

James Philip Bible Readings

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1)

Matthew

The Gospel according to St Matthew

(These Notes were first printed in August 1968)

Although scholars are generally agreed that Mark's Gospel is the earliest of the four, there is a considerable body of opinion which holds that Matthew's Gospel is based on an even earlier Aramaic original, and that our present Matthew represents a revision of this original document, with considerable additions from Mark. It stands first in the New Testament canon because of the immense popularity with which it was held in the early Church, and because of 'its proved and persistent capacity to shape Christian thought and church life'.

Reference is made in our first introductory Note to the 'orderly' way in which Matthew presents his message, and to the theme of the words and deeds of Jesus which it is clearly his concern to present to us in his Gospel. Readers may find it useful to have a working analysis before them to show the orderly unfolding of the message that Matthew sets out. The following outline is based on a brief division given by J.C. Fenton in his commentary in the Pelican Gospel Series:

The Words and Works of Jesus

Chapters 1 - 4

Narrative

The birth of Jesus, the wise men from the East, John the Baptist's ministry, the temptation, and the call of the disciples.

Chapters 5 - 7

The first sayings of Jesus

The Sermon on the Mount: the Way of life in the kingdom.

Chapters 8, 9

Narrative

Miraculous works of healing.

Chapter 10

The second sayings of Jesus

Directions to the disciples for proclaiming the kingdom.

Chapters 11, 12

Narrative

The rejection of John the Baptist and Jesus by the Jews.

Chapter 13

The third sayings of Jesus

The parables of the kingdom.

Chapters 14-17

Narrative

Further miraculous works, controversy, Peter's confession, and the Transfiguration.

Chapter 18

The fourth sayings of Jesus

Relationships within the Church and the kingdom.

Chapters 19-22

Narrative

The journey to Jerusalem, Palm Sunday, more parables, and the Woes

Chapters 23-25

The fifth sayings of Jesus

The coming of the kingdom.

Chapters 26-28

Narrative

The anointing of Jesus, the Lord's Supper, Gethsemane, the betrayal, the trial, the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

2) 1:1

It will be useful to spend some little time on introductory comments which may be used as guide-lines for our study. Matthew presents his message in a very orderly way: the words and deeds of Jesus are clearly his concern, and these form the structure of what he has to say. The first four chapters, from Christ's birth to the beginning of His ministry, may be said to be introductory, while the last three, describing His death and resurrection, constitute the climax and conclusion. The intervening chapters comprise a series of five groups of the sayings or teaching of Jesus interspersed by narrative sections. These 'teaching' sections are: chaps 5-7; 10; 13; 18 24-25, and the action passages linking them are: 8-9; 11-12; 14-17; 19-22, 26. Some think that Matthew takes as the central point of the gospel the break in the middle section of teaching (ch.13) where Jesus turns from the crowds and concentrates on His disciples, and that he systematically arranges his scheme of presentation round this point. As an interesting comment and corroboration of this suggestion we may consider the words in John 1:11 'He came unto His own, but His own received Him not; but as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name'. This central point in the central section of teaching as given by Matthew marks the division between those who believed and those who did not.

3) 1:1

One question that arises in any study of the gospels is why there should have been four separate documents handed down to the Church. The answer in part must surely be that no one account could have done justice to such a subject, or adequately presented such a glorious Figure. From old time, the four have been held to present Christ as follows: In Matthew, He is the King; in Mark, the servant of Jehovah; in Luke, the Son of man; in John, the Son of God. These are rough generalisations, true indeed, but not exclusively so, for although Matthew is often called 'the royal gospel' it is surely clear that all four present Christ as a kingly figure. The important point, however, is that they present and proclaim Christ. And we must not fail to note that they are not called 'biographies of Jesus by....', but gospels. And gospel means 'good news'. Matthew proclaims 'the good news concerning Jesus Christ'. It should hardly need saying that all four write from the standpoint of the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and in the glad power and joy of Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit. All this should remind us of the purpose of the gospels -they were written, as Paul puts it in Romans, 'from faith to faith', i.e. from the standpoint of faith and with the purpose of eliciting faith in others, and building it up (this is explicitly stated in John 20:31, which see). Christ's birth, life and ministry, death, resurrection and ascension - this is the gospel, the good news concerning Jesus, which both brings faith to the birth and establishes it in the lives of believers. The gospel records are therefore the summary of the preaching and teaching of the early Church (see Acts 10:36-44 for evidence that this 'teaching' does in fact create and establish faith. This is its purpose, and our hope also in studying it).

