

Day 308

Jesus in Jerusalem for Sukkot (Tabernacles)

John 7.2 – 8.11

Jn.7. 2- 9 Jesus' brothers give Him a hard time about not promoting Himself more, particularly with a festival time coming up, and many people coming to Jerusalem for it. Jesus knows His brothers are more interested in the celebrity factor than in faith in Him, since they do not really believe Him.

Jesus says He is not going to go publicly and promote Himself, however.

Jn.7.10-13 After His brothers have gone to Jerusalem, however, Jesus makes His way there in secret, knowing that He is wanted man by the religious police of His day. There is 'widespread whispering', gossip going on about Him, some pro and some anti. However, the thought police are everywhere, and people do not speak out.

Jn.7.14-24 Jesus then breaks His cover and appears in the Temple courts, teaching. The leaders are surprised at His clear authority, He makes sense. Jesus ascribes His source to the Father Himself, but His detractors, despite their interest in His teaching, are trying to kill Him. They deny they are seeking to do so, and accuse Jesus of being demonized.

Jesus raises the clear point that while He is pursued for healing on the Sabbath day, it is quite in order for boys to be circumcised on the Sabbath. Why is there any difference? Jesus unveils their hypocrisy in this.

Jn.7.25-31 There is a general questioning going around the Temple about whether Jesus is really the Messiah, with some for and others against. Jesus stands up and declares for all to hear, that He has been sent by God, whom they are cutting themselves off from by their hypocrisy. Now the authorities move to arrest Him, but once again Jesus gets away, leaving behind Him more believers in His words.

Jn.7.32-36 Presumably, those sent to arrest Him are the ones He evaded, the Temple guard. Jesus has said that He is not remaining around for much longer, which puzzles the guards, who wonder where Jesus might go to escape them. Is He going overseas to Greece, to teach in the diaspora?

Jn.7.37 – 39 The last day of *Sukkot*, Tabernacles arrives. On this day, a ceremonial pouring out of water by the priests takes place in the Temple, to remember the water poured from the rock in the desert for the people of Israel. At the moment this libation is being poured out, Jesus calls out for all to hear, 'Is anyone thirsty? Let Him come to me and drink!' His promise is of streams of living water, the Holy Spirit of God which are going to pour out from those who follow His Way to life on the day of Pentecost, still in the days ahead at this point.

Jn.7.40-44 This statement of Jesus again leads to division, as some believe in the Messiah, while others cannot accept Him because of His coming from Galilee, rather than from Bethlehem, where Messiah is supposed to arise from. There are thoughts again of arresting Him, but no one dare.

Jn.7.45-52 The tension is such that the Temple Guards do not want to risk a riot by arresting Jesus; they come back to the Sanhedrin and report their awe at His teaching and His authority. The leaders are insensed that the guards are listening to Jesus, and they curse the crowd who listen to Jesus. Their prejudice is on full display when Nicodemus challenges their anger and their malice against Jesus, and they respond that no prophet can come from Galilee, so hated a place is it.

Jn. 7.53 – 8.11 These verses in John are debatable land, since they do not appear in the earliest versions of the most reliable manuscripts. In the practice of integrity in dealing with Scripture, while it is not right to dismiss this section out of hand as false, it is worth noting that it may be a later addition to the gospel of John to complement the book.

After a night when tensions calm down, which Jesus spends at the Mount of Olives, He is back in the Temple area when some of the leaders bring a woman to Him, taken in the act of adultery. This is an ideal moment for them to trap Jesus with the Law, so that they can have the proof Nicodemus is saying they need to finish Him off.

Jesus, drawing in the sand, simply invites any one of them who is not a sinner to commence the public execution by stoning. Suddenly, the spotlight is thrown back on the accusers, standing there, full of hatred and malice for Jesus as well as for this woman. Knowing they are just as guilty as she, in other ways, they drop the stones, the older ones going first who know wisdom when they see it, leaving Jesus and the woman alone.

Note again the interaction of Jesus with a woman in the unfolding of the story. Jesus extends the forgiveness she needs to her, removing her condemnation, and sends her home to live a life no longer tangled up in sin and failure.

Day 309

Further Contention and a Blind Man Healed

John 8.12 – 10.21

Jn.8.12-20 Jesus claims to be the Light of the World, the lamp of all humanity. He is challenged on this by the Pharisees, who are now marking His every move. But Jesus claims as His witness His heavenly Father who backs up His testimony. No one dares to lay a finger on Him, because of the possible consequences for public order.

Jn.8.21-30 Jesus speaks, somewhat cryptically, of His coming death, resurrection and ascension. His detractors can know nothing of this deep mystery He is speaking of, and are locked in the failure of broken laws and statutes. But Jesus is reliant on the Father, speaking what He has been given. The time is coming when they will raise Him up on the cross, and it will become very evident who He really is.

Jn.8.31 – 38 Jesus is the key issue; anyone who follows Him and keeps His teaching will be free, released from bondage. The Jewish leaders appeal to their Abrahamic heritage as proof of their independence from any oppression, but Jesus highlights that they are enslaved by the sin which follows the breaking of the law. Instead, Jesus offers sonship with Him of the Father, setting completely free from the chains of the law. The Jewish

leaders have no space for the Father's loving relationship, working instead on the basis of fearful servitude to the law. This is why they have to kill Jesus, who threatens the system.

Jn.8.39-47 Jesus now faces the religious agitators up with the fact that they are not working from the same source as Him – their source is the devil, the enemy. This kind of vindictiveness in their hearts has nothing to do with the covenant with Abraham. Their spiritual deafness is because the devil has his fingers in their ears.

Jn.8.48 – 59 The Jewish religious leaders now accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan, that is, of unsound theology with a dose of paganism in it. They also say He is demonized. But Jesus maintains His clear testimony to His life-giving nature, and the honour of His Father.

