



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.

PORATIO – 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 RECONCILED

Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵“If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. ¹⁶But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that ‘every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,’ as the scripture says. ¹⁷And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸“And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.

¹⁹“And I tell you more: whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.”

Other Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9; Romans 13:8-10



LECTIO:

Today’s reading is part of what’s known as Jesus’ ecclesial teaching. The Greek word *ekklesia* is only used twice in the Gospels, here in verse 17 and two chapters earlier in Matthew 16:18.

The focus of Jesus’ teaching here is on relationships between members of the local church community. He is fully aware of the human frailty of his disciples – and of us! There will be times when we are sinned against by our fellow Christians and we in turn will sin against them. So Jesus gives some practical instructions on how to deal with this.

The very first course of action is to try and sort it out one to one. If this works and your brother or sister sees their sin and repents then forgiveness can flow and the relationship is restored. No one else needs to be involved.

If this approach doesn’t resolve the matter, Jesus instructs us to take along one or two others. He quotes from Deuteronomy 19:15 where God’s instruction is that evidence needs to be established by more than just one witness. On a very practical level this adds a reality check to our own judgement of the situation so it is important that we choose people who can be objective.

If the person concerned still fails to repent then the matter needs to go the whole church, where a third opportunity is given for repentance. If this too is

refused the person concerned can no longer be treated as a member of the church fellowship. Brotherly correction was a serious duty in the early church and still remains so today.

Jesus makes two amazing promises at the end of this passage, in verses 19 and 20. First he promises to be present with us if we come together in his name. Then he also promises that if two Christians agree about something in prayer God will not let their prayer go unanswered.

Through his living presence in the Christian community Jesus inspires our prayers and decisions. This is why dealing with divisions in the community is so important.



MEDITATIO:

- Why does Jesus place such importance on dealing with sin in the church community? Why is forgiveness a necessity?
- Do you find it easy to deal with conflict with other Christians? Or would you prefer to ignore it? Why is this harmful for both you and the other person concerned?
- Read Romans 13:8-10, part of which is given below. How do these verses relate to today’s Gospel reading and our attitude towards people that sin against us?

‘Be under obligation to no one—the only obligation you have is to love one another. The commandments ... are summed up in the one command, “Love your neighbour as you love yourself.” If you love others, you will never do them wrong...’



ORATIO:

The Lord’s Prayer reminds us that our personal forgiveness depends on our willingness to forgive those who sin against us. Pray for God’s will to be done in your life and forgive anyone that has sinned against you.



CONTEMPLATIO:

In John 17:11 Jesus prays that his followers ‘may be one just as you and I are one’. Think about the importance of unity in your local church community and the role of forgiveness in this.

DEBT FREE

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?”

²² “No, not seven times,” answered Jesus, “but seventy times seven,” ²³ because the Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who decided to check on his servants’ accounts. ²⁴ He had just begun to do so when one of them was brought in who owed him millions of pounds. ²⁵ The servant did not have enough to pay his debt, so the king ordered him to be sold as a slave, with his wife and his children and all that he had, in order to pay the debt. ²⁶ The servant fell on his knees before the king. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay you everything!’ ²⁷ The king felt sorry for him, so he forgave him the debt and let him go.

²⁸ “Then the man went out and met one of his fellow-servants who owed him a few pounds. He grabbed him and started choking him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he said. ²⁹ His fellow-servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’ ³⁰ But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything. ³² So he called the servant in. ‘You worthless slave!’ he said. ‘I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. ³³ You should have had mercy on your fellow-servant, just as I had mercy on you.’ ³⁴ The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount.”

³⁵ And Jesus concluded, “That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Other Readings: Ecclesiasticus 27:30 – 28:7; Psalm 103:1-4, 9-12; Romans 14:7-9



LECTIO:

We continue to look at Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness. Peter wants to know how far forgiveness should stretch. So he asks how many times he must forgive a brother that keeps sinning against him. Is seven times enough? Jesus replies, ‘seventy times seven!’ It’s not intended to be taken literally but rather to illustrate generosity of spirit. In effect Jesus is saying don’t keep a record, just keep on forgiving.



MEDITATIO:

- What does this parable teach us about God’s nature?
- Do you recognise that you have been forgiven a huge debt of sin you can never repay? How does this affect your willingness to forgive others?
- In this parable the king simply cancelled the debt but God couldn’t deal with our sin like that. How was our debt paid? What is our response?



