

THE JOURNEY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Luke 9:51 – 19:40

The journey begins

⁵¹ **When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.**

⁵² **And he sent messengers ahead of him.**

On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him;

⁵³ **but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.**

⁵⁴ **When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?'**

⁵⁵ **But he turned and rebuked them.**

⁵⁶ **Then they went on to another village.**

Jesus has been speaking about the rejection he is going to suffer at the hands of the leaders of Judaism (9:22), and, in the scene of the transfiguration, Luke has told us that Jesus, Moses and Elijah 'were speaking of Jesus' departure (*exodos*), which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem' (9:31). Now we learn that the days are drawing near for him to be 'taken up' – an allusion to the taking up of Elijah to heaven in the fiery chariot (2Kings 2:9-11). Nothing can deter Jesus from what he perceives as God's will for him, and so he 'set his face to go to Jerusalem'.

Jesus' ministry in Galilee began with rejection (4:16-30). His journey to Jerusalem begins in the same way. Luke is once again stressing his conviction that rejection cannot thwart God's will. There is a further allusion to Elijah in the reaction of James and John. One of the stories in the Elijah saga tells of his causing fire to come down from heaven to destroy those who opposed him (2Kings 1:10-11). Yet another link with Elijah is found in Jesus' disciples being 'sent ahead' of the Lord to 'make ready for him' (compare 1:17,76; 3:4; 7:27).

However, here at the beginning of the journey it is made abundantly clear that the spirit that spurs Jesus on, and so the spirit that must motivate his disciples, is different from that which characterised Elijah or which we find expressed in the following passage from Ezekiel:

I will set my face against them; although they escape from the fire, the fire shall still consume them; and you shall know that I am the Lord, when I set my face against them.

– Ezekiel 15:7

This difference is brought out in a variant text found in a number of ancient manuscripts:

He turned and rebuked them, and said, You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them. Then they went on to another village.

Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem to bring pardon and peace. The rest of this section will focus on what it is that characterises the spirit of Jesus, and must characterise the spirit of anyone who would accompany him.

The cost of journeying with Jesus

What is needed to follow Jesus to Jerusalem? The first character in this scene is obviously enthusiastic. Jesus insists that to follow him is to follow the 'Son of Man' (see commentary on 5:24). If he wants to follow Jesus he must be prepared to identify, as Jesus does, with the poor in spirit who cry to the Lord in their distress. He must be ready to share in Jesus' mission which is to bring about God's redemption.

The term 'foxes' may refer to Herod and his supporters, while 'birds of the air' may refer to the Roman occupying forces. These are the groups that exercise power in the land. If the scribe is seeking power he had better join them. To follow Jesus is to follow the Son of Man who demonstrates the judgment of God, but who does so by associating with the oppressed and powerless.

The second person is someone whom Jesus invites to be his disciple, and who responds positively to the invitation, addressing Jesus as 'Lord'. However, family pressures are being brought to bear on him, and he feels that he should carry out the duties expected of him as a responsible son.

He asks to go 'first' to bury his father. From the fact that the man is not already at home it is clear that his father is alive at the time of speaking. What he is actually asking is to leave off following Jesus, to go back and stay with his father until his father dies, and then, having buried his father, he would be free to come back and join Jesus.

Jesus' reply makes it clear that nothing, not even family obligations, can come before being a disciple. We must follow Jesus, even if it means leaving our father (2:49; 5:11). With Jesus there is a new creation, a new life. Whatever was before is, by comparison, 'dead'. A disciple must leave everything to follow Jesus, seeking 'first' the 'kingdom of God'.

The third example is similar to the second, though this man wants only to go 'first' to bid farewell to his family. Jesus' response continues from the previous passage the allusions to the Elijah saga. Elisha was ploughing when called by Elijah (1Kings 19:19-21).

Following Jesus requires of us a single-minded commitment to carrying on the mission given us by God. We recall Jesus' earlier words: 'Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', and do not do what I tell you?' (6:46).

⁵⁷ *As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'*

⁵⁸ *And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'*

⁵⁹ *To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'*

⁶⁰ *But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'*

⁶¹ *Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.'* ⁶² *Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'*

compare
Matthew 8:19-22

¹ *After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.*

² **He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. ³ Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.**

⁴ **Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.** ⁵ **Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" ⁶ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.**

⁷ **Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house.**

⁸ **Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹ cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."**

compare Matthew 10:7-13
Matthew 9:37-38

Sharing in Jesus' mission

Jesus' mission is expanding. The commission given earlier to the twelve (9:1-6) is now extended to the 'seventy' (or, according to other ancient manuscripts, the 'seventy-two'). This recalls the scene where Moses shares his spirit with the seventy elders, and the spirit comes down also on two others in the camp (Numbers 11:10-17).

Luke may also intend to emphasise the universal nature of the mission and be alluding to Genesis 10 which gives the nations of the world as seventy-two. These disciples, like the earlier group (9:52), are 'sent ahead of him'. Their mission, like that of the twelve, continues that of John the Baptist (see the commentary on 9:52).

Jesus' mission instruction begins with a call to prayer. It is God's mission that they are on. Only God can provide the missionaries and, for their mission to be effective, they cannot rely on their own resources but must continually look to God, listen to God, and rely on God (compare commentary on 9:3).

They will be like 'lambs in the midst of wolves', with all the vulnerability that goes with a mission of love. They are to 'greet no one on the road'. This is not an instruction encouraging lack of courtesy, but an indication of the urgency of their mission and of their need to be committed to it single-mindedly. The gift that they bring from God is the gift of 'peace': that harmony and fullness of personal and communal life that comes from union with God (see 1:79; 2:14,29; 7:50; 8:48). One is reminded of the words of Isaiah:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

– Isaiah 52:7

The peace which they offer may not be accepted. God's respect for human freedom means that there is no guarantee of success for Jesus' apostles. Where they are welcomed they are to continue Jesus' healing mission, announcing the good news of the 'kingdom of God'.

We have already witnessed Jesus being rejected (4:28-29; 6:11; 7:34; 9:53; see 2:34), and he has spoken of the rejection that awaits him in Jerusalem (9:22). Jesus has already warned his disciples that they too will experience rejection (6:22). They must not be deterred by this, but must be faithful to their healing ministry, and keep insisting on the good news that ‘the kingdom of God has come near to you’. They are to make clear to those who reject them what this rejection means by shaking the dust from their feet (see commentary on 9:5).

Sodom, long buried beneath the Dead Sea, was a symbol of the most wicked of Gentile cities. According to tradition, it was destroyed because it rejected the word of God. What will be the destruction that comes to those who reject the word that is the fulfilment of all God’s words, the definitive call to salvation! Tyre and Sidon are castigated by the prophets because of the injustice upon which their power was based. It will be worse for Chorazin and Bethsaida. This is not a final and all-inclusive condemnation of the inhabitants of these Galilean towns. Jesus’ offer of salvation is still open for acceptance. It is, however, a warning and a rebuke, and the mood indicates an expectation that, on the whole, most will continue to reject him.

The worst rebuke is kept for Capernaum. The people of Nazareth were envious of the deeds Jesus did there (4:23; see 4:31; 7:1). Capernaum has seen more of Jesus, and so more of God’s merciful design, than any other town. They have been invited to be ‘exalted to heaven’. Their failure to believe means that they will, on the contrary, be ‘brought down to Hades’.

Finally, Jesus expresses his identification with his missionaries (compare the conversion experience of Paul, Acts 9:5). God has declared that we are to listen to Jesus (9:35). Luke is telling his readers that they listen to Jesus by listening to the community of Jesus’ disciples. To reject those sent by Jesus is to reject him, and to reject him is to reject God whose mission he and they are carrying out.

10 But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say,

11 “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.”

12 I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

13 Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.

14 But at the judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

15 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades.

16 Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.’

compare
Matthew 10:14-16
Matthew 11:20-24
Matthew 10:40

The true joy of Jesus' missionaries

¹⁷ The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'

¹⁸ He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.'

¹⁹ See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.

²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

The disciples rejoice at the power they exercise over evil. They are sharing in the ministry of Jesus (4:1-12; 31-36; 41; 6:18; 7:21; 8:2,33; 9:42), as he had promised (9:1).

Some were expecting a great, final battle between good and evil at the end of human history. Luke sees this battle, already won by Jesus, as being waged here and now in the life of the Christian community (compare Acts 3:6,16; 4:7,10,12,30; 5:41).

In words reminiscent of Isaiah 14:12-15, Jesus reveals to his apostles the ultimate significance of their victory: Satan is suffering defeat. Jesus' missionaries should not be afraid, for, in the words of the psalmist:

On their hands the angels of the Most High will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

– Psalm 91:12-13

At the same time, Jesus warns them not to lose perspective. They should rejoice not so much in the conquering of evil as in the communion with God that has been given them. Their names are in God's scroll. They belong to him (compare Exodus 32:32; Isaiah 4:3, 56:5; Daniel 12:1; Psalm 69:29).

Jesus delights in his disciples

In presenting Jesus' prayer, Luke invites us to contemplate the heart of the Saviour whose every action is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Jesus addresses God in traditional fashion as 'Lord of heaven and earth' (see Psalm 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; Acts 4:24; 17:24). But first he calls God 'Father', expressing the special intimacy he experiences as God's Son. Those who think of themselves as 'wise and intelligent' have rejected him; not so those who know that they are as infants before the revelation of God. The idea is traditional:

The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple ['infants'].

– Psalm 119:130

These are the 'poor' addressed in the beatitudes (6:20). God's 'gracious will', God's saving design as revealed by Jesus has been welcomed by them. They have cried to God in their distress and have rejoiced in the obvious divine authority of Jesus' words and actions.

Having thanked his Father, Jesus goes on to speak of the intimacy of the communion which he has with him. Revelation comes out of this communion. Luke is portraying Jesus as the one who fulfils and brings to perfection the revelatory mission of Moses (Exodus 33:12-14). God knows Moses, and Moses prays to know God, who promises to be with him and give him rest. Concerning his special intimacy with Moses, God declares:

With him I speak face to face — clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord.

– Numbers 12:8; compare Deuteronomy. 34:10

Jesus' communion with God goes beyond even that of Moses, for in this especially does Jesus fulfil the law and the prophets. It is this intimate communion with God which Jesus shares with his disciples, and it is in this that they should rejoice. In Jesus they are witnessing the fulfilment of all God's promises. In sharing his mission they are coming to know God as Father and to experience his compassion for the poor (6:36).

²¹ At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

²² All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

²³ Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!

²⁴ For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.'

compare
Matthew 11:25-27
Matthew 13:16-17

²⁵ **Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’**

²⁶ **He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’**

²⁷ **He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’**

²⁸ **And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this (‘go on doing this’) and you will live.’**

compare
Matthew 22:34-40
Mark 12:28-34

The commandment of love

The lawyer’s question is asked ‘to test Jesus’. He wants to know Jesus’ real attitude to the Law, because for him the keeping of the Law is the condition for receiving God’s gift of ‘eternal life’. By *eternal* life, he means the life which comes from God and which transcends space and time.

Jesus assumes the role of a teacher and turns the question back to the lawyer. The lawyer responds by quoting the *Shema*’, so-called after its first word in Hebrew. In its original setting it is followed by this injunction:

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

– Deuteronomy 6:6-9

It was a pious practice to wear a small pouch which contained this text. It was worn on the forehead as a reminder to keep these words always before one’s eyes. It was worn on the arm as a reminder to always act in accordance with them. A mezuzah which contained the text of the *Shema*’ was also hung at the entrance to the home. The lawyer immediately adds a quotation from Leviticus 19:18, the importance of which is borne out by the following tradition concerning Rabbi Hillel the Elder, who died when Jesus was in his early teens. Asked to give a summary of the Law, he is said to have replied:

What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbours. This is the whole Law, and the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.

– The Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath 31a

First and foremost, love characterises God’s relationship with us: a relationship expressed by his redemptive action. It is this love which makes possible in us a wholehearted response of love to God, and it is this wholehearted response to God that flows over into our relationships with others. This point is picked up by Jesus’ disciples and repeated elsewhere in the New Testament:

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

– 1John 4:8-10

So it is that Paul can write:

The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

– Galatians 5:14

The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.

– Romans 13:9

Likewise, James:

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'.

– James 2:8

Love of God, that is to say, a commitment to listen to God's word and obey his will, makes possible a love of others that transcends natural friendship, convenience and self-interest. Furthermore, love of others is the test of the reality of one's love of God. As John says:

Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

– 1John 4:20

To know God and to listen to God will allow God's own love to be 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). And it is this love that will flow back to God and out to everyone, for everyone is loved by God.

Paul's letters are filled with exhortations to love, as are the letters of John. We will take but one example to aid us in our reflection:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

– Philippians 2:1-5

Jesus approves of the answer given by the lawyer, but adds that understanding is not enough. To 'live' he must actually *do* what he knows is to be done (10:28).

If love for God and love for one's neighbour belong, in effect, to one and the same commandment, how are we to know what to do when we find ourselves in a situation where the demands of obedience to God and the requirements of love for one's neighbour appear to be in conflict? This problem is addressed in the following two scenes.

Love of neighbour

²⁹ **But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'**

³⁰ **Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.'**

³¹ **Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.**

³² **So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.**

³³ **But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.**

³⁴ **He went to him and**

The lawyer is unhappy with the reversal of roles and tries to gain the upper hand. The expected, and according to the received teaching of the day, the correct answer to 'Who is my neighbour?' is found in the following 'wisdom':

If you do good, know to whom you do it, and you will be thanked for your good deeds. Do good to the devout, and you will be repaid - if not by them, certainly by the Most High . . . Give to the devout, but do not help the sinner. Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly; hold back their bread, and do not give it to them, for by means of it they might subdue you; then you will receive twice as much evil for all the good you have done to them. For the Most High also hates sinners and will inflict punishment on the ungodly. Give to the one who is good, but do not help the sinner.

– Ben Sirach 12:1-7

According to this understanding, one's neighbour is a devout and observant Jew. Jesus' behaviour regularly cut across this and the lawyer is still trying to expose Jesus as a person who does not follow the Law. Jesus tells the story of a man who is robbed, stripped, beaten and left half dead by the side of the road. It is important to note that all we ever find out about him is that he is a 'man'. Here is our first lesson: to be a 'neighbour' it is enough to be a person. We are introduced to a priest who is travelling down the same road. Because of his social position we are to assume that he is riding. He sees the man but passes by on the other side. He feels under no obligation to assist the man, because it is not at all clear that he is a neighbour towards whom he has obligations.

Furthermore, it is possible that the man is dead and a priest was forbidden to pass within two metres of a corpse, under pain of being considered ritually unclean. To investigate would mean running this risk. He might have to return to Jerusalem to buy and sacrifice a heifer. We are not surprised that he avoids this risk and continues on his way. He can always claim to be scrupulously obeying God's injunction.

Next comes a Levite. He, too, is on his way from Jerusalem having completed his cult obligations. These included pouring oil and wine on the offerings to prepare them for sacrifice. He sees the man. If the priest did nothing, why should he? Besides there is not much that he can do (we are to assume that he is walking). However, he had oil and wine with him, and so he could have brought some ease and comfort to the man. It is easier to pour these on a sacrifice than to care for a neighbour!

Anyone listening to Jesus would have expected the next character to be a Jewish layman, but here the story takes a sudden twist. He is a Samaritan. Travelling in Judaeen territory, he is in more danger than either the priest or the Levite. He also has more reason not to act, since it is more likely that the man by the side of the road was a Jew, and so an enemy, rather than a 'neighbour'. Let us observe carefully what he does.