Jesus then astounds them by claiming to pre-exist Abraham, and more than pre-existing, He says *before Abraham was, I am* (Greek πρὶν Ἀβραάμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί. *Prin Abhraám yénesthai egó eimí*) Jesus' words link directly to the words of God to Moses in Exodus 3.14 when He reveals His name. There is no mistake in what Jesus is saying – He is using the Divine Name to refer to Himself. This is the reason the Jewish agitators pick up stones to stone Him – this is rank blasphemy in their eyes. In recording this in this way, it is clear how John understood the nature of Jesus as God incarnate.

However, once again, Jesus evades harm, and slips away.

Jn.9.1-12 Jesus and His disciples pass by a man born blind; the disciples engage Jesus in discussion about the sin which resulted in this disability. They betray the common assumption, which can be traced back to Job's friends, that bad things happen to bad people. However, Jesus dismisses their speculation, and says the purpose of this blindness is for God to work in His life.

Jesus makes a poultice of clay from the dust, and places it on the man's eyes, telling him to go and wash in the Siloam Pool. When he returns, seeing, there is a commotion among the people who recognise him as the one who was blind. Now, his eyes shine with sight, his face full of hope. No wonder they do not immediately recognise him! He then confirms the miracle, and its source in Jesus.

Jn.9.13-17 The people now present the formerly blind man to the Pharisees, presumably as proof of Jesus' veracity as a healer. However, they have picked the wrong day – once again, it is Sabbath, and the Pharisees, blinder than the man had been, dismiss Jesus as a law-breaking fakir.

However, the seeing man confirms the belief of others that Jesus is a prophet of God.

Jn.9.18-23 The Pharisees now seek to show Jesus to be a fraud by setting out to prove that the man healed had not been blind. They order the man's parents to come. They confirm he was born blind, but disclaim any involvement in his healing, presumably because of fear of being implicated with the renegade Jesus. They push the responsibility onto their son, who they say is of age, and able to give the answers needed. John comments on their fear of these powerful religious thought police, and of their power of life and death in these matters.

Jn.9.24 – 34 The now-seeing man is summoned again, and called on to testify to Jesus' being a fraud and sinner. The man refuses to perjure himself, and simply states the undeniable facts – he was blind, now he can see.

The furious Pharisees now rant against him, seeking to intimidate him into accusing Jesus. They say they have no idea of Jesus' provenance, or his origins. The man now turns on them, and mocks them; Jesus has healed the man, but the leaders don't know how or why. He confesses that he believes Jesus is of God, and for this, they rail at him and throw him out, expelling him from their presence.

Jn.9.35-41 Jesus finds the healed man, and encourages him in his faith. The man confesses again his reliance on Jesus as the Son of Man, and actually worships Him. Jesus then comments on the fact that the blind see, but those claiming to see have become inwardly blind to God's love. The Pharisees then respond by saying they are perfectly sighted, and Jesus points out that this means that they have no excuse for missing God's action.

Jn.10.1-10 Following on from this encounter, Jesus, obviously referring to the Pharisees and the religious police, warns His hearers of relying on those who have no real care for their wellbeing, unlike the shepherd, who protects and 'lies in the gap' of the sheepfold to stop predators, blocking the way with his own body. The sheep know and trust such a shepherd. Those who come in through the way of Jesus will be kept safe. Others are sheep-stealers and rogues.

Jn.10.11-18 Jesus is the good shepherd, then, unlike the hired hand who only cares for the sheep as long as he gets paid, and it goes well for him. And like the shepherd, Jesus offers his life to keep the wolf from the sheep. This is why the Son is so beloved of the Father.

Jn.10.19-21 There is a marked division among the religious people; is Jesus a madman, a demon in disguise – but how can the devil do God's work and create new eyes in the blind?

Day 310

Setting His Face to Jerusalem, Sending Out His Team

Luke 9.51-56; 17.11 – 19; 10.1 -11.13; Matthew 11.28 – 30; John 10.22 – 42

Lk.9.51-56 (mirrored in Mt.19.12, Mk. 10.1) Jesus now 'sets his face' to go to Jerusalem, knowing that the time has come for the showdown with the religious leaders and agitators who are misrepresenting His Father so badly. Going south, he needs to pass through Samaria, but because of the ongoing dispute between Samaritans and Jews about where worship may be offered, the Samaritans still worshipping at the place of Jeroboam's idols, and the Jews insisting worship can only be offered at the Temple, the Samaritans refuse Jesus hospitality when they hear Jesus is on His way to the Holy City. The brothers, James and John (the sons of Thunder), reverting to the Jewish stereotypical prejudice against the Samaritans, are so angry, that, flushed with their newly-given authority they want to call on God to wipe out the village with fire from heaven! Jesus will not hear of this, and rebukes them, going to another place en route.

Lk.17.11- 19 Going south, Jesus meets a group of lepers; they stand at the required distance, but shout out to Jesus to help them. Jesus tells them to go and see the priest, and in obeying Jesus' words, their skin is restored and by the time they arrive before the priest, they are completely healed.

However, one of them, a Samaritan, - significant in terms of the foregoing account of the Samaritan village's rejection of Jesus – comes back to thank Jesus for His love. Jesus is surprised that only one has come to acknowledge Jesus' kindness, and he is one of the hated Samaritans. James and John must have had their heads hung at this demonstration of the outsider's good heart.

Lk.10.1- 16 (mirrored in Mt.11.20-24) Jesus now commissions seventy-two more emissaries, sending them to get people ready for Jesus' arrival. They are to live from the hospitality of the people they stay with, announcing the kingdom and healing the sick, as Jesus does.

Jesus urges them not to waste time on places where they are not welcome – for such places, their refusal will go against them in the last analysis.

Lk.10.17-20 Having gone out, the seventy-two report back, absolutely thrilled and excited at the supernatural events they are seeing – deliverance, healing, demons screaming and coming out – and Jesus rejoices with them, but encourages them not to focus on the phenomena of power, but on the content of God's love for them as His people.

Lk.10.21-24 (mirrored in Mt.11.25-27) Jesus, addressing thanks to His Father for His work, is now filled with the Holy Spirit's joy. The Greek has ἠγαλλιάσατο *eeghalliásato*, from a verb meaning literally, to 'jump for joy'. This is not quiet, controlled, beatific smiling, but a 'Yes' with a clenched fist and teeth, for Jesus sees the enemy being put to flight all around Him, through these simple, uneducated people. This is what the prophets spoke of and longed for, happening before their eyes!