ORATIO:

Today most people ignore or excuse sin. How do you view your own sin? God calls us to be holy. Use Psalm 51 as a prayer and confess your sin to God who is rich in mercy.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Meditate on the wonderful promises of Psalm 103.

‘As high as the sky is above the earth,
so great is his love for those who honour him.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our sins from us.’

TOO GENEROUS?

Matthew 20:1-16

¹“The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them the regular wage, a silver coin a day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. ³He went out again to the market place at nine o’clock and saw some men standing there doing nothing, ⁴so he told them, ‘You also go and work in the vineyard, and I will pay you a fair wage.’ ⁵So they went. Then at twelve o’clock and again at three o’clock he did the same thing. ⁶It was nearly five o’clock when he went to the market place and saw some other men still standing there. ‘Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?’ he asked them. ⁷‘No one hired us,’ they answered. ‘Well, then, you also go and work in the vineyard,’ he told them.

⁸“When evening came, the owner told his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who were hired first.’ ⁹The men who had begun to work at five o’clock were paid a silver coin each. ¹⁰So when the men who were the first to be hired came to be paid, they thought they would get more; but they too were given a silver coin each. ¹¹They took their money and started grumbling against the employer. ¹²‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘while we put up with a whole day’s work in the hot sun – yet you paid them the same as you paid us!’

¹³“ ‘Listen, friend,’ the owner answered one of them, ‘I have not cheated you. After all, you agreed to do a day’s work for one silver coin. ¹⁴Now take your pay and go home. I want to give this man who was hired last as much as I have given you. ¹⁵Don’t I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?’ ”

¹⁶And Jesus concluded, “So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last.”

Other Readings: Isaiah 55:6-9; Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18; Philippians 1:20-24, 27



LECTIO:

Jesus tells this parable to teach us something about God and his new kingdom. It’s not intended as a comment about social justice.

As in other parables God is the owner and the vineyard his kingdom. At different times of the day he hires people to come and work in his vineyard. Perhaps the workers that were hired last were the ones no one else wanted. Surprisingly, when

the wages are paid everyone gets the same. Those who toiled for 12 hours get exactly the same as those who only put in an hour right at the end.

The ‘wage’ or reward is really a covenant promise – eternal life in God’s presence. It’s not a reward for kingdom service but God’s gift. God doesn’t measure out his love and grace so some get more and others less. God lavishes his grace on whoever he chooses.

The truth is that everyone, including those who have had the privilege of serving God for a long time, gets more than they deserve.



MEDITATIO:

- What does this parable teach us about our attitude to serving God, our pride and our attitude to our fellow Christians? Are we jealous of others?
- The owner hired workers that no one wanted. What can we learn from this?
- What does this parable teach us about God’s character?



ORATIO:

The owner sought out new workers several times during the day, underlining his urgency to see the harvest finished on time. Jesus urged his disciples to ask God to send more workers to bring in the harvest. Pray that the church will have enough workers for the mission. Ask what part you can play in sharing the gospel and nurturing disciples.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Reflect on these verses from Isaiah 55:8-9:

“My thoughts,” says the Lord, “are not like yours,
and my ways are different from yours.
As high as the heavens are above the earth,
so high are my ways and thoughts above yours.”

TRUE SERVANTS

Matthew 21:28-32

²⁸“Now, what do you think? There was once a man who had two sons. He went to the elder one and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹‘I don’t want to,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. ‘Yes, sir,’ he answered, but he did not go. ³¹Which one of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The elder one,” they answered.

So Jesus said to them, “I tell you: the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John the Baptist came to you showing you the right path to take, and you would not believe him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. Even when you saw this, you did not later change your minds and believe him.

Other Readings: Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm 25:4-9; Philippians 2:1-11



LECTIO:

To help us understand this parable we need to look back to events earlier in the chapter. Matthew 21 opens with Jesus arriving in Jerusalem to a hero’s welcome. Some people proclaim him to be ‘David’s Son’, the long awaited Messiah. Jesus then causes chaos in the Temple, overturning tables, sending Temple money flying and driving away the people who were buying and selling.

Not surprisingly, the chief priests and elders want to know what authority he has to act in this way (verse 23). Jesus replies by asking them a loaded question about John the Baptist that leaves them floundering (verses 25-27).

Jesus then reinforces his point to the religious leaders by telling them this parable of the two sons. The father asks his elder son to work in his vineyard. This son begins by refusing but later has a change of heart and goes to work. The other son agrees initially but his actions don’t match his words. He doesn’t follow through. The religious leaders are led to conclude that it is the elder son that actually did what his father wanted.

