

Hebrews

The letter to the Hebrews is one of the most difficult of all biblical books. Although it ends like a letter, for most of its length it reads like a very closely argued lecture or seminar paper. It also takes for granted a close knowledge of the Old Testament laws of priesthood and sacrifices, which we have just been studying.

It was evidently written to a group of Jewish Christians who were in danger of giving up their faith. Exhortations to remain firm in the faith abound throughout the letter (2:1-3; 3:6-13; 4:11; 6:4-6; 10:26-31; 12:25-29). The problem seems to have been persecution from fellow Jews. In the early days the new Christians resisted this persecution (10:32-34) but now they appear in danger of falling back into Judaism. So the writer's main purpose is to convince them that the salvation Jesus brings is far superior to that which they enjoyed under the Law of Moses. The covenant given through Moses is destined to pass away, but the one given through Jesus remains for ever (8:13).

There is no indication of who the author of the letter was. It was unlikely to have been Paul. Paul was conscious of his calling to preach to the Gentiles and stresses this in many of his letters (Galatians 2:7-9; Ephesians 3:2-8). Moreover the style of the letter is most unlike Paul's. It is extremely fine rhetorical writing, without any of the digressions and ungrammatical sentences which Paul so often uses. Finally, the writer does not seem to have been familiar with the Hebrew Bible. All his quotations are from the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament. Martin Luther was the first to suggest that he might have been Apollos, a learned man, skilled in rhetoric and full of powerful arguments to refute the Jews (Acts 18:24-28). However, there may well have been others, whose names we do not know, capable of writing such a letter.

There is also very little to indicate when the letter was written, where the author was when he wrote it and where the recipients lived. But again we can make a guess. Jewish Christians were subjected to persecution from their fellow Jews virtually from the start, but this persecution and the temptation to defect reached a peak in Jerusalem in the days leading up to the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. The Roman siege lasted for some

time and would have been headline news for Jewish communities throughout the Roman world. Perhaps 8:13 reflects the strong expectation that the sacrificial system of the old covenant was actually about to disappear. Possibly too 13:13-14 is a reference to the imminent fall of Jerusalem ("Here we have no abiding city") and a warning to Christians to leave the city before it is too late, just as Jesus had warned them (Mark 13:14-19). This is, in fact, what they did, escaping before the city's fall.

All this is guesswork. What is beyond doubt is that in this letter we have a powerful and eloquent argument for the superiority of Jesus over all humanly constructed systems of religion.

Day 303. Psalm 8; Hebrews 1:1 - 4:13

"Such a Great Salvation"

Psalm 8

The wonder of God's creation and the place of human beings in it. Although small in God's sight, men and women are the rulers of creation.

Hebrews 1:1 - 4:13

The writer begins straight away with a contrast between the present and the past, since his purpose is to urge his readers to hold fast to their present salvation and not to return to the past. In the past God spoke to his people through the prophets, but "in these last days" he has spoken through his Son (1:1). There was no fully worked out doctrine of the Trinity at the time the letter was written, but the opening verses clearly express the divinity of Jesus in terms which anticipate it. Jesus is creator and heir of all things, the image of God, sustainer of all things by his powerful word, redeemer and ruler. He shares the glory, that is, the essential being of God and is the one who carries out God's purposes (1:1-4).

In late Jewish tradition the Law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai by angels (see Acts 7:53) and it was angels who guarded the people of Israel in the desert (Isaiah 63:9). But Jesus, though a man, is far superior to the angels (1:5-14) and the salvation he brings far superior to the message which they brought. So the writer makes his first appeal: "Do not neglect such a great salvation" (2:2-3).

But, it might be argued, Jesus was only a man and therefore not so great as angels. Again, although the writer did not have the developed doctrine of Jesus' two natures, he anticipates it. But his argument in the rest of chapter 2 is far more significant than this. The "world to come" is to be subjected to human beings, just as this first one was (2:5; Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:4-6). Yet, because of sin, human beings are not in fact ruling the whole universe (2:8). The purpose of Jesus in becoming a man was that he might live, endure temptation, suffer and die on behalf of humanity in order to restore the dominion which should have been ours and then share it with us. It is not as God but as the representative of humankind that he now reigns in the heavenly world (2:9-10).

So if Jesus looks rather unimpressive as a man, suffering with loud cries and tears (5:7), this is because he was suffering on behalf of us all so that he could help us when we are tempted, just as the readers are being tempted (2:18). Jesus was faithful in his earthly life, and so should we be (3:2). The people of Israel rebelled against Moses in the desert and missed out on the salvation which should have been theirs (3:7-19). Our salvation is due to someone greater than Moses (3:1-6) but we may lose it all the same if we are unfaithful in the same way. Paul uses the same argument in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 and like the writer to the Hebrews ends with the assurance that God can help those who waver through temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Cleverly, the writer takes up another theme of Israel's desert wanderings, which he introduces in the quotation from Psalm 95 and develops with an extremely technical argument. In some passages the Promised Land itself is known as a "rest" for God's people (Deuteronomy 12:9; Psalm 95:11). The first generation of Israelites missed out on that rest because of their lack of faith (4:2). Yet even though their children did enter the Promised Land under Joshua, the psalm speaks of a rest still to come (4:6-9). Like the people of Israel, our salvation consists of a rest (4:3) in which we cease from our labours as God did from his. The labours from which we rest are the works the Law demands (6:1). Instead, we rely on the work of Jesus. We will also see that for this writer faith is the capacity to endure suffering in the hope of what is to come (11:1).

Day 304. Psalm 110; Hebrews 4:14 - 7:end

Jesus, our High Priest

Psalm 110

A psalm of praise to the King as God's appointed ruler, whose enemies God will crush. The King is also a priest after the order of Melchizedek, the ancient king of Jerusalem mentioned in Genesis 14:18-24. The psalm probably began in Jerusalem before it was conquered by David. When he made it his capital, he took over the tradition by which its kings were also priests (2 Samuel 8:18; in some versions, see marginal note). By the time of Jesus and the early Church the psalm was accepted as referring to the Messiah (see Acts 2:34-35).

Hebrews 4:14 - 7:end

In chapter 2, the author speaks of Jesus as the representative man, the one who restores the sovereignty of mankind over God's creation. To achieve this, he had to be "made like his brothers and sisters in every way" (2:17). For the Jews it was natural to think of such a person as a high priest since he was the representative of the people who made atonement for them (2:17). In this passage, he takes up the image of Jesus as a high priest and develops it.

First he shows that Jesus is a genuine high priest. As the representative of the people, the high priest has to be chosen and has to be one of them (5:1-3). The fact that he offers sacrifices for his own sins (Leviticus 4:3-12) shows that he is touched by the same weaknesses (5:2-3). These things are true of Jesus: the quotations from Psalms 2 and 110 show that he was chosen by God (5:4-6) and the sufferings he endured enabled him to understand from experience our human weakness (5:7-9).

At this point, he breaks off to warn his readers against complacency. Perhaps they do not think any of what he is offering is worth learning. But, he reminds them, they are called to maturity (6:1; see Philippians 3:13-15; Colossians 1:28). He then puts both sides of the mystery of God's election. On the one hand, God's calling is sure; he is able to perform what he has promised (6:13-end). But on the other, we may let go of it and fall away. It is clear that he envisages the possibility that some who have accepted

Christ and received the Holy Spirit may return to their old ways and actually be worse off than before (6:4-8). The words in 6:9-12 are to balance warning with encouragement as he does throughout the letter. To believe, as many do, that one experience of grace guarantees our salvation whether or not we remain faithful to Christ is to fall into the same complacency of which the writer warns.

In chapter 7 he returns to his theme and shows how the priesthood of Jesus is greater than that of the high priest in Jerusalem. First he introduces Melchizedek, who was by his name "king of righteousness" and by his position "king of peace," but who is not given any genealogy or any note of his birth or death. He then shows

1. that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham and thus greater than Levi, since Abraham gave him a tithe and he blessed Abraham (7:4-10);
2. that Psalm 110 looks forward to a new priesthood, which implies that the existing priesthood was not perfect (7:11-14);
3. that the basis of Jesus' priesthood is the resurrection by which he lives for ever to intercede for us, comparing this with Melchizedek of whom it is simply said that he lives (7:3,15-25);
4. that Jesus' priesthood is unshakeable because it was confirmed by God with an oath (7:20-22);
5. that Jesus offers a better sacrifice than does the Jerusalem high priest, a point which he will develop in greater detail in chapter 9 (7:26-end).