Mt.11.28-30 Following Matthew's version of these words, Jesus invites those who have laboured to rest, and to be at peace. To be yoked means 'to work together with' – the one yoked with Jesus is walking with Him, letting Him set the pace. His is not a way of strife, but life.

Lk.10.25 – 37 Luke stays with the theme of the division between Samaritans and Jews which he has taken on from chapter 9. He may well also have in mind the story which will unfold from his pen in Acts 6 to see Samaritans being filled with the Holy Spirit after Pentecost.

In response to a question from a legal expert, about what needs to be done to have eternal life, Jesus puts a question back to him on what he thinks is necessary. The lawyer comes up with a standard response – living in obedience to the 'Shema' Israel' – that, is loving the Lord with all of heart, mind and strength and in addition loving the neighbour as oneself (a command found in Leviticus 19.18).

Jesus commends him for his answer, and says this pattern of living will produce eternal fruit. However, the man has a personality which seeks to shine, and to make himself look good, so he asks Jesus to be more specific on the subject of neighbourliness and who is specified in that.

Jesus now tells one of his most famous parables, concerning the man who falls among thieves on the road down to Jericho, a road through the desert, dropping quickly into the deep valley of the Dead Sea plain from the hills around the city. The man is passed by a priest and a Levite, both of whom are keeping away from the victim, probably out of fear of ritual contamination, since, if the man is dead, they would be unable to fulfil their religious duties.

Then, the Samaritan comes by, and shows compassion and takes the man to safety, paying for his bed and board. The Samaritan, the heretic, the enemy, becomes the aid and the rescuer.

The lawyer cannot deny that the outsider is the neighbour, and is sent away with an instruction to go and show mercy – even to Samaritans!

Lk.10.38-42 Here is Luke again, highlighting Jesus' interaction with women. This time, He is teaching a woman. The term 'sitting at his feet' is not just a physical position, but an indication that Jesus was instructing her in the same way a rabbi would instruct a disciple.

Her sister, Martha, is 'distracted' (Greek περιεσπᾶτο *periespáto* from a root word meaning 'to drag around' – Martha is hostage to her busyness.) The inference is that Martha could have chosen the place Mary is taking also; but Martha has taken the role she thinks is expected of her. Jesus tells Martha that Mary has made the better choice, and *only one thing is necessary* – everything else is relative, is ephemeral. Jesus resists therefore Martha's expectation of Mary's help, and calls Martha rather to take her place beside her sister.

Lk.11.1-4 Luke has the prayer here which Jesus gives His disciples as a framework around which to build their approach to God. It is in stark contrast to the elaborate and extensive prayers of the Jewish tradition, which mostly begin 'Blessed are You, Lord God, King of the Universe, who...'; here, the address is firstly to 'Father', as direct as a child would be to a parent. The blessing of the Name then follows, in line with Jewish tradition, and a calling for the Kingship of the Lord to be fully revealed, in the visible as in the invisible realm, for heaven to come to earth.

Then come petitions for provision – Luke has Jesus encouraging us to ask for τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον *ton árton ymón ton epioúсион* – that, is bread not only sufficient for today, but abundant enough to see us through to the next provision, just like the manna in the wilderness, which was always in abundant supply for the day it was needed, with double on Friday to last through Sabbath.

(The word ἐπιούσιον, *epioúсион* is a fascinating one – it is a *hapax legomenon*, a Greek phrase meaning *once spoken* – that is, it appears only once in the Bible. In the case of this word, it seems to appear nowhere else in the whole of Greek literature! It is a word about

which there has been much speculation, and some suggestion that in its interpretation as ‘super-substantial’ bread, it could have to do with the Eucharist, the communion bread in the early Church, though this is not proven.)

Forgiveness is the life-breath of the Jesus-follower, both from the Lord and extended to the offender against us. It is a frequent concern, therefore, to clear our feet of the debris of brokenness to allow us to walk forward into life.

Luke ends the prayer with ‘lead us not into testing’ – some manuscripts of Luke include, as Matthew does, ‘deliver us from the evil one.’ There is therefore a prayer implied here, also, ‘lead us away from testing and temptation’, which is the desire of the believer, to be taken up only with the Lord and His Kingdom.

Lk.11.5-13 Luke continues on the theme of prayer with a story of the persistent neighbour requesting bread of his friend in the middle of the night. Even if the men’s friendship will not provoke the disturbed sleeper to get up and meet the request, the persistent knocking and the brass neck of the seeker will get through!

Jesus therefore encourages us to ask (and keep on asking), knock (and keep on knocking), seek (and keep on seeking). The Greek words here are in the present continuous tense, and infer an ongoing action, not a one-off. If as human parents we cannot close our ears to our children’s hunger when they ask for food, so the Father cannot resist answering our hunger for the bread of life, and the Living Water of the Holy Spirit.

Jn.10.22-30 Jesus is in Jerusalem for the celebration of Chanukah, the commemoration of the rededication of the Temple by the Maccabees after the dark days of Antiochus Epiphanes, around two centuries before. It is December, and it is winter.

Jewish enquirers come and continue to ask Jesus to go public about His Messiah-ship, if He is. But Jesus replies that He doesn’t need to self-publicise like that. Those who receive Him as Messiah are already following Him and they are steadfast in their decision. And Jesus will ensure that any who commit to Him will not be rejected by His Father.

Jn.10.31 – 39 The death-threats against Jesus surface again, as they prepare to stone Him for blasphemy. It is clear that Jesus is not just teaching about God. For the Jewish hearers, He is evidently making a claim to be God. Jesus refers in His defence to a Psalm which speaks of God’s people as divine – thus, if men can experience divinity, why would it be so strange for God to inhabit the Son who is the image of the Father? He appeals to the power of His miraculous deeds, but His attackers are intent on harming Him. Once again, Jesus escapes being caught and slips away.