Jesus then reveals that it is the prostitutes and tax collectors who are the elder son. While they initially rejected God’s call to serve him, they have had a change of heart. They accepted John’s message. They accept Jesus’ teaching. They repent and start living the kingdom lifestyle.

The shocking conclusion is that the religious leaders are in fact behaving like the other son. They are maintaining the outward appearance of being religious but are failing to do God’s will. They refuse to accept God’s messengers. They rejected John the Baptist and now they are rejecting their own Messiah.

MEDITATIO:

- This parable gives us the opportunity to review our relationship with God. If we initially said ‘yes’ to him, are we continuing to obey him? Are we merely keeping up an outward appearance of serving him but really just doing what we want?
- Consider how God wants you to serve him at this time in your life. How are you responding to his call?
- What can we learn from this parable about God’s grace and our attitudes to others?

ORATIO:

Make your own response to God. You may find these verses from Psalm 25:5, 9-10 a helpful prayer:

‘Teach me to live according to your truth,
for you are my God, who saves me.
I always trust in you.
He leads the humble in the right way
and teaches them his will.
With faithfulness and love he leads
all who keep his covenant and obey his commands.’

CONTEMPLATIO:

Read Philippians 2:1-11. Meditate on the wonderful description of Jesus’ humility and greatness in verses 5-11. Now consider your response to Paul’s exhortation,

‘Don’t do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble toward one another, always considering others better than yourselves. And look out for one another’s interests, not just for your own.’

PROPER FRUIT

Matthew 21:33-43

³³“Listen to another parable,” Jesus said. “There was once a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a hole for the winepress, and built a watchtower. Then he let out the vineyard to tenants and went on a journey. ³⁴When the time came to gather the grapes, he sent his slaves to the tenants to receive his share of the harvest. ³⁵The tenants seized his slaves, beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again the man sent other slaves, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷Last of all he sent his son to them. ‘Surely they will respect my son,’ he said. ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the owner’s son. Come on, let’s kill him, and we will get his property!’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

⁴⁰“Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” Jesus asked.

⁴¹“He will certainly kill those evil men,” they answered, “and let the vineyard out to other tenants, who will give him his share of the harvest at the right time.”

⁴²Jesus said to them, “Haven’t you ever read what the Scriptures say?

‘The stone which the builders rejected as worthless
turned out to be the most important of all.

This was done by the Lord;
what a wonderful sight it is!’

⁴³“And so I tell you,” added Jesus, “the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits.”

Other Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:8, 11-15, 18-19; Philippians 4:6-9



LECTIO:

We are in the days between Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his crucifixion. Jesus tells this parable while he is teaching in the temple.

The metaphor of God’s people Israel being a vineyard would have been familiar to Jesus’ listeners. The parallels with today’s liturgy reading from Isaiah 5:1-7 are particularly striking. God lovingly plants the vineyard and expects it to bear fruit but all it produces is sour grapes. Isaiah was one of the many prophets God sent to warn the people to repent and return to God or face judgement.

Jesus makes the meaning of this parable even more explicit and makes some very significant additions.

The vineyard is entrusted to the care of tenants. When harvest time comes the owner sends his slaves to collect his share. The tenants take no notice of the slaves, beat some and kill others. Finally, the owner sends his son in the hope that they will at least show him respect. The tenants kill the son too, thinking they will now be able to claim the vineyard for themselves.

Before revealing the meaning of the parable Jesus asks the people what the owner should do with the tenants. Without realising that they are passing judgement on themselves, the people reply, ‘let the vineyard out to other tenants’ (verse 41).

Having got the people incensed at the tenants’ behaviour, Jesus reveals the sting in the tail – they are the tenants (verse 43)! They will receive the sentence that they passed themselves. The vineyard (kingdom of God) will be given to ‘a people who will produce the proper fruits’.

The most significant addition that Jesus makes is to identify himself as the owner’s son. He does so indirectly by quoting from Psalm 118. This is another opportunity for the Jewish leaders to repent but they refuse and will go on to fulfil the parable literally by insisting that Jesus is put to death.