The priest 'saw' the man by the roadside. The Levite 'came to the place'. The Samaritan 'came near *him*'. The personal note is not accidental. Furthermore, while all three saw the man, the Samaritan, like Jesus at Nain (7:13), 'was moved with pity'. The key to the story lies here. Because he is moved with pity, he does what the Levite could have and should have done, but failed to do. Without any concern as to who the man might be, 'he bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them'. There is an echo of the critique offered by Hosea:

The Lord has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him ... He will come to us ... I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. They transgressed the covenant, they deal faithlessly with me ... As robbers lie in wait for someone, so the priests have banded together; they murder on the road... they commit a monstrous crime.

– Hosea 6:1-10

Next the Samaritan does what the priest could have and should have done, but failed to do. 'He put him on his own animal, brought him [or, perhaps 'led it'] to an inn, and took care of him'. We are in Judah. It is a Jewish inn. One can imagine the risk the Samaritan was taking. Should the man happen to be known there, the people in the inn may have acted violently towards the Samaritan and asked questions later. At the inn the Samaritan reverses the crime of the robbers. He sees that the poor man is cared for, clothed, and financially covered.

The answer to Jesus' final question 'Which of them was a neighbour?', is unavoidable, yet it contains an understanding of 'neighbour' that goes beyond anything imagined by the lawyer. Jesus' reply is uncompromising. If we truly want the life that comes from God, we have no option but to do what the Samaritan did. There is no place for prejudice or sectarianism, and there is no place for avoiding the demands of love of neighbour by hiding behind laws which aim at regulating our relationship with God.

bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

³⁷ He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Love of God

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.

³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.'

⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;

⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

There is no intended criticism here of the service which Martha is providing (compare 4:39). She is corrected by Jesus because she is 'distracted' by her many tasks; she is 'worried and distracted by many things'(compare 8:14). By contrast her sister Mary is portrayed as a disciple, sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to what he is saying.

For Martha's service to be truly an expression of love of neighbour, it would need to flow out of the contemplation that belongs to a disciple. Then it would not be distracted nor would it cause her worry. She would, on the contrary, be delighted to see her sister responding to Jesus' love, even though her sister's response was so different from her own. We can love our neighbour as ourselves only to the extent that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind (see 10:27). Love of neighbour is undistracted only to the extent that it is an expression of love of God and flows from an obedient listening to his word.

Jesus has already exhorted his disciples not to worry. Being caught up in the 'cares of life' was partly responsible for choking the seed that fell among thorns (8:14). Later, he will ask them to look at the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, and stop worrying (12:29). He also warns: 'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with ... the worries of this life'(21:34). The contrast between Martha and Mary supports the advice of Peter:

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

– 1Peter 5:7

Mary is doing this, and she 'has chosen the better part'. Saint Teresa of Avila composed a prayer on this scene:

I sometimes remember the complaint of that holy woman, Martha; her complaint was not merely of her sister - I feel sure that the chief cause of her sorrow was the thought that You, Lord, had no compassion on her for the labour that she was enduring nor cared whether or no she was with You. Perhaps she thought that You had less love for her than for her sister, and this would have troubled her more than serving One Whom she loved so dearly, for love turns labour into rest. And so she said nothing to her sister, but made her complaint to You, Lord, alone, for love made her bold enough to ask why you did not care for her. Your answer, which seems to imply that the source of her complaint was as I have been saying, was that it is love alone which gives value to all things and that the most needful thing is that it should be so great that nothing can hinder its operation.

– from Exclamations of the soul in love

The central place of prayer in the life of a disciple

In his prologue, Luke presented Jesus in the temple concerned with ‘the affairs of my Father’ (2:49). He was at prayer, Luke tells us, at his baptism at the beginning of his public ministry (3:21). Before choosing the twelve, Jesus ‘went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the whole night in prayer to God’ (6:12). He ‘was praying alone, with only the disciples near him’ (9:18) on the occasion of his asking them who they believed him to be. Just after Peter’s declaration that he was the Messiah of God, he ‘went up on the mountain to pray’ (9:28) and was transfigured.

Here again we see Jesus in prayer, and on this occasion his disciples ask him to teach them to pray. Jesus’ reply takes us to the heart of his own prayer, and the prayer he taught them has been treasured in the community as an example of Jesus’ own prayer and of how we should pray as his disciples. We can pray this prayer only while contemplating Jesus and accepting his invitation to join him in the intimacy of his communion with God.

God is addressed simply as ‘Father’. The practise of calling God ‘Abba’, the intimate address used by Jesus, is found in one of Paul’s earliest letters (written about 53AD):

Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’

– Galatians 4:6

Similarly in his letter to the community in Rome a few years later:

You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

– Romans 8:15-16

This is the Spirit of God that descended on Jesus at his baptism (3:22), the Spirit that searches the ‘depths of God’ (1Corinthians 2:10), and the depths of the human heart. To pray to God our ‘Father’ is to be conscious of our union with Jesus. It is to join with his prayer and to allow his Spirit to move our hearts and minds to share his sentiments. Christian prayer is the prayer of Jesus drawing his disciples with him towards God. It is the prayer of the ‘poor’, responding to the assurance of a Father’s loving presence.

There are no texts in the Hebrew Scriptures in which God is addressed as ‘Abba’, though we do find God spoken of as a tender father:

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 31:20

*¹ He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’
² He said to them, ‘When you pray, say: Father,*

compare
Matthew 6:9

**hallowed
be your
name.
Your king-
dom come.
³ Give us
each day
our daily
bread.
⁴ And for-
give us our
sins, for we
ourselves
forgive
everyone
indebted to
us.**

The first words of the prayer express the deepest longing of the heart of Jesus: 'Hallowed be your name'. To be 'hallowed' is to be recognised as holy and treated as such. 'Holy' is a word kept solely for God. It refers to the unique beauty and mystery of God who transcends the whole of the created universe. In Isaiah's vision, the seraphs cried:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.

– Isaiah 6:3

If people are said to be 'holy', as they sometimes are, this is not a statement about some quality which they possess; rather, it is an assertion that God, the Holy One, is in them. Likewise a place is said to be holy only because the Holy One has been experienced there. However, as Isaiah says: 'the whole earth is full of God's glory'.

Who God is has been revealed in creation, in the history of God's 'holy' people and, for Luke and his community, most beautifully and in a perfect way in Jesus. The 'name' of God means God as addressed by us, God as the one we invoke and to whom we pray. God is revealed as one who wishes to relate to us personally. Jesus understood his mission as letting everyone know who God really is, so that people would see the beauty of God radiantly manifest, and so would respond in delight and praise.

The first movement of Jesus' prayer makes it clear that this is to be the primary focus also of the prayer of his disciples. They are to want God to be praised and glorified everywhere and by everyone in a creation that filled with the glory of God.

The second phrase, 'your kingdom come', points to the way in which this primary longing is to be realised.

When the angel announced to Mary that she was to conceive the Messiah, it was promised that 'of his kingdom there will be no end' (1:33). Jesus understood his mission as that of proclaiming 'the good news of the kingdom of God' (4:43; see 8:1; 9:11). His disciples share this same mission (9:2,60; 10:9,11).

This kingdom is enjoyed by the poor, who know their total dependence on God and cry to him in their distress (6:20). Wonderful as John the Baptist surely was, it was an even greater privilege to be a disciple of Jesus and to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God (7:28; 8:10), a kingdom that Jesus' contemporaries would see revealed in their lifetime (9:27). Being part of God's kingdom requires of us a wholehearted commitment to doing the will of God (9:62).

compare Mat-
thew 6:9-12

It follows that the more people respond in delight to the glory of God revealed (the more God's 'name' is hallowed), the more God's kingdom will be present in this world. It is for this that Jesus is giving his life, and he invites his disciples to share this mission and this prayer. God is present in Jesus. God is to be radiantly and obviously present in the community of Jesus' disciples. The longing expressed in 'your kingdom come' will be fully satisfied only when all live as Jesus lives, when God is 'all in all' (1 Corinthians 15:28).

In his prayer so far, the heart of Jesus has been caught up in contemplation of God, longing that the radiant beauty of God may become obvious to all. Jesus, recognising the frailty of his human condition, now pleads with his Father for three things, and invites us to do the same.

'Give us each day our daily bread'. This is the 'bread' that Jesus was tempted to provide for himself in the first temptation (4:3). Jesus knows that the bread we need is always 'manna from heaven'. God alone has the wisdom to know what 'bread' we really need, and he will provide this, but only enough to last us from day to day. Jesus invites his disciples to share this trust. As early as the first century, this prayer was solemnly recited just prior to the reception of the Eucharist. This is an indication of how the early church understood 'bread' in this context. The bread of life, the manna from heaven, is, before anything else, Jesus himself given to us while we await our participation in the heavenly banquet.

'Forgive us our sins, as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us'. It is the consciousness of God's forgiveness that brings us, in the prayer itself, to forgive others. It is impossible to repay God for all that God has given us, and so Jesus asks his Father to cast aside the debt. Jesus embraced the human condition. His heart, though beautifully sinless and entirely loving, was still a heart that knew the limitations of the human. In the weakness he shares with all the human race, he asks his Father to keep giving him life, love, the Spirit, and the blessed communion that sustains him, knowing that, as man, he would always be in God's debt. It is this total generosity of God that enables God to not measure the love he offers and to keep giving (to 'for-give')..

Jesus, the sinless one, invites his disciples to make the same request. We have already seen that this means that we will have to suffer many injustices (6:22), and that we must continue to give love to those who respond with malice (6:27). We have already seen Jesus forgiving sin (5:20), and later he will tell us that we too must forgive, and without limit (17:3-4). This is what is asked of someone who is 'blessed' to be a disciple of Jesus. Only thus, sustained by the daily bread from heaven, can we be instruments to bring about the kingdom of God.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

The final plea is a cry from the heart to our Father that He will not leave us alone to confront evil. We pray that God will be powerfully present with His grace, so that when times of trial come we will not fail the test. This is the prayer which Jesus will pray later for Peter (22:32).

James assures us that it is not God who is responsible for our times of trial (James 1:3). But in all our trials God is present gracing us through them. Always aware of the difficulties facing himself and his disciples, Jesus pleads with God that when trials come we will not give way under them, but that God will ensure that we remain faithful.

Jesus remained faithful, and when he was entering the final struggle he warned his disciples once again to pray that they would not enter into the power of evil at the time of trial (22:46).

Paul assures us:

God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

– 1Corinthians 10:13

The main temptation is to be scandalised in Jesus (7:23), because of the ways in which he does not fulfil our expectations of him. If we lose faith in him we will lose faith in God whom he reveals. As Jesus' disciples we are invited to pray, like him, to endure to the end (21:19). This can happen only if God rescues us, as he will rescue Jesus from death by taking him into his eternal embrace in the risen life. We are reminded of the final words of Paul's final letter:

The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom.

– 2Timothy 4:18

compare
Matthew 6:13

The point of this parable depends on the translation of the Greek of the final verse, *dia tēn anaideian outou*. The NRSV considers that it is speaking of the shameless insistence of the man asking for the bread. It seems more likely that it refers to the shame that would be experienced by the man in bed, if it were known that he had refused such a simple hospitality to a needy neighbour.

If this second understanding is correct, a contrast is being made between this and the following passage (11:13). Here we have an ordinary, and not very generous, neighbour who is shamed into granting a request for bread. In the following passage we see the generous love of our Father to whom we address our request for ‘our daily bread’ (11:3).

The neighbour in this parable gives the food requested, because not to do so would bring him dishonour. How much more confident we can be that our loving Father will respond to our prayer.

⁵ **And he said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.”’**

⁷ **And he answers from within, “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.”**

⁸ **I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence (to avoid shame) he will get up and give him whatever he needs.**

9 'So I say to you, Ask (keep on asking) **and it will be given you; search** (keep on searching) **and you will find; knock** (keep on knocking) **and the door will be opened for you.**

10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?

12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?

13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give *the Holy Spirit* to those who ask him!

compare Matthew 7:7-11

This is the prayer of the 'poor' who know that they are completely dependent upon God and so, like little children with a parent, they simply ask for what they want, knowing that they will receive 'good gifts', indeed, the greatest of good gifts, the Holy Spirit, from their Father who loves them. Jesus leaves us in no doubt: 'it will be given', 'you will find', 'the door will be opened for you'. And this applies to 'everyone'.

However, like children, we do not always have the wisdom to know what is good for us. A little child may not be able to distinguish between a fish and a snake, or an egg and a scorpion. The human parent, seeing the child reach out pleadingly for a snake or a scorpion, knows that what the child really wants is fish or an egg, and so the parent satisfies not the immediate request but the need that the request attempts to express. Even more so is this true of God.

Jesus therefore encourages his disciples to ask. We may not have the wisdom to know what is good for us. We are still invited to ask, with our eyes fixed not on the object of our request but on God our Father. God is wise and God will certainly give us what we need. He will lead us to find what it is we are really seeking. He will open for us the door that leads to life. He longs to give his Spirit to us. We might recall the words of Jeremiah:

When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.

– Jeremiah 29:13

In the Acts, Luke presents us with scene after scene in which the prayer of the Christian community is answered by the gift of God's Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17; 15:8).

Jesus releases a man from the evil that keeps him dumb

Luke has focused on the central place of love in the life of a disciple (10:25-42). He then established that this love can come only from the Holy Spirit, and so only when we join our prayer to that of Jesus (11:1-13). Here he wishes to show that, when we are open to the Spirit, we are liberated from the power of evil which oppresses us, and our lips are freed to speak to others the word given to us by God. This theme is introduced in this opening scene. A man who is unable to speak is healed by Jesus, to the amazement of the crowds.

As in the scene at Nazareth (4:22,29), some still reject Jesus. They interpret his action as coming from the 'ruler of the demons', called here 'Beelzebul'. How often in our folly we interpret as evil what is in fact good. This is the sin which Jesus will call the sin 'against the Holy Spirit' (12:10).

Jesus shows up the stupidity of their accusation with his illustration concerning a kingdom divided against itself, and he challenges them to see in his ministry the action of God.

Pharaoh's magicians recognised the 'finger of God' in the miracles of Moses (Exodus 8:15). What Moses began, Jesus has come to complete. If they were to open their eyes and their hearts to this, they would realise that 'the kingdom of God has come to you'.

¹⁴ Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed.

¹⁵ But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.'

¹⁶ Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven.

¹⁷ But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house.

¹⁸ If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?— for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. ¹⁹ Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

²⁰ But if it is by the *finger* of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

compare Matthew 12:22-28
Mark 3:22-26

²¹ **When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe.**

²² **But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder.**

Jesus uses a second illustration, pointing out the need to bind a strong man before being able to plunder his property. The 'strong man' refers to the devil, and so to every evil force that exercises power over us. We recall the temptations experienced by Jesus, especially the second one in which the devil is portrayed as showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and saying to him: 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please' (4:6)

The seductive power of evil, as well as its power to corrupt everything it touches, is not difficult to see. However, as we have seen from the beginning of the gospel, evil does not have the final word and in Jesus God is speaking his word of mercy, healing and liberation.

Jesus is the 'more powerful one' (3:16) promised by John the Baptist. If people would only put aside their prejudices and listen to Jesus' words as well as observe his actions, they would see that he is overcoming evil and liberating people from its power. This is captured well by the English poet, John Donne:

Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

I, like an usurped town to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
but is captived and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.

Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.

compare
Matthew 12:29
Mark 3:27

– Holy Sonnets v

Jesus is God's Messiah gathering whoever responds in faith to the merciful love that invites repentance. He is fulfilling the promise declared by Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

– Isaiah 56:8

In refusing to accept Jesus, the people of Israel, along with their leaders, are opposing God's action. Their actions are evil, not those of Jesus. They are scattering the sheep, not gathering them.