4) 1:1-17

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy. It is the family tree of Jesus the Messiah. He is called 'the son of David, the son of Abraham', because Matthew is intent on showing that the gospel is rooted in the Old Testament, and that it is indeed the fulfilment of the Old Testament, standing in direct continuity with it, not some new, isolated phenomenon bearing no relation to what had gone before. 'This 'anchoring' of the gospel in the Old Testament and its promises is underlined in another way also, perhaps less obvious, but no less unmistakeable, in the opening phrase of 1, 'the book of the generation of...' For this echoes a familiar phrase in Genesis (see Gen 2: 4, 5:1, especially the latter, which speaks of the generations of Adam). Here, Matthew means to say, is the book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the second Adam. The Old Testament record of the generations of Adam tells of the sad and tragic fall of man through sin, and the darkness that came upon the world because of it. And here, Matthew sets another 'generation' alongside the first as if to say, 'Here is God's answer to man's need. That first record is one of failure and sin; but here is one that provides the Divine answer to the tragedy of man'.

5) 1:1-17

As to the genealogy, several points call for comment. In the first place, it is not a full genealogy, as Luke's seems to be in his gospel. There are several known names missed out, which we may see by comparison with the books of Kings and Chronicles. Also, Matthew divides the genealogy into three sections, of fourteen generations each, from Abraham to David, from David to the Captivity, and from the Captivity to Christ. Different explanations of this 'fourteen' have been given, which may sound fanciful and arbitrary to modern ears. It is suggested, for example, that in view of the association of weeks and years in Scripture, and the fact that weeks often stand for years, the three 'fourteens' represent three times two weeks, which gives the period from Abraham to Christ, a period of six 'weeks', corresponding to the six 'days' of creation, the seventh being God's Sabbath rest, foreshadowing the age of the gospel which ushers in the day of God and the rest promised by Him to man. But this is not as fanciful as we might think, but in line with the hidden, symbolic meanings that the writers of Scripture delight in.

Next, we should note that Jesus was the 'adoptive' son of Joseph. He was adopted into this family. But the point of his inclusion in the genealogy is to show that legally he was regarded as being a full member of the family. The full rights of sonship are given by adoption as completely as by actual descent. Jesus, then, was adopted into the human family, that we might be adopted into the family of God (cf John 1:12, 'to them gave He power to become the sons of God', and the 'adoption of children', Eph 1:5, Gal 4:5, Rom 8:15).

We should also note the inclusion in the family tree of Jesus of some very questionable antecedents, Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba. This reminds us how near Christ came to human sin when He took upon Himself the likeness of sinful flesh, and how closely He wills to be related to the stained, the sinful, the outcast. What is more, it teaches us to remember that there is no background, however questionable or doubtful, over which grace cannot prevail. And that is a word for many complicated, mixed-up folk in our troubled generation today.

6) 1:18-20

The genealogy in the first part of the chapter leads up to, and is fully explained by, the account which follows of the birth of Christ. And it is quite clear that Matthew's whole point is to show that there was something different about the birth of Jesus, something unique. The Virgin birth of Christ is increasingly challenged today as a mere legendary accretion, and disputed on theological grounds. It is said that if the incarnation is to be real, Jesus must be born in the ordinary way, otherwise He could not be fully man, sharing our experiences in very reality. But this, in fact, is a debatable point. Why should He not enter into all our experiences as He was, and as the New Testament says He is (i.e. one born of a virgin)? Paul says in Romans 8:3 that He was made 'in the likeness of sinful flesh', and this is interpreted by Dr James Denney to mean, 'what for ordinary men is their natural condition is for this Man only an assumed condition' and that 'God sent His Son in that nature which for us is identified with sin'. The Apostle is therefore clearly referring to the uniqueness of Christ's birth as Matthew does here.

The real issue in the doctrine of the Virgin birth is not that it was necessary in order to ensure that Jesus be sinless, but rather that in the Divine purpose and provision of salvation man, as man, is completely set aside. Karl Barth says: 'Man as humanity is not simply excluded, for the Virgin is there. But the male, as the specific agent of action and history, with his responsibility for directing the human species, must now retire into the background, as the powerless figure of Joseph... God did not choose man in his pride and defiance, but man in his weakness and humility, not man in his historical role, but man in the weakness of his nature as represented by the woman, the human creature who can confront God only with the words, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to Thy Word".'