As high priest Jesus is not only able to sympathise with our weaknesses because he has been tempted in every way that we are tempted, but because he has triumphed over temptation he is pure, blameless and holy, the Son who has been made perfect for ever (7:26,28).

Day 305. Psalm 40:1-10; Hebrews 8 - 10

The New Covenant

Psalm 40:1-10

A song of praise from one who makes obedience to God his greatest desire. He speaks of himself as a willing slave, one who, because he loved his master, decided to stay with him when he could be released because he loved him, and in token of this had his ear pierced (40:6; Exodus 21:2-6).

Hebrews 8 - 10

Having presented Jesus as the representative man, the writer then portrayed him as our perfect high priest. He now goes on to examine the sacrifice this high priest offers and the covenant in which it takes effect.

He begins with a contrast which governs the whole of this section, a contrast between the true tabernacle in heaven and the copy of it on earth. The glory of the first tabernacle was that it was made according to the pattern given to Moses on Mount Sinai and therefore planned by God himself (8:5; Exodus 25:9). But, the writer argues, this implies that there must be an original, a greater and perfect tabernacle (8:2-6). Not only must there be an original and perfect sanctuary, there must also be a new and better covenant, since Jeremiah looked forward to the end of the old covenant and the coming of a new in which God would forgive his people's sins (8:7-13).

Having introduced the perfect sanctuary of which the earthly tabernacle is a copy and the new covenant for which the old gives way, he moves to his conclusive point: the sacrifices of the old covenant could never forgive sins. The description of the tabernacle in 9:1-5 draws attention to the Most Holy Place, separated by a curtain, containing the ark of the covenant. (The three things said to be inside the ark are drawn from Exodus 16:33-34, 25:16 and Numbers 17:10-11.) Once each year the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, the place of the presence of God, taking with him the blood of the bull sacrificed for his own sin and that of the people (9:1-7).

But the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement only removed ritual impurity, enabling the tabernacle to be used in worship for another year; it did not deal with a guilty conscience. Under the old covenant, there were no

sacrifices for deliberate sin (Numbers 15:30-31). In contrast, the blood which Jesus took into the heavenly sanctuary was his own blood that clears the conscience, sets us free from "dead works" and enables us to serve a living and holy God (9:11-15).

Then the writer introduces a further argument, based on the fact that the same Greek word can mean both "will" and "covenant." Like a will, a covenant must be ratified with a death (9:16-17). Thus, the first covenant required the death of an animal to ratify it and yearly sacrifices to maintain its effectiveness. But the new covenant is based on the one perfect sacrifice of Christ himself.

Thus the writer moves to his astonishing conclusion: the Jewish Law and its elaborate sacrificial code is only a shadow of the real covenant which was to come (10:1)! The fact that sacrifices must be made continually year by year proves that it can never finally deal with sin (10:2-4). In fact, Jesus brings to fulfilment that other Old Testament tradition that what God required was obedience rather than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 40:6-8; Isaiah 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24). Whereas the sacrifices of the Temple fell short, Christ's obedience fulfilled God's righteous demands perfectly (5:7-10) and introduced the new covenant by which sins are forgiven.

Having demonstrated the superiority of the new covenant over the old, the writer warns his readers again not to let go of it. The blessings of the new covenant are ours by faith and remain ours as long as we continue to live by faith. He now shows us what faith means: the confidence with which we approach God (4:14-16; 10:19-22) and the perseverance by which we continue in the face of persecution (10:35-36).

Day 306. Psalm 40:11-end; Hebrews 11 - 13

Faith or Failure

Psalm 40:11-end

A prayer for help in time of persecution.

Hebrews 11 - 13

God has prepared a new covenant for us under which Jesus is our perfect high priest, who offered for all time the one perfect sacrifice which cleanses us from all sin. But we need faith to receive this gift and make it our own. Faith is the confidence by which, metaphorically, we enter the Most Holy Place where Jesus has gone before, opening the way for us to follow (10:19-20; see 6:19-20; 9:8). Faith is also the confidence by which we persevere in the face of hardship (10:35-36). And faith is the assurance of the reward to come for those who endure (10:39 - 11:1).

To endure in the face of suffering, we need faith, so the writer shows that this was exactly how the great men and women of the Old Covenant won divine approval (11:6). Most of those he mentions also shared some aspect of his readers' situation. Abel offered a better sacrifice than his brother (11:4; see 7:27; 9:12-14) and was murdered for it. Noah condemned the world by the measures he took for his own salvation. Abraham left his family and lived as a stranger, looking forward to a better country and a lasting city (11:8-10,13-16). Moses left the security of Egypt to endure persecution "for the sake of Christ" (11:24-26). Here the application breaks through the strict interpretation of the passage. Others achieved great things but were persecuted as well, became outcasts and some suffered death, looking forward in faith to what they had been promised (11:32-end).

The example of these servants of God under the old covenant should inspire us to look to Jesus. He is the author of our faith, the pioneer who suffered in order to bring salvation to many brothers and sisters (12:2; see 2:10). He is also the perfecter of our faith, the one who himself was made perfect so that by following him in his suffering we should be perfect (12:2; see 5:7-9). Jesus endured persecution from his own people and so will we (12:3). Rather than give up our faith, we should see this as the necessary

discipline by which we become true children, just as he is the Son (12:5-11; see 1:2; 2:10; 5:8). Instead, we must live lives of holiness in fear and reverence, remembering the awefulness of the God whom we serve (12:14-end). Otherwise, like Esau, we risk losing the inheritance which should be ours.

The practical advice of the last chapter, while relevant to all, is especially apt for those enduring persecution. Fear and suspicion should not lead them to become isolated. Love and hospitality should continue and those imprisoned should not be forgotten (13:1-3). Discipline in the areas of sex and money is important (13:4-6) and leaders should be honoured and obeyed (13:7-8,17).

Legalistic teaching was a danger to all churches (see Colossians 2:8-end) but perhaps especially among the Jewish Christian community. Our "ceremonial food" is Jesus Christ himself in the eucharist (13:9-10). Our sacrifice consists in praise and deeds of love and kindness (13:15-16).

In a final reference to the old sacrificial code, the writer compares Jesus to the animal sacrificed on the Day of Atonement, whose body was burned outside the camp (13:11-12). This was a place of disgrace, where the parts of the animals not used in the sacrifices were disposed of and where unclean people were confined (Leviticus 16:27; 13:45-46). As followers of Jesus, we should be prepared to bear the disgrace of being outside the camp, rejected by those among whom we live. These words may also have a special purpose, advising the Christians in Jerusalem to leave the city that is soon to perish in favour of a heavenly city (13:13-14).

Day 307. Psalm 120; James

True Christian Maturity

Psalm 120

The singer is a man of "shalom", peace, whose spirit is oppressed by the harsh, selfish words of those around him. He seeks help in the Lord's peaceable wisdom.

James

James was the Lord's brother and leader of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:17; Galatians 2:9). Like Hebrews, his letter is written for Jewish Christians familiar with the Law and living under persecution, although not so grave as that facing the readers of Hebrews. His subject is not the ceremonial aspects of the Law but the practical. The letter has been criticised for what appears on the surface to be an almost total lack of distinctive Christian content and for a view of faith which seems to put the emphasis on good deeds. Martin Luther even called it a "right strawy epistle" and questioned its right to inclusion in the Bible. But these are examples of the surface judgements of which James himself was so critical (4:11-12). While remaining a Jew, the spirit of James's message is that of Jesus, and there are several echoes of the Sermon on the Mount, especially the warnings against pursuing wealth and judging by appearances, and in 3:13-18, where the values of true Christian wisdom echo those set out by Jesus in the Beatitudes.

The opening chapter presents the message of the whole book in a nutshell. The persecution his readers are experiencing will, if they allow it, result in true Christian maturity (1:2-4). Maturity consists in the possession of true Christian wisdom, which is practical rather than theoretical (1:5; 3:13-end) and is given to the person who asks in faith (1:5-8). This wisdom enables us to distinguish between true and false, between the outward appearance of blessing and true inward happiness (1:9-11). But first we must stand fast under trial, not blaming God for what happens to us, but recognising that difficult circumstances are sent to refine us and remove the selfish desires which govern us (1:12-18; 4:1-5). Rather than speaking, we should be ready to listen to the word of God and, having listened, to obey (1:19-25; compare these verses with Psalm 39, for example, and the many verses in Proverbs

which commend good speaking). True Christian living is a matter of action, not words (1:26-27).

