulations'. These are attitudes rather than moral principles. So Jesus says that if you have these attitudes – if you are humble, show mercy, are pure, work for peace, are prepared to obey God even if this involves persecution, recognise your need for God, allow God to comfort you and your greatest aim is to please God – you are lining yourself up with God's kingdom.



MEDITATIO:

- Each of the beatitudes is challenging. Which do you find most challenging and why?
- Which of the beatitudes seems most achievable to you and why?
- What difference would it make to our world if all Christians demonstrated these attitudes in their lives?



ORATIO:

Choose just one of these beatitudes and talk to Jesus about it. Ask him for the grace to be able to give God's ways more priority in your life. Remember God sends the Holy Spirit to help us live for him.

Last week we read how the apostles had to leave their everyday lives behind so they could learn how to live and minister in God's kingdom. Jesus has given us the beatitudes to enable us to do the same. Draw apart from your busy life for a little while every day this week and allow God to replenish you so that you can live out the beatitudes more faithfully.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Consider each of the rewards and promises God makes to those who have these attitudes. Reflect on just how wonderful and valuable they are.

SALT AND LIGHT

Matthew 5:13-16

¹³“You are like salt for the whole human race. But if salt loses its saltiness, there is no way to make it salty again. It has become worthless, so it is thrown out and people trample on it.

¹⁴“You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.

Other Readings: Isaiah 58:7-10; Psalm 112:4-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5



LECTIO:

We continue to reflect on Jesus' teaching for his followers. Matthew drew all these nuggets of wisdom together and created the beautiful but challenging Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Given on different occasions, the individual lessons circulated freely around the Christian community of the first century AD.

Last week we looked at the beatitudes. Matthew chooses to follow this with three striking images that Jesus used to describe a disciple's relationship with the world.

The significance of the ideas has changed a little for us today. At the time Matthew was writing the primary role of salt was as a preservative to prevent things from going bad. While this is still important, most people today would think of using salt to improve the flavour of food.

The image of light is briefly interrupted by the image of a city on a hill. Cities were often built on hilltops because it made them easier to defend. They had influence over the surrounding area and would be highly visible.

Jesus continues to talk about light. For many of us a flick of a switch will give us as many lights as we want indoors. And it's easy to slip a torch into our pocket for a walk on a dark night. These are recent developments. In Jesus' day, little oil and rush lamps lit houses. Outside the stars and moon shone, the only other light. So light was very important. Jesus uses humour to help reinforce his message. No one would think of putting a lamp under a bowl – there would be no point and soon the light would go out completely.

This English translation uses comparisons to explain – you are like salt or light. But the original Greek makes a stronger statement, saying you *are* the salt for the whole human race and you *are* the light.

Jesus places a responsibility on Christians individually, and on the Church collectively, to be salt, light and a city set on a hill. We are to show the way, add flavour and be an example in our communities. And the purpose is that God is given praise – or as we pray in the Lord's prayer, that God's holy name is honoured.

MEDITATIO:

- Consider the three images Jesus uses of salt, light and a city on a hill. What can we learn from each about living out our faith in this world?
- The readings from Isaiah 58 and Psalm 112 give some practical examples of being salt and light. Consider whether, and how, you can put any of these into practice in your life.

ORATIO:

Do you feel ready for the responsibility Jesus is laying upon you as his disciple? The apostle Paul felt no shame in laying bare his own fears and anxieties before God and us (1 Corinthians 2:1-8); we need not fear doing the same. So ask God to strengthen you and give you boldness to be salt and light for him in your family, at work and in your community.

CONTEMPLATIO:

When Jesus sets the standards for our Christian lives, we can easily make the mistake of trying to meet these in our own strength. Paul reminds us that we shouldn't rely on our own abilities but on the power of the spirit. Read Paul's full prayer in Ephesians 1:17-20 and let this encourage you. Verses 17, 19 and 20 are given below.

'...and ask the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you the Spirit, who will make you wise and reveal God to you, so that you will know him.

...and how very great is his power at work in us who believe. This power working in us is the same as the mighty strength which he used when he raised Christ from death and seated him at his right side in the heavenly world.'

KINGDOM LIVING

*Matthew 5:20-34, 37**

²⁰I tell you, then, that you will be able to enter the Kingdom of heaven only if you are more faithful than the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees in doing what God requires.