MEDITATIO:

- This parable was told as a warning to the Jewish leaders but what lessons can we learn from it for our lives today?
- Consider the significance of Psalm 118:22-23. In rejecting Jesus the Jewish leaders rejected their most important prophet. They rejected God’s Son and their Messiah and saviour. Are we in danger of rejecting Jesus’ authority in our lives?
- What is the ‘proper fruit’ that Jesus expects from his followers today?
- What can we learn from Isaiah 5:7 about the sort of behaviour God expects from his people?



ORATIO:

Respond to God in prayer. Ask God to show you how to live a life that bears more fruit for him.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Meditate on Jesus the cornerstone, the most important stone of all. Is he the cornerstone of your life? Does he have the place of greatest honour?

WEDDING INVITATION

Matthew 22:1-14

¹ Jesus again used parables in talking to the people. ² “The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who prepared a wedding feast for his son. ³ He sent his servants to tell the invited guests to come to the feast, but they did not want to come. ⁴ So he sent other servants with this message for the guests: ‘My feast is ready now; my bullocks and prize calves have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast!’ ⁵ But the invited guests paid no attention and went about their business: one went to his farm, another to his shop, ⁶ while others grabbed the servants, beat them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was very angry; so he sent his soldiers, who killed those murderers and burnt down their city. ⁸ Then he called his servants and said to them, ‘My wedding feast is ready, but the people I invited did not deserve it. ⁹ Now go to the main streets and invite to the feast as many people as you find.’ ¹⁰ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, good and bad alike; and the wedding hall was filled with people.

¹¹ “The king went in to look at the guests and saw a man who was not wearing wedding clothes. ¹² ‘Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ the king asked him. But the man said nothing. ¹³ Then the king told the servants, ‘Tie him up hand and foot, and throw him outside in the dark. There he will cry and grind his teeth.’”

¹⁴ And Jesus concluded, “Many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Other Readings: Isaiah 25:6-10; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20



LECTIO:

Jesus’ listeners may well still be feeling battered by the parable of the wicked tenants but he continues to reinforce the point, telling this parable to explain what the Kingdom of heaven is like.

A king is preparing a wedding feast for his son. He sends his servants to tell the invited guests that everything is ready but the guests aren’t interested. They add insult to injury by abusing the king’s servants, even killing some of them. The king responds by burning down their city – probably an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The king then instructs the servants to invite the ‘good and the bad alike’ straight off the streets. The king comes to meet the guests. He discovers one man who is not wearing wedding clothes and throws him out of the feast. Jesus concludes with the words, ‘Many are invited, but few are chosen’.

Jesus doesn’t provide an interpretation of the parable but clearly the king is God and his son is Jesus. The Jewish leaders and people are first on the invitation list. The way the king’s servants are treated echoes the treatment of God’s prophets and repeats the actions of the tenants in the earlier parable. The invitation is then thrown wide open. There are plenty of examples in the Gospels where those who are considered ‘sinners’ by the religious establishment become followers of Jesus. And now Gentiles as well as Jews are invited to the feast.

What are we to make of the guest not wearing wedding clothes? While ‘good and bad alike’ are invited God does not expect us to stay that way. We can only be in God’s presence if we have received his holiness. If we reject God’s invitation we have to face God’s judgement and exclusion from his presence. The invitation is there. We both choose our response and are chosen by God.

2 MEDITATIO:

- What is your response to Jesus’ invitation? Are you willing to accept or are you too busy?
- Many people in Jesus’ day, including those who considered themselves religious, were actually spiritually blind and deaf. They failed to see God at work in Jesus. How can we stay spiritually alert?
- What are the ‘wedding clothes’ Jesus expects us to wear?
- Why do you think Jesus uses the image of a wedding feast for this parable?

3 ORATIO:

Use Psalm 23 as the basis for your prayers today.

4 CONTEMPLATIO:

Meditate on the wonderful picture of salvation that Isaiah paints in Isaiah 25:6-10.

PAYING GOD

Matthew 22:15-21

¹⁵ The Pharisees went off and made a plan to trap Jesus with questions. ¹⁶ Then they sent to him some of their disciples and some members of Herod's party. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you tell the truth. You teach the truth about God's will for people, without worrying about what others think, because you pay no attention to anyone's status. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what do you think? Is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, or not?"

¹⁸ Jesus, however, was aware of their evil plan, and so he said, "You hypocrites! Why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for paying the tax!"

They brought him the coin, ²⁰ and he asked them, "Whose face and name are these?"

²¹ "The Emperor's," they answered.

So Jesus said to them, "Well, then, pay the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay God what belongs to God."