The rest of the letter develops the themes of the opening chapter, teasing out the difference between theoretical and practical, outward and inward. Inwardly, true wisdom means purity, kindness, mercy, humility and peaceableness (3:17 - 4:10). Outwardly it means good deeds (1:26-27; 3:13). There is a false wisdom consisting inwardly of "faith" which is merely theoretical and does not lead to action (2:14-end) and outwardly of eagerness to speak and especially to become a teacher (3:1-12). That is why we must be slow to judge others (2:12-13; 4:11-12) lest we judge by appearances rather than reality.

The commonest example of judging by appearances and one of the easiest errors to fall into is to judge a person by wealth and status (2:1-11) or to desire it for ourselves (4:1-5). Wealth is the outward epitome of well-being, but people who delight in it have their reward already (5:1-6). The Christian is not to aim at wealth and power but humility and contentment (4:6-10), not to take pride in worldly success or well-being but to submit to God's providence (5:13-end). We are not called to prosperity in this life, but to wait for the Lord's coming with patience (5:7-11) and prayer (5:13-18).

Finally, like all the Lord's words, this message is not just for hearing but for doing (1:21-22). So if anyone uses this letter to help someone else return to the straight and narrow they will be blessed (5:19-20).

Matthew's Gospel

Like Luke, the author of Matthew probably had a copy of Mark's gospel in front of him as he wrote and like Luke he follows its general outline, recounting the story of Jesus from his birth, his baptism and temptations, his public ministry in Galilee, the transfiguration at Caesarea Philippi, followed by the journey to Jerusalem and his death and resurrection. But also like Luke, Matthew is not slavish in the way he uses Mark, feeling quite free to change the order of events and alter the recorded words of Jesus.

In particular, Matthew adds a considerable amount of Jesus' teaching. Some is included in stories of encounters with his enemies, but most is arranged in five blocks: the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), the charge to the disciples (chapter 10), parables of the Kingdom (chapter 13), values for the Church (chapter 18), and the end of the age (chapters 24 and 25). These five blocks have been said to parallel the five books of Moses, portraying Jesus as bringing to Israel a new Law for a new age.

Certainly, Matthew has a feel for the Law. There are several instances where the words of Jesus recorded in Mark are altered in a way which shows Jesus giving a definitive judgement in a particular rabbinical debate (Mark 10:10-12; Matthew 5:31-32). Possibly, the whole gospel is a teaching manual to instruct new converts from Judaism in the ways of Christian faith.

But Matthew is much more than a teacher of the Law. The gospel he offers us is a portrayal of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, whose revolutionary life and teaching had a huge impact on everyone he met and who called his followers to costly commitment in the way of the cross.

Day 308. Psalm 126; Matthew 1:1 - 4:16

The Son of God

Psalm 126

Israel rejoices when God restores them.

Matthew 1:1 - 4:16

The birth narratives and account of Jesus' early life set the scene for what is to come in the rest of the Gospel and foreshadow its major themes. He is introduced as the Messiah, the Jewish people's expected king in the line of David, and as "Son of God". In the visit of the magi from the East, the Gentiles acknowledge him King and worship him.

In contrast to Mark, Matthew builds slowly to the title "Son of God." First he is introduced as Messiah, Son of Abraham and Son of David and his genealogy given (1:1). All Jews of importance would expect to be able to trace their ancestry back to some significant ancestor (see Ezra 7:1-5). Jesus' genealogy includes Abraham, Judah and all the royal line.

The story of his birth is told from Joseph's point of view, a devout Jew and himself the descendant of David (1:20). The appearance of the angel of the Lord with a special message is a common theme in the Old Testament and especially in those passages where God is about to embark on some saving work (Genesis 22:11,15; Exodus 3:2; Judges 13:3). The angel announces not only the name but the significance of Jesus: he will save his people "from their sins" (1:21). The theme of Jesus' battle against sin on behalf of his people also runs through the gospel (4:17; 9:13; 26:28).

Then he is called Emmanuel, recalling the promise to Israel that God would dwell among them (Exodus 25:8; Psalm 46:7,11; Ezekiel 48:35). Later, Matthew shows Jesus as the one who is with his people by fulfilling the hope for Jerusalem in the coming age (18:20; 28:20). Next he is "King of the Jews" and Messiah (2:2-6), receiving the worship and the wealth of the Gentiles (Isaiah 2:2-3; 60:1-14; Zechariah 14:16). Finally God himself calls Jesus "my Son" (2:15). The title "Son of God" is the controlling theme of the gospel (11:27; 14:33; 17:5 26:63-64). The birth narrative is explicit that Joseph is not Jesus' father (1:25 and the repeated phrase "the child and his mother" in 2:13,14,20,21).

John the Baptist is introduced as the forerunner. His dress identifies him as Elijah (3:4; see 2 Kings 1:8), who was expected to precede the Messiah (17:10-13; Malachi 4:5-6). Elijah's preaching separates Israel according to whether or not they repent (3:7-10) and, as we shall see in the passages to come, Jesus' preaching will have the same effect.

The quotation in 2:15 is taken from Hosea 11:1, where "my Son" refers to Israel. At his baptism, Jesus is anointed for ministry by the Holy Spirit and his status as God's Son is reaffirmed (3:16-17). As God's Son, Jesus takes on the vocation of Israel. As Israel were led through the Red Sea into the wilderness, the baptism is followed by the temptations in the wilderness. All his answers to the devil are taken from Deuteronomy and express the lessons of the wilderness wandering (4:4,7,10). Israel grumbled when they went hungry, but Jesus endured; Israel put the Lord to the test but Jesus refused; Israel turned from God to worship the golden calf, but Jesus worshipped God alone. Where Israel failed, Jesus will succeed, but the outcome of his faithfulness is to be his suffering and death.

Day 309. Psalm 51; Matthew 4:17 - 5:end

The New Law

Psalm 51

Sin goes deeper than wrongdoing. It is an attitude of heart that only God can deal with. But to the one who brings a broken spirit as his offering, God responds by granting a willing spirit, the inward desire to keep the Law.

Matthew 4:17 - 5:end

The words "from that time" in 4:17 signal a new stage in Jesus' ministry when he emerges into public life. The same words occur at 16:21, when the focus shifts to the journey to Jerusalem with the disciples.

Jesus' public ministry has a two-fold theme: repentance and the kingdom of heaven. In the following chapters we will see him attacking sin in all its forms, announcing the Kingdom as a present reality and calling people to enter it.

His first act is to call disciples. By doing so, he becomes a Rabbi, a travelling teacher. Normally, the disciples chose the teacher. The fact that Jesus chooses his disciples is the first sign of the newness of the coming Kingdom. The disciples play a key role in the gospel: they are the ones who receive Jesus' teaching, even though they are not very good at understanding it. Later, they will pass it on to others (5:1-2; 10:1; 16:21; 28:19-20).

Next we see Jesus surrounded by great crowds, teaching, preaching and healing. This summary gives us the context in which everything in the next few chapters takes place. There is a large crowd consisting of all kinds of people with varying degrees of faith; and there are the disciples to whom Jesus is entrusting the secrets of the Kingdom (13:10-13). The Sermon on the Mount is for the disciples (5:1-2). Throughout chapters 5 - 7, the word "you" refers to those who have left everything to follow Jesus (4:20,22; 19:27).

The main question for any Rabbi was how he stood in relation to the Law. Some interpreted it leniently, some strictly. Jesus went further than any Rabbi of his time. He had come to fulfil the Law by bringing a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees and other Rabbis (5:17-20). At the heart of this righteousness is repentance and forgiveness. Jesus

fulfilled the Law by his death for the forgiveness of sins (1:21; 9:6-8,10-13; 20:28; 26:28). Because of his death, we, his disciples, can fulfil the Law by living according to its intention rather than the letter and so bring glory to God (5:16).

The heart of Jesus' new Law is the Beatitudes, the Christian equivalent of the Ten Commandments. They mark a radical break with other Jewish Rabbis because Jesus commends the piety of those who have no Rabbi. The "poor in spirit" were the ones the Rabbis overlooked because they were not important enough, but who tried to live faithfully in the details of their everyday lives. Examples of their piety are found in the pilgrimage psalms, 120 - 134. The values Jesus commends are mercy, humility, purity, peacemaking and endurance under persecution (the same qualities James identifies as genuine wisdom: James 3:13-18). They are for people whose main concern is a heart that is right before God rather than wealth, status, outward happiness and the praise of men and women.