7) 1:18-20

The doctrine of the Virgin birth therefore tells us that that part in us which wants to do, and indeed insists on doing, something active for our own salvation is resolutely and firmly set aside by God. Salvation is of God, and all of grace. Furthermore, it declares most unequivocally and unmistakeably that here, in Jesus Christ, God is beginning a new thing. A new humanity is called into existence by the grace of God, which means a decisive break with the old. This has already been hinted at in the phrase 'the book of the generation of Christ' the second Adam. But it is made even more explicit in the statement that Mary was found with child 'of the Holy Ghost'. If, in fact, we compare Luke 1:35 (which corresponds to our passage here) - 'The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee....' - with Gen 1:2, 'The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters', the implication becomes clear - here, in the Virgin birth of Christ, is an act of new creation. This is what Matthew is concerned to impart to us in the story of Jesus. The old humanity, in spite of its glory and promise, has come to grief, and now the new humanity, signifying a complete break with the old, and a new beginning is ushered in.

8) 1:21-25

In direct connection with what was said in yesterday's Note about the new beginning, Matthew now defines its nature in what he says here. It means salvation (21), and that salvation lies in God being with us (23). Let us take the second reference first. Again our thoughts are taken back to Genesis and the Fall of man; for there, in Gen 3, we are told how man was cut off from God, separated from Him by sin, and driven out as a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. And the message of the gospel is, not that he finds his way back again, but that God Himself goes out to seek and to save that which was lost. It is He Who makes the move; He bridges the gulf; He makes the overture of friendship; He breaks the long silence. This is the meaning of the Incarnation. But the Incarnation - and the message of Christmas - is in one sense an anticipation. It is not really fulfilled till all Christ's work is ended, and He ascends to the right hand of the Father. The real meaning of this word, 'Immanuel – God with us' is not seen until we come to the last words of Matthew's gospel, 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world', and to the history of the early Church in Acts, where the all-prevailing, all-sufficient presence of the risen Lord with His people is such a manifest and glorious reality.

'He shall save His people from their sins' (21) -this then, is what the gospel is about. It is as if Matthew were saying: Here is the explanation of the amazing, miraculous things that have been happening in the experience of the early Church - transformation of life, new beginning - it is that men have been saved from their sins. In the message of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ resides the dynamic of God, the power behind all powers, that brings men into new life and hope and peace and joy. It is clear that this is how Matthew intended his gospel to be understood, and any other understanding of it is a misunderstanding.

9) 2:1-2

To study the Christmas story and its accompaniments away from its hallowed and, alas, romanticised associations is a very necessary and profitable exercise, and its real lessons are much more likely to be discerned and understood. What we learn in this chapter is not in the least 'Christmas' in the sentimental sense, but full of thrust and challenge. We have already spoken of the Incarnation as God's answer to the need of man, and here we see something of the dynamic nature of this visitation. Christ came as a Babe in a manger, but even this weakness is a manifestation of the Divine power, for the Infant Redeemer even in His helplessness compels men to ask this question, 'Where is He?' Whether they will or no, He requires them to think on Him, and make up their minds concerning Him. The fact of His coming acts like some great, invisible magnet, which draws His chosen ones to Himself. Is it fanciful to detect in the words of the Wise Men something of the wistfulness of a world that knows not God?

Nor is it without significance that these Wise Men represent the Gentile world. It is the Gentiles, not the Jews, who are represented in this chapter as coming to the Saviour. It can hardly be doubted that, from Matthew's point of view in writing his gospel, this is meant as a challenge to all Jews who might read it, 'to provoke them to jealousy' as Paul puts it in Rom 11:11, and constrain them to think again about the gospel they have rejected.

10) 2:3-12

We should note particularly the unmistakeable sense of tension, not to say conflict that runs through the whole chapter. This is an inevitable characteristic of the gospel, and something that we have to expect will appear in any work for Christ in which we become engaged. For what is represented here, and in the New Testament as a whole, is the collision of two worlds. The gospel is the coming of God into the human situation, and since that human situation is characterised not only by need, but also by rebellion and revolt, it means that not only gladness, joy and blessing, but also conflict and battle, are involved in the Divine visitation. This is always what Christian encounter will mean, whether in the life of a congregation or in that of the individual. If the gospel is thought of in terms of an invasion from on high of what is essentially enemy-occupied territory, then it cannot be otherwise than that resistance will be shown. This is the seed from which passages in the Acts such as 13:49 - 14:5 spring - the proclamation of the Word is ever followed by both joyful reception and determined resistance. As the aged Simeon put it (Luke 2:34, 35), 'this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against... that the thoughts of many hearts shall be revealed'.