²¹“You have heard that people were told in the past, ‘Do not commit murder; anyone who does will be brought to trial.’ ²²But now I tell you: whoever is angry with his brother will be brought to trial, whoever calls his brother ‘You good-for-nothing!’ will be brought before the Council, and whoever calls his brother a worthless fool will be in danger of going to the fire of hell. ²³So if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God.

²⁵“If someone brings a lawsuit against you and takes you to court, settle the dispute with him while there is time, before you get to court. Once you are there, he will hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to the police, and you will be put in jail. ²⁶There you will stay, I tell you, until you pay the last penny of your fine.

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But now I tell you: anyone who looks at a woman and wants to possess her is guilty of committing adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹So if your right eye causes you to sin, take it out and throw it away! It is much better for you to lose a part of your body than to have your whole body thrown into hell. ³⁰If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away! It is much better for you to lose one of your limbs than for your whole body to go to hell.

³¹“It was also said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a written notice of divorce.’ ³²But now I tell you: if a man divorces his wife, for any cause other than her unfaithfulness, then he is guilty of making her commit adultery if she marries again; and the man who marries her commits adultery also.

³³“You have also heard that people were told in the past, ‘Do not break your promise, but do what you have vowed to the Lord to do.’ ³⁴But now I tell you: do not use any vow when you make a promise...

³⁷Just say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ – anything else you say comes from the Evil One.

**The full reading is Matthew 5:17-37*

Other Readings: Ecclesiasticus 15:15-20; Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34; 1 Corinthians 2:6-10

LECTIO:

In this part of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus contrasts the demands he places on his disciples with the demands of Judaism as taught by the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. Jesus teaches that it is not enough just to keep a code of moral and religious rules, but rather his disciples must focus on doing everything God requires.

In these few verses Jesus touches on some powerful areas – anger, disputes, lust, divorce and honesty.

Jesus’ teaching illustrates the need for us to control our thoughts and emotions before they result in outward actions. He deliberately exaggerates to make his point. So removing your eye or cutting off your right hand is not to be taken literally but demonstrates how ruthlessly we must deal with sinful thoughts that can lead to sinful actions. Sin is not something we can live with. We must remove it completely, and as quickly as possible.

MEDITATIO:

- Jesus’ teaching lays bare human frailties. Right living starts with right attitudes. Which of the areas Jesus mentions challenges you most?
- Is there anyone you need to make peace with?
- How do you deal with thoughts and emotions that can lead you into sin?

ORATIO:

Bring today’s Gospel reading humbly before God. Allow your prayer to flow as you listen to what he says to you.

CONTEMPLATIO:

Slowly read today’s verses from Psalm 119. Pause after each verse and meditate on it before moving onto the next one.

WALK IN LOVE

Matthew 5:38-48

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’
³⁹ But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too. ⁴⁰ And if someone takes you to court to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. ⁴¹ And if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one kilometre, carry it two kilometres. ⁴² When someone asks you for something, give it to him; when someone wants to borrow something, lend it to him.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your friends, hate your enemies.’ ⁴⁴ But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil. ⁴⁶ Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! ⁴⁷ And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that! ⁴⁸ You must be perfect – just as your Father in heaven is perfect!

*Other Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; Psalm 103:1-4, 8, 10, 12-13;
 1 Corinthians 3:16-23*



LECTIO:

This passage opens with Jesus highlighting some Old Testament teaching (Exodus 21:12-27 and its parallel texts in Leviticus). Jesus wants to contrast the guidelines set out in the Law, or the Torah, with a new attitude and way of behaving.

The Law established the level of compensation equal to the damage done – an eye for an eye and so on. Jesus points his disciples to a new way of looking at things where generosity is the standard.

For this kind of behaviour, which goes well beyond human expectations, Jesus takes God as the model. We have to imitate God, who is perfect (verse 48). God does not distinguish between good and bad people when he lavishes his blessings on mankind. In this God shows his perfection.

The Torah demands God’s people to be holy and perfect just as God is (see today’s reading from Leviticus). In the Gospel reading, God calls for his people to sort out disputes, not to hold grudges and to love others as themselves. What a different place this world would be if we lived like that. Well, this is indeed the challenge that Jesus places before us: follow my example.