The letter of the Law is not enough. Jesus' disciples are to take as their rule what James calls the "royal law" and the "law of freedom" (James 2:8,12) and Paul the law of love (Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:22-24). To avoid murder is not enough; our anger is to be under control (5:21-26). To avoid adultery is not enough; our sexual desire is to be under control (5:27-32) and Jesus takes a very strict position on divorce (5:31-32; 19:3-9). To keep oaths is not enough; we should always be people of our word (5:33-37). To keep within the bounds of strict retaliation is not enough; we should give generously even to those who oppress us (5:38-42). To love our neighbours is not enough; real love embraces our enemies as well (5:43-48).

This is a law for children of a heavenly Father (5:45,48). Jesus the Son of God comes to make his disciples children of God like him. One essential qualification for being his disciple is to be baptised for the forgiveness of sins (3:11; 28:19). This means following Jesus in his baptism, when he fulfilled all righteousness and was declared God's Son (3:15,17). In chapter 6 the life of God's children is contrasted with those who look for outward approval.

Day 310. Psalm 19; Matthew 6

Children of God

Psalm 19

To live God's way is the path to greatest happiness.

Matthew 6

The theme of the Sermon on the Mount is the way the Law is fulfilled in the lives of those who live as God's children. Jesus points to the inward attitude the Law requires rather than the details of outward observance. Instead of performing their religious duties to be seen by others, for God's children all these acts of piety spring from a personal relationship of love and trust. They do not look for rewards in this world, such as worldly wealth or the praise of others. Instead they find their reward in the knowledge of God himself and the promise of the eventual coming of his kingdom.

A feature of Jesus' preaching style was his use of vivid images, frequently exaggerated for effect. In 6:2-4 he uses two: someone so concerned to let others know about his generosity that he arranges for a flourish of trumpets and someone so concerned to avoid publicity that his right hand doesn't even tell his left hand what he is doing. There are more of these memorable word pictures in 7:3-6 and 9-11.

Prayer is relationship with God. Jesus did not forbid corporate prayer (18:19-20), but the prayer that builds relationship is done in secret, to be seen only by him. Too much attention to public prayer, especially when performed by those with a gift for words and who rejoice in the attention of others, can make us think that prayer must be very difficult or that God's attention is guaranteed by well-turned phrases. Not so, says Jesus. Prayer is as simple and straightforward as a child's conversation with a loving father, who knows already what is best but loves to be asked.

Jesus himself called God "Abba" or "Dear Father". This is the simple address at the beginning of Luke's version of the Lord's prayer (Luke 11:2). Matthew's is the Church's version, designed for public prayer, and Luke's has been altered in several places to reflect it. "Hallowed be your name" reflects both the first and third commandments. It is a prayer for lives

governed by the holiness of God. It teaches us the purpose of adoration: to lead us to lives more centred on God.

Jesus announced that the Kingdom of heaven was "near" (4:17). He came to teach and preach the good news of the kingdom (4:23) and to demonstrate its coming in works of healing. But the kingdom is not yet fully come. It is like a small seed which must grow (13:3,24,31) until finally the harvest comes and with it a time of separation (13:36-43; 25:31-32). In the meantime, we are to pray that the kingdom he brought to earth may grow.

The key to the coming of the kingdom is forgiveness. It was to save his people from their sins that Jesus came (1:21). Those who do not show forgiveness cannot be instruments of the kingdom for others. Jesus emphasises this point in the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:21-end).

The disciples are not to use temptation as an excuse (James 1:13-15). Although an enemy of God, Satan is under his control (Job 1:12; 2:6). We are allowed to pray to be delivered from temptation.

The purpose of the Lenten disciplines - almsgiving, prayer and fasting - is to build our relationship with God. Fasting is devalued when it is only seen as a means of raising money for others or drawing attention to an area of need. The reason for the discipline of self-denial is to promote singleness of heart, to train us to place more value on the good things God gives than those the world offers. This is the connection between verses 16-18 and what follows.

Wealth is the ultimate in outward reward. God's children are to live for the values and rewards of the kingdom. But the great god Mammon can exercise a hold over us. He offers security, status, comfort and self-indulgence. All these conflict with the calling of disciples to work and pray for the coming of the kingdom. Wealth and the desire for it can also cloud our judgement, making us unable to discern the things of God. While there is no law against being wealthy, Jesus' followers are to renounce wealth as a goal. This was the advice he gave the rich young ruler, again going beyond simple obedience to the Law (19:16-22).

Freedom from anxiety is a gift, but also a command. God's children are not to seek the things of this world, but instead to trust God to provide them, giving their time and effort to the work of his kingdom (see 5:6; 19:27-30).

Day 311. Psalm 26; Matthew 7

The Narrow Way

Psalm 26

The prayer of an upright man.

Matthew 7

One of the subtlest of temptations is to compare ourselves with others. Making a habit of this will always lead us astray: it will prevent us from discerning those areas where we ourselves need to change (7:3-5). Even worse, it may lead us to try to change others, either through judging their conduct, or by offering well-intentioned help they are not ready to receive (7:6). In the Christian community we are challenged to love with no strings attached. This means straightforward reliance of the goodness of God (7:7-11) and loving others just as we hope to be loved (7:12).

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus tells us to pray for the coming of God's kingdom (6:10). It is a kingdom which grows slowly, with many set-backs (13:27-33), so it will be necessary to persevere in praying and working for it. The words, "ask," "seek," and "knock," are in the present continuous tense. Jesus is telling us to keep on asking, seeking and knocking and not become discouraged, knowing that God is a generous Father who delights to give us good things.

7:12 sums up the teaching Jesus has given, the teaching which fulfils the Law (5:17). It is to treat others as we would like them to treat us. In this way we will be acting like our generous heavenly Father, who gives good gifts to his children (7:11) and who is kind to the deserving and the undeserving (5:45). By doing this, we will approach his perfection (5:48).

The Sermon is for the disciples rather than for the crowd as a whole (5:1-2). The requirements of true discipleship are even more stringent than the Law (5:20; 8:18-22; 19:18-21). The gate is narrow and few find it (7:13). Not all the seed grows to harvest (13:18-23). Not all who wish to enter the kingdom are able to (19:23-24; 25:11-12,29,44-46). Thus, the Church will have to wrestle continually with the imperfection of her members.

The problem of false prophets and false teachers was already a serious one for the Church at the time the gospel was written, as can readily be seen by

the frequency of the warnings given in the epistles and elsewhere (Acts 20:29-30; 2 Corinthians 10:7-11; 11:12-15; Galatians 1:8-9; 3:1; Philippians 3:2-3; Colossians 2:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 1 John 2:18-19; 2 John 7-8; 3 John 9-10; Jude 4). Disciples are to discern their fruits and must not be impressed by outward profession or spectacular displays of power. Genuine Christianity is measured by the teaching Jesus has just given, discerned in meekness, mercy, purity and peace (5:5-9).

The final parable (7:24-27) sums up all Jesus teaching, that which is to come as well as the Sermon. He has presented the new Law, the law of love and freedom. Disciples who live by it will find life (7:14).

Day 312. Psalm 146; Matthew 8:1 - 9:34

The Kingdom of Heaven in Action

Psalm 146

Praise to God, the gracious and compassionate Creator and help of the needy.

Matthew 8:1 - 9:34

In 4:23, Matthew introduced Jesus teaching, preaching and healing. In the Sermon on the Mount he presented an outline of Jesus' teaching - the new Law of the kingdom of heaven. In these two chapters, he presents an outline of Jesus' healing ministry. The gospel is written as a teaching manual, probably for new converts, and each episode has a distinct teaching point, displaying the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven.

First comes Jesus' encounter with sickness, with three healing miracles and a summary (8:1-17). Here, as in 9:1-8, Matthew omits some of the colourful detail included in the Marcan and Lucan version of these stories (Mark 1:40-end; 2:1-12; Luke 7:1-10) in order to concentrate on his main point. In 8:1-4 it is a Jew who is not only healed but cleansed from his ritual impurity. In 8:5-13 the healing of a Gentile in response to his master's faith foreshadows the gathering of the Gentiles who will replace the unbelieving Jews in the kingdom. In 8:14-15, Peter's mother-in-law is a representative Christian. Matthew subtly changes the wording of Mark 1:30-31 so that now she "rises" (pointing to resurrection) and serves not "them" but "him". Through his healing ministry, Jesus fulfils the vocation of the suffering servant (8:16-17). As in the baptism and temptations, he is succeeding where Israel failed.