Jn.10.40-42 Jesus retreats quickly from Jerusalem across the Jordan, to Perea, and continues His ministry there. Those who remember John’s words there in that region see that, while John was not a wonder-ministry, his words are amply fulfilled in the person of Jesus, and many more come to faith in Him as Messiah.

Day 311

Parables from Luke, and one in Matthew

Luke 13.22 – 16.31; 17.20 – 18.14; Matthew 20.1-16

In the arrangement of his account, Luke declares at the beginning that his intention is to present all Jesus ‘began to do and to teach’ in His earthly ministry. In this sense, Luke does what he sets out to do. The first part of his gospel is taken up with the actions of Jesus, what he did, while the middle part is made up of the teachings and stories of Jesus. This is different to Matthew, who has Jesus’ teaching discourses interspersed with activity through the account. Both, of course, end with the retelling of the passion and resurrection of Jesus.

Here in the middle chapters of Luke are placed some of the most profound and well-loved of Jesus’ stories, the parables. (For more about parables, see day 301 above, on Matthew’s parables of the kingdom.)

Lk.13.22-30 On his journeying towards Jerusalem, Jesus is asked if just a few will be rescued at the end of the day. Jesus responds with a call to go in by the narrow door; there is a limited opportunity for response, for one day the door will be closed, with great anguish for those left outside. Jesus makes it clear that the choice is ours, God will not force us to accept His offer. But He does also say that there will be many from across the nations who will come to the banquet celebrating the age to come.

Lk.13.31-33 If Jesus is at this point still in Perea, across the Jordan, He is in the territory of Herod Antipas, who ordered the death of John the Baptist. Whether the Pharisees are coming to warn Jesus out of concern for Him or out of malice towards Him is not clear, but Jesus refuses to be intimidated, and sends a message to the Tetrarch that he intends to keep going, because His end will not be yet, and will be in Jerusalem.

Lk.13.34-35 Jesus lifts up a lament over the city of Jerusalem, which He has longed to gather to Himself like a hen with chicks. He will not be going back there until the dénouement of His saving story.

Lk.14.1-4 Jesus is in the house of a leading Pharisee when he is confronted with a man suffering from dropsy. (Oedema, called in Greek ὑδροπικτός *ydropsikós*, ‘watery’, from the word *ydor* for water – hence, the old form, hydropsy, which became shortened to dropsy. The condition is a retention of fluid beneath the skin which leads to pain and can be fatal.) It is the Sabbath, and Jesus is under observation to see if His ministry will contravene the Mosaic Law.

Jesus asks the Pharisees there if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, but none of them reply, so that do not implicate themselves in Jesus’ actions. Jesus then heals the man, but rounds on the hypocrisy of these people who would rescue a son or an animal from a well on the Sabbath, but will not allow Him to rescue this man from his ‘watery’ oppression on the same day. The onlookers are speechless at this wisdom and unmasking of their duplicity.

Lk.14.7-11 Jesus sees the self-preferential behaviour of dinner guests, taking the best seats for themselves, and He shows them all another way, to stop self-promotion and to allow others space to honour and bless. Taking the seat lower down the table first is an action of humility, not assuming one is better than others, but second may lead to being brought forward by another to a place of greater honour.

Lk.14.12-14 Jesus points out to his host that giving a banquet for those who he hopes will invite him back is not a particularly selfless motive for hospitality. True hospitality is to find those who cannot repay our invitation, particularly the marginalised and poor.

Lk.14.15-24 Jesus responds to a comment by one of the guests that the Kingdom dinner will be amazing, by giving a parable of a banquet to which the invited guests send excuses for their absence. The invitation is then sent to include the poor, blind, crippled, all the marginalized, and when room is still found, another invitation is given, with an instruction to 'make them come in.' (Unfortunately, this verse has been used as a pretext for forced conversion – the so-called '*compelle intrare*', notably following Augustine's treatise of the same title.) The message is that there is no bar to anyone following Jesus, but the invitation must be responded to.

Lk.14.25-33 Moving on, Jesus is followed by huge crowds; aware of their mixed motives, Jesus turns and warns them of the cost of following Him. It will cost them their family relationships, their very lives. Therefore, they need to be sure they have the will to commit to this hard road with Him. Jesus perhaps was aware of the depth of aggression towards His message which would lead to thousands of His disciples coming to the baptism of blood in the arenas and execution places of the Empire.

Lk.14.34,35 Starting out on the road of discipleship and turning back would be like becoming salt which loses its savour, useful for nothing from then on.

Lk.15.1-7 Three parables of Jesus are found in Luke 15 which share the common theme of being lost and found. They are provoked by the hostility of the religiously correct community towards Jesus for consorting with the 'low-life' of the day, the *Mafiosi* tax-collectors and others seen as sinful by the Jewish establishment.

Jesus first takes the image of a lost sheep, after whom the compassionate shepherd comes, leaving the rest of the flock held in the fold while he searches. When he finds it, the shepherd shares his joy with his friends over what he has found. Jesus tells then of the partying in heaven over every broken sinner who comes home, more than over the ones already safely there.

Lk.15.8-10 A second example is of a woman who loses a silver coin, and hunts high and low until she finds it. Jesus again emphasises the joy of heaven over the repentance of even one sinner.

Lk.15.11-32 Jesus third parable on this theme is arguably His most beloved and powerful. It speaks to so many of the human frailties which pull men away from God. The Prodigal Son story could as easily be described as The Forgiving Father. It has so many facets, in terms of the pain of letting go, the folly of human lust and greed, the realisation of our need of a Saviour, the extravagant grace of God and the sour jealousy of dutiful religious observance when favour is shown to sinners, that it has been the text of millions of sermons through the centuries.

Just a few noteworthy comments –

- 1) The part of the estate which the son received would have become his at his majority, not on his father's death. The father would share with his sons the estate to help him manage the business.
- 2) The son goes to a Gentile country, hence ending up in the pigsty, to the Jews, the most degrading position possible.
- 3) The father runs to meet his son, having been looking for him coming home. An older man running was not considered seemly, but here the Father throws off all protocol to embrace his lost child.
- 4) The grace and forgiveness of the father to the younger son is abrasive on the elder, who has worked in unstinting labour to earn his father's approval, not realizing that the father's love is already unconditional and willing to bless at all times.