MEDITATIO:

- Who influences your behaviour towards others, God or ‘the world’?
- What lessons can we learn from this passage about the values of the kingdom? In what practical ways can we start living the kingdom way now?
- Have you been in a situation, perhaps even in church, where no one speaks to you? Jesus’ words in verse 47 challenge us to be friendly to others. Look out for opportunities to speak a friendly word to people this week.

ORATIO:

‘Praise the Lord, my soul, and do not forget how kind he is.
 He forgives all my sins...’
 ‘He does not punish us as we deserve or repay us
 according to our sins and wrongs’ Psalm 103:2-3, 10

Thank God for the mercy and grace he has shown you. If there is someone you need to forgive or are finding it hard to love, ask God to help you. Remembering God’s forgiveness for you may help.

Today’s passage specifically instructs us to pray for people who persecute us. Maybe someone has been unkind or hurtful to you. Bring them before the Lord and ask God how you can pray for them.

CONTEMPLATIO:

Consider the ways in which Jesus gives us an example of loving his neighbour as himself and ‘turning the other cheek’.

What is true wisdom? Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-23 and think about what God considers wise.

WHO ARE YOU SERVING?

Matthew 6:24-34

²⁴“No one can be a slave of two masters; he will hate one and love the other; he will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

²⁵“This is why I tell you not to be worried about the food and drink you need in order to stay alive, or about clothes for your body. After all, isn’t life worth more than food? And isn’t the body worth more than clothes? ²⁶Look at the birds: they do not sow seeds, gather a harvest and put it in barns; yet your Father in heaven takes care of them! Aren’t you worth much more than birds? ²⁷Can any of you live a bit longer by worrying about it?

²⁸“And why worry about clothes? Look how the wild flowers grow: they do not work or make clothes for themselves. ²⁹But I tell you that not even King Solomon with all his wealth had clothes as beautiful as one of these flowers. ³⁰It is God who clothes the wild grass – grass that is here today and gone tomorrow, burnt up in the oven. Won’t he be all the more sure to clothe you? How little faith you have!

³¹“So do not start worrying: ‘Where will my food come from? or my drink? or my clothes?’ ³²(These are the things the pagans are always concerned about.) Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. ³³Instead, be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all these other things. ³⁴So do not worry about tomorrow; it will have enough worries of its own. There is no need to add to the troubles each day brings.

Other Readings: Isaiah 49:14-15; Psalm 62:1-2, 5-8; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5



LECTIO:

Jesus seems to be saying in this text, ‘tell me what you are preoccupied about and I will tell you who your master is’. In other words, if you are overly concerned about the worries of the day then they are ruling you.

Jesus makes it clear we have to make a choice. We can serve God or we can serve money and everyday concerns but we can’t serve both. If we are guided by faith in God, the only master that really counts in this world, everyday worries lose their power.

Jesus also reminds us about God’s nature. He is the God of creation and sustainer of life. He created beautiful flowers that are here one day then gone the next. He provides for the birds of the sky. If he takes care of birds and plants how much more will he look after people that he made in his image?

Jesus, echoing the opening phrase of the prayer he taught us (Matthew 6:9-15), refers twice to God as ‘your Father in heaven’. These four words combine two immensely powerful ideas. Firstly the relationship we are invited to have with God is like a father and child. But, unlike earthly fathers with all their limitations, our spiritual Father is in heaven, perfect and all powerful.

God fully understands that as humans we need food, drink and clothing. Scripture also teaches that we should work to provide for ourselves and we should take care of those who are unable to provide for themselves.

Where people go hungry it is not God that has failed. There is enough food in the world for everyone but man’s greed and selfishness mean it is not distributed fairly, which is an offence against God’s providence.



MEDITATIO:

- Reread today’s Gospel passage but imagine Jesus speaking directly to you. Does what Jesus is saying affect the way you feel? In what way? What do you need to do?
- How do we know what God requires of us in practical terms? And how do we keep our priorities right?



ORATIO:

Read Psalm 62 and use this as a basis for your own prayer.

Think about how God has provided for you in different ways during your life and give him thanks. Bring any worries you have before him honestly.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Consider God as your father in heaven. Remember his love and care and this wonderful promise he makes to his people in Isaiah 49:15,

‘...I will never forget you.’