The next two stories focus on the call to discipleship. It is a call to give Jesus overriding loyalty, a point emphasised throughout the gospel (8:18-22; 10:37-38; 16:24-26). But it also leads the disciples into danger. In 8:23 they "follow" him (see 4:19) but end up having to call out "save us" because of their little faith. Jesus' call may bring difficulty and danger. Following him requires constant trust.

In the stories that follow, Matthew begins to show us the reason for the dangers. After the encounter with sickness comes the assault on Satan.

Jesus heals the demon-possessed men but is unwelcome in the neighbourhood (8:28-end). Exactly why Matthew has two demoniacs here and two blind men in 9:27-31 when the Marcan stories have only one is something of a puzzle.

Having overcome both sickness of demon possession, the next few episodes portray Jesus in direct encounters with sin. First he demonstrates that he has authority to forgive sins (9:6). Then he calls sinners to be his disciples, demonstrating that he has come to bring mercy (9:12-13). Having fulfilled the picture of the suffering servant from Isaiah 53, he now fulfils the picture of the bridegroom in Isaiah 54, who forgives and remarries his erring bride (9:14-15). The kingdom of heaven cannot contain the old wine of judgement; it is made for the new wine of mercy (9:16-17).

Finally, Jesus is victor over death itself. Like Peter's mother-in-law, Jairus' daughter "rises" to new life (9:25). These miracles demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah and some believe, like the blind men who call on him as "Son of David" (8:27-29). However, others refuse to see Jesus for who he is and remain spiritually blind. The healings end with the first sign of the opposition he will face from the Pharisees (9:34). This theme is reintroduced in 12:22-45 after the healing of another deaf and blind man.

Day 313. Psalm 141; Matthew 9:35 - 12:21

The Kingdom of Heaven Proclaimed

Psalm 141

A righteous man prays to be delivered from the snares of the wicked.

Matthew 9:35 - 12:21

The summary passage in 9:35-end completes the section in chapters 8 and 9 in which Jesus demonstrates the kingdom of heaven in action and leads into the teaching of the next chapter, in which he sends out the twelve apostles to preach. Like the Sermon on the Mount, chapter 10 is a compilation of sayings, this time on the theme of evangelism. Jesus' last command to the apostles is to make disciples of all nations (28:19) and these instructions apply not only to the limited preaching mission in Galilee during Jesus' lifetime but to the world-wide preaching of the Church which was to follow his resurrection.

The twelve apostles stand for the twelve tribes of Israel. It is on their preaching that the Church is to be built. First they go to the "lost sheep" of the house of Israel (10:6). They are lost because the shepherds have been neglecting them (9:36; 23:4,13). Later, the gospel will be taken to the Gentiles too (10:18). Those who are called to proclaim the Kingdom are to expect persecution (10:17-25) and not seek to avoid it (10:34-39); they are to make use of worldly wisdom (10:16); to depend on the power of the Holy Spirit (10:19-20); to persevere (10:23); to fear God rather than people (10:26-28); to depend on him for preservation (10:29-33); and to be willing to give up their lives (10:37-39). Those who receive them, even to the extent of giving them a cup of water, will receive God's blessing (10:40-42).

Chapters 11 and 12 follow on from chapter 10 and lead into the next block of teaching in chapter 13. Their theme is the way the gospel of the kingdom is received. First John enquires about "the Christ" (11:2), wondering if Jesus is really he. Jesus' answer is to remind him of the Scriptures which are being fulfilled (11:4-5). John has already been described as the "voice crying in the wilderness" of Isaiah 40:3 (3:3). Now he is the messenger of Malachi 3:1 (11:10), the Elijah who is to come (11:14; 17:10-13; Malachi 4:5-6). Although he is the greatest man of the old covenant, he is not as great as

the least in the kingdom (11:11). John brought judgement but Jesus brings mercy and the Holy Spirit. His disciples are known as "little ones" (10:42) and "children" (11:25; 18:1-5). They are the "poor in spirit" (5:3), the humble ones to whom the Father reveals the Son (11:25-end).

Meanwhile, those who refuse to receive Jesus bring judgement on themselves. "This generation" judges both Jesus and John according to their own expectations. They do not allow the kingdom to change the way they think (11:16-19). Their penalty will be more severe even than the pagan cities (11:20-24; 10:14-15).

Chapter 12 begins to focus once again on the dispute with the Pharisees about the true meaning of the Law. They are blinded by their rigid adherence to the letter. In fact, Jesus is fulfilling the Law, but they fail to see it (12:7-8; 5:17-20). To prove his point, Matthew adds some extra legal arguments to the account in Mark 2:23 - 3:6 (12:5-6,11-12).

12:15 is the first of several occasions when Jesus withdraws from those who refuse to accept him (14:13; 15:21,39), a sign of the separation which is to come between the faithful and the unbelieving. In chapters 8 and 9 Matthew showed Jesus fulfilling Isaiah 53 and 54 (8:17; 9:15). Here he shows him fulfilling Isaiah 42:1-4 as the servant who will bring God's "torah" to the nations by his patience and perseverance.

Day 314. Psalm 3; Matthew 12:22 - 13:end

The Kingdom Concealed in Parables

Psalm 3

The Lord's servant prays for protection.

Matthew 12:22 - 13:end

The mention of a man who is demon-possessed, blind and mute picks up the two stories in 9:27-34 where the Pharisees made the same accusation against Jesus. There, the blind men had faith and called on Jesus as "Son of David", or Messiah. The dumb man was delivered from evil and spoke. The themes of faith and unbelief, speech and dumbness, spiritual blindness and the accusations made against Jesus are all taken up in the second half of chapter 12. This teaching is not just about Jesus. Following chapter 10, it is also for the Church in its mission, showing how we should respond to unbelief.

The crowds wonder whether Jesus is the Messiah (12:23) but the Pharisees refuse to consider it (12:24). When Jesus drives out unclean spirits, it is a sign of the kingdom and evidence of the Spirit of God at work, but they fail to recognise it (12:25-29). The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the unbelief which rejects his work and attributes it instead to the evil one (12:30-32). While Jesus gives words to the dumb (9:33; 12:22) the Pharisees reveal the evil in their hearts through the words by which they accuse him (12:33-37).

The request for a sign is more evidence of unbelief. The point about the people of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba is that they were Gentiles. Their belief will condemn the unbelief of God's own people who reject Jesus (12:39-42; 8:10-12). The people of "this generation" are like the person Jesus has cleansed of an evil spirit; they have been cleansed by the Law, but unless they recognise and put their faith in Jesus, they will end up worse than before (12:43-45; 11:20-24).

The story of Jesus' mother and brothers (12:46-50), like the parable of the two houses which ends the Sermon on the Mount (7:24-27), sums up the whole of chapters 10-12. There are no special places in the kingdom of heaven; it is open to all who do the Father's will.

Following the apostles' mission in chapter 10, a division began to appear between those who believed in Jesus and those who refused to believe. The parables of chapter 13 show both the source and the outcome of this division. To those who have, more will be given (13:12) but to those whose hearts are hard the parables bring condemnation (13:13-15). Of those who hear the word, only a few believe and produce fruit (13:23; 7:13-14). The division caused by the preaching of the Kingdom is not only between the disciples and the rest.

There is also a distinction within the Church between true and false believers. The kingdom is small (13:32) and hidden (13:33) but gradually and inevitably grows. While it is growing the righteous and the wicked exist together and only God knows the difference (13:28-29). When the harvest comes at the end of the age, God will make the final separation (13:40-43,47-50; 7:15-23; 25:31-end). True believers are those who give their all for the sake of the kingdom (13:44-46; 4:20,22; 8:18-22; 10:37-39).

The parables of the kingdom in chapter 13 form the third of Matthew's five blocks of teaching. It ends with another comment on the relation between Jesus and the Law. The teacher of the Law instructed for the kingdom brings with him some of his old knowledge but adds to it the new treasures of the kingdom (13:52), a less radical comparison than that in 9:16-17.

The story of Jesus' reception at Nazareth in 13:53-end picks up that of his own mother and brothers in 12:46-50. Those who do the Father's will are his true family. Those who see only his earthly family refuse to believe.