11) 2:3-12

But this is not an equal tension in the sense that the forces that oppose one another are equally poised and matched. There is the over-riding and over-ruling of evil for good by God: the Wise Men are not condemned to fruitless search, they find the One they seek; the evident determination of Herod to seek the Infant King for a very different purpose than theirs is thwarted, and the Wise Men return home another way; and when Herod in his fury takes what he thinks are sufficient and foolproof steps to destroy the Redeemer, this also is forestalled and Jesus escapes, Joseph having been warned in a dream to depart from Bethlehem. There is a wonderful word in John 1:5 in this connection, which has been translated, 'The light shineth in the darkness and the darkness could not put it out'. Nothing could emphasise the triumph of grace over evil more graphically than this inspired translation! And it reminds us that in the work of the gospel we are working not towards victory but from it. This is the great encouragement that is ours in Christian work. Oppositions there may be, and tensions, and conflicts, but oppositions are to be broken down, tensions eased, and conflicts resolved. In the passage in Acts referred to in yesterday's Note (13:49 - 14:5), we are told that when the opposition was stirred up against Saul and his companions their reaction was not to be discouraged or lose heart, but this: 'Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord, Who gave testimony to the word of His grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands'. And not only did they believe for God's victory in the situation, but also that their preaching would be the instrument by which that victory would be won. It was simply a question of letting the light shine, and all that the darkness could do was unavailing to put it out.

12) 2:3-12

It might be thought that with tension and conflict such an undeniable reality in the work of the gospel it would be difficult, if not impossible, to have the kind of spirit in our work that we must long to see and experience. But this is not the case: for alongside the evident tension in this story there stands one of the most beautiful expressions of worship that we have in the Scriptures. One recalls the Psalmist in Ps 23, 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies'. This is what we have here, and here is the response of the human heart to the claims of Divine love. Now, worship, not service, is the keynote of this lovely scene. True, the Wise Men brought their gifts to the Infant Redeemer. But we are not to interpret the gifts as we sometimes think of gifts today, when we speak of using our gifts in the service of God. This though right and proper in its place, is not the thought here. It was not their natural gifts of wisdom, their talents and human endowments that the Wise Men brought to Jesus, but on the contrary the expression of their hearts' love and worship. This is important. It is possible to evade the challenge of the gospel by making service for Christ and the Church a substitute for the submission and love of our hearts. We can spend a lifetime in the former without ever giving the latter to Christ. We should not forget that one New Testament definition of believers is 'them that love God' (Rom 8:28), and this should underline for us that faith is neither a matter of habit or tradition, or background or upbringing, still less of mechanics, but something we feel towards him. In the story in Luke 7: 40-50 of the woman who anointed Jesus' head and feet, it is made clear to us that she felt something of the greatness of the thing that had happened to her, and she poured out her gratitude and love to Christ because of it. The life of service can be a terribly barren thing, when it is not rooted in, and does not flow from, a spirit of worship.

13) 2:3-12

Tradition suggests that there is a symbolism in the gifts the Wise Men brought, and gives a specific interpretation for each, gold speaking of Christ's kingship, frankincense of His deity, and myrrh of His sufferings. But it may be that all three emphasise His kingship (cf Ps 72:15, Isa 60:6, Ps 45:8, where all have a kingly reference). Another interesting and suggestive interpretation, however, takes the Wise Men to be eastern magicians, and that the gold, frankincense and myrrh are the materials they use in their arts; and by offering them to Jesus they are declaring the end of their practices. This is how one of the early Fathers, Ignatius, understood the passage: 'From that time, all sorcery and every evil spell began to lose their power; the ignorance of wickedness began to vanish away; the overthrow of the ancient dominion was being brought to pass, since God was appearing in human form unto newness of life eternal'. Whatever the interpretation, however, the important thing is that they came to the Infant King, drawn to Him by the star, which they saw 'at its rising' (which is a truer rendering of the original than 'in the east'). God has His own ways of speaking to those outwith the sphere of His recognised revelation (i.e. the law and the Scriptures), and history indicates that Messianic hopes were widespread in the world at that time. Nor should this surprise us, for if this coming of Christ is to be thought of as a unique visitation from on high, as God breaking into His creation, what more likely than that echoes of this should sound throughout the world, and that those outwith the covenants of promise should overhear the intimations of immortality and desire to share in them?