Many of those listening to Jesus had been affected by his ministry. The power of evil that had in fact been controlling them had been cast out so that they could be said to be like a house that is 'swept and put in order'. But they were not open to fill their hearts with the Spirit of Jesus. Nothing filled the vacuum left by Jesus when he healed them of the evil possessing them. Here Jesus warns them that if they persist in refusing to make room in their hearts and in their lives for him and for the Spirit of God that fills him, they will find that evil will once again corrupt them and they will be even worse off than they were before his healing.

It is not enough to try to avoid evil. What is more, we cannot fight evil on our own. If we are ever going to learn to love, we must learn to understand our hearts, to accept our limitations and humbly to look to God, the source of all good, to draw us into his love. Only the Spirit of God can so fill our minds and hearts and lives that there is no room for evil.

²³ Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

²⁴ 'When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, "I will return to my house from which I came."

²⁵ When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order.

²⁶ Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first.'

compare Matthew 22:30
Matthew 12:43-45

We are to hear and obey God's word

²⁷ While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!'

²⁸ But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!'

Obedience to the will of God is a sure indication of the presence of the Spirit of God. In her hymn of praise (1:46-55) Mary acknowledged God's graciousness as the source of all her happiness. This was obvious to Elizabeth who exclaimed: 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord' (1:45).

The woman in the crowd could not restrain her admiration of Jesus and so of his mother. Earlier we heard Jesus say: 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it' (8:21).

Mary is, indeed, blessed to be the mother of Jesus. This relationship, however, was never something primarily of nature. From the beginning it was a gift of grace, a gift in which Mary believed, and to which she remained faithful.

If we wish to be disciples of Jesus we must learn, like his mother, to treasure God's word and God's action in our lives, to ponder their meaning in our hearts, and to be ever attentive to respond in obedience to God's inspiration (1:38; 2:19,51).

The folly of rejecting Jesus, the word and the wisdom of God

Jesus turns his attention here to those in the crowd who refuse to accept him unless he gives them a sign that would meet their expectations (compare 11:16). He is forced to move from warning to threat. It is surely with profound sadness that Jesus speaks of his contemporaries as ‘an evil generation’.

The people of Nineveh listened to God’s word spoken through his prophet, Jonah. The queen of Sheba listened to God’s word spoken through Solomon who was gifted with divine wisdom. Jesus’ contemporaries have Jesus, the Son of Man (see commentary on 5:24), who is speaking God’s word and revealing God’s wisdom to them. That is their sign.

If they continue in their obstinate rejection of him, he will be a sign not of the grace God is offering them but of the gravity of their sin in rejecting and then murdering God’s Messiah. Luke wants to stress that we have no excuse for rejecting Jesus. In comparing the people unfavourably with the Gentile city, Nineveh (Jonah 3:6-9), and with the Gentile queen of the South (1Kings 10:1-13), he emphasises their failure to repent, and their refusal to listen to Jesus’ words.

²⁹ When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, ‘This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. ³⁰ For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation.

³¹ The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!

³² The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

compare Matthew 12:38-42
Mark 8:11-12

³³ **No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lamp stand so that those who enter may see the light.**

³⁴ **Your eye is the lamp of your body.**

If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of (radiating) light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness.

³⁵ **Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness.**

³⁶ ***If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.***

compare

Matthew 5:15; Mark 4:21

Matthew 6:22-23; Luke 8:16

The enlightened heart radiates light to others

Here Jesus makes the point that if we radiate light out to others, this is an indication that there is light within us, a light that shines out from our heart through our eyes.

If, on the other hand, all people experience from us are negative feelings and negative judgments, such as people have just been having towards Jesus, this is proof that our hearts are shrouded in darkness.

Furthermore a healthy eye sees the world as it really is. It sees the sacred. Though often shrouded in the darkness of evil, the world and the people in it are fundamentally good, or, in the words of the Book of Genesis, ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31). God’s loving Spirit is everywhere manifest to the healthy eye, which is why Jesus could see goodness where others saw only sin. Hence his ability to reveal God and the herald what many people recognised as ‘good news’.

Our mind is meant to go back to the dumb man whom Jesus enabled to speak at the beginning of this section (see 11:14). He is a symbol for a disciple. If the words we speak are to enlighten others, it is necessary that our hearts be purified, for it is from the heart that the mouth speaks. The Spirit which Jesus has from his Father overpowers evil and releases the disciple to speak God’s word.

Here Jesus extends an invitation to let the light of God’s Spirit enter our hearts to purify them, so that they will be a source of light to others.

Lamentation over those who refuse to heed God's word

Luke has just presented Jesus' words on the importance of heeding God's word (11:27-28) and of allowing the light of God to enter our hearts (11:33-36). In this and the following passages (11:37-54) he laments those who fail to do either.

The style of this passage is modelled on that of a number of the prophets who, like Jesus, lament the failure of their contemporaries to listen to God's word and to alter their lives accordingly (see Isaiah 1:4; Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 13; Amos 5:16-20; Habakkuk 2:6-19). The key criticism is expressed by Isaiah:

They have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

– Isaiah 5:24

Jesus addresses his remarks firstly to the Pharisees (11:39-44) and then to the scribes, the students of the Law (11:45-52). Luke places these lamentations here because he wants the Christian community to heed their message. The missionary task given by Jesus to his disciples will fail if they are not converted from the attitudes castigated here by Jesus.

The first lament (11:39-41) focuses on the hypocrisy of seeming clean on the outside while inside having a heart that is 'full of greed and wickedness'. The Pharisees are trapped in their own folly. Jesus is attempting to bring them to insight. He confronts them with the truth of their behaviour and its inevitable consequences if they continue in their obstinate refusal to heed God's word.

Jesus is not saying that the outside does not matter, but his concern as always is with the heart, and with the outside insofar as it is consistent with and reveals what is within. As he has just said, if there is light inside, it will shine out (11:33-36).

He is concerned with purity of heart and he insists that the heart is purified only in the process of giving itself (11:41). A good example of this is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:29-37). 'Alms', that is to say deeds of mercy, have their source in the heart of our compassionate God (see 6:36). We must do what we can to be open to God's grace but we must know that only God can purify our hearts. Of ourselves we cannot attain to communion with God or be instruments of His grace to others.

³⁷While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. ³⁸The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner.

³⁹Then the Lord said to him, 'Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.

⁴⁰You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?

⁴¹So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.

compare Matthew 15:1-2
Mark 7:1-2
Matthew 23:25-26

⁴² **'But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice (judgment) and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practised, without neglecting the others.**

⁴³ **Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honour in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the market-places.**

⁴⁴ **Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it.'**

⁴⁵ **One of the lawyers answered him, 'Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too.'**

⁴⁶ **And he said, 'Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them.**

compare

Matthew 23: 23, 6-7, 27-28

Matthew 23:4

The second lament (11:42) accuses the Pharisees of neglecting God's judgment and God's love. Jesus is speaking of God's verdict concerning what really matters – a verdict he himself proclaimed to the whole world. They have failed to listen to what God is revealing in Jesus and have stubbornly held to their own conviction, with the result that their judgment of Jesus and of others is wrong. They have failed to recognise the faithful and merciful love of God, and so they have failed to show the same compassionate love to others (see 6:36).

There is a place for religious authority and it is to be respected. However, there are faults of which all must be wary. In his third lament (11:43), Jesus warns the Pharisees against enjoying the privileges and honours of office and the adulation that comes to people in such a position. Religious leaders, then and now, need to be warned against the danger of using their position in the religious community to attract people to themselves, thus gaining personal glory in God's name.

Finally, Jesus likens the Pharisees to unmarked graves. If a person in Jesus' day walked over a grave, he or she incurred ritual defilement which required a form of quarantine. They could take part in religious assemblies only after a period of isolation. The Pharisees present themselves as teachers of God's way but because of pride their hearts are not attuned to God. This is hidden beneath a mask of righteousness and so they are a danger to all with whom they come in contact.

Jesus then turns his attention to the lawyers (the scribes), who are respected in the community as masters of the Law and interpreters of God's word. They make of God's revelation a burden, failing to see it as a revelation of his redeeming, compassionate and faithful love. There is an obvious importance in upholding the value of good law, but this is done safely only by someone who is in touch with his own heart and with the hearts of those whom it is his responsibility to teach. The ultimate responsibility of the religious leader is to communicate convincingly the truth that God is love. If a teacher fails in this, he has failed to uphold any law that has its origins in God's word.

The scribes appear to honour the prophets but in reality are no better than their ancestors, who failed to listen to what the prophets were saying and murdered them. Jesus points out the irony of their building and decorating the tombs of the prophets. They are continuing the behaviour not of the prophets but of those who killed them. Their treatment of Jesus himself is in line with the infidelity and obstinacy of their ancestors.

The fall and destruction of Jerusalem at the beginning of the sixth century BC was seen as the consequence of the people's rejection of the prophets. Jesus can see history repeating itself.

The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy.

– 2Chronicles 36:15-16

Jesus mentions Abel and Zechariah because the story of Abel is found in the first book in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 4:8) and the story of Zechariah is found in the last book in the Hebrew Bible (2Chronicles 24:20-22).

The lawyers and, indeed, 'this generation', that is to say, all those who choose to follow the lawyers in rejecting Jesus, will suffer the consequences of their choice.

Finally, Jesus laments the fact that the lawyers present themselves as interpreters of tradition and teachers of the people but they fail to heed the very word they are committed to study and teach. In so doing they have 'taken away the key of knowledge', thus preventing others from entering into the real meaning of God's revelation. They act like this in regard to the words of the prophets. They are now doing it in regard to Jesus. Christian prophets and apostles can expect the same treatment (compare 6:22-23).

⁴⁷ Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. ⁴⁸ So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs.

⁴⁹ Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, "I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute," ⁵⁰ so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, ⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation.

⁵² Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.'

⁵³ When he went outside, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things, ⁵⁴ lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.

compare Matthew 23:29-32, 34-36
Matthew 23:13

¹ *Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another, he began to speak first to his disciples, 'Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy.*

² *Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.*

³ *Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops.*

⁴ *'I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. ⁵ But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!*

compare Matthew 10:26-28; 16:6; Mark 8:15
Luke 8:17; Mark 4:22

Disciples are to fear the corrupting attitudes of the Pharisees, not their opposition

In the preceding passage we have been listening to Jesus lamenting the unwillingness of the religious leaders to open their hearts to God's word. Here he warns his disciples not to follow their example. 'Yeast' causes dough to puff up. Jesus' disciples must beware of being contaminated by the hypocritical attitudes of the Pharisees which Jesus has just lamented (11:42-44). We have seen this hypocrisy at work in earlier scenes (5:17-32; 6:1-11; 7:30; 7:36-50). Jesus warns his disciples of the folly of hypocrisy. Nothing is hidden from God. In the final analysis, only the truth matters. As Paul reminds the Corinthians, when the Lord comes he will:

bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

– 1 Corinthians 4:5

Jesus goes on to tell them not to be afraid of their persecutors. People can kill their body, but the only one who has power over their soul, their life, is God. God is the only one worthy of fear. Rejection of God is the only thing to be afraid of, for that alone can result in hell, the eternal loss of life (see 12:5).

The word 'hell' translates the Greek *gehenna* which itself is a transliteration of the Hebrew *ge-hinnom*, the valley of Ben-Hinnom (see Joshua 18:16). This valley forms the southern boundary of Jerusalem and it was here that certain inhabitants of the city sacrificed children to the god Molech in an effort to placate the god and save the city (2Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). This was in the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem (587BC). Jeremiah was horrified at their action and cursed the valley:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter: for they will bury in Topheth until there is no more room. The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the animals of the earth; and no one will frighten them away.

– Jeremiah 7:32-33; see also 19:1-15; 32:35

By the first century AD *gehenna* had become a symbol. If the people refused to heed God's eschatological word, Jerusalem would suffer again the disaster of 587BC (1Enoch 90.24; 2Baruch 85:13; Revelation 19:20; 20:14-15).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews warns:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.
– Hebrews 10:31).

Likewise James:

There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy.

– James 4:12

When the Scriptures speak as they do of ‘fear’ in relation to God they are speaking of a sense of awe at God’s majesty and a fear of anything that can separate us from God’s creative and forgiving love. Everything about Jesus tells us how mistaken we are when we make God an object of dread.

Jesus makes this point by drawing attention to the providence of God that extends to the sparrows. We mean much more to God than they. God knows everything about us and dotes over each of us much more than human parents over their children. What parents are so enamoured of their child as to count the hairs on the child’s head? Jesus encourages us to place our trust in God. We are reminded of the words of Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord. ... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine ... For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour ... Do not fear, for I am with you.

– Isaiah 43:1-5

Jesus reminds his disciples that their acknowledgment of him in spite of persecution enables him to acknowledge them as his at the final judgment. He can do so because he is the Son of Man who identifies with the persecuted (see commentary on 5:24). If, on the other hand, we deny our relationship with him, he cannot pretend before his Father that things are otherwise. This is not to contradict his unconditional love. As Paul says of Jesus:

If we are faithless, he remains faithful.

– 2Timothy 2:13

His love is offered unconditionally. We must choose to accept or to reject it, to acknowledge him or to deny him. There is no way we can hide from the reality of our response or from its consequences. At the same time, we should note that the only person whom Luke mentions as denying Jesus is Peter (22:57). The compassion of the heart of Jesus flowed out to him in forgiving love (22:61) and Peter repented.

⁶ Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight.

⁷ But even the hairs of your head are all counted.

Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

⁸ ‘And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God;

⁹ but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God.

compare
Matthew 10:29-33; 6:26
Luke 12:24

¹⁰ And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

¹¹ When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say;

¹² for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.'

compare
Matthew 12:32; Mark 3:29
Matthew 10:19
Mark 13:11

Jesus reminds them that God is willing to forgive sin, even words spoken against the Son of Man. However, sin can be forgiven only when sinners recognise their sin and look to God for the forgiveness they need.

Sin, however, cannot be forgiven if people blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. If we are dying of thirst and there is only one source of water close by, and we judge the water to be impure and so refuse to drink, we will surely die. Likewise with those who reject God's Spirit and turn their back on the only one who can forgive them. They will find that there is no escape from their sin. God's Holy Spirit is everywhere. To the extent that we judge as evil what is in fact good we are cutting ourselves off from grace and so from the Holy Spirit who alone can heal us. Is this not why Jesus warns us against sitting in judgment upon others? And is this not why he pleads with us to forgive.

Jesus goes on to warn them of the kind of persecution they should expect (compare 6:22). He assures them that they will be sustained in their suffering by the Holy Spirit. This is the same Holy Spirit who brought about Jesus' conception (1:35), who descended from heaven and alighted upon him at his baptism (3:22), and who led him into the wilderness to be tested (4:1). It is the same Holy Spirit whom Jesus shares with his disciples, as promised by the Baptist (3:16). Because of this sharing his Father has become their Father.

Jesus promises them that when they are brought to trial because of their allegiance to him the Holy Spirit will strengthen and inspire them (compare Ephesians 6:19).

Peter writes:

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

– 1Peter 4:14

A warning against avarice

Having spoken of the central place of love in the life of a disciple (10:25-42), and so of prayer (11:1-13), and of the need to remain open to the healing and light that come from God's word (11:14 - 12:12), Luke moves now to focus on what it is that should be most precious to a disciple. As we shall see, it is communion with Jesus. This is experienced now, but only imperfectly. Luke directs our longing towards the hour when we shall experience full communion with our Lord.