Day 315. Psalm 5; Matthew 14:1 - 16:20

The Separation Complete

Psalm 5

A prayer that God will separate the righteous and the wicked.

Matthew 14:1 - 16:20

Already Matthew has given us hints that the kingdom of heaven is to be opened to the Gentiles: in chapter 2 the magi come to worship him, and in 8:5-12 a centurion's faith is interpreted as a sign that Gentiles will be welcomed into the kingdom while the rightful heirs are rejected. In 28-19-20 the apostles will be commissioned to take Jesus' teaching to all nations. But before this takes place, the representatives of the Jewish people will reject Jesus, leaving only a remnant of the "house of Israel" among his followers.

These chapters illustrate the final separation between those in Israel who believe in Jesus and those who reject him, whilst also looking forward to the inclusion of the Gentiles. The disciples confess Jesus as Messiah and Son of God (14:33). In a number of episodes Peter is presented as the representative disciple and as such becomes the foundation of the Church (14:28-29; 15:15; 16:16-18,22; 17:24). The Pharisees are offended by Jesus and demonstrate their lack of faith by asking for a sign (15:12; 16:1-4). In between are the crowds, for whom the Pharisees are blind guides (16:14) but on whom Jesus has compassion (14:14; 15:32) and both feeds and heals them.

The story of John the Baptist's execution illustrates the danger Jesus is in from the political authorities. Herod has already beheaded John and now thinks that Jesus is John resurrected. When Jesus hears about it he withdraws (14:13). This is not just a reaction to danger; it is also a sign of his withdrawing from Israel to take the gospel to the Gentiles, the path which the Church later followed (12:14-15; 14:13; 15:21; 16:4).

In the feeding of the five thousand, it is the disciples who feed the crowd (14:16,19) with the bread Jesus provides, a sign of the coming ministry of the Church to the world. But the incident on the lake, like that in 8:23-27, shows the disciples in trouble, their faith too small to cope (8:26; 14:31). This time, however, they acknowledge Jesus as Son of God (8:27; 14:33).

The faith of the Church, though small, is contrasted with the unbelief of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. They are hypocrites whose concern is with man-made rules (15:7-9), whereas Jesus, as the Sermon on the Mount has already shown, is concerned with the heart (15:16-20).

Jesus' withdrawal from the Pharisees (15:21) takes him into Gentile country, where another non-Jew receives healing because of her great faith (8:10; 15:28). This parable has sometimes been interpreted as an incident in which Jesus is persuaded by the woman's faith and realises that the gospel is also for Gentiles. This interpretation, however, ignores the clear signs Matthew has already given that Jesus already knows that the Gentiles are to receive the gospel. It is not Jesus but the disciples who remain to be convinced, and this is the reason Jesus so publicly tests the woman's faith. The feeding of the four thousand takes place in Gentile country and the crowd would include Gentiles as well as Jews. But here as before Jesus both heals and feeds them. And, Matthew significantly adds, they praise the "God of Israel".

The introduction to the feeding of the four thousand shows that we are meant to compare it with the Sermon on the Mount (15:29; compare 5:1). The feeding of the Gentiles symbolises the fact that, after his death and resurrection, the Gentiles will receive Jesus' teaching. In contrast, the Pharisees again demonstrate their unbelief by asking for a sign (16:1-4; compare 12:38-42), in response to which Jesus leaves them (16:4). Their "yeast" is the teaching that consists of man-made rules (16:12; 15:9), whereas Jesus' teaching "satisfies" (14:20; 15:37).

Despite his lack of faith on the lake (14:28-31) and the error he is about to make in 16:22-23, Peter's confession represents the climax of the first half of the gospel. Jesus has preached the gospel of the kingdom, the disciples have believed in him and they will form the foundation of the Church which is to come.

Day 316. Psalm 25:1-10; Matthew 16:21 - 19:15

The Journey to Jerusalem

Psalm 25:1-10

A prayer for guidance recognising the importance of humility.

Matthew 16:21 - 19:15

The words, "From that time on," in 16:21 close the section which began with the same words at 4:17 and introduce a new one in which the theme is Jesus' journey to the cross and resurrection and the demands of discipleship that flow from this. At the climax of the first section, Peter confessed Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, but that confession is the start of a journey with Jesus to the cross and beyond it, whose implications he does not yet understand. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that discipleship means a radical change of values, and in the teaching to come the values of purity, humility, poverty of spirit and hunger for righteousness will be reaffirmed. But now he teaches that it will also mean a radical change of goal, nothing less than losing one's life for the sake of the kingdom. 16:27 looks forward to 25:31-end where the true disciples are portrayed having fed the hungry, clothed the naked and comforted the oppressed.

We have to remember that Matthew is a teaching manual for the early Church, for disciples who know Jesus not in his earthly life but as crucified, risen and ascended. The teaching that follows about relationships in the Christian community is preceded by a vision of the glorified Jesus. Again, Peter wants to stay with the glory, rather than be involved in the messiness of the world, but the voice reaffirms the words spoken at Jesus' baptism (17:5; 3:17) with the addition, "Listen to him." What follows is the teaching of the ascended Jesus for his Church.

First, they must have faith. In the story of the father and his demon-possessed son, the emphasis in Mark's gospel is on the father's lack of faith (Mark 9:24). In Matthew it is the disciples who lack faith; they still have much to learn (17:19-23).

17:24-end deals with the duties of disciples to the secular authorities. As sons of their heavenly Father, they are not bound to the laws of the state, but they keep them out of respect and to avoid giving offence.

Chapter 18 is the fourth of Matthew's five blocks of teaching, this one based on the question in 18:1. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who is humble (18:4) and the one whose purity of life offers no stumbling block to new converts (18:6-10). Jesus the good shepherd has gone to enormous lengths for each individual among his Church (9:36; 10:6; 15:24) and so should his disciples (18:12-14). He came to save his people from their sins (1:21) so his Church must take steps to eradicate sin among their members. They are entrusted from him with the authority to forgive sins (9:6; 18:18) and sin within the Church must not be ignored (18:15-17). When the Church is united, Jesus Emmanuel is present with them (18:20; 1:23). On the other hand, the parable of the unmerciful servant is a terrible warning against lack of forgiveness (18:21-end).

19:1-9 give the rules for divorce within the Church, amplifying 5:31-32. Like the Sermon on the Mount, the emphasis is on the heart of God's will rather than the letter of the Law. This teaching for married men and women is expanded to allow a place in the Church for single people (19:10-12) and affirm the value and dignity of children (19:13-15).

Day 317. Psalm 118:15-end; Matthew 19:16 - 21:32

The Arrival of the King

Psalm 118:15-end

The King enters Jerusalem in a victory procession.

Matthew 19:16 - 21:32

Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem, where he has announced that he is to suffer, die and be raised to life (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19). Travelling south from Caesarea Philippi (16:13), his disciples assembled in Galilee for the Passover pilgrimage (17:22), passed through Capernaum, where he had made his home (17:24), travelled along the east side of the Jordan, thereby avoiding Samaria (19:1), re-crossed the Jordan and took the road through Jericho (20:29) which enters Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives (21:1).

There are no public miracles or teaching between Caesarea Philippi and Jericho. Instead, Jesus teaches his disciples about the demands of the kingdom. It requires humility (18:1-4) and forgiveness (18:21-22) and marriage must be held in honour (19:4-6). Next Jesus deals with the subject of wealth and status. The Jews believed that wealth was a sign of God's blessing; Jesus teaches the opposite. It is not earthly wealth but heavenly treasure which counts (19:21; see 6:19-21). Wealth may even be an obstacle to the kingdom (19:23-26). As in the Sermon on the Mount outward obedience to the Law is not enough; what is needed is a heart of compassion. The wealthy person has greater responsibility to help the poor and needy (see 25:35-36).

In the kingdom there is a great reversal, where the meek inherit the earth (5:5), the poor in spirit receive the kingdom (5:3), the rich are excluded (19:24), prostitutes and tax collectors go in before the righteous (21:31-32; 9:12-13), the greatest is the servant of all (20:25-28), the first are last and the last first (19:30; 20:16). It is the kingdom of grace where rewards are given on the basis of God's generosity rather than our deserving (19:27-30; 20:11-15). The parable of the workers in the vineyard extends this grace to the Gentiles. They, who come in last, receive the same reward as God's grumbling people, the Jews (20:16; 9:11-12). Church leaders may have to

suffer and will certainly have to be servants, following the example of Jesus, who gave his life as a ransom for many (20:20-28).