14) 2:13-15

Joseph is now warned in a dream to take Jesus and His mother to Egypt, to escape the evil designs of king Herod. Matthew sees in this a fulfilment of prophecy (15), and also, it would seem, a repetition of events, which happened at the time of Israel's Exodus from Egypt. Once again, as then, an evil king is slaughtering Jewish children, and once more one particular child is hidden and preserved, to become God's anointed Leader and Redeemer. Thus Matthew portrays Jesus as the Leader of the people out of bondage. The Jews looked back to the Exodus as the beginning of their history, and forward to a new Exodus, under a new Moses, at the end of the world. Matthew's point, then, is that the new Exodus was about to begin, with Christ, and he interprets the gospel in these terms. It is true that Jesus went into Egypt, as a child, to escape the fury of Herod; but there was a deeper reason. His going symbolised His going down to 'where we were', for Egypt was the house of bondage for Israel, and we are in the bondage of sin. He shared the common lot of man, and was made in the form of a servant. His 'Egypt' was deeper than we could ever know, and was entered fully when He agonised in the Garden of Gethsemane and went to the lonely horror of the Cross. And His resurrection, Matthew means, was God calling His Son up out of Egypt, as the Leader of a great multitude which no man can number. This is not fanciful, arbitrary exegesis, for the whole Old Testament is God's 'picture-book' of His redemptive purpose in Christ. The story of Moses and the Exodus is suggestive of New Testament redemption not because we arbitrarily read the latter into it with dishonest hindsight, but because Christ's redeeming work is the reality of which the other is an echo in the course of history, and an illustrative type.

15) 2:16-18

Matthew again sees, in the massacre of the innocents, a fulfilment of Scripture, and he quotes from Jeremiah 31:15. The circumstances of this passage are interesting and significant. Jeremiah stood on the threshold of the great captivity when all hope for God's people was gone, and they were rushing down the mad slope to their doom. The prophet pictures the long winding trail of the captives as they wound their sorrowful way to Babylon, and the tramp of their feet disturbs, as it were, the grave of Rachel, who figuratively mourns as her children pass by her tomb into captivity. But the real point of Jeremiah's words is that they occur in a section of his book that is full of comfort and assurance; and in the next verse, God says, 'Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears...' This is what Matthew means: the massacre of the innocents is tragic indeed, but evil does not have the last word in the matter; that is to say, just as in the midst of the tragedy of the Captivity God gave a word of hope, so here there is a word of infinite hope. The children are slaughtered, but the Child is preserved, and in Him blessing and comfort will surely come. Alexander MacLaren very beautifully comments: 'In their brief lives they have won immortal fame. They died for the Christ whom they never knew. These lambs were slain for the sake of the Lamb who lived while they died, that by His death they might live forever'. The weeping for the miseries that surrounded the coming of the King is part and parcel of the Divine pattern of suffering leading to blessing and glory.

16) 2:19-23

Matthew finds yet another fulfilment of prophecy in the return of the Holy Family from Egypt. In this case, however, a problem faces us, for we can point to no specific prophecy in the Old Testament which contains the words quoted in 23. But Matthew says this was spoken 'by the prophets', and he may have in mind general impressions gathered from the prophetic writings rather than any specific passage. What we do know is that the word 'Nazarene' was a term of reproach, of contempt, and to call a man this was to dismiss him as lowly and despised (cf John 7:52, 'Out of Galilee ariseth no prophet', John 1:46, 'Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?'). The word 'Nazareth' is thought by some to derive from 'netzer' meaning a 'branch' or 'shoot', and may have been given to the little village contemptuously to express its insignificance. Applied to Christ, it is likewise an expression of contempt. Compare Isa 11:1, the 'rod' (or 'sprout') out of the stem of Jesse, also Isa 53:2, a 'root out of a dry ground'. Christ was 'disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God and precious', and God chooses the weak things of the world, and the things that are despised, to fulfil His redemptive purposes among men. All His life, Jesus was 'Jesus of Nazareth', and this was the shadow of the Cross on His life, the mark of its shame and reproach. This paradoxical pattern of share and glory is seen in all the quotations Matthew makes from the Old Testament in this chapter: in 6, the meanness and majesty of Bethlehem; in 15, the contrast of exile and exodus; in 18, the paradox of sorrow and rejoicing; and finally, in 23, the contemptuous name that became the mark of His power (cf Luke 24:19, Acts 3:6, 10:38). And it is expounded doctrinally by both Jesus and Paul, in such passages as John 12:24, 25, Romans 7:17,18, and 2 Cor 4:7-12. It is the divine and eternal law of spiritual harvest, and the secret of all that is effectual in Christian service.