Firstly, he establishes the point that material possessions cannot fulfil the longing that is in our hearts. The anecdote opens with a cry for justice – a cry, however, which is self-centred. Jesus' reply, as we have come to expect, approaches the problem from a perspective which invites the man to repentance. Jesus is not there as an arbitrator (literally, 'one who divides'), but as a reconciler (literally, 'one who unites'). He warns the man, and anyone else who is listening, not to focus on possessions if they really want life.

Jesus then tells a story about an excessively self-centred person. He is rich but his relationships with people are extremely poor. When he has a problem he talks it over with himself. His pleasure at his solution is also something that he talks over with his own 'soul'.

There is a nice play on words in the Greek text: the land is producing abundantly (12:16, *euphoreō*), and the rich man looks forward to the euphoria of a life of merriment (12:19, *euphrainō*). He is described, however, as a fool (12:20, *aphrōn*).

His life, like the crops, is a gift given him on loan to be used well and to produce a fruitful harvest. It is not something that is to be stored away against the future.

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.'

¹⁴But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'

¹⁵And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'

¹⁶Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly.'

¹⁷And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?"

¹⁸Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods."

¹⁹And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

²⁰But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.'

22 He said to his disciples, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

24 Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! 25

And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 26 If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?

27 Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 28 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you — you of little faith!

compare
Matthew 6:25-30

Our real treasure comes from God

In the previous passage, Luke made the point that material possessions cannot satisfy the human heart. Here he directs our longing towards God. Let us look at what Jesus is not saying. Firstly, he is not encouraging us to be irresponsible. Secondly, he is not inviting us to escape into a make-believe world. After all, ravens do starve, and lilies sometimes die before they bloom. So do people, including those who have placed their trust in God and have looked to him in their need only to find themselves victims of famine, war and persecution.

Jesus himself cried out to God in his agony (22:42), but he still died an excruciating death. Luke and his community were not strangers to persecution and suffering (6:22; 10:3; 12:4). This passage is bringing out the implications of the previous one. We are not to strive for things like food and clothing, forgetting that it is God who provides them and who cares for us. This is the kind of life lived by 'nations of the world', by those who do not know of the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus.

While living responsibly, we are not to 'worry' - the word recurs four times in this passage. We first met the word when Jesus spoke about those who are: 'choked by the worries and riches and pleasures of life'(8:14). This was the problem with Martha who was: 'worried and distracted by many things'(10:41). Peter writes:

Cast all your worries on God, because he cares for you.

– 1Peter 5:7

We find the same message in the Letter to the Hebrews:

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you'.

– Hebrews 13:5

Jesus is inviting his disciples not to be closed to the wonder of God's action in this world. Their concern indicates that they have 'little faith'. Faith does not protect us from the injustices and sufferings of life or from the horrible consequences of sin - our own sin or the sin of others. It does, however, give us a way of coping with them so that they do not destroy our heart or prevent us from loving. Faith opens us to the grace and love of God who never leaves or forsakes us.

God, our Father, knows what we really need and it will always be provided. We see a powerful example of this towards the end of Jesus' life. What Jesus wanted in his agony is one thing; what he really needed is another. What he really needed on the cross was the love of God to sustain him and enable him to endure his suffering in love and to commit his spirit to God. His eyes were not distracted from looking to God and his heart remained fixed on God, and so his whole body was 'full of light'(11:36). He is inviting us to the same trust.

Jesus is calling us to be 'poor'. While living responsibly, we are to be like children, peacefully leaving tomorrow in God's hands, and living today in trust. Our whole desire should be to belong to Jesus, and so to share in the kingdom of God which is already present in him, while we work to do the will of God and to bring about the final goal of God's beautiful and loving design for the world.

God's 'good pleasure'(12:32, *eudokeô*) is that the little flock of Jesus' disciples should experience the blessedness of enjoying the reign of God's love and of being part of the kingdom where God's saving and redeeming will is effective.

This was announced by the angels who at the birth of Jesus praised God for the peace that was to be enjoyed by those who were the objects of God's good pleasure (2:14, *eudokia*), a good pleasure lavished especially upon Jesus, his Son, in whom he was 'well pleased' (3:22, *eudokeô*).

Jesus is concerned about the heart. What is treasured in the heart motivates our thoughts, desires and actions. He warns his disciples against the constricting effect material possessions can have upon us when we allow them to possess us.

They are of value. We need them. If we have more than we need, like the man in the preceding parable, it is better that we rid ourselves of the surplus and give it to those who need it. This is an act of mercy, an act of justice, and when we are 'compassionate as the Father is compassionate' (6:36), we bind ourselves to the heart of God. Having chosen God as our treasure, we will learn that our hearts find rest in him.

29 And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying.

30 For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them.

31 Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

32 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

compare Matthew 6:31-34
Matthew 6:19-21

Watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord

³⁵ *'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;*
³⁶ *be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.*
³⁷ *Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.* ³⁸ *If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.*
³⁹ **'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.** ⁴⁰ **You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'**

compare
Matthew 24:43-44

Material possessions cannot satisfy our heart (12:13-21). Only God has the treasure for which we long (12:22-34), and that treasure is Jesus himself, our Lord. He comes from the marriage banquet and knocks on the door of our heart seeking entrance. He wants to take us to the banquet which has been prepared for us, there to satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. The same idea can be found in the Book of Revelations:

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

– Revelation 3:20

The Eucharistic allusion should not be missed. The psalmist invites us:

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

– Psalm 37:4

We read in the Song of Songs:

With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love.

– Song of Songs 2:3-4

Jesus does not want his disciples to be so distracted that they miss the grace of God's coming to them. He wants us to be alert, ready and watching. The kind of readiness expected of us is foreshadowed by the readiness the people of Israel had when they were awaiting the moment of redemption from Egypt:

This is how you shall eat the Passover: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord.

– Exodus 12:11

Jesus is inviting his disciples to the wedding banquet. This is what our hearts really desire. We must let nothing distract us. This is what it means to be vigilant: watching for his presence and listening for his word. Every coming of the Lord is a moment of judgment, a moment of liberation, an hour of the 'Son of Man' (see the commentary on 5:24).

This parable focuses on those who have been given a ministry of leadership in the community – a point emphasised by Luke by placing the question on the lips of Peter.

The more we have been graced, the greater the response we are able to give. Moreover, certain of Jesus' disciples are called to a special service of leadership and they will be judged on their faithfulness in carrying out this ministry.

Jesus' answer to Peter's question is given at the end. Those chosen to minister for Jesus to others need to pay special attention to Jesus' words. He is, however, speaking to 'everyone'.

⁴¹ *Peter said, 'Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?'*

⁴² *And the Lord said, 'Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time?'*

⁴³ *Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. ⁴⁴ Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions.*

⁴⁵ *But if that slave says to himself, "My master is delayed in coming," and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk,*

⁴⁶ *the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful.*

⁴⁷ *That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating.*

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

compare Matthew 24:45-51

Bringing fire to the earth

⁴⁹ *'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!*

⁵⁰ *I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!*

⁵¹ **Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?**

No, I tell you, but rather division!

⁵² *From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;* ⁵³ *they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'*

compare
Matthew 10:34-35

In the preceding section (12:13-48), Luke focused our attention on that for which our hearts most long. Here he assures us that it is being offered now. John the Baptist promised that the more powerful one who was coming after him would 'baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire' (3:16). This is the fire of God's judgment, a judgment of love that purifies us so that we can enjoy that communion with God for which we are made and for which we long.

Here Jesus gives expression to the longing in his heart to accomplish this mission. He was baptised, that is to say overwhelmed, with love at the Jordan. He knows that he is going to be overwhelmed again, in the passion and death that await him. His ministry spans the years between these two baptisms. His whole being is caught in the tension of longing to reach all, yet experiencing the rejection of those who obstinately refuse the grace he is offering. Luke sees this longing of Jesus as being fulfilled at Pentecost when the promised Spirit of the risen Jesus (Acts 1:5) was poured out upon the Church in 'tongues as of fire' (Acts 2:3): the fire of love. The sentiments of the heart of Jesus can be expressed in the words of the Song of Songs:

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.

– Song of Solomon 8:6-7

Jesus' words about division in the family come from the prophet Micah 7:6. Of course Jesus came to bring peace (1:79; 2:14; 7:50; 8:48). Has he not told his disciples to offer peace to those to whom their mission takes them (10:5-6)? His peace, however, comes with the two-edged sword that issues from the mouth of Jesus (Revelation 1:16), the 'sword of the Spirit which is the word of God' (Ephesians 6:17; see also Hebrews 4:12-13).

Even family values are not absolute. Each of us is created by love and for love and our soul is a sacred place that we and others must respect. Even if our family stand against obedience to the call of God experienced in the sacred depths of our souls, we must say Yes to God's call. Tolstoy speaks of a child:

He was nine years old. He was a child. But he knew his own soul and he treasured it, guarding it as the eyelid guards the eye.

Not even family should come between us and our soul.

Disciples need to interpret the present time

If the time of God's judgment is now, if we are being offered the fire of God's Spirit now, we cannot afford to miss the significance of the present moment.

Jesus is concerned about the acute spiritual blindness and obstinacy of the people. They can read the signs of the 'sky', but they cannot read the 'heavens' – that is to say, they cannot discern what God is doing among them.

Just as a person would be foolish not to settle out of court rather than face a long prison sentence, so they are foolish not to heed Jesus' words and accept the salvation he is offering them.

A further point is being made: our salvation hinges on our willingness to be reconciled with each other.

⁵⁴ *He also said to the crowds, 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat"; and it happens.*

⁵⁶ ***You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?***

⁵⁷ *'And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?*

⁵⁸ *Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison.*

⁵⁹ *I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.'*

compare Matthew 16:3
Matthew 5:25-26

¹ At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

² He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?'

³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them — do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?'

⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

The summons, now, to repentance

They tell Jesus of this atrocity committed by the Roman oppressors. He immediately changes the focus from the Romans to the people who are speaking with him. Whatever their concern about Pilate and the Galileans, their first concern should be to change their own behaviour.

Nor should they conclude that those who suffered a violent death at the hands of Pilate were guilty of some special sin. They are to take these deaths as an indication of the uncertainty of life and so as a warning to take life seriously and repent.

John the Baptist proclaimed 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (3:3). Jesus likewise saw his mission as one of calling 'sinners to repentance' (5:32). He lamented the failure of the people of Chorazin to repent (10:13), and levelled the same accusation against many of his contemporaries (11:32).

God's judgment is occurring now. It is a call to love, and so a call to letting go whatever holds us back from love. Let that be our first concern.

We are given this time in order that we might repent

Three years have gone by and the fig tree in the vineyard still has borne no fruit. Jesus has spent about the same time calling for the fruits of repentance but has met from most only obstinate refusal.

If, for three successive seasons, there has been no fruit on the tree, it seems reasonable to judge that it is 'wasting the soil'. Any sensible farmer would dig it out and plant something else.

However, God is patient. He cannot pretend that fruit is present where it is not, but he can and does continue to reach out in love, to grace us to change our attitudes and our actions.

If we obstinately persist in rejecting grace, we must accept the consequences. But only obstinate rejection can bring us to this desperate position, for God is a patient lover. This is shown by Jesus who 'remains faithful even if we are faithless' (2 Timothy 2:13).

Is Luke still hoping that official Judaism will heed Jesus' word, see in him God's Messiah and accept from him the salvation which God is offering?

⁶ Then he told this parable:

'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

⁷ So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"

⁸ He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.

⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.'
¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.
¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.'
¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?
¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?'
¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

God's judgment is a liberating judgment

The Sabbath has featured importantly from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' rejection by his own people occurred on a Sabbath at Nazareth (4:16), and the first miracle recorded by Luke happened at Capernaum, also on the Sabbath (4:31).

Jesus claimed, as the Son of Man, to be 'lord of the Sabbath' (6:5), and it was his challenge of the Pharisees' interpretation of Sabbath observance that set the scene for the hostility that dogged him throughout his ministry (see the commentary on 6:1-11).

In the present scene, Jesus refuses to give in to the hypocritical attitude of the leader of the synagogue, who completely fails to understand the purpose of the Sabbath. It is to set aside a day as especially sacred to God in order to open oneself to God's covenant love, allowing it to heal and liberate us from whatever holds us bound.

The synagogue official is interpreting the law in such a way as to exemplify the complaint made by Jesus against the lawyers: 'You load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger the ease them'(11:46).

The wonderful largesse of God's grace

God's judgment is revealed by his action in the world. In and through the ministry of Jesus, God is establishing the reign of his love.

The comparison of the kingdom of God to a mustard seed highlights the openness of God's saving welcome, extended to all who would want to settle in the branches of the tree which will grow from it. In the Acts, Luke highlights the amazing growth of the Christian Church (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). This has been a central theme of Luke's gospel from the moment when Simeon took the child Jesus in his arms, and declared that he would be: 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' (2:32).

We recall the splendid image of Ezekiel, as he looked forward to the final restoration of Israel:

On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

– Ezekiel 17:23

The difference is that instead of the 'noble cedar' we have the humble mustard tree. One could easily pass it by, and reject it.

In the second illustration, Jesus again points out the largesse of God's saving grace: three measures of flour would make enough bread for one hundred and fifty people! God's love is great and there is room for everyone at the feast being prepared by the Messiah.

¹⁸ He said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it?

¹⁹ It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.'

²⁰ And again he said, 'To what should I compare the kingdom of God?

²¹ It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

compare
Matthew 13:31-33
Mark 4:30-32

22 Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.

23 Someone asked him, 'Lord, will only a few be saved?'

He said to them,

24 'Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.

25 When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us," then in reply he will say to you, "I do not know where you come from." 26 Then you will begin to say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." 27 But he will say, "I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!"

compare

Matthew 7:13-14; 25:10-12

Matthew 7:22-23

We must follow Jesus, now, along the road he has chosen

For the first time since Jesus began this journey, we are reminded of his destination, Jerusalem. It is there that he is to accomplish his 'exodus' (9:31) from this world to his Father, and nothing can distract him from his goal (9:51). He is asked if only a few will be saved. Towards the end of his reply Jesus indicates that many will enjoy the fullness of life that he offers, not only among the Jews, but 'people from east and west, from north and south'.

However, for each person the decision lies in our willingness to follow Jesus along the only way that leads to salvation: the way of the cross. This way is 'narrow' in the sense that every other way has to be abandoned if we are to choose it. The need to decide which path to follow is stated clearly in the Book of Deuteronomy:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

– Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Similarly, Jeremiah:

I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.

– Jeremiah 21:8

Jesus is lamenting the terrible truth that many people lead lives of self-destruction, and fail to experience the blessedness offered them by God through him. They never know the experience of the beatitudes because they take the way of self-indulgence. But there is another way, and it is the way lived by Jesus.

It demands all our courage and all our faith, hope and love. To follow this way is to follow Jesus, and that demands of us that we leave everything that hinders us from answering his call. The stark contrast faces each of us with an unavoidable life and death decision. However, while reflecting on this let us not forget the faithful love of God. However narrow the door into the city of God and however difficult the road, the door has to be as wide as the arms of Jesus stretched out on the cross. Let us not forget that it is he, the loving one, who is the gate (John 10:9), as well as the way (John 14:6).

Words are not enough. Acknowledging Jesus as ‘Lord’ is not enough (compare 6:46). It is our heart that matters, and what we actually do from the heart, ever attentive to the one to whom we owe obedience. He approaches us in love (compare 12:36-37). Familiarity with Jesus is of no value if our actions are evil.

Luke includes here a saying of Jesus which laments the failure of many of his fellow Jews to believe and to respond to his call. The ‘people who will come from east and west, from north and south’ may be an allusion to Psalm 107:3 and other places where the hope is expressed that the dispersed Jews will be gathered back to Israel. For Luke it undoubtedly includes also the Gentiles.