Other Readings: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96:1, 3-5, 7-10; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5



LECTIO:

The Pharisees have already been criticised by Jesus in the parables of the tenants and the wedding feast. Today's reading marks the first of four disputes between Jesus and the religious leaders.

The Pharisees have thought long and hard about how they might trap Jesus and they are confident that they have come up with the perfect question: 'is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor or not?'

This was one of the hottest issues of the day. The Romans had invaded and occupied their country and now taxed the Jews for the privilege! Paying taxes to the Romans was a symbol of defeat, subjugation and a source of bitter resentment. The very coin they had to use in paying the tax was another insult. The Jews were not allowed to put images of people on their coins but Caesar had his image stamped on his. It also carried the inscription 'son of the divine Augustus'. This would have been an affront to any devout Jew as only God was divine.

It appears to be a 'no win' situation for Jesus. Surely someone heralding God's new kingdom can't possibly endorse such an unjust tax. If he is their Messiah, delivering Israel from its oppressors must be top of his list. Jesus will be finished if he supports the tax and all his followers will desert him as a traitor, with their hopes dashed. If, on the other hand, he opposes the tax he will be openly inciting people to defy the Romans and will soon end up like every other revolutionary – hanging on a cross.

Jesus is fully aware of the trap. He asks them whose face and name are on the coin although he is fully aware of the answer. Then comes the masterful reply which doesn't give them enough to report him to the Romans but won't cause his followers to desert him either, 'pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay God what belongs to God.'

We have to interpret this passage in the light of the whole story. Jesus' answer isn't intended as a comprehensive statement of the relationship between God and political authority. Jesus is not afraid of confrontation. He is fully aware that he is walking towards his death but it will be on his terms. He knows that ultimately the kingdom of God will defeat the Emperor's kingdom but it will do so on a far more fundamental level by defeating an even greater empire, death itself.



MEDITATIO:

- What do we learn about Jesus from this passage?
- Consider the irony and insincerity of the Pharisees words, 'we know that you tell the truth. You teach the truth about God's will for people' (verse 16).
- Do you worry about what others think of you? Do you treat people differently according to their social status?



ORATIO:

Read through Psalm 96 several times and let its words inspire you. Bring your offering of worship and praise to God.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Reflect on Jesus' instruction, 'pay God what belongs to God'. What does belong to God? Consider whether you are giving all you should to God. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you.

LOVE

Matthew 22:34-40

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they came together, ³⁵ and one of them, a teacher of the Law, tried to trap him with a question. ³⁶ “Teacher,” he asked, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

³⁷ Jesus answered, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and the most important commandment. ³⁹ The second most important commandment is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.’ ⁴⁰ The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

Other Readings: Exodus 22:20-26; Psalm 18:1-3, 46, 50; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10



LECTIO:

In Matthew’s account this is the third dispute with the religious leaders. Last week we saw how Jesus comprehensively outmanoeuvred the Pharisees on the question of paying taxes to Rome. Immediately before this reading the Sadducees were put right on the issue of bodily resurrection. In today’s passage the Pharisees make another attempt to discredit Jesus’ teaching publicly.

Many Jewish teachers debated which was the greatest out of all the 613 commandments in the Law of Moses. It is clear that they hope to trap Jesus with this question. Perhaps they hope he might dismiss the Law of Moses completely or give an answer they can ridicule. By now they should know better.

Jesus’ initial answer would have been accepted by most Pharisees as he quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This was the foundation of the Jewish faith, *Shema* Israel, a daily prayer and reminder of allegiance to the one true living God.

Jesus then links this to Leviticus 19:18, ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself’. Love then is at the centre of the greatest commandment. Firstly love for God which then overflows into our relationships with people around us. The two must go hand in hand. As John expresses it so directly in his first letter (1 John 4:20), ‘If we say we love God, but hate our brothers and sisters, we are liars. For people cannot love God, whom they have not seen, if they do not love their brothers and sisters, whom they have seen.’

We mustn’t forget the context of today’s reading. Jesus is living his last few days on earth before his death. Matthew wants us to see that in submitting to crucifixion Jesus is fulfilling both these commands: loving God through obedience to his will and loving his brothers and sisters by being separated from his father in order to restore us to fellowship with God.

Lastly, if we think back to the Sermon on the Mount Jesus’ new kingdom lifestyle is about an invitation and promise for a new way of living with the help of the Holy Spirit rather than struggling to obey commandments in our own strength. Those who fully grasp and embrace Jesus’ kingdom lifestyle will be blessed indeed.