Lk.16.1-13 From one of the most beloved, Luke records now one of the most inaccessible parables of Jesus of the shrewd manager, the 'canny factor'. The steward of a rich estate owner is to be dismissed for his apparent profligacy with his master's resources. In quitting his job, the man shrewdly turns this to his advantage, by discounting the invoices owed by his master's debtors, thus winning favour with them for future help in hardship.

The message here seems to be that to give away is better than to hoard and store, and to use wealth and money to bless and be generous is better than to be controlled by its power. Jesus encourages us to use money to bless others and build relationships, rather than miserly hiding it away in a bank.

However, He also counsels against dishonest dealing, remembering that the steward's master commends him for his shrewdness in getting back most of what is owed, while winning the friendship of the debtors. The overall message is that it is better to use money to bless than to hoard.

Lk.16.14-15 The Pharisees, who have a very money-grabbing approach, dismiss Jesus' teaching with derision. But God sees their avaricious hearts, and is not fooled by their seeming prudence, which is really greed in disguise.

Lk.16.16-18 Jesus drops in here a statement on the nature of John the Baptist's ministry. He is the last in the line of the prophets of the Old Covenant, but now the good news of God's inbreaking Kingship is being declared, and people are grabbing hold of it with force; even so, this does not abrogate the ancient promises of God to His people.

Jesus emphasises this continuity with what was by intensifying the heart of Moses' law on divorce, describing casual marriage break-up to take up with another as adultery, even if it is technically 'legal.'

Lk.16.19-31 The parable of Dives (the rich man) and Lazarus contains much insight into how Jesus presents the age to come. What is worth noticing in this parable is

- The dead of Jewry are considered to be carried to Abraham's side
- Those who are evil go after death into Hades, a Greek word meaning in Greek mythology, the place of the dead, but here would be the Jewish equivalent, *She'ol* (Heb. שְׂאוֹל)

- In Hades/She'ol, there is an awareness of the bliss of those who died in peace and the apparent chance to pray.
- The great gulf (Greek χάσμα *chásma*, chasm) between Hades and Abraham's side is unbridgeable.
- God has provided all the necessary revelation without the miraculous intervention to enable mankind to find Him and know Him.

The message is really that seeking God now, while He may be found, is the only way to security beyond human death.

Lk.17.20 – 35, 37 The Pharisees quiz Jesus about the nature of the reign of God. Jesus replies that the reign of God is not about human structures or constructs, but about the inner transformation of individuals.

Jesus speaks also of the cataclysmic events of the end of the age, the 'day of the Lord' referred to by the prophets. This day will be unexpected and catastrophic, a day of destruction and death.

Lk.18.1-8 Jesus gives more teaching on the nature of persistent prayer with the parable of the 'importunate widow', or the 'pushy widow' to use a modern term! This woman keeps on at an indifferent judge, who tries to ignore her. She gets through to him by sheer annoyance-power. Surely, if this bothersome woman gets her way in the end from an ungodly judge, we can expect better things of a just and loving God? But the key is whether people will persist in faithful prayer in the meantime.

Lk.18.9-14 Jesus tells a further parable to illustrate different approaches to God. The Pharisee, confident of his own score with God, promotes himself to the Lord and crows over the man praying nearby, whom he knows to be a collaborator and a spiv, a tax-collector.

The tax-collector, fully aware of his failure and his unworthiness, simply slaps himself in painful regret and calls out to God in his anguish to show him favour, despite his sin. For this humility, the tax collector is accepted.

The words of the tax-collector in this parable have become melded into one of the simplest but oft-said prayers in the world, the *Jesus Prayer*. Combined with a confession of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, it has formed the basis for a whole practice of contemplative prayer still followed by believers today, particularly of the orthodox tradition, saying, and repeating meditatively;

Κύριε Ιησοῦ Χριστέ, Υἱέ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐλέησον με τὸν ἁμαρτολῶν
Kýrie Ieesoú Christé Yé tou Theóu eléison-me, ton amartolón
 Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me, a sinner.

Mt.20.1-16 Moving to Matthew, Jesus emphasises the grace attached to the reign of God and the impossibility of using human reason and logic to apply to the Lord's ways.

The parable of the vineyard workers perhaps is saying, there is no point quibbling over the level of grace shown to any person in the realm of God's reign, for the grace of God, the provision of God is inexhaustible, and not measured sparingly to those who seem to work hardest for it. 'God is no respecter of persons' says the Old Covenant. Jesus demonstrates it here.

Day 312

Jesus Raises Lazarus

John 11.1 – 54

Here again we see a gospel writer recounting a close encounter of Jesus with women, in this case, his friends Mary and Martha. We are told that Mary is the one who anointed his feet with precious ointment.

Jn.11.1-4 While he is in Perea, Jesus is contacted by Mary and Martha to say that their brother, Lazarus, is sick and needs Jesus' help. The family live in Bethany (Hebrew suggested as *בֵּית הַתְּאֵנָה* *Bet-te'ena*, House of figs), nearby Jerusalem, to the east, on the road over the hills leading to the steep descent to Jericho.

Jesus tells his disciples that the end of this story will not be death for Lazarus.

Jn.11.5-16 the disciples are alarmed that Jesus is thinking of going back to Judea, where attempts have been made on His life. But Jesus has already stayed two days more, and in that time, Lazarus has died, although Jesus euphemises it as sleep, which his disciples think is natural sleep. Jesus then tells them straight that Lazarus is dead, but Jesus sees this as an opportunity to increase their faith.

Thomas comments sarcastically that they might as well go and die with Lazarus.

Jn.11.17-27 When Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been buried for four days. The Jewish tradition was that the spirit of the dead person stayed around their tomb for three days, but after that, there was no possibility of revival. Jesus is therefore arriving at the time when hope would have been extinguished.