Many who should have recognised the coming of the bridegroom, are not sharing table-fellowship with the Messiah, and will despair (‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’) when they find themselves ‘thrown out’. It is they who have locked themselves out of the wedding feast by refusing to go through the door of entry: the way of suffering-love.

In relation to the question as to who and how many will be saved, Jesus warns us against forming our own judgment. We should leave the judgment to God, for God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and God’s ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8). Our judgments, in this as in every other matter, are turned upside down by the good news revealed by Jesus: ‘some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last’.

²⁸ **‘There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out.**

²⁹ **Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.**

³⁰ **Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.’**

compare
Matthew 8:11-12
Matthew 19:30; Mark 10:31

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'

³² He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.

³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem."

The one we are following will not be turned from his goal

Jesus knows in whom he has placed his trust. He has a mission from God to conquer evil and to heal, and he will not be turned aside from this mission by Herod, or the Pharisees who use Herod as a threat: 'tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way'. As a prophet he will experience the same rejection that was suffered by all the prophets.

However, Jesus places his trust in God's vindication: 'on the third day I finish my work'. The 'third day' is the day when God reveals himself (see Exodus 19:11). It is the day when God vindicates the poor. The path of obedience will take Jesus through the rejection to his goal – the fullness of communion with God and the revelation 'in the sight of all the people' of who God is, and how God has chosen to act for the redemption and salvation of the world.

Jerusalem plays a pivotal role in Luke's theology. His gospel begins and ends there, for, like his mentor Paul, he sees Gentile Christianity as grafted on to the Jewish olive tree (see Romans 9-11). There is a special providence for Luke in Jesus' life reaching its climax in Jerusalem. Jesus is to proclaim God's word and to reveal God's face there where so many prophets suffered, in the city which housed the temple where God chose to reveal his presence.

Lament over the Jerusalem which rejects Jesus

Jesus concludes this section of judgment on a note of intense compassion and hope mixed with sadness. Jesus was reaching out to them like a mother bird but they did not accept his offer. The psalms speak of God protecting us by drawing us to his throne under the wings of the cherubim:

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

– Psalm 36:7; see Psalm 17:8

God was also likened to an eagle:

You have seen ... how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

– Exodus 19:4; see Exodus 32:10-12

Jesus uses a gentler image, but still his offer of protection and care is rejected. One result is that the temple, as in the days of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 22:5), will be abandoned by God. The final verse, however, is full of hope. In its original context it is a blessing given to those who are entering the temple in procession with their king (Psalm 118:26; see Luke 19:38). Just before these words we find the following:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O Lord.

– Psalm 118:22-25; quoted Luke 20:17

Many of Jesus' contemporaries did reject him. He did not fit their picture of the Messiah. Luke, however, clings to the hope that filled the heart of Jesus, that one day they will come to recognise Jesus as the herald of God's love to them. Then they will repent, rejoice in him, and enter the 'temple' of the community of Jesus' disciples. We find the same anguish in the heart of Paul (Romans 9:1-5), and the same hope:

My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

– Romans 10:1; see Romans 11:11,23,26

If this hope is to be realised, however, we must know that it is not anything that we can do of ourselves. The religious leaders and the people are too blind to see, and the disciples' faith is too weak. Our only hope is to wait expectantly for God to grace us with a love that will liberate us from our self-reliance – a grace that our hearts will welcome.

³⁴ **Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!**

³⁵ **See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."**

compare
Matthew 23:37-39

¹ On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

² Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy.

³ And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, 'Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?'

⁴ But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away.

⁵ Then he said to them, 'If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?'

⁶ And they could not reply to this.

The initiative comes from Jesus

In the previous section (12:49 - 13:35), Luke has gathered together a number of anecdotes as well as various saying of Jesus to make the point that God is offering us life now. We are being judged now on whether we accept or reject this offer.

In the present section (14:1 - 15:32), he goes on to describe this offer in terms of a banquet to which all are invited. The persistence of God's call is underlined by the constant repetition of the Greek word *kalein* ('to call'), which occurs eleven times in chapter fourteen alone.

The first scene takes place on the Sabbath and at a meal in the home of one of the leading Pharisees. Present also are some scribes. The scene is set for a discussion after the manner of a symposium, familiar to Luke and his Greek readers. Notice that it is Jesus who opens the discussion. He is the real host, inviting the religious leaders to another kind of banquet.

Similar incidents have already been presented by Luke (6:6-11; 13:10-17). The significance of such scenes is found in the kind of God that is being revealed. The Sabbath observance is meant to remind people of the covenant they have with God. It is meant to help reinforce the sacredness of life. Jesus is insisting that in observing it they should not overlook the redeeming action of God which they are celebrating. Otherwise the custom becomes an idol, substituting for God rather than revealing him.

The poor are invited to God's banquet

The parable does not claim to present a picture of noble virtue. Jesus directs it to the self-centred mentality of his audience. It picks up the theme announced in the Magnificat: 'He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly' (1:52). Our way of looking at things is not God's way, and Jesus offers a radical challenge to accustomed ways of viewing life.

This parable is rightly understood as an invitation to 'humility', though the word translated here as 'humble' (Greek *tapeinoō*) is a more general word, perhaps better translated 'bring low'. The technical word for 'humility' in the New Testament (Greek *tapeinophrosunē*) is derived from it. No examples of it have been found in Greek literature prior to the New Testament, though there is one example of the cognate verb and one example of the cognate adjective in the Greek version of the Old Testament.

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have humbled [*tapeinophronoun*] and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and for ever more.

– Psalm 131:1-3

A man's pride will bring him low, but he who is humble [*tapeinophonas*] will obtain honour.

– Proverbs 29:23

Humility involves more than taking up a low position. It focuses on the way we *think* about ourselves, and includes the realisation that of ourselves we can do nothing. It includes also an element of joy. The humble are like children who experience complete dependence, confident that they are not alone but are embraced by God who loves them unconditionally – the way a mother loves her child. We can have absolute trust in depending on such a God. Jesus, as God's Son, addresses God as 'Abba!' He knows the secret of the kingdom of God. Only when we accept with delight that God delights in us can we begin to understand the gospel which Jesus is preaching and enter into that communion with God which Jesus enjoys.

⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable.

⁸ 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place," and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰

But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.

¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

Everyone is invited

**¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.
¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.
¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'**

The greatest barrier to grace is a form of self-reliance that fails to recognise our dependence on God. As adults we have had to learn to resist the pressure to be independent. We have to learn that we cannot make a success of life by our own efforts. We must also learn that we cannot earn grace. Jesus looks to God as a child looks to a parent, with total trust, and a simple expectation of receiving love. To be Jesus' disciples, we must learn to do the same. Jesus has already promised: 'People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God (13:29). He has already expressed his longing: 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings'(13:34).

Now he insists that the invitation go out to the poor. This takes us to the heart of Jesus' understanding of his mission. In the synagogue of Nazareth, we find Jesus quoting the following text from Isaiah as being fulfilled in his person:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

– Luke 4:18-19, from Isaiah 61:1-2

Jesus' opening beatitude reads: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.' (Luke 6:20). When the disciples of John the Baptist ask for Jesus' Messianic credentials, he replies: 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them'(7:22).

The theme of this present section is that of the Messianic Banquet (see the commentary on 5:27-32). Luke has in mind the Eucharistic celebration of the Christian community. The invitation to enjoy a meal with Jesus must go out to all if we are to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful (6:36). This is only the second occurrence of the word 'resurrection' in Luke (*anastasis*, see 2:34). Those who, like Jesus, make the poor their concern will be rewarded by God in the eternal communion of love experienced by the blessed.

God's invitation goes out to the whole world

It was customary to send out invitations and to prepare a banquet according to the number who accepted. We should assume that the slave in this parable is sent only to those who have already said that they intend to come. As it turns out they have changed their minds. Their excuses are weak and insulting. Land is always inspected and oxen are always tested prior to purchase. The third excuse would be considered impolite.

Jesus is clearly alluding to those who claim that they are faithful to God's covenant and that they desire to enjoy the promised Messianic banquet but are unwilling to do what is required of them. They prefer to go about their ordinary business and to ignore God.

The owner of the house does what Jesus himself has just instructed people to do (14:13): he invites 'the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame'. The allusion is clearly to what God is doing through Jesus. The poor accept, but 'there is still room'. The invitation is then extended to the Gentiles who do not expect to be invited, and who are tempted, out of courtesy, to decline the invitation. The slave is told to persist so as to convince them that they really are wanted at the banquet.

¹⁵ One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, 'Blessed is the one who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' ¹⁶ Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many.

¹⁷ At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets."

¹⁹ Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets."

²⁰ Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." ²¹ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." ²² And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." ²³ Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled." ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

A similar parable can be found in Matthew 22:1-10

²⁵ Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish."

³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

compare Matthew 10:37-38

The necessity of accepting the invitation

Luke emphasises that God's invitation must be accepted by us if we are to enjoy the banquet with his Son. He also makes the point that we can be confident that we will be offered the grace to accept and to carry out the demands inherent in following Jesus.

This is expressed in terms that remind us of the absolute commitment expected of the Levites (Deuteronomy 33:9). The word 'hate', however, conveys the wrong sense in English. We think of hate as being the opposite of love, and we think of both love and hate as focusing on a feeling of attraction or repulsion towards another person. In the New Testament and throughout the Bible neither word focuses on feelings.

In the Aramaic idiom spoken by Jesus, to love means to carry out one's obligations faithfully in regard to someone, no matter how one might feel. To hate is to fail to carry out these obligations. To say that you love one person or group and hate another is to say that you choose to carry out your commitments to one in preference to the other when these commitments are in conflict.

Jacob 'loved' Rachel, and 'hated' Leah (Genesis 29:31); that is to say, Rachel came first in his affections (see Deuteronomy 21:15). God 'loved' Jacob' and 'hated' Esau (Romans 9:13); that is to say, he favoured Jacob over Esau (see Malachi 1:2-3).

The point Jesus is making is that no commitment, however sacred, can come before our commitment to the God whom he reveals. We are to seek God first and to fulfil our commitments to people only in so far as these do not contradict our commitment to God. The ties of family are not absolute. The good news liberates us from the bonds that they sometimes impose, and gives us the only perspective within which they have true and lasting value. We have already met this theme: 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it' (8:21; see 11:28). 'From now on five in one household will be divided ... father against son ... mother against daughter' (12:51-53).

If we intend building a tower, we must make sure that we have the required materials. If we are going to engage in battle, we need to ascertain our chances of victory. So, some things are essential if we intend to be faithful to our commitment to God. If we want to be disciples of Jesus we must be ready to 'give up all our possessions'. This demands the same single-mindedness required by the Jewish Law:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind.

– Luke 10:27; see Deuteronomy 6:5

Christian detachment does not mean holding back from being really involved in this world. Rather it is a matter of being attached to people and to things in such a way that we are willing to let them go if and when we are called by God to do so. Furthermore, detachment is not possible for us on our own initiative. We can leave what we love only when called and graced to do so.

As John of the Cross notes in the Ascent of Mount Carmel (I.2.4), it makes little difference whether the leg of a bird is tied with a strong rope or with the tiniest thread. If anything is holding it, it cannot fly. Flight to God cannot occur till all attachments that cause us to resist the call of grace are broken, however apparently insignificant they may appear.

This single-minded commitment to God and to doing God's will gives a special savour (like the taste of salt) to the life of a disciple of Jesus. If this is lost, the life and contribution of one who might claim to be a disciple loses all value.

³³ *So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*

³⁴ **'Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?**

³⁵ **It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'**

compare
Matthew 5:13
Mark 9:49-50

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ *'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*

compare Matthew 18:1-14

Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them

Welcoming sinners and sharing table-fellowship with them is a practice that is characteristic of Jesus. He has a longing to answer the plea of his Father to: 'Go out ... and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled' (14:23).

We are already familiar with the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes: 'Levi gave a great banquet for Jesus in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors?' (6:29-30).

Finding the lost sheep

This is the first of three parables which illustrate why Jesus takes such delight in welcoming sinners and eating with them. The spirit throughout is one of divine festivity and joy. These stories are a kind of comment on the following from Zephaniah:

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ... The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will ... save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

– Zephaniah 3:14,17-19

Throughout the Bible, God's care for his people is frequently likened to that of a shepherd for his sheep (Genesis 48:15, 49:24; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:15-16; Psalm 23, 80:2, 95:7). The shepherd in Jesus' story leaves the ninety-nine sheep because he can trust that the assistant shepherd will get them back to the fold safe and sound. He personally goes after the one that is lost. He finds it and is delighted. He invites the whole town to rejoice with him as the loss affects the whole community.

Jesus makes the point that God continually goes out after those who stray from his grace. He wants us to be with him and he delights when we repent and accept to be welcomed home (see 13:1-5). The Pharisees and scribes are invited to be part of the celebration: 'Rejoice with me'.

Finding the lost coin

The literary parallelism between this and the previous parable is obvious. We have here another example of Luke's practice of balancing a story about a man with one about a woman.

As in the previous parable, there is an invitation to 'rejoice': to share in God's delight and the delight of the heavenly court in the repentance of a single sinner.

⁸ 'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost."

¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

In his mercy, God invites all to the feast. We are free to accept or not accept his invitation

¹¹ Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons.

¹² The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them.¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!

This parable is neatly arranged in two sections. The first section focuses on the younger son who accepts his Father's invitation to join in the celebration which has been organised for his welcome home. The second section focuses on the elder son. He, too, is invited to the banquet, but we are not told whether he accepts or not.

At the beginning of the story, the younger son is portrayed as being completely self-centred and as having no regard for his father. He treats his father as though he were already dead by asking for his share in the inheritance. Then, when his father accedes to his request, he sells his half of the property, depriving his father of the produce and alienating for ever the family inheritance.

He squanders everything in extravagant living, finds himself destitute, and ends up in what is for a Jew the utterly humiliating position of feeding unclean animals. We are told that 'no one gave him anything'. He would have been happy with the 'pods' – the bitter and unnourishing berries from the thorny carob bush.

The turning point in the story comes when the boy reflects on his condition. He thinks of his father, and is confident that his father will accept him back. There is no question yet of genuine repentance. He still has no interest in a personal relationship with his father, but decides to use him to survive. He wants to keep his independence by being a hired hand. In this way he will not have to seek reconciliation or develop any kind of proper relationship either with his father or his brother. All he wants is to be assured of something to eat.

He sets off, and then the focus changes to the father. It is the father's immense love that brings about the boy's repentance. The father has been on the look out for the boy all the time, longing for his return. He catches sight of him while he is still a long way off and he is 'filled with compassion'. It is this compassion that will bring about the boy's change of attitude.

The father casts dignity aside and runs through the village, eager to reach his boy before any of the other villagers decided to hurt him. What the boy has done to his father threatens the basic social structure of village life. The father throws his arms around the boy and kisses him. After that no one can reject the boy without also rejecting the father.

This display of unconditional love moves the boy to true repentance. For the first time we see the dawning of a real son-father relationship. The father's love shows him that it is the relationship that is paramount, not the lost property. Mending the relationship is something that the boy cannot do for all his scheming; it depends on the father's grace.

The young lad is overwhelmed with humility and, for the first time, allows himself to be truly a son. When we compare verse twenty-one with verse nineteen, we see that all reference to being a hired hand has been dropped. In accepting the unmerited gift of being a son, the boy is accepting the need to be reconciled with the older brother, and to be once again under his father's authority. It will also mean setting aside the satisfaction of having earned his own way back.

The father overwhelms him with welcoming love. The festive robe in which he has him clothed requires of everyone that they give the boy the respect due to the father himself. The ring demonstrates absolute trust, and the slaves are required to look up to the boy as to their master.