MEDITATIO:

- Think about the example Jesus gives us in fulfilling these commandments in the way he lived his life on earth.
- Mark describes a similar encounter in Mark 12:28-34. There the question is asked genuinely and the teacher of the law draws the conclusion that obeying these commandments is more important than offering animal sacrifices, the central feature of worship at the time. Can we fall into the trap of thinking more about observing religious practices and miss what God wants from us the most?
- Read Exodus 22:20-26. These verses provide some practical examples of loving our neighbour. Think about the opportunities you have to show God’s love to people around you.



ORATIO:

Humbly come before God and ask the Holy Spirit to help you love God with all your heart, soul and mind. Ask him to reveal God to you in a deeper way and remind you of things you may have forgotten. Let God minister his love to you.

When you feel ready, ask God to speak to you about loving your neighbour.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Reminding ourselves of God’s character is a good way to renew our love for him. Take time to read through the whole of Psalm 18 over the next week.

HUMBLE YOURSELF

Matthew 23:1-12

¹ Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples. ² “The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees are the authorized interpreters of Moses’ Law. ³ So you must obey and follow everything they tell you to do; do not, however, imitate their actions, because they don’t practise what they preach. ⁴ They tie on to people’s backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry, yet they aren’t willing even to lift a finger to help them carry those loads. ⁵ They do everything so that people will see them. Look at the straps with scripture verses on them which they wear on their foreheads and arms, and notice how large they are! Notice also how long are the tassels on their cloaks! ⁶ They love the best places at feasts and the reserved seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted with respect in the market places and to be called ‘Teacher’. ⁸ You must not be called ‘Teacher’, because you are all members of one family and have only one Teacher. ⁹ And you must not call anyone here on earth ‘Father’, because you have only the one Father in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor should you be called ‘Leader’, because your one and only leader is the Messiah. ¹¹ The greatest one among you must be your servant. ¹² Whoever makes himself great will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be made great.

Other Readings: Malachi 1:14 – 2:2, 8-10; Psalm 131; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13



LECTIO:

Matthew wrote his gospel account after Mark and he includes practically all of Mark’s material. But he also includes a lot more of Jesus’ teaching. This is organised in five main blocks, starting with the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. The commissioning of the disciples follows in chapter 10, the parables of the kingdom in chapter 13 and teaching about living as God’s new kingdom community in chapter 18. Today’s reading comes just before the final section, chapters 24-25, looking to the second coming and final judgement.

A substantial part of this teaching involves Jesus’ denunciation of Israel’s religious leaders. Jesus accuses them of being hypocrites. While they are indeed experts in the Law of Moses they are not practising what they preach. This incenses Jesus because they are burdening the people with a heavy load but they aren’t willing ‘to lift a finger to help’ (verse 4) or to carry this burden themselves. This is in direct contrast to Jesus, who offers a light load and an easy yoke (Matthew 11:30).

Before and after this passage we learn that the leaders’ sins are compounded by the fact that they are neglecting the really important teachings of the law, the greatest commandments (Matthew 22:37-39), and justice, mercy and honesty (Matthew 23:23).

So while Jesus instructs the people to follow the law he warns them not to imitate the lifestyle of their religious leaders. Instead of serving God and the people the leaders had become self-serving, full of pride and absorbed with their own importance and position in society.

Servanthood and humility, as demonstrated when Jesus washes the disciple’s feet (John 13), is the pattern for Jesus’ kingdom community. As Christians we should look to Jesus as our teacher, our leader, our Messiah. And we should look to God as our heavenly Father. Greatness in God’s kingdom is to be found in humble service.

MEDITATIO:

- If you are not a leader in your church community it can be easy to think that this passage doesn’t apply to you. But it has much to say about the attitude and behaviour of ‘ordinary’ Christians too. Take some time to think these through.
- How can you cultivate the humble attitude of a servant?
- What kind of leaders does Jesus expect for his church?

ORATIO:

Leaders in the church carry a heavy responsibility before God for the spiritual oversight of God’s people. Pray for your leaders. Ask God to protect and equip them. Ask God to help you deal with areas of pride in your own life.

CONTEMPLATIO:

Reflect on these verses from Psalm 131:

‘Lord, I have given up my pride
and turned away from my arrogance.
I am not concerned with great matters
or with subjects too difficult for me.
Instead, I am content and at peace.
As a child lies quietly in its mother’s arms,
so my heart is quiet within me.
Israel, trust in the Lord
now and forever!’