The house at Bethany is full of mourners. Martha goes out to meet Jesus, while Mary waits at home. When Martha meets Jesus, she upbraids Him gently for not having been there, but states her faith in Jesus' ability to still rescue the situation. Jesus promises her that her brother will rise, and she responds that she believes in the great resurrection, as many Jews do (other than the Sadducees, who deny it.)

Jesus now makes a dynamic statement; He tells Martha that He Himself is the resurrection and the life. That is, in Him is vested all the power of death brought to life, which will be released in the final resurrection of all things. Martha confesses her faith in Him as Messiah and Son of God.

Jn.11.28-37 Mary now hears Jesus is near, and rushes out to meet Him, followed by the mourning Jewish friends around her. Meeting him, she falls down, weeping and expressive of her grief, also saying 'If only You had been here, Jesus...'

Jesus now asks to be taken to the tomb. He is deeply moved by the human grief around Him, and the pain which death brings, and, despite the fact that He is about to perform the greatest wonder of His ministry, Jesus weeps.

John's verse 11.35 is the shortest in the Scripture. In Greek it is three words, *ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς* *edhákrysen o Ieésous*, in English two words, Jesus wept. Yet it is one of the most

touching and powerful statements of Jesus' humanity, compassion and emotional expression, particularly in a culture which has told its sons the lie that 'grown men don't weep.' Jesus gives every man and woman the right here to tears, unashamed and releasing.

For the Jews standing by, these tears are a sign of Jesus' devotion to His friend. But others question the love of one who could have saved His friend from death as He has healed others.

Jn.11.38-44 Jesus now shocks everyone by calling for the tombstone to be removed. This is tantamount to sacrilege, to disturb the dead. Martha, ever the practical one, points out that the body will now be decomposing, but Jesus gently rebukes her, calling her to believe even now.

Jesus thanks His Father that He has heard Him – He does not make a request – and then He shouts out, in the Greek, Λάζαρε, δεῦρο ἔξω *Lázare, dhévro éxo!* (Hebrew NT has Him say לֵעֲזָרָה קוּם לָאזָר La'azar, qum tze') – Lazarus, come out! And the restored man comes out, wrapped in the ribbon-bindings of death, which Jesus asks to be removed.

Jn.11.45-53 The result of this outstanding miracle is decisive. Many now choose to put their trust in Jesus as Messiah, while some carry the news to the religious police, the Pharisees, who then call the council, the Sanhedrin, together .

The main point of the discussion is that Jesus is going to cause political upheaval by His growing power. If the people follow Him, and rebel against Rome, the nation will be lost, and the Temple destroyed. Caiaphas, the high priest, then speaks words so prophetic, yet his motive is evil – he declares it would be better for one man, Jesus, to die than for the whole nation to be lost. John comments that the High Priest of Israel has himself prophesied the vicarious nature of Jesus' death, not just for the Jews in Palestine, but for the gathering of all Jews through the nations into one new man.

This is the turning point, and now they are just looking for the pretext to finish Jesus off, having found a justification for doing so.

Jn.11.54 Jesus now ceases public ministry for the time being, retreating to the village of Ephraim, in the hills to the north of Jerusalem, towards the desert, out of the immediate reach of the Jewish authorities.

Day 313

Turning toward Jerusalem

Matthew 19.3 – 12, 27-30; 20.20 – 23; 26.6- 13; Mark 10.10 – 27, 32 – 52; 14.3-9; Luke 18.31 – 19.28; John 11.55- 12.11

Mt.19.3-9 (mirrored in Mk.10.2-9) The Pharisees, looking for a way to catch Him out, come to Jesus and quiz Him on the contentious subject of divorce. Jesus refers them immediately to the priority of Scripture, and to the first reference to the union of marriage and its unique bonding nature. They ask then why the Law permits divorce, and Jesus responds that this was a concession to man's selfish will, his hard heart, but this is not the

created order as Genesis envisages it. Jesus reiterates his prohibition on divorce, apart from cases of adultery (when, presumably, the offending partner will be executed by capital punishment, anyway!) To get rid of one wife to marry another is adulterous behaviour, and unfaithfulness to one's own flesh.

Mt.19.10-12, Mk.10.10-12 Evidently, Jesus' disciples find His teaching on this hard, and they continue to question Him back at base. They are shocked at His harsh line, and comment that it is better not to marry at all than to get into this kind of difficulty. Jesus responds with a comment that this is a hard teaching, but there are those who can handle it. Some have become 'eunuchs', abstaining from marriage, for the sake of God's reign in their lives not being compromised. (In the context, this seems to suggest perhaps those who are divorced who then remain celibate, rather than single people.)

Mk.10.13-16 (mirrored in Mt.19.13-15, Lk.18.15-17) The character of God in Jesus shines through in His treatment of and attitude to children. While the disciples are trying to keep Jesus for the grown-ups, answering grown-up questions, the mothers are trying to bring their children to Jesus for His blessing. Jesus is insensed by His team's assumptions that He is too busy for the kids. He sweeps aside their condescension, and takes the children in His arms, and blesses them. The reason they are so key is that their simplicity of faith accepts God at His word, and they are a model for all those whose faith struggles. That the mothers want to get their children to Jesus also indicates the nature of the accessibility of Jesus to ordinary people – they love Him and want to be with Him, and want their children to be with Him.

Mk.10.17-22 (mirrored in Mt.19.16-22, Lk.18.18-23) As Jesus continues His journey, He is accosted by a young man who appeals for the key to eternal life. The man addresses Jesus as *Rabboni tov*, 'Good teacher', a religious address perhaps used as a term of honour. Jesus questions his use of such religious language, and instructs the man to keep the Law of Moses. The young man says he has done this, but Jesus then goes for the one area of his heart which is unyielded, unsundered – his wealth. Jesus tells him to let go of it, because it is controlling him, but the young man goes away uncommitted and sad, because of his possessions, which have him, rather than him having them.

Mk.10.23-27 (mirrored in Mt.19.23-26, Lk.18.24-27) Once again, Jesus stretches his disciples' understanding in His teaching on possessions. Being rich and living under the reign of God is virtually impossible, He says. The team wonder how anyone is going to be rescued, in that case, but Jesus gives hope that all things are possible with God, even the rescue of the rich from their riches!