A calf is killed—an indication that the whole village is invited to the welcoming home festivities. The lost boy has been found. 'They began to celebrate'. A happy ending, thanks to the amazing love of the father. The boy, like the tax collectors and sinners (15:1), accepted the invitation with joy.

¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

²² But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe — the best one — and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound."

²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

²⁹ But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

We now turn to the elder son, symbol of the Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling about Jesus' behaviour (15:2). How is the elder son going to respond? We have already been given some hints as to his character. We might have expected him to reprimand his brother when he requested his share of the inheritance, but he is silent. Moreover, when the inheritance is divided, we are told that the father 'divided his property between *them*' (15:12). The elder son does not object to receiving his share while the father is still alive. It seems that he, too, has no real concern for the father.

From one of the slaves (or perhaps one of the children playing outside the banquet hall) he learns about his brother's return. His response is one of anger and 'he refused to go in'. Because he is the elder son he has certain responsibilities to perform. His refusal to go in has to be taken as a public insult offered to his father. The father is as loving to him as he is to the younger brother. He does not stand on dignity, but humbles himself by coming out to plead with him.

He is met with angry complaints. The elder boy thinks of his relationship with his father not as that of a son to his father but as that of a slave to his master. He complains that he has never been given 'even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends'. We already know that all that is left of the property has been already given to him by his father. The father retained the right to the use of the produce, but the property itself belongs to the elder son who can use it as he wills. Furthermore, if he wants to celebrate with his friends all he has to do is respond to his father's invitation. The whole village is celebrating. If he has any friends they are all inside!

His second complaint is about his brother. Notice that he calls him 'this son of yours'. He does not look upon him as a brother any more than the Pharisees see the tax collectors and sinners as their brothers. Furthermore, in his self-centred anger he exaggerates his brother's crimes. Nothing has been said about 'prostitutes'.

The father attempts to win him over, calling him ‘my son’ and reminding him that ‘you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours’. He also speaks of ‘this brother of yours’ and of the importance of the celebration.

The parable ends there. The listener has to supply the ending. Both sons represent alternative options made by Israel. The younger son is in exile because of sin, but is being called back to grace in Jesus’ ministry and can now carry out Israel’s vocation to the Gentile world (see Acts 15 and Amos 9:11). The elder son, in the name of being a guardian of tradition, is resisting the building of the new temple.

Will the elder boy go in or will he continue his obstinate refusal. This is the precise point Jesus is making to the Pharisees, and to any of us who might fancy ourselves as being better than anyone else and who might take it upon ourselves to sit in judgment on our brother or sister.

The sin of the younger brother is awful, but he does respond to the astonishing love of his father. He does repent and so he is enjoying the banquet. The sin of the elder brother is worse, for it is a sin of pride. Will he see this and repent? Or will he be too proud to share the feast with his brother and remain obstinate in his refusal to celebrate?

³¹ Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

¹ Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.

² So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer."

³ Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.

⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes."

⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" ⁶ He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty."

⁷ Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty."

⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

Disciples are to use material possessions for the benefit of others

The rich man in Jesus' story is just: he cannot continue to have the dishonest manager in his service. He is also exceptionally generous in simply dismissing him and not sending him to prison. The manager realises that he has to do something before the dismissal takes effect and before he loses possession of the books in which the transactions are entered.

It was the custom to adjust the yearly rent according to fluctuations in the harvest. Those summoned by the manager would not have been surprised by his actions. It appears that the rich man had a reputation for generosity and they would have assumed that the manager had been considerate of them, had advised his master of their need and was acting in accordance with his master's intentions.

The manager is acting dishonestly, but he is right in calculating on the master's renowned generosity. This merits commendation. The point Jesus is making is not only that we should dispossess ourselves of our 'dishonest wealth' ('mammon of injustice') to advantage the poor, but also that we can rely on the fact that God is infinitely generous in cancelling our debts to him. As 'children of light' we should be confident in this.

The Aramaic '*mammon*' is related to '*emet* the word for faithful. It stands for something upon which one relies as being firm and dependable. Our natural tendency, and our mistake, is to think that our security lies in material possessions. These need not be 'dishonest', but often are unjustly acquired, or, as in this story, they can seduce a person into unjust behaviour.

Do not be slaves of wealth

Material possessions do not pertain to our persons (16:12). If we have them, we have them from God and we should use them according to God's will in helping to promote the good of others.

The position held by the Pharisees in the community does not give them the right to accumulate wealth or to set themselves over others as judges of behaviour. Observance of the Law should make them more obedient to the covenant, and so more dependent upon God and more compassionate and generous with others. Their attitude to Jesus betrays their unconverted hearts.

Commenting on the expression 'unfaithful with what belongs to another', Saint Basil (died 379AD) wrote:

When someone steals another person's clothes we call him a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the person who is hungry. The coat hanging unused in your wardrobe belongs to the person who needs it. The shoes rotting in your closet belong to the person who has no shoes. The money which you are hoarding belongs to the poor.

Jesus insists that those who 'serve wealth' cannot serve God. It is the 'poor', who know that they are completely dependent upon God, who are blessed (6:20), not those who are slaves of material wealth (6:24; 8:14; 12:13-34; 14:33; 16:19-31).

¹⁰ 'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.'

¹¹ If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?

¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?

¹³ No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him.

¹⁵ So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.'

compare
Matthew 6:24

Willingness to follow the Law to its goal

***16 'The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force.
17 But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.***

'The law and the prophets' refers to the sacred Scriptures as expressing God's self-revelation to the people of Israel (see 24:44). With the coming of John the Baptist a new era dawned: the Messianic era of God's full revelation in Jesus.

The key accusation made against Christianity by the leaders of Judaism was that following Jesus meant disregarding this revelation and abandoning faith in, and obedience to, the God of Israel. This is not true, says Luke. Jesus did not abolish the revelation held sacred by the Jews. However, neither did he simply confirm, reinforce, or obey it (see the commentary on 6:1-11).

Jesus is the culmination of God's self-revelation. In him it reaches its goal. He brought it to its fulfilment (its perfection), by proclaiming the kingdom of God, as John the Baptist had foretold. Luke agrees with Paul that Christ is the 'goal' of the law (Romans 10:4). Once the goal is reached, one cannot go back to the imperfect revelation that was leading up to it.

In Jesus' miraculous healings, Luke has shown us the forceful advance of the kingdom, conquering evil in all its forms: physical, psychic, and moral – reaching even beyond the grave to give life. In Jesus' ministry, God is breaking through all the bounds within which people attempt to confine him, including the understanding of revelation taught by the scribes, taught without the authority that is evidenced in the words and the actions of Jesus (4:32).

The kingdom is advancing, and with it the power of God, but it demands a corresponding determination on the part of those who would take hold of the redemption offered them. They will need all the courage they can muster, for they can belong to the kingdom only by repenting, by leaving whatever they must leave to follow Jesus. They will have to do violence to earlier perceptions and ways of living in which they have previously found security. They will have to find the courage and energy to take up the cross, even lose their life; and they must endure to the end.

Coming straight after the previous passage in which Jesus shows up the self-interest of the Pharisees, the statement about the difficulty of dropping 'one stroke of a letter in the law' seems to be yet another example of Jesus' use of irony (compare 5:39 and 15:7). Even though the law has been surpassed by God himself, the religious leaders, who use the law as the basis of their power, will not allow for any change. As Jesus has already lamented: 'You have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering' (11:52).

compare
Matthew 11:12-
13; 5:18

Marriage fidelity: an example of how the good news of the kingdom surpasses the Law

If it is true that the previous passage is meant ironically, this may explain the presence here of this statement on divorce and remarriage. Not only is marriage fidelity a symbol of God's fidelity to the covenant, and of the fidelity to love required of us by a true understanding of the Law, but this fidelity does demand that we let go rather more than a stroke or a letter of the following:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession.

– Deuteronomy 24:1-4

In Jesus' day the lawyers took up two positions with regard to the above. Those who followed Rabbi Hillel interpreted 'something objectionable' (Deuteronomy 24:2) very broadly, allowing divorce for almost any reason. The disciples of Rabbi Shammai restricted the 'something objectionable' to adultery.

The text from Deuteronomy says nothing about the rightness or wrongness of divorce. It is an attempt to regularise an already existing practice in such a way as to give the divorced woman some security. At least if her husband divorces her, she can live without fearing that he can call her back at whim.

However, both schools of thought took it as an expression of God's allowance of divorce. Jesus' view is very different. The 'good news of the kingdom of God' (16:16) is that the marriage commitment is a sacrament of God's commitment of love to his people. God will never withdraw his love. Knowing this, we can place our trust in God without fear. It is to be the same with marriage. It is a love-commitment in which, for those who follow Jesus, the married couple can safely trust. Divorce comes under the same condemnation as adultery. Jesus' statement as recorded here by Luke is addressed to men because within Judaism only the man could legally procure a divorce.

¹⁸ 'Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.'

compare Matthew 19:9 and 5:32; Mark 10:11-12

Marriage fidelity

The earliest account of Jesus' teaching on this matter is found in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written probably in 54AD. Paul begins by reminding his readers of Jesus' command. The parallel with Luke's statement is obvious:

To the married I give this command— not I but the Lord— that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

– 1Corinthians 7:10-11

Paul continues:

To the rest I say – I and not the Lord – that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you. Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

– 1Corinthians 7:12-16

Paul is writing to a community which included husbands who had joined the Christian community while their wives remained outside, and wives who had joined the community while their husbands remained outside. Sometimes this created conflicts within the marriage that were unresolvable. He admits that he has received no direct teaching of Jesus on the subject (7:12), but that does not prevent him from reflecting upon the problem in the light of the gospel. Paul's first response (7:12-14) and final plea (7:16) are to encourage Christian husbands and wives to remain in their married relationship. However, he acknowledges that there could be situations where this is not possible, and, in such circumstances, he allows for the possibility, even the need, to separate, and, if appropriate, to enter into another marriage (7:15).

Two values are highlighted by Paul. The first is faith, and the second is peace. It is obvious that an unbelieving partner – one, that is, who is not committed to the values espoused by Jesus – may make it impossible for the believing partner to live his or her Christian life. The failure to share such basic values may make living together in peace quite impossible. It is a matter of priorities and perspective. Every culture recognises the importance of supporting marriage, for the sake of the man and woman involved, and also to provide the kind of security which is so important for children. But as we have seen on a number of occasions family values, though important, are not absolute. The good news liberates a person from what is unloving in the bonds that knit a society together. We recall Jesus' words: 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and keep it' (Luke 8:21).

We recall his words to the man who wanted to follow him but wanted *first* to take leave of those at home: 'No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God' (9:62).

He spoke of households being divided because of the good news (12:52-53), and said: ‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple’ (14:26). Family is important. Marriage is important. But they are not absolute values. Jesus is bringing in a new creation. New wine needs fresh wineskins (5:38). Openness to God’s word and a readiness to leave everything, not excluding one’s wife or husband (14:26; 18:29), must come first. When ties, even those as important as marriage, are an obstacle to living as a disciple of Jesus:

the brother or sister (that is to say the Christian man or woman) is not bound.

– 1Corinthians 7:15

Each community and each married person has to enter into a careful and honest spiritual discernment in this matter. It is clear that Jesus is demanding a fidelity to marriage and a commitment to pledged love that goes beyond the expectations of his contemporaries, of whatever school of thought. Jesus does not compromise. Where there has been a genuine commitment of love between two people who have embraced the good news, breaking this commitment comes under the condemnation of adultery.

Of course people, with the best will in the world, make commitments which prove to be impossible to keep for any number of reasons. Where the commitment, however, is genuine, and where faith-values are shared and peace enjoyed, an arbitrary decision to renounce the commitment is a breaking of faith.

Keeping faith can, in some circumstances, demand heroic love – a love that is possible only through grace. It can mean dying to oneself (9:23), but we must not lose sight of Jesus’ teaching that such dying does issue in life. It is not destructive, but life-giving, and its fruit is love. Jesus is not commending a waste of life, or a destructive disregard of self.

Being a disciple of Jesus does not protect a person against the ordinary situations, of hurt or misunderstanding or being the victim of another person’s infidelity, that are part of the human condition. The fact that two disciples of Jesus pledge their love to each other in faith does not guarantee them against marriage breakdown. Love does not control, and one partner cannot prevent the sin or the infidelity or the breaking of the covenant by the other.

In Jesus’ world, as in our own, it was all too easy to break the marriage covenant and to seek in a another relationship the happiness one failed to find in marriage. If a marriage is destructive, this may be an appropriate response. Jesus’ words, however, stand as a warning against a too easy neglect of one’s obligations. Some suffering is destructive. To undergo it has no merit and no reward. Some suffering, however, is redemptive. The later is revealed by its fruit: a deepening of love.

The Law and the Prophets require of us that we care for each other

¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." ²⁵ But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.

In this parable we find illustrated the reversal of values promised in the Magnificat: 'He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty' (1:53) Lazarus (means 'God helps') is indeed blessed. We see him with Abraham 'eating bread in the kingdom of God' (14:16).

The rich man has excluded himself from the festive banquet by his behaviour. The most telling aspect of this parable is that there is no mention of oppression. The failure of the rich man - and it is a grave failure - is simply that he ignores the needy man at his gate. In refusing to 'invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind' (14:13), he is refusing to 'listen to Moses and the prophets'. We are here at the heart of the religion of Israel. The Book of the Covenant is one of the oldest sections of the Law. It gives us an insight into the understanding of pre-monarchic Israel. Among its injunctions we find the following:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans. If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbour's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down.

– Exodus 22:21-26

We find the same teaching in the Book of Deuteronomy (15:1-15; 24:10-15) and in many other parts of the Law. The prophetic scrolls are filled with the same spirit:

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals — they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.

– Amos 2:6-8

Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!

– Isaiah 5:8

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!

– Isaiah 10:1-2

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am ... and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

– Isaiah 58:6-11

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, 'I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,' and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practising oppression and violence.

– Jeremiah 22:13-17. see also 34:8-22

If people will not listen to the Law and the prophets on a matter as central as this, but choose to be 'dressed in purple and fine linen and feast sumptuously every day' while ignoring the cries of the poor, they will not even pay attention to the teaching of the risen Christ as it is preached to them through the community of his disciples. That was Luke's experience. Is it any different today?

²⁶ **Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."**

²⁷ **He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house —**

²⁸ **for I have five brothers -- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment."**

²⁹ **Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them."**

³⁰ **He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent."**

³¹ **He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.""**

¹ Jesus said to his disciples, 'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come!'

² It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.

³ *Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.*

⁴ And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent," you must forgive.'

compare
Matthew 18:6-7; Mark 9:42
Matthew 18:15, 21-22

Sensitivity and forgiveness in the life of a disciple

Jesus is concerned for his disciples, called 'little ones' in this passage. Being a disciple of Jesus makes a person as vulnerable as is Jesus himself. Opening one's heart in love to all makes a person vulnerable to rejection, to abuse of trust, and so to hurt. It is no accident that this statement comes immediately after Jesus' defence of married women and the parable about Lazarus. Jesus wants to protect his disciples against those who would take advantage of their vulnerability to hurt and oppress them.

He has a warning for them as well. They are not to abuse the trust placed in them by taking advantage of others for their own ends. This can happen in many ways. We can distort the gospel in our preaching, engaging people's longing for God and pointing them in the wrong direction. We can use spiritual power to attract others to ourselves instead of encouraging them to be united to God. By our sinful behaviour we can cause others to doubt God's love or to lose faith in the Christian community to which we belong.