BE WISE

Matthew 25:1-13

¹“At that time the Kingdom of heaven will be like this. Once there were ten young women who took their oil lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and the other five were wise. ³The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any extra oil with them, ⁴while the wise ones took containers full of oil for their lamps. ⁵The bridegroom was late in coming, so the women began to nod and fall asleep.

⁶“It was already midnight when the cry rang out, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come and meet him!’ ⁷The ten women woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸Then the foolish ones said to the wise ones, ‘Let us have some of your oil, because our lamps are going out.’ ⁹‘No, indeed,’ the wise ones answered, ‘there is not enough for you and for us. Go to the shop and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰So the foolish women went off to buy some oil; and while they were gone, the bridegroom arrived. The five who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast, and the door was closed.

¹¹“Later the other women arrived. ‘Sir, sir! Let us in!’ they cried out. ¹²‘Certainly not! I don’t know you,’ the bridegroom answered.”

¹³And Jesus concluded, “Be on your guard, then, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Other Readings: Wisdom 6:12-16; Psalm 63:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18



LECTIO:

This passage is part of Jesus’ ‘eschatological’ (end time) teaching in chapters 24-25. This parable marks the first of three about the coming of the Son of Man for final judgement. We will look at the others over the next two weeks.

Jesus probably intended this parable to be understood on two levels, referring both to his first and second coming.

One thing to note in this parable is that Jesus draws strongly on the Jewish tradition of contrasting wisdom and foolishness. The writer of Proverbs personifies these qualities as two women calling out to men and offering them their respective lifestyles. In this parable the five wise young women are the ones who have thought ahead and are prepared for the bridegroom. They are contrasted with the five foolish young women who, when the time comes, are not ready.

Jesus uses this parable to reinforce the importance of being alert and ready for his second coming. In the previous chapter (Matthew 24:36-44) Jesus teaches us to be ready for the unexpected. He will return, we can be certain of that. But no one knows when it will be, not even Jesus himself; only God the Father knows the exact time. For people living on earth at the time it will be ‘when you are not expecting him’ (verse 44).

This parable was also intended to speak directly to Jesus’ fellow Jews. The central issue since his triumphant arrival in Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11) had been whether he was Israel’s promised Messiah. Elsewhere in Matthew (9:15) Jesus refers to himself as the bridegroom and in an earlier parable (Matthew 22:1-14) he speaks about the guests refusing to come to the wedding feast prepared by the king in honour of his son. For centuries the people of Israel had longed for their Messiah. They were the invited guests. When the time comes and their Messiah is living among them some are ready while others, like the foolish young women, are unprepared.



MEDITATIO:

- In Matthew 7:24-27 Jesus contrasts two house builders. The wise one builds on rock, the foolish one builds on sand. One heard Jesus’ teaching and obeyed it. The other also heard Jesus’ teaching but didn’t follow it. How does this help our understanding of the parable we are looking at today?
- Have you recognised Jesus as the Messiah who will return as judge?
- Are you living your life as a follower of Jesus? Does your lifestyle match what you say you believe?



ORATIO:

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul reminds us of the salvation hope we have in Jesus. Give thanks that through Jesus’ death and resurrection we can be forgiven and reconciled to God. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you live each day in obedience to him.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Meditate on these verses from Proverbs 3:5-7:

‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know. Remember the Lord in everything you do, and he will show you the right way. Never let yourself think that you are wiser than you are; simply obey the Lord and refuse to do wrong.’

USE YOUR TALENTS

*Matthew 25:14-19, 24-30**

¹⁴“At that time the Kingdom of heaven will be like this. Once there was a man who was about to go on a journey; he called his servants and put them in charge of his property. ¹⁵He gave to each one according to his ability: to one he gave five thousand gold coins, to another he gave two thousand, and to another he gave one thousand. Then he left on his journey. ¹⁶The servant who had received five thousand coins went at once and invested his money and earned another five thousand. ¹⁷In the same way the servant who had received two thousand coins earned another two thousand. ¹⁸But the servant who had received one thousand coins went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹“After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them.

²⁴“Then the servant who had received one thousand coins came in and said, ‘Sir, I know you are a hard man; you reap harvests where you did not sow, and you gather crops where you did not scatter seed. ²⁵I was afraid, so I went off and hid your money in the ground. Look! Here is what belongs to you.’