17) 3:1-4

Matthew does not, like Luke, 'date' the spectacular movement of the Spirit of God, which he now proceeds to record. We are plunged very suddenly and dramatically into the story of John and his ministry - it is no exaggeration to say that he bursts on the scene like a meteor - and yet we are surely meant to see from the two opening chapters that there was in fact a hidden, quiet preparation for this public ministry in the providence of God. And those who had eyes to see and ears to hear knew that something of eternal moment was about to take place. There were those who were 'waiting for the consolation of Israel' (Luke 2:25). Now, the point of Luke's introductory note (Luke 3:1, 2) to this Judaea revival - the record of the first revival of religion in New Testament times - is to set it against the background of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, against the grim, relentless, debauched, degenerate life of the Roman empire, and to show it as the Divine answer to that godless empire. This is the true setting of any genuine revival movement - it affects empires, and this one was destined to mean a very great deal to the Roman power, for it marked the beginning of the process that led to the downfall of Rome and its world rule. 'This thing was not done in a corner' (Acts 26:26).

18) 3:1-4

We need to set the life and work of John the Baptist in the context of the gospel as Matthew conceives and represents it, and see in so doing the unified theme that Matthew has in mind. We have seen in the first two chapters how he represents the gospel as a new Exodus, and Christ as the new Moses come to deliver His people. This idea is continued here. In common with the other evangelists, Matthew asserts that John fulfilled in his coming the prophecy spoken by Isaiah (3). Now the setting of that prophecy (Isa 40:1 ff) is that Israel, in captivity in Babylon, is on the eve of her great deliverance by the mighty hand of God. The long discipline of the exile is about to end, and God is about to break in power and love. A careful study of Isaiah reveals the prophet's association of the deliverance from exile with the great Exodus from Egypt, and his declaration that God's 'new thing' (Isa 43:19) would be a second Exodus for His people. And Matthew takes up this same theme. For him, the gospel is a second Exodus, *the* Exodus, of which that from Egypt and that from Babylon were alike only illustrations and types. John, then, is the Forerunner, the Announcer that this great and mighty deliverance is at hand. And all the comfort, hope and promise of Isa 40:1-11 may very legitimately be read into the advent of John and his ministry. Basically it was a preparation of men's hearts to receive the good news of the gospel. Isaiah proclaimed 'a way back to Jerusalem from exile'; John proclaimed 'a way back to God from sin'. This is Matthew's first point in the chapter.

19) 3:1-4

The second point is that Matthew also represents John as a second Elijah. This is the force of the describing of John's attire, which he appears to take from 2 Kings 1:8. Jewish expectation was that before the coming of the Messiah Elijah would appear again (Mal 4:5, and see Matt 11:14 and Christ's words about John as fulfilling this prophecy). John comes abruptly on the scene, just as Elijah did. Ahab and Jezebel are paralleled by Herod and Herodias in this New Testament story. Above all, the application of this parallel must be to the nature and content of his ministry. No-one can think of Elijah without also thinking of the characteristic notes that he struck. 'Art thou he that troubleth Israel?' Ahab cried. And John certainly troubled Israel in his day, as we are to see shortly. And what of the dramatic challenge issued to the prophets of Baal and to the people? 'Why halt ye between two opinions?' 'If the Lord be God, follow Him'. 'The God that answereth by fire let Him be God'. These references define the content of John's mission. It was a summons to decision. A sifting was to take place; the wheat and the chaff were to be separated, and men were to be divided into those 'for' and those 'against'. There was to be no place for neutrality. We do not understand the preaching of the Word of God aright if we do not recognise that always, whatever the context, it is preaching for a verdict. Thus the summons to 'repent', which one commentator says might be literally rendered from the original Aramaic as 'be converted' or 'turn round and go back'.

20) 3:5-6

The effect of John's ministry was extraordinary. It is clear that this was something new in that day. For long years the inspired word had been lacking in Israel. As in the days of Samuel, the word of the Lord was precious (i.e. scarce) and there was no open vision (1 Sam 3). The religious life of the nation was at a low ebb, when suddenly, after the silence of the years, the voice of this strange figure was heard in the land, thundering out the word of the Lord to the people. This movement was significant because it bore an authentic, authoritative word from God to men about eternal issues. It was eternity breaking into time, touching the lives of men - the proclamation of an ultimatum to a nation that had slipped away from God. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that John's ministry was deeply disturbing, and that it sounded so stern and forbidding. True, he was the forerunner of 'good news', but the only way good news can come to a situation of national decadence and degeneracy is through the radical disease that has caused it being dealt with radically. This is surely a pointer to the need of our own time. What use is an innocuous, sentimental message couched in psychological terms to a generation that has corrupted itself as ours has done? Our national life is polluted: cinema, radio, television, newspapers and wayside advertisements alike proclaim the sickness of our time. Private dishonesty, public dishonesty, private and public impurity and immorality - these are the real problems, and it is madness to suppose that anything will make an impact upon it save a radical word from God, and an urgent, inexorable summons to repentance. Our need is for a sense of judgment to come upon the nation, a sense of fear and dread at what we have done, bringing conviction of sin to the conscience until a moral regeneration takes place throughout the land. This is what authentic movements of the Spirit have done in the past. It is our desperate need today.