Jesus now approaches Jerusalem, where he is to be rejected by the chief priests and elders. The disciples already know that he is not only the Messiah but the Son of God (14:33; 16:16). For the Jews, to believe in Jesus is to call him "Son of David" or Messiah (1:1; 9:27; 12:23). In Jericho, two blind men do so and become his followers (20:29-end). Finally in Jerusalem, the crowds do so (21:9). Jesus enters the city as the expected king, the heir to David's throne (Zechariah 9:9). But it is the crowds who have come with him from Galilee who proclaim him king; Jerusalem does not know who he is (21:9-11).

When the Lord comes to his Temple, he will purify it to make right offerings (Malachi 3:1-4). As we have seen, the kingdom brings a separation between those with faith and those without, the poor in spirit and those who oppress them (5:10-12; 9:36; 11:25-end; 12:38-45; 13:11-17; 16:5-12). Thus, entry to the city immediately leads to confrontation as Jesus attacks the unfaithful and oppressive religious system of his day and replaces it with teaching, healing and the praise of children (21:12-16,23). The cursing of the fig tree is a sign of God's judgment on the Jerusalem leaders, who refuse to recognise his authority (21:18-27). They are the ones who honour God with their words, but whose hearts are far from him (21:28-32; 15:7-9).

Day 318. Psalm 86; Matthew 21:33 - 23:end

The Sin of Jerusalem

Psalm 86

A servant of God calls upon him in a time of trouble.

Matthew 21:33 - 23:end

Like the Sermon on the Mount, the whole section from Matthew 21 - 25 is a carefully constructed section of teaching. The king enters Jerusalem to bring peace (21:4-5), but the city rejects him (23:37-end). As a result, the city will be destroyed and the coming of the king will take place not in Jesus' days but at the end of the age and for the whole world (chapters 24 - 25). The framework for these chapters is taken from Mark 11 - 13 but within it Matthew has carefully arranged other blocks of teaching. Some of these are unique to Matthew, such as the parable of the two sons (21:28-33) and the sheep and the goats (25:31-end) and some also occur in Luke but at a different point in the story, such as the parable of the wedding banquet (22:1-14) and the woes on the Pharisees (23:1-32).

Jesus' opponents in Jerusalem include the chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, the Sadducees and the Herodians, in various combinations (21:15,23,45; 22:15-16,23; 23:2). All represent the system of organised religion which values outward status and conformity and fails to recognise the true worship and service God desires, which springs from the heart. The cursing of the fig-tree because it bore no fruit (21:18-22) already foreshadows the coming destruction of Jerusalem. The city is God's vineyard (Psalm 80:8-end; Isaiah 5:1-7) which has failed to bear fruit (21:33-41). As a result the kingdom of God will be given to others (21:43). The parable of the great banquet takes up the same theme. The guests originally invited will be destroyed (22:1-7) and the banquet opened to all (22:8-10), though not all who come in will be found acceptable (22:11-14; see 13:24-30).

After the parables, Jesus defeats the Pharisees and Sadducees in legal argument. The Pharisees have honoured neither God nor Caesar (22:21) and the coming destruction of Jerusalem by Caesar will in fact be God's judgement. The Sadducees do not understand the power of the Law which

they teach (22:29-32). Jesus answers an expert in law (22:35) with his own authoritative pronouncement and finally shows that "Son of David" is not a sufficient title for the Messiah (22:41-end). It is as "Son of God" that he has come to Israel (2:15; 3:17; 17:5) and as the Son of God that he will be rejected (21:37-39; 22:2; 26:63-65).

The basic error of the Pharisees is that they conduct their religious lives for people to see and admire (23:5-7). True love of God is practised in secret, seeking his reward alone (6:1,2,5-6,16-18). The kingdom of God is for the humble, who are content to serve one another (23:8-12). The seven woes (23:13-32) condemn a religion which is merely outward show. Jesus has taught that what comes from the inside is most important (15:15-20). In the words of John the Baptist (23:33; 3:7) "this generation" is condemned to bear the responsibility for the whole rebellious history of mankind (23:33-36).

Day 319. Psalm 28; Matthew 24 - 25

The End of the Age

Psalm 28

The psalmist prays to be saved from the fate of the wicked.

Matthew 24 - 25

The whole gospel has been written under the shadow of the "end of the age". Jesus had announced that the Kingdom of heaven was near (4:17). Since his first coming, the kingdom had been a reality within the present age. But in his teaching he predicted a time when the present age would pass away and give way to the kingdom of heaven in its fullness (13:31-33). The intervening time was a time of separation, during which the gospel would be preached, the Church persecuted and many fall away (10:11-23; 13:18-23). At the end of the age, there would be a separation between those who were faithful and those who were not, as well as between the Church and the world (13:36-50).

The fall of Jerusalem, which many Christians believed would bring in the end of the age, had come and gone. Now Christians were uncertain when the final fulfilment of the Kingdom would be. In this new situation, Matthew has collected and arranged Jesus' teaching to show his readers how to respond. At the outset, he distinguishes carefully between the signs of the city's fall and the signs of Jesus' coming (24:3). Whereas the destruction of Jerusalem is past, the coming of Jesus is indefinitely delayed (24:13,48; 25:5,19). His followers need to know how they are to live in the interval.

The coming of the kingdom with Jesus has brought in an age of suffering, including wars, famines and earthquakes on a global scale, but Jesus warns the disciples not to confuse these with the signs of the end (24:4-8). This is the time in which the gospel must be preached and the Church suffer persecution (24:9-14). The sign of the fall of Jerusalem is the "abomination of desolation" (24:15), at which the inhabitants of the city must flee (24:16). The words in Daniel referred to a pagan idol set up in the Temple by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes; in Matthew it is much less specific, probably referring only to the approach of the pagan Roman army. He is

explicit that the fall of Jerusalem is not the time of Jesus' coming (24:23), nor will there be a secret coming; when Jesus returns, everyone will know it (24:24-28).

The sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky as a prelude to his coming (24:30). This is a verse Matthew has added to the words he found in Mark and again it is not clear exactly what he means by it, except that when it happens, the disciples will recognise it (24:32-34). For the others it will be as unexpected as the Flood was in Noah's day (24:36-41).

How then are Jesus' followers to live in the shadow of the end of the age? They are to be ready for him to come at any time (24:42-44). Their readiness will consist not in any special precautions but in faithful daily obedience (24:45-51). Some will fall away (24:10) so they need perseverance, enough "oil in their lamps" to keep them going to the end (24:13; 25:1-13). For those who are faithful in the task they have been given, however humble, there will be a great reward (25:14-30).

Finally, Matthew explains the criteria by which the Son of Man will judge all nations according to their deeds (16:27). Those who enter the kingdom will be the ones who have kept the heart of the Law, not simply the letter. They have treated others as they would like to be treated (7:12) and loved their neighbour as themselves (22:37-40). They have not stored up earthly possessions (6:19-21) nor despised the humble (18:10-14) but laid up treasure in heaven by their concern for the poor and the outcasts (19:21). These are the ones who show they have the gospel in their hearts and so enter life (25:46).

Day 320. Psalm 55; Matthew 26:1-56

Jesus is Handed Over

Psalm 55

The prayer of a man betrayed by his friend.

Matthew 26:1-56

As he approached Jerusalem, Jesus had been telling his disciples that once there he would be "betrayed" or "handed over" to the chief priests and teachers of the law (17:22; 20:18). Chapter 26 begins with the same prediction (26:1-2). This handing over is clearly shown to be God's will. The Greek verb "paradidomai" meaning "betray" or "hand over" is part of the apostles' preaching and always it is God who hands Jesus over for our sake (Acts 2:23; Romans 8:32).

The chief priests begin to make their preparations (26:3-5), but whereas they want to avoid arresting Jesus during the Passover festival God has other plans. Meanwhile the anointing at Bethany graphically portrays Jesus' coming burial. His words, "You will not always have me with you," (26:11) contrast with the closing words of the gospel, "Behold I am with you always" (28:20), showing that it is his death that he is speaking of, not his later ascension.