Mt.19.27-30 (mirrored in Mk.10.28 – 31, Lk.18.28-30) Peter is crestfallen at the idea that they are going to have no gain at all from this surrender of their lives, but Jesus speaks of the new age to come, when, at what he calls 'the renewal of all things' (Greek *παλιγγενεσις* *α palinghenesia* – the 'palingenesis', literally, the re-birth, the again-birth) the disciples will be involved in the 'right-wising' of all Israel. No one who suffers loss for Jesus will be His debtor!

Mk.10.32-34, Lk.18.31 – 34 (mirrored in Mt.20.17-19) The disciples are amazed that Jesus is now heading straight for trouble in Jerusalem, and others fear for Him. But Jesus speaks to His team, and reminds them that His death is part of the plan and story – He has to be judicially executed, to be able to judge the system, and be freed from death, which He will be. They still do not understand what He is saying.

Mt.20.20-23, Mk.10.35-40 The Jewish mother is an archetype and a stereotype, and the mother of James and John is a great example of her. She comes and seeks the success of her two boys, having heard that they are going to be judges of Israel in the coming age. Can they have pride of place in the Kingdom? James and John come with the same request, but Jesus warns them of a baptism of blood that is coming, an immersion into death itself, which they will indeed share, though this will not qualify them for position in the age to come – only those ready can inherit those places.

Mk.10.41- 45 (mirrored in Mt.20.24-28) When the other ten get wind of what James and John and their mother have been up to, they are angry, and things are about to get ugly. Jesus then quells their dispute by teaching the true meaning of serving and leading- not lording, as the Gentiles do. (Particularly the Roman Gentile rulers, whose hierarchical system holds sway.) They are to become the slaves of all to truly lead.

Lk.19.1-10 At the foot of the winding way to Jerusalem, up through the desert, in the plain of the Jordan stand the palm trees around Jericho, a fertile, green place. At one time it was known as ‘Madinat an-Nakhil’, city of palms in Arabic, because of its abundant trees.

In Jesus’ time on earth, the city was in the territory ruled by Herod Antipas, on the edge of the Perea region. Jesus is passing through on his way to Jerusalem.

In the city is a tax-collector named Zacchaeus. Tax-collectors were hated by the Jews as quislings and collaborators, and were some of the wealthiest people around, since they had to guarantee the tax intake by having reserves of their own as surety. They had the reputation of *mafia*, a protection racket, and failure to meet their demands would bring the Roman soldiers down on the offender as a lawbreaker. The tax collectors paid the Roman regime what it required, and kept the balance as commission.

Zacchaeus is locally reviled, then, and of short stature to boot. Wanting to see Jesus pass by, but too short to see over the crowd, and too ashamed to push forward, he climbs a sycamore-fig tree, and watches the Messiah approach.

At the tree, Jesus addresses him directly and calls him down to host Him for the night, where Zacchaeus is so touched by Jesus’ acceptance and love to a sinner like him, that he repents, turns from his greed and agrees to make reparation for any damage done to people in the city, four times over. Jesus has again reached out to the marginalised and rejected in this little man.

Mk.10.46-52; Lk.18.35-43 (mirrored in Mt.20.29-34) On the way out of Jericho, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus (Aramaic for ‘son of Timaeus’) calls out for Jesus, calling Him ‘Son of David’, a Messianic title. The people around him tell him to shut up, but that makes him all the more insistent. Jesus then calls him, and asks him what he wants. This may seem obvious, but Jesus gives the man the opportunity to express his desires.

In response to the man’s request to see, Jesus heals him, simply, with a word – no clay or spittle or hands laid on here. And then Bartimaeus joins the crowds following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, all praising God for the miracle they have seen.

Lk.19.11-28 As Jesus climbs up to Jerusalem from the Jordan valley, he tells a parable to counter the people's anticipation of a reign of God which would break in by force and political will. The parable of the minas (Greek μνᾶ *mna*, taken from Semitic *mene* – cf Daniel 5.25, a unit of weight and a coin equal to sixty shekels), symbolises the importance of what we do with what God entrusts to us. God is looking for a return on His investment in us, and there will be anguish for those who squander, hide or bury the gifts God gives.

Jesus warns that multiplication is the aim, and fruitfulness will produce more fruitfulness, while stinginess and avoidance of risk will result in nothing at all. God calls us to venture for Him.

Jn.11.55-57 Passover is approaching, bringing thousands to Jerusalem for the sacrifice. People are already looking out for the arrival of Jesus, and the authorities are seeing this as their opportunity to arrest Him, should He appear.

Mt.26.6-13, Mk.14.3-9, Jn.12.1-8 Jesus comes to Bethany, just before the rise of the hill which will give Him the view over Jerusalem. Here, in the house of Simon the Leper, another formerly marginalised character whom Jesus loves and honours with His presence, Martha is looking after the catering, while Lazarus is among the guests. Their sister Mary now takes a pint of expensive perfumed ointment, spikenard, and pours it all over Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair. The place is heavy with the scent.

Judas is angry at the waste of what was probably Mary's dowry, so costly was it. Judas, knowing the price of everything, reckons it at a year's wages, about three hundred denarii. In his account, John comments that Judas is dipping his hand into the common purse for his own use, an untrustworthy man.

Jesus rounds on Judas, telling him to stop criticising what Mary has done. She is preparing Him for the end, for He is to die before long. There will be time later to see to the poor, but as for Mary, her extravagant act of worship of the living Lord will be immortalised in this story, and told as long as the Gospel is spoken.

Jn.12.9-11 Since Lazarus has been raised from the dead, he is becoming a celebrity alongside Jesus, with crowds wanting to see the man who came back from Hades. For this reason, the authorities want to destroy Lazarus as well, for being an accomplice in the events, since he is a cause of many people trusting in Jesus as the Messiah.