21) 3:7-10

What was true on the national level was, and is, true also for individuals. John's summons to repentance came with terrific force to the hearts and consciences of individuals. He challenged the easy assumptions men make, especially religious men (7), that their background and tradition are sufficient to put them in the right with God. The fact that men have been born and nurtured in the Church of God does not guarantee their salvation they too must repent and be converted. It is perilously easy to rest on an insecure foundation. 'We have Abraham to our father' is a position that has led many to eternal loss.

But this is something that is often disputed today, even by theologians of merit, who speak of a 'movement in grace' rather than a 'step into grace' when they refer to the work of evangelism. It is true that children are baptised 'unto faith', and that baptism declares them to be born for a destiny of salvation, born to be born again. But it is one thing, by painstaking teaching and instruction to bring them, in years of understanding, to the realisation of their baptismal vows - that it is a real movement in grace - but quite another when baptismal vows and profession of faith alike are so completely misunderstood as to be taken to mean virtually the same as a moralistic humanism, not only little related to the message of the gospel, but in fact the exact antithesis of it. Moule, in his commentary on Romans, says, 'The meaning of faith has sometimes been beclouded till it has seemed, through the haze, to be only an indistinct summary-word for Christian consistency, for exemplary conduct, for good works'. That the real answer to this problem is not further 'movement in grace' in the sense of clearing up misunderstanding in those that are 'in grace', but a movement 'into grace' from 'outside' is seen in the perfect parallel we find in our Lord's own day, and in the ministry of John the Baptist. It was to men who had received the sign of the covenant (i.e. circumcision) that He - and John - denied the right to call God their Father, saying 'Ye are of your father the devil'; it was to a ruler of the Jews, Nicodemus, that He said, 'Ye must be born again'. For all such, the need is not further and fuller enlightenment on something they had already partially and to some extent grasped themselves, but the unlearning of an attitude that was in complete antithesis to the true message of salvation by grace through faiths. Christ did not come to lop off a few branches here and there, but to lay the axe to the root of the tree. Hence John's radical challenge here.

22) 3:11-12

The distinction John makes between his own baptism and that of Jesus in 11 calls for some explanatory comment, in that there is a certain ambiguity, not to say paradox, inherent in the matter which is in the nature of the case inevitable. What we mean is this: on the one hand, it is clear that John was speaking of some future operation of the Spirit of God when he spoke of the baptism of fire, just as Jesus Himself, later, spoke of it as something in the future. On the other hand, the Spirit of God was undoubtedly at work in the world in the Old Testament dispensation, in spiritual awakenings, in the revival in John's time itself, and in the ministry of Jesus and the disciples, before Pentecost. Also, on the one hand, Jesus spoke of His Church as something only then beginning in His ministry, and at Pentecost - 'I will build My Church' - and on the other hand it is clear and certain that He was also building it during the Old Testament dispensation, operating in history before His Incarnation (cf 1 Cor 10:4, 'That rock was Christ'). A belief in the doctrine of the Trinity commits us to this view that Christ was at work in Old Testament times. Now, it is this kind of ambiguity that enables us to say that John's ministry was both a work of the Spirit of God in its own right and a preparatory movement, this also which enables the Westminster Confession to say on the one hand that the whole Old Testament dispensation was preparatory, and on the other to insist very properly that the Old Testament types, sacrifices, ordinances etc. were 'for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by Whom they had full remission of sins and eternal salvation'. Now, unless we understand that this ambiguity belongs to the very nature of the gospel, and to the fact that Christ came at a specific point in history, once for all, and that the events associated with His coming stand on the borderline between two dispensations, the old and the new, we shall be terribly mixed up and confused about many things, and particular about the teaching or the New Testament about the Holy Spirit. We shall give specific instances of this confusion in tomorrow's Note.