In Matthew it is the disciples who complain about the waste of the woman's ointment. They still do not understand what is to come. While the woman wastes a jar of expensive perfume on Jesus, his betrayer hands him over for 30 pieces of silver. Later, the money is explicitly linked with the figure of the rejected shepherd in Zechariah 11:11-13 (27:6-10). Jesus is also one who came to care for those without a shepherd, but was rejected (9:36).

The betrayer is one of Jesus' own disciples, one who dips his hand into the bowl with Jesus (26:23). This dipping was one of the ritual parts of the Passover meal. His role is a necessary part of God's plan, yet brings him judgement. The whole chapter makes it clear that it is not really Judas who is handing Jesus over, but God. It stresses both Jesus' foreknowledge of all that was to happen and God's control (26:1-2,12,21,29,34,39,45-46,53-54,56).

At the end of the Passover meal a piece of unleavened bread was broken and shared and the third cup, the "cup of blessing", also shared. At this

point, Jesus told his disciples to do this in memory of him. The "blood of the covenant" is the blood by which the covenant is made, as in Exodus 24:8, but recalls the new covenant predicted by Jeremiah in which sins are forgiven (Jeremiah 31:31-34). It is to save his people from their sins that Jesus has come (1:21).

The sacrifice for sins is costly and in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus struggles with agony and sorrow at the thought of what is to come (26:37-38). This is not because he is weak (26:41), but because of the ordeal he is to face. On the cross it is not his physical suffering but rather the weight of the world's sin that kills him (27:45-50).

While Jesus faces his ordeal, the disciples fall away (26:31). At the decisive moment, none of them is able to stay with Jesus; Peter, James and John fall asleep in the Garden (26:40) and Peter denies Jesus under pressure (26:69-end). Their defection as well as Judas' betrayal, is a sign of what is to come in the preaching of the gospel, when many will fall away under persecution (24:9-10).

Day 321. Psalm 6; Matthew 26:57 - 27:44

The Crucifixion

Psalm 6

A prayer for healing.

Matthew 26:57 - 27:44

The main emphasis in the story of the crucifixion is the responsibility of the Jewish leaders for Jesus' death. Jesus had predicted that "this generation" would suffer punishment for its rejection of him and bear the responsibility for the deaths of all the martyrs from the beginning of the world (11:20-24; 12:22-42; 23:33-36). Jerusalem would be destroyed because it had refused to accept him (23:37-end).

At the climax of the middle section of the gospel, Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter had answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." On the rock of this confession, Jesus had said that he would build his Church (16:15-18). Here, at his trial, the high priest asks if he is the Christ, the Son of God, and Jesus himself makes the same confession as Peter had done (26:63-64). Instead of worshipping, the high priest rejects Jesus and accuses him of blasphemy. The other occasion on which Jesus was accused of blasphemy was over his claim to forgive sins (9:2-3). Jesus has come as Messiah and Son of God to save his people from their sins, but is rejected by them.

In 27:3-10, Judas disclaims responsibility for Jesus' death and returns the money the priests had given him. His innocence is nothing to them, though they acknowledge that the money is blood money (27:3-6. The quotation in 27:9-10 is not from Jeremiah but Zechariah and not exact. Matthew may be remembering the incident at the potter's house in Jeremiah 18). When the Jewish leaders hand Jesus over to Pilate, he too disclaims responsibility. The title "King of the Jews", which Pilate first uses (27:11), is characteristic of Gentiles, first used by the Magi at 2:2. But speaking to the crowd he calls Jesus "Messiah" (27:17,22) and they refuse to recognise this title. Pilate's wife urges him to have nothing to do with Jesus and proclaims him innocent (27:19). The ceremonial washing of hands is not an act of hypocrisy, but a solemn demonstration of his own innocence (27:24) to

which the people answer, "Let his blood be on us and on our children." (27:25). For Matthew and his readers the consequences of this cry had already been seen in the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of Temple worship.

At the crucifixion, the point is made even more vividly. The whole scene is a description of the unbelief of the Jewish leaders. The "King of the Jews" is being put to death by the Romans at their own request, and they mock him with this title (27:42). The words of the passers-by take up the charge of the false witnesses made at Jesus' trial (26:61; 27:40). The chief priests tempt him in words reminiscent of the devil to prove himself the Son of God by avoiding the pain of the cross (27:40-43; 4:3-6). But Jesus has not come to save himself. His purpose is to save others by his death (1:21; 9:13; 20:28; 26:28).

Day 322. Psalm 22; Matthew 27:45 - 28:end

The Resurrection

Psalm 22

The psalmist is experiencing the silence of God in a time of oppression and bewilderment (22:2) and concludes that God has abandoned him (22:1). He reflects that others have been saved (22:3-5), but he does not deserve it; he does not count, is not important enough (22:6-7). By trusting in God, he has been made to look a fool (22:8), yet he really had no alternative; his whole way of life from his youth has been based on trust in God (22:9-10). Is that lifelong trust now to be disappointed (22:11)?

In heightened metaphors, he describes the experience of anguish and confusion and the enmity and indifference of others (22:12-18). The descriptions of dismay and confusion might be only poetic for the psalmist, but for Jesus on the cross they were fulfilled in reality. He was surrounded by enemies (22:12-13,16), the guards gambled for his clothes (22:18; Matthew 27:35; John 19:23-24), he was thirsty (22:15; John 19:28) and in the agony of crucifixion his bones would have become dislocated and his strength fail (22:14,17).

The prayer for help (22:19-21) leads to the assurance of an answer and the promise of praise and sacrifice (22:22-28). Even the dead will praise God (22:29) and the future declare his righteousness (22:31). Again, these words are fulfilled in the crucifixion and resurrection, through which Jesus became Lord of the dead as well as the living (Romans 14:9). His quotation of 22:1 on the cross testifies to the experience of abandonment and despair as he took the weight of sin. But as a quotation from this psalm it is at the same time a declaration of confidence in the ultimate victory of the God, to whom he entrusted his life.

Matthew 27:45 - 28:end

As Jesus dies, Matthew shows us the consequences of his death. The curtain of the Temple is torn in two, indicating that the way into God's presence is now open. But it is also a sign of the coming destruction of the Temple and the end of the sacrificial element in Jewish worship. The graves are open as a sign of the coming resurrection of God's people. And the centurion believes, a sign of the conversion of the Gentiles which is to come.

The rest of the chapter prepares us for the story of the resurrection. The women watch to see what happens to Jesus' body (28:55-56,61). Joseph of Arimathea lays it in his own new tomb and wraps it in a clean linen cloth (28:59). The posting of the guards prepares for the false story that the disciples had stolen the body, which Matthew evidently wished to refute (27:62-end; 28:11-15).

All the gospels agree that it was the women who were first at the tomb, which is remarkable, given that in a Jewish court, women's evidence had no status (28:1; Mark 16:1-3; Luke 24:1-3; John 20:1). But Matthew alters Mark's story. Instead of coming to bring spices, wondering who will roll away the stone and meeting a young man, the women come only to look at the tomb and an angel unexpectedly rolls away the stone (28:1-4; Mark 16:1-5). The

removal of the stone has nothing to do with the resurrection itself; its purpose is to show the women that Jesus' body is no longer there (28:5-7).

As in Mark, the reaction of the women is a mixture of fear and joy (28:8; Mark 16:8) but Matthew wishes to add to Mark's account the all-important resurrection appearance in Galilee, for which he has been preparing ever since the disciples' vision of the glorified Christ at Caesarea Philippi (17:9; 26:32; 28:7). So the women are told to tell the disciples, who are called brothers, a detail also picked up in John's gospel (28:10; John 20:17).

It is on another mountain, recalling both the Transfiguration and the Sermon on the Mount (5:1; 17:1; 28:16), that Jesus meets his disciples. At this point they are the Church in miniature, followers of the crucified and glorified Jesus, some worshipping and some doubting (28:17). To the risen and glorified Lord are given all authority in heaven and on earth (28:18). The authority of his teaching (7:28-29) is a reflection of this cosmic authority. He is the one through whom God's kingdom is to come on earth as it is in heaven, in answer to the prayers of his disciples (6:10; 18:18-20).

This authority is that of the Trinity, into whose name disciples from every nation are to be baptised (28:19). This reflects a more developed practice than the one Luke records in Acts, in which converts were baptised in the name of Jesus (Acts 8:16; 10:48). The baptised are to be taught all the commands of the risen Jesus, which is the purpose for which the whole gospel was written, while Jesus himself promises to fulfil his name of Immanuel, God with us (28:20; 1:23).