²⁶“‘You bad and lazy servant!’ his master said. ‘You knew, did you, that I reap harvests where I did not sow, and gather crops where I did not scatter seed? ²⁷Well, then, you should have deposited my money in the bank, and I would have received it all back with interest when I returned. ²⁸Now, take the money away from him and give it to the one who has ten thousand coins. ²⁹For to every person who has something, even more will be given, and he will have more than enough; but the person who has nothing, even the little that he has will be taken away from him. ³⁰As for this useless servant – throw him outside in the darkness; there he will cry and grind his teeth.’

**For the full parable also read verses 20-23.*

*Other Readings: Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31; Psalm 128:1-5;
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6*



LECTIO:

On one level Jesus probably intended the religious leaders of his day to understand this parable as being directed against them. They behaved like the wicked servant, hiding God’s truth rather than making it a light for the world

(Matthew 5:14-16) and locking the doors to the Kingdom of heaven rather than opening them (Matthew 23:13-14).

The parable also speaks to us today about being good stewards of the gifts and resources God has entrusted to us. The master is going away so he entrusts different amounts of his money to three servants according to their abilities (verse 15). It is important to realise that a huge sum of money is involved. What is translated here as ‘gold coin’ was a unit of money known as a ‘talent’ which was worth over 15 years’ wages for a labourer at the time.

The servants that started with 5,000 and 2,000 coins are both congratulated for returning twice that amount to their master. But the servant who hid his master’s money, and has done absolutely nothing with it the whole time the master has been away, is condemned.



MEDITATIO:

- What does verse 24 reveal about the attitude of the lazy servant to his master?
- What is our attitude to our time and money? Do we consider they belong to us or to God?
- Do we see ourselves as God’s servants using our gifts and resources to further God’s kingdom on earth?
- What can we learn from the fact that the master gave the servants different amounts according to their ability?



ORATIO:

The Psalm for today is a ‘wisdom psalm’. It teaches that blessing is to be found in honouring God by living in obedience to him. Pray through these verses from Psalm 128 and ask God to help you to be a good steward of the talents he has entrusted to you.



CONTEMPLATIO:

Reflect on all the talents and resources God has given to you. Are you hiding them or are you using them for God’s glory?

FAITH IN ACTION

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹“When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, ³²and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will put the righteous people on his right and the others on his left. ³⁴Then the King will say to the people on his right, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. ³⁵I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, ³⁶naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.’

³⁷“The righteous will then answer him, ‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?’ ⁴⁰The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these members of my family, you did it for me!’

⁴¹“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Away from me, you that are under God’s curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels! ⁴²I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me a drink; ⁴³I was a stranger but you would not welcome me in your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me.’

⁴⁴“Then they will answer him, ‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and would not help you?’ ⁴⁵The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me.’ ⁴⁶These, then, will be sent off to eternal punishment, but the righteous will go to eternal life.”

*Other Readings: Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17; Psalm 23:1-3, 5-6;
1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28*



1 LECTIO:

This liturgical year draws to a close with the final part of Jesus’ fifth discourse in Matthew’s gospel. It is not a parable in the strict sense but paints a vivid scene of judgement. It is a complex passage so we will only be able to draw out a few points.

In most of the earlier parables the King represents God the Father. Here Jesus himself is identified as the King who will come to judge all people. Jesus knows that he will be rejected by the religious leaders and crucified. When he returns his true identity will be beyond dispute.

The image of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats would have been a very familiar one to people in Israel at the time. Sheep and goats grazed together during the day but at night the goats, being less hardy, were separated so they could be kept warm.

The division of the righteous and unrighteous reinforces much of Jesus’ earlier teaching. Reaching out in compassion to people around is a natural expression of faith in Jesus. Walking in obedience to Jesus and loving our neighbour leaves no place for being indifferent to the needs of others.

2 MEDITATIO:

- Meditate on Ezekiel 34:11-17. Consider all the different ways the shepherd cares for his sheep. What does this say to you about how God cares for you?
- How does James 2:14-26 help our understanding of this passage?
- How do you respond to the fact that Jesus will come to judge us all?
- What does this passage have to say to us about our attitudes to other people?

3 ORATIO:

Worship Jesus as the King seated on his throne and surrounded by the angels. Ask God to make you responsive to the needs of others. God might speak to you about people who are spiritually, as well as physically, hungry or thirsty.

4 CONTEMPLATIO:

Give thanks that we are reconciled to God because Jesus paid the price for our sin on the cross.