But perhaps the worst scandal that can be given is the refusal to forgive. It is true that forgiveness is not effective till it is received and that its reception depends on recognition of fault and repentance (17:3). It is also true that an important means of coming to recognise one's fault is the correction offered by another.

Correcting others, however, is necessarily a delicate task. It cannot properly be done except from love. Moreover, if we do not love others enough to correct them, our love is poor indeed. Correction must always be in the hope of repentance, and when the offending person repents and seeks forgiveness we must always ('seven times') grant it.

Care must also be taken that we do not set ourselves up as the ones to judge concerning the truth or degree of repentance (see 6:37: 'Do not judge'). That must be left to God. Ours is to grant forgiveness whenever it is genuinely sought. Such readiness to keep forgiving is beyond our capacity. To remain committed to it whatever the circumstances requires faith.

Grace is a gift as is the faith that enables us to respond to it.

The apostles want an increase of faith, as though faith were something to which they could lay claim and which would enable them to do more wonderful things the more they had of it. Jesus corrects them. It is God who does everything. The tiniest bit of faith is enough, so long as it is real faith — a reliance, not on self, but on God. For ‘nothing is impossible for God’ (1:37). When they find themselves following Jesus in his service of others, they still need to remember that they are not to take credit to themselves for this. All is grace.

In Jesus’ culture a domestic slave enjoyed the security of belonging to the family. He or she, however, had certain assigned duties and no extra gratitude was due for performing them. Similarly in regard to God we should not be thinking that we earn grace, however faithful we might be in carrying out God’s will.

God’s longing to share familiar intimacy with us, a longing made evident in Jesus’ ministry, is a grace. We should accept this grace with wonder, committing ourselves simply to do God’s will in all things, just because God is God and we are his creatures. Jesus said earlier: ‘My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it’ (8:21).

The reign of God comes in our lives and in the lives of others thanks to God’s loving initiative. It is not our efforts that achieve it. God achieves it through our actions, and so our concern should be to follow Jesus in obedience to the inspiration of God’s Spirit.

If we do this, wonders will never cease. So long as we realise that it is not we who are responsible for these wonders, God can continue to act through us. If we take glory to ourselves, we close off the action of God. In all this we see the necessity of faith.

⁵ *The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’*

⁶ *The Lord replied, ‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey you.’* ⁷ *‘Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, “Come here at once and take your place at the table”?’*

⁸ *Would you not rather say to him, “Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink”?’* ⁹ *Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?* ¹⁰ *So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!”’*

compare
Matthew 17:20-21; 21:21
Mark 11:23

11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance,

13 they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!'

14 When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean.

15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

17 Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?'

18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'

19 Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well'

[saved you].

Our attention is once again drawn to the fact that Jesus is 'on the way to Jerusalem' (see 9:51; 13:22,33). The previous scene focused on the necessity of faith, and the fact that it is a gift from God. In this passage we see that the only way to find salvation is to follow Jesus in his faith (17:19).

Jesus taught us to pray that we would not fail in the time of trial (11:4). God's answer to our prayer is to draw us close to his Son. This is something we do by choosing to believe that the one we call 'God' is love, that we are held in existence by this love and that everything is graced. This 'choosing to believe' can be seen in the final poem of James McAuley, written in the last months of his struggle with cancer:

I know that faith is like a root
that's tough, inert and old,
yet it can send up its green shoot
and flower against the cold.
I know there is a grace that flows
when all the springs run dry;
it wells up to renew the rose
and lift the cedars high.

Without faith we cannot but fail when faced with the trials that necessarily confront us on our journey. We may experience healing thanks to God's gracious mercy, but we will not experience the complete healing which God longs to offer us.

The narrative of the ten lepers reminds us of the fact that faith is something which we are free to accept or to reject. It is unconditionally offered, and it is offered to all. This is the significance of the number 'ten', for ten is the minimum number required to constitute a community for the purpose of synagogue worship. It represents a certain completeness.

However, as the narrative demonstrates, while healing and salvation is offered to all, it is not automatically received. It requires of us a choice. Recognising the source of grace, we are to open our hearts to God in faith and thank him for his mercy.

Once again it is an outsider who chooses to believe (see 10:29-37). Once again it is faith that leads to salvation (see 7:50, 8:48 and 18:42).

God is present in Jesus

The presence and action of God in human history is not something which we can sit back and calculate for ourselves by external observation.

God is already working in the world, like the leaven working in the dough, or the mustard seed growing in the soil (13:18-21). It is within our grasp to be part of the reign of God's love. It is up to us to take hold of the gift being offered us.

The immediate context indicates how this is to be done. The following passage tells us that God's kingdom is present in the ministry of Jesus. The previous passage tells us to take hold of God's action by believing in Jesus.

**²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed;
²¹ nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'**

²² *Then he said to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.*

²³ *They will say to you, "Look there!" or "Look here!" Do not go, do not set off in pursuit.*

²⁴ *For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.*

²⁵ *But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation.*

²⁶ *Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man.*

²⁷ *They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them.*

²⁸ *Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building,*

²⁹ *but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulphur from heaven and destroyed all of them*

³⁰ *– it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.*

compare Mark 13: 21
Matthew 24: 23,27, 37-39

God's judgment and the present moment of our encounter with Jesus the Son of Man

The question asked by the Pharisees in the previous passage concerned the kingdom of God. The answer supplied here speaks of the Son of Man. The action of God in the world, in other words, is to be identified with the Messianic ministry of Jesus who is God's answer to the cry of the poor, and who shows that it is the poor who are vindicated in the judgment of God (see the commentary on 5:24).

It is Jesus for whom we long (17:22), though, as Jesus warns his disciples here, his presence is accompanied by suffering (17:25). This remark takes us, once again, to Luke's central theme. The human condition is dogged by sin, which reveals its ugly nature especially in the rejection of the innocent. God's providence encompasses this awful reality.

It is God's will to bring about the saving of the human race by gracing us to respond with love to such rejection. This is Jesus' mission and it must be the same for his disciples. It is only through such fidelity that we find salvation and that God's judgment (the days of the Son of Man) will be revealed.

We will not need some sort of esoteric knowledge to see him. His judgment is as clear as a flash of lightning that 'lights up the sky from one side to the other'. There seems to be an allusion here to the glory of the resurrection.

God's judgment is spoken of in typical Biblical fashion in terms of water (Noah) and fire (Sodom). The people of Noah's day carried on with their everyday living and paid no heed to God's word (Genesis 7:6-23). It was the same in the days of Lot (see Genesis 19:15-29; Sirach 16:4-10; 2Peter 2:4-10).

God's judgment is present in the ministry of Jesus. If we wish to find salvation, we must do what Noah did and enter the ark; we must do what Lot did and leave the dissipations of the world and follow God's call. In other words, we must do what the Samaritan leper did (17:15): we must go to Jesus, the Son of Man.

Jesus wants his disciples to heed God's word and not to allow themselves to be distracted from it. And there can be no turning back: 'Remember Lot's wife' (see Genesis 19:26).

We cannot set up our own soul in security and we are not the source of our own life (17:33). Let us then give our lives over to God and respond in faith to the call that comes to us through Jesus. That is the way to find life. Neither is the timing of the moment when we have to give an account of our lives within our control (17:34-36).

The gathering of vultures is a sign that death has occurred. Judgment follows on death just as inevitably. To wonder when this will happen (17:20) or where it will happen (17:37) is to be distracted from the main issue. Judgment is determined by our present moment, for it is here and now that the risen Jesus is present to us through his Spirit, guiding, inspiring, forgiving, healing, and gracing us to live the truth in love. We are judged on our response to this grace.

³¹ On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back.

³² Remember Lot's wife.

³³ Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.

³⁴ I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left.

³⁵ There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left.'

(Some ancient manuscripts add ³⁶Two will be in the field, one will be taken and the other left).

³⁷ Then they asked him, 'Where, Lord?' He said to them, 'Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.'

compare

Matthew 24:17-18; 10:39; 16:25;

Matthew 24:40-41,28

Mark 13:15-16; 8:35; Luke 9:24

¹ Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent."

⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."

⁶ And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says.

⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?

⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

God hears the cry of the poor

The judge in Jesus' story is totally cut off from others, living in his own self-centred world. The widow, having no husband, is in the powerless position of having to do her own pleading. The judge finds no difficulty initially in ignoring her. We should assume that she is too poor to be able to offer him a bribe. However, sheer persistence wears him down and he is finally forced to do something just to be rid of the woman.

Now if a self-centred, unjust judge finally heeds the cry of a poor widow for whom he has no personal concern, will not the God of justice heed the cries of his 'chosen ones who cry to him day and night?'. What is more, God will not put us off for no reason, but will act quickly. Our readiness to be open to God's action is one factor here. Another is God's wisdom, which is beyond our comprehension. Jesus is calling on us to trust.

Sometimes it is lack of faith that is the problem, and Jesus, with a cry from the heart, wonders whether, when God's judgment is finally revealed (when the Son of Man comes), people will have the faith required to receive God's saving grace. Compare the following:

He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan, or the widow when she pours out her complaint. Do not the tears of the widow run down her cheek as she cries out against the one who causes them to fall? The one whose service is pleasing to the Lord will be accepted, and his prayer will reach to the clouds. The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal; it will not desist until the Most High responds and does justice for the righteous, and executes judgment. Indeed, the Lord will not delay, and like a warrior he will not put at a distance his anger until he crushes the loins of the unmerciful and repays vengeance on the nations, until he destroys the multitude of the insolent, and breaks the sceptres of the unrighteous.

– Sirach 35:17-23; see also Psalm 82:1-4

We must recognise our need

Luke has already made it clear that the real questions concerning the presence and action of God in our lives are not questions of ‘When?’ (17:20) or ‘Where?’ (17:37), but rather ‘How?’ (13:18-21) and ‘Who is it who is coming?’ (17:22-30). It is important that we be ready to accept the turning-upside-down which must happen if the Spirit of God truly enters our lives, and the suffering that is unavoidable if we are going to walk with Jesus to Jerusalem.

The setting of this story is either the dawn or the mid-afternoon atonement ritual which took place each day at the temple. The first character presented to us is the Pharisee (see 16:15). He typifies the wrong attitude. He is self-focused and self-reliant. He is standing by himself. He sees himself as pure and is determined not to allow his purity to be in any way tainted by mixing with sinners.

He is not actually praying, for his attention is not on God but on himself. He thinks he is speaking to God, but he is speaking to himself. He thinks he is looking upon the face of God, but he is seeing only himself in the mirror of his own self-satisfied projection. This is made abundantly clear by the way he looks down on the tax collector – a certain sign that he knows neither God nor himself. He is using prayer in order to draw attention to himself, and to instruct others to live as he lives. Note that Jesus does not condemn him. He simply states that the Pharisee’s prayer does him no good, leaving him in the same state after as before.

The second character is a tax collector. He is also standing apart, but it is because he feels unworthy of being part of the assembly. He does not even dare to raise his eyes to heaven. However, he is there, pleading with God to forgive him his sins. Unlike the Pharisee, he is in touch with reality, and his humble plea opens him to God’s forgiving love. Luke concludes by repeating an exhortation to humility made earlier by Jesus (see the commentary on 14:11). We cannot raise ourselves up to God. Only God can raise us to himself. And he can do this only when we recognise our lowliness and look to him to raise us up.

⁹ *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:*

¹⁰ *‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

¹¹ *The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*

¹² *I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”*

¹³ *But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”*

¹⁴ *I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other;*

for all who exalt themselves will be humbled (brought low), but all who humble (lower) themselves will be exalted.’

verse 14 compare
Luke 14:11
Matthew 18:4

¹⁵ People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶ But Jesus called for them and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

¹⁷ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'

compare Matthew 19:13-15
Mark 10:13-16

We must look to God in trusting humility

The disciples have to learn not only to welcome such little children (a point already made in Luke 9:48), but also that to enter the kingdom of God they must welcome it the way these little children are opening themselves to Jesus' embrace. We have already noted that this childlike trust is the essence of the Christian virtue of humility (see the commentary on 14:11).

Jesus looked to God as a child looks to a parent, with total trust and a simple expectation of receiving love. To be his disciples, we must learn to do the same.

Jesus, who addresses God as 'Abba!', knows the secret of the kingdom of God. Only when we accept that God delights in us can we begin to understand the gospel which Jesus is preaching and enter into that communion with God which he enjoys.

We must learn to rely on God not on ourselves

The ruler wants to ‘inherit eternal life’. This is the same desire expressed by a lawyer in an earlier scene (10:25). Jesus himself has spoken of the ‘eternal homes’(16:9) into which people will welcome us if we use our wealth to help them.

There is a distinction between ‘everlasting life’ and ‘eternal life’. ‘Everlasting’ is a temporal concept, referring to a life that never comes to an end. ‘Eternal’ is primarily spatial. It refers to life that belongs to the sphere of the divine, as distinct from the natural life we experience here and now in our present existence (‘this age’, 18:30). Natural life ends with death. The ruler in this scene wants to enjoy the life of communion with God, a life that lies outside the horizon of life and death as we know it, a life which he hopes to inherit at the resurrection (‘the age to come’, 18:30).

Jesus initial response – ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ – comes as a necessary reminder to us of the central reference point in Jesus’ life: his Father. He wants this man, as he addresses this request to Jesus and looks upon his face, to see there the ‘glory of God’ (2Corinthians 4:6). Jesus wants to point the ruler to the Father. Jesus’ attention was not on himself but on his Father. His heart was directed to God. His will was conformed to God. His prayer was directed to God. God revealed himself to Jesus at the heart of every event and every person in Jesus’ life. Jesus wants his disciples to have the same experience. Note that the first three commandments are replaced by the call to follow Jesus – to God.

We are not told what the man did, but we are told that ‘he became sad; for he was very rich’. It was widely assumed that wealth and prosperity were signs of God’s favour. Here was Jesus speaking of the grave disadvantages of wealth. Those who heard Jesus’ remarks drew the conclusion (rightly) that it was impossible for them of themselves to follow Jesus in this, and therefore impossible to be ‘saved’ (18:26). Our mind goes back to the words of Jesus: ‘Those who try to make their life secure will lose it’(17:33).

¹⁸ A certain ruler asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’

¹⁹ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

²⁰ You know the commandments: “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother.”’

²¹ He replied, ‘I have kept all these since my youth.’ ²²

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ ²³ But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich.

²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ ²⁵ Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’

²⁶ Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’

²⁷ He replied, ‘What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.’

compare Matthew 19:16-26
Mark 10:17-27

Giving up possessions

It is possible that the word ‘camel’(Greek: kamêlos) might be meant to be ‘hawser’ (Greek: kamilos). One might be able to work a thin thread through the eye of a needle, but not the thick rope used for attaching a boat to a wharf!

It is material possessions that are holding this man back from answering God’s call. He is possessed by his possessions and he lacks the freedom to part with them, even though he is yearning for ‘eternal life’ and learns what is required of him to find it.

In many ways material possessions are the least problematic of all. If attachment to them can hold a person back from life, what about the more subtle and penetrating possessions like reputation, learning, positions of power? Do we really have to be ready to let go anything and everything if the call from God asks this of us? If this is the case ‘Who can be saved?’. If we cannot of ourselves let go of material possessions, it is obvious that we cannot of ourselves let go of any security. We will need God’s grace to make it possible (18:27).

This is why John of the Cross sees the dark night of the senses and of the soul as ‘sheer grace’. ‘Nobody’, he writes, ‘is able alone to empty himself of all his appetites in order to reach God’ (Ascent I.1.5). He also warns us of those more subtle ‘possessions’ (even quite spiritual ones) that hold us back from journeying with Jesus:

They must not so rely on their sharp intellects nor upon gifts received from God as to believe that their attachments or appetites will not blind, darken, and cause them to grow gradually worse.