Day 314

Jesus Arrives in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday

Matthew 21.1 – 16; Mark 11.1 – 19; Luke 19.29 – 48; John 12.12 – 36

Jn.12.12-13 Crowds are gathering in the holy city for the Passover, due to begin the following Thursday night with the Seder meal. Already, preparations are being made to clean and clear houses of yeast products to ensure that no leaven is found anywhere.

As Jesus comes nearer, the people form up with palms and shouts,

Hosanna (Heb הוֹשַׁע־נָא *Hosha-na*, Save, please!)

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord (Heb בָּרוּךְ הוֹשִׁיעַ הַיְהוָה *Barukh ha-ba be-shem Adonai (YHWH)* - this is the normal way of saying ‘welcome’ in Hebrew, so it could be rendered - ‘Welcome to Him who comes in the Lord’s Name.’)

King of Israel! (Heb מֶלֶךְ-יִשְׂרָאֵל *melekh Yisrael!* – remembering this is a great Messianic hope, the restoration of true Jewish Kingship, after the putting down of the Hasmoneans by Rome in 63BC, now in the hands of the puppet (Edomite) Herodians.)

Mt.21.1-7, Mk.11.1-7, Lk.19.29-35, Jn.12.14-16 Just before coming over the brow of hill, and into sight of Jerusalem, Jesus has obtained an unbroken donkey colt, borrowed by His disciples to meet His need of one.

This fulfils the prophecy of Zech.9.9 that the King would come on a donkey, humbly. The donkey was the most common form of transport in the middle east; this would be the equivalent of the Queen arriving in a Renault Clio or Ford Focus! Jesus shows He is of the people, that He is identified with them. Jesus sits on this unbroken animal, and it bows to His use, its Creator riding on its back.

Mk.11.8-10, Lk.19.36-40 (mirrored in Mt.21.8-9) Before He reaches the city, on the road down from the Mount of Olives, where the silver-green leaves of those trees still grow today, the crowds hail Him as King and shout His praise.

The Pharisees, insensed at the emotion of the throng, demand that Jesus tell them to stop. Jesus responds that it’s impossible – the very stones would sing if they didn’t, such is the significance of this day. People are laying their coats down before the colt as it moves slowly forward down the hill.

Lk. 19.41-44 As Jesus nears the gates of the city, He is seen to be weeping, as He speaks of the peace which could have been, but is now lost. Instead, as He looks up at the great walls, He foretells the coming inferno of AD70, when under Vespasian the city would be sacked and ruined, because of their missing the import of this day.

Mt.21.10-11, Jn.12.17-19 As Jesus comes now into the city walls, there is a commotion to see who this is who has arrived. The answer comes back, ‘The Galilean prophet, Jesus of Nazareth.’ People are telling others of the awesome miracle just up the hill in Bethany, where Lazarus was raised, which brings even more people out to see Him, so that the Pharisees, planning already for His death, in exasperation complain (perhaps unwittingly and prophetically) that the whole world is following Him!

Mk.11.11 (mirrored in Mt.21.17) Jesus makes His way to the Temple, to complete His arrival and to see the centre of the Jewish faith. But it has been a momentous day, and with His team, they climb the steep hill east, up the Mount of Olives and back over to Bethany for the night.

Holy Week – Monday

Mk. 11.12-14 (mirrored in Mt.21.18-19) Returning to Jerusalem the next morning, Jesus expresses hunger and looks for figs on a tree nearby. However, this is March, and not the

time for figs. He forbids the tree ever to produce fruit again, in the hearing of His disciples.

This seems harsh, but it bears out the reality that Jesus is the Creator, and looks for the fruit of His work, and that He has the right to declare the tree fruitless if it will not produce for Him.

Mk.11.15-17 (mirrored in Mt.21.12-13, Lk.19.45-46) Arriving at the Temple, Jesus repeats an action John has already recounted early on in His ministry in Jn.2.13 on the first Passover of His ministry two years before. Then He accused them of turning His Father's house into a market; now He goes further, and states that this should be a house of prayer, but they have made it a den of thieves. Jesus targets both the exorbitant rates charged by the moneychangers who profit from the prohibition of Roman coinage in the holy place, providing Temple currency to worshippers at high commission, as well as the merchants profiteering from the sale of priest-approved unblemished livestock for the sacrifices. In upsetting the tables of the spivs, Jesus is *right-wising* for the people of God.

Mk.11.18, Lk.19.47 -48 Things are now proving difficult for the authorities who want to carry out their plan to liquidate Jesus. If they move openly, and a riot ensues, it could give the Romans reason to take action and disturb the equilibrium. This is a powder-keg for Jesus' pursuers.

Mt.21.14-16 As Jesus continues healing in the Temple, even the children join in the shouts of praise. The Pharisees are livid at the Messianic declarations by even the youngsters, but Jesus won't silence the truth of God spoken by the simple in heart and faith, referring the whingers to Psalm 8.2.

Jn.12.20-26 Now, even Gentiles are clamouring for access to Jesus; some Greeks, God-fearers, are there to honour the God of Israel at Passover. The disciples pass on their request. Jesus sees just how widely His sacrifice is going to have effect; the vow of God to Abraham to bless all the earth through His seed is coming to pass – but that seed, Jesus, must die and be buried, to produce the explosion of fruitfulness which will come, even reaching beyond Israel to all nations.

Jn.12.27 -33 Jesus, in anguish at the storm brewing on the horizon, confirms His willingness to follow His Father's plan, so that God may become even more present and weighty among His people. At this moment, there is thunder across the sky, and as God speaks encouragement to His struggling Son. Jesus confirms the voice as God's, and gives notice to the devil that his time of reckoning is coming, as Jesus will be impaled and raised up on an unmerited cross in a few days.

Jn.12.34-36 The crowd, hearing these words of Jesus, seemingly pointing to defeat and death, question His message. Jesus however urges them to trust in His light, before the darkness comes, and the power of evil clouds over the sky. They can be 'children of light' through faith in Him, so that the light will be within them, even if it is dark around. Jesus then leaves quickly, to avoid further enquiry.

Mk.11.19 Again, they leave the city for the night, probably back to Bethany.