Attachment to anything that possesses us (‘possessions’), no matter how small, will tie us down and prevent us answering the call to ‘eternal life’, even when we desire it as much as does the man in this scene. As noted earlier, John of the Cross uses the image of a bird whose leg is tied by a strong piece of string, or by the flimsiest thread. So long as the thread remains unbroken, it cannot fly (Ascent I.11.4). No more can we.

Moreover, of ourselves we need all the security we can find and so we cannot break from these possessions on our own. We need to hear the call. We need also the grace of God to untie us and set us free. In this, as in so many other aspects of the Christian life, we find an encouraging example in Saint Paul, who was able to write:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

– Philippians 4:11-13

Pope John-Paul II’s encyclical ‘Veritatis Splendor’ 1993 includes a long reflection on this scene as recorded by Matthew (see nn. 6-27).

To attain to God, we must leave all that is not God

When Jesus first called Peter and his fishing partners, Luke tells us that ‘they left everything and followed him’(5:11). When Jesus called Levi, he too ‘got up, left everything, and followed him’(5:28). By contrast, the man in the scene we have just studied was saddened by Jesus’ words and we are left with the impression that he found it too hard to give up his possessions (18:23).

Peter speaks up for the other disciples. As on an earlier occasion (9:20), he seems not to grasp the significance of his own words, for it will soon become clear that his claim to have left ‘everything’ goes well beyond the facts.

Earlier Jesus had promised that ‘those who lose their life because of me will save it’(9:24). Here he spells out some of the experiences that ‘losing one’s life’ might involve, such as leaving one’s home and family. This could extend even to one’s wife (18:29; see also 14:26).

In including ‘wife’(or husband), Luke is perhaps picking up the recommendation of celibacy given by his tutor, Paul (1Corinthians 7:7). In which case to ‘leave’ one’s wife means to forego marriage. On the other hand he may be underlining the truth that even commitments such as marriage, which are basic to the social structure of a community, are not absolute, and, if need be, must give way before the demands of discipleship.

When a disciple is ready to let go all of this because of Jesus, he is promised ‘very much more in this age’ and ‘in the age to come eternal life’.

Everything is grace. Let us be ready to leave anything that stands in the way of responding to God’s call, and then entrust ourselves to the mystery and to the mercy of God who is the giver of life. We experience this life here. We trust that God will continue to share it with us beyond the horizon we call death.

28 Then Peter said, ‘Look, we have left our homes and followed you.’

29 And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God,

30 who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.’

compare
Matthew 19:27-29
Mark 10:28-31

³¹ **Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.**

³² **For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon.**

³³ **After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.’**

³⁴ ***But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.***

compare Matthew 20:17-19
Mark 10:32-34

We must realise that Jesus is giving his life and be prepared to follow him

Luke reminds us of the fact that following Jesus means following him to Jerusalem, and so to the cross. When Jesus first spoke of the suffering he had to undergo, he said that he would be ‘rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and scribes’. He spoke of the fact that he would ‘be killed, and on the third day be raised’(9:22). This present passage adds the further detail that Jesus’ own people will hand him over to the ‘Gentiles’ who will carry out his execution.

Luke stresses two things: first, that what is to happen to Jesus is the fulfilment of ‘everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets’; and second, that the twelve completely failed to grasp the significance of what Jesus was saying (see also 9:45).

To grasp the meaning of suffering in Jesus’ life and to learn from him how we are to handle suffering in our own, we need the humility of the tax collector (8:9-14), and the simplicity and trust of the little children (18:15-17). The grace to keep loving through suffering comes from God who continues to love us in it. We need to learn to entrust all to love and to release our hold on whatever possessions give us a false sense of security (18:18-27).

Only through a miracle of grace can we see Jesus and follow him

Jesus is approaching Jericho. He is therefore on the last section of his journey to Jerusalem. Will the disciples ever learn to ‘follow him’? Again and again he has spoken of suffering as an essential part of his mission. Again and again they have failed to understand. In this scene the disciple is symbolised by a blind man. He is needy, and knows his need, for he is a ‘beggar’. He is not *on* the way, but *beside* it.

He cries out to Jesus as ‘Son of David’, a Messianic title reminiscent of Peter’s confession when he acknowledged Jesus as the ‘Messiah of God’(9:20). That Luke’s focus of attention is on the blind disciples in his own community is reinforced by the following dramatic detail: Jesus does not call the man himself, but does it through the mediation of the community.

Jesus, with typical respect, does not presume to know what the man wants, but asks him: ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The man, though now blind, had seen in the past. It was the same with the disciples. They saw when Jesus called them; they saw when they watched him heal; they saw when he fed the crowds. But they kept forgetting; they kept being distracted; they kept losing the clarity of their sight.

If they are ever going to understand his teaching, it will have to be he who gives them sight. Jesus assures the blind beggar that it is his ‘faith’ that makes it possible for him to be healed and so to see (compare 7:50; 8:48; 17:19).

The only sight the disciple can have is the seeing of faith: the seeing of a mind and heart that knows its own powerlessness, and that cries out for grace, trusting in the mercy of God revealed in Jesus. It is this faith, and nothing else, that makes it possible for the disciple to ‘follow him’ on this final section of his journey to Jerusalem — to death and resurrection and the fullness of life as God’s beloved.

Let us contemplate this scene and be the blind beggar. Let us taste our experience of being blind, of being alone, by the side of the road, missing out on life. Let us cry out for

³⁵ **As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.**

³⁶ **When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening.**

³⁷ **They told him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.’**

³⁸ **Then he shouted, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’**

³⁹ **Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’**

⁴⁰ **Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him,**

⁴¹ **‘What do you want me to do for you?’ He said, ‘Lord, let me see again.’**

⁴² **Jesus said to him, ‘Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.’**

⁴³ **Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.**

compare Matthew 20:29-34
Mark 10:46-52

Let me see again

help. Let us anticipate a response, and listen for it. Let us be willing to cast off whatever it is that gives us our security, little though it may be, and let us run to him.

Luke wants us to do this in each of the scenes which he presents, for the gospels are born of reflection, and capture the essence of the relationship with Jesus which his early disciples came to experience.

We are to identify with the disciples in their folly, but also in their staying with Jesus and wanting to learn. We are to identify with the epileptic boy, a victim of the evil that invades and surrounds us. We are to identify with his desperate father, incapable of helping the one to whom he has given life, but willing to believe with whatever little faith he finds in his heart. We are to identify with the Pharisees, as we try to secure our own positions in a world that Jesus keeps upsetting, and as we put him to the test and resist his grace. We are to identify with the rich man, keen to live more meaningfully, but unwilling to pay the price. And so it goes on.

For the people of the gospels are each part of us, and Jesus' way of relating to them is a grace: disturbing, encouraging, welcoming, threatening, warning, but always loving. If, as we find ourselves sitting by the side of the road, we cry out to him in our distress, he will heed our call, for he wants us to 'follow him on the way'. It is the only way that leads to life.

In Jesus God reaches out to the lost

Perhaps no scene in the gospel illustrates better Jesus' capacity to accept a person unconditionally, especially when we recall his lament concerning the rich (6:24; 18:24-25). Zacchaeus must have been one of the most hated men in Jericho. Not only had he acquired wealth from his fellow countrymen as a tax collector, he had done it in the name of the hated foreign overlords, the Romans. Jesus speaks of him as one who was 'lost', recalling the central theme of the parables of chapter fifteen.

What matters to Jesus is a person's present dispositions. Zacchaeus is keen to see Jesus and is willing to go to any lengths to do so. Jesus responds to his wishes and, presuming on his generosity, he invites himself to enjoy Zacchaeus's hospitality.

The problem in this scene is not Zacchaeus, it is the people who judge him and grumble about Jesus associating with him. In fact we find that Zacchaeus, unknown to those who judge him, has been a generous man with the wealth he has acquired..

He receives Jesus with joy (a central theme for Luke: see 1:14,28; 6:23; 10:20; 13:17; 15:5,9,32; 19:37; 22:5; 23:8), and finds repentance (contrast 12:16-21; 18:18-25) and salvation (see 2:29-30; 3:6).

This scene complements the previous one, and demonstrates the gracious offer of salvation which reaches out to all 'today' (compare 2:11; 4:21; 23:43).

Zacchaeus 'was trying to see Jesus', but we come to realise that he was only responding to the even greater longing in the heart of the Son of Man who 'came to seek out and to save the lost'.

¹ He entered Jericho and was passing through it.

² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.

³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.

⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.'

⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'

⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much.'

⁹ Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.

¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

¹¹ As they were listening to this, he went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.

¹² So he said, 'A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return.

¹³ He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, "Do business with these until I come back."

¹⁴ But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, "We do not want this man to rule over us." ¹⁵ When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading.

¹⁶ The first came forward and said, "Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds."¹⁷ He said to him, "Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities."

The responsibility inherent in discipleship

The message which Luke wishes his readers to take from this parable is indicated in the opening sentence. The conversion of Zacchaeus, the rich exploiter, seems to have resulted in a kind of euphoria. People thought that perhaps the reign of God's justice was just about to emerge. They thought that the time might have come when all exploiters would follow Zacchaeus' example and welcome Jesus and his message.

Jesus wants to disillusion them. He has come to the goal of his journey, and he is about to enter Jerusalem. He will speak God's word openly, but his followers are not to expect immediate success. The rich and powerful will remain, for the most part, intransigent.

His followers must be prepared to do what Jesus is about to do. They are not to 'stand looking up to heaven' (Acts 1:11) expecting a miraculous intervention of God. Rather, like Jesus, they are to love faithfully in the real world where many will continue to resist grace.

The parable itself may be referring to events in the reign of Archelaus, son of Herod the Great and ruler of Judea from 4BC to 6AD. Verse fourteen especially picks up the prevailing attitude to Archelaus among his Jewish subjects: they hated him.

Luke has another purpose in including this parable here. The behaviour of the nobleman to the third slave is cruel and utterly reprehensible. But there is a lesson to be learned also from the behaviour of the slave.

The journey to Jerusalem, the journey in which a disciple learns what it means to follow Jesus, is drawing to a close. Luke concludes his study of discipleship with a parable which highlights the responsibility which disciples have not to neglect the grace that is given them.

For a similar parable, see Matthew 25:14-30

This provides a balance to the two preceding narratives of the blind man and Zacchaeus. They focus on the enduring and unconditional nature of God's love. This parable reminds us of our responsibility. Jesus is making the point that just as the slave who failed to use his money well ended by losing everything, so it will be with those who fail to use their God-given gifts in carrying out the mission entrusted to them.

We have already met the proverb quoted in verse twenty-six. Luke used it to encourage his readers to heed the teaching of Jesus. The more we listen, the more we are open to hear; the more we fail to listen, the more deaf to God's word we become (compare 8:18).

Here the focus is on action. If we use our gifts in doing God's will we will be blessed. If we sit on our hands and wait for God to act, afraid to dare the risk of life, we will end up with nothing.

To receive a gift is to accept a responsibility. We are made in the image of God. We are called to be creators, life-givers. Love that is not offered lies stagnant. It destroys. A tree is for bearing fruit. The more we love, the more capable of love we become. The less we love, the less capable of loving we become till life dries up within us. A life centred on self, not wanting to risk oneself, leads to a definitive egoism. We choose to exist in the outer darkness, separated from the community of love.

¹⁸ **Then the second came, saying, "Lord, your pound has made five pounds."**

¹⁹ **He said to him, "And you, rule over five cities."**

²⁰ **Then the other came, saying, "Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, ²¹ for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow."**

²² **He said to him, "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow?"**

²³ **Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest."**

²⁴ **He said to the bystanders, "Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds." ²⁵ (And they said to him, "Lord, he has ten pounds!")**

²⁶ **"I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.**

²⁷ **But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and slaughter them in my presence."**

²⁸ **After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.**

verse 26, compare Luke 8:18; Matthew 13:12; Mark 4:25

29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples,³⁰saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.

³¹ If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this, "The Lord needs it." ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.

³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' ³⁴ They said, 'The Lord needs it.' ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

compare
Matthew 21:1-7
Mark 11:1-7

Jerusalem, the goal of the journey

This scene is charged with excitement and Messianic expectation. Jesus is at last coming into Jerusalem. The first words he speaks in Luke's gospel are: 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house' (2:49). And from the introduction of John of Baptist we have been awaiting the fulfilment of Malachi's promise:

I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

– Malachi 3:1; see Luke 7:27

The temple of Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonian army in 587BC, as a result of an ill-conceived uprising some ten years after the capture of the city and the beginning of exile for many of the leading citizens. However, the Babylonian Empire was powerful only during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, and in 539BC, king Cyrus of Persia was welcomed into Babylon as a liberator. The following year, he issued an edict permitting the exiles to return home (Ezra 1:2-4; 6:3-5; 1Chronicles 36:22-23).

In 520BC Zerubbabel, a prince of the Davidic line, was sent to Jerusalem, not as an independent king but as an administrator of Persian rule, along with Joshua the high priest, at the head of a large contingent of returning Jews (Ezra 2:2b-70; Nehemiah 7:7b-73; 1Chronicles 3:19). Encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, he organised the rebuilding of the temple. It is this temple, enlarged by Herod the Great, that Jesus is approaching, and the words of Zechariah form the background to Luke's narrative.

Zechariah saw Zerubbabel as God's instrument to restore the fortunes of the house of David. He was the 'Branch' that, having learned humility from the experience of the exile, would at last bear fruit, and bring about the time of Messianic peace:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he that shall build the temple of the Lord.

– Zechariah 6:12-13

He then describes the entry of the Messiah into the temple:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

– Zechariah 9:9

In the period between Zerubbabel and Jesus the words of the prophet were understood as reaching beyond his own time to the time of the coming of the promised Messiah. The restoration and re-dedication of the temple was indeed a Day of the Lord. It came to be seen as a foreshadowing of the ultimate Day of the Lord when God's reign would come and God's chosen people would be vindicated against their enemies. In visionary material added to the Zechariah scroll we read:

Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley.

– Zechariah 14:3-4

Luke is alluding to this passage when he sets the scene 'at the place called the Mount of Olives', preparing us for divine judgment. Jesus is presented as 'the Lord' who 'will suddenly come to his temple' (Malachi 3:1). His instructions to the two disciples portray him as being in complete command of the situation. On the surface Jesus may appear to be the victim of rejection by those who wield power in the land. Luke is reminding us that everything comes within the providence of God and that we are really watching the liberating and saving action of the Lord who remains the master.

The people 'kept spreading their cloaks on the road', indicating their submission to the kingly rule of the Messiah. They are exultant with joy (compare 2:10-11). The first part of the hymn sung by the disciples comes from Psalm 118:26, and belongs to the liturgy of the feast of Tabernacles. This festival commemorates the universal kingship of the Lord and the dedication of the temple. The second part of their hymn echoes the words of the angelic host at the birth of the Messiah (2:14).

The Pharisees try to get Jesus to order his disciples to be quiet. He tells them that the very stones of the temple recognise the approach of the one who inherits the promise made to David. The disciples have not understood Jesus' teaching about his suffering. They seem to be expecting him, as the Messiah, to accomplish in Jerusalem what they understand to be the promise made by Zechariah. Surely he is now going to 'build the temple of the Lord' (Zechariah 6:13). He will, but, as will shortly unfold, in a way that completely transcends their expectations, and through suffering of which they have no comprehension.

³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.

³⁷ As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen,

³⁸ saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.'

⁴⁰ He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'

compare
Matthew 21:8-9
Mark 11:8-10