23) 3:11-12

Our Lord said to His disciples, 'Wait for the promise of the Father` (Acts 1:4). This was an instruction to them to wait for the Spirit. Now, if we did not understand the ambiguity referred to in yesterday's Note, we could easily interpret this to mean that the reception of the Spirit was an additional experience to that of conversion or of becoming disciples. And, of course, this misinterpretation is often made. But we must realise that the Holy Spirit could not yet have been given, because Christ's work was not yet complete - the Ascension was yet to take place. And therefore these men could not yet have the Spirit. But we today are not in that position of standing on the threshold of a new dispensation, and therefore their experience cannot be taken as valid or relevant for us in the same way. And it is idle to try to decide whether they were true believers or not before the Spirit was given. For they both were and were not. They were true believers of the old dispensation, but they were not believers of the new, for the new was just about to dawn, at Pentecost. Indeed, the experience of the first disciples was not regarded as valid even for the example of the later disciples in the early Church, for they did not wait for the promise of the Father after the days of Pentecost. The Spirit came upon them in their reception of the gospel. Defined doctrine of the Spirit is to be found in the epistles of the New Testament, not in Acts, and there, we find that the baptism of the Spirit is the initiatory work of grace by which we are brought into Christ (cf John 3, 1 Cor 12:13, Eph 1:13f). In other words, John the Baptist is speaking here in 11 of the initiation of the new covenant, by which stony hearts are made into hearts of flesh (Jer 31:31-34, Ezek 36:26) - the covenant which Christ came to inaugurate and which is sealed in His blood.

24) 3:11-12

Two further points are to be made before we go on. The first is that the baptism of the Spirit is something that Christ bestows, and He does so on the basis of His finished work. The baptism of the Spirit is never apart from Christ, and never dissociated from the work of the Cross. This needs to be said today, for there is an emphasis on the Spirit apart from Christ that almost constitutes another gospel. We need to beware of any emphasis on the age or dispensation of the Spirit that neglects – and therefore dishonours - Christ Who is the Head. Secondly, the baptism here referred to is that of the Holy Ghost and of fire. These are not two separate elements, still less does one refer to grace, the other to judgment. Fire is the symbol of the Holy Ghost. Further, the preposition should be 'in' not 'with'. Christ plunges us into this fire, and we should note in this connection the association of this idea with Romans 6, where Paul speaks of being baptised into Christ's death and resurrection. This is the 'fire' which seals the new covenant to our lives. The fire, then, indicates the nature of what Christ seeks to do for us and in us. It represents 'divine energy' working in grace towards men. In this sense, the qualities it suggests are cleansing and life giving. On the one hand, fire 'lays hold upon cold, dead matter, making it sparkle and blaze, and turning it into the likeness of its own leaping brightness'. This is what happens when the grace of God lays hold of one dead in trespasses and sins. Christ kindles a fire on the cold hearths of men's hearts and sets them aflame with love for God and man. On the other hand, fire is a purifying agent, separating the dross from the pure metal. And when the love of God is kindled in our hearts it burns all the impurities out of our system. This is one of the things Paul means when he speaks of the love of God being shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost who is given unto us. The cleansing power of the Spirit of God - as He applies the merits of Christ's work to our hearts - is the good news that John proclaimed. Like the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace, all the bonds that bind us to sin and in sin are burned away, and we are set free and cleansed from the defilement and enslavement of sin. But fire, when we are in a wrong relation to it, burns, scorches, destroys, and the alternative to being baptised in fire is to be consumed and destroyed by it (12).

25) 3:13-17

The baptism of Jesus is a subject full of instruction for us and we must spend some time seeking to understand its significance. Let us begin by underlining the fact that right from the beginning our Lord had a deep consciousness of His Messianic vocation of suffering, and that He understood this to be a vocation of suffering. It has often been suggested that the true interpretation of our Lord's life and work should be that He started out with high hopes of a successful mission, and that only at a much later stage He became disillusioned, and accepted the possibility of failure and martyrdom. This may sound plausible, but it is not in fact the interpretation of Christ's ministry that the gospel writers hold, for here, we see that at the beginning of His ministry there was present the thought of suffering. Let us explain: Take the voice from heaven, 'This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased'. It is important to recognise that this is a composite statement, and that it is derived from two Old Testament passages, Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1. In the first, God is pictured as crowning a son of David as Messiah, with the words 'Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten thee', and this has been called the 'coronation formula' for the kings of Israel. In the second, the prophet speaks of an ideal servant of God who perfectly does His will as he treads the pathway of obedience and service. Now - and this is the real heart of the meaning of Christ's baptism - these two quotations represent the two distinct pictures given in the Old Testament of the messianic idea - that of a glorious king and that of a suffering servant. And Jesus, in this tremendous experience of the baptism, was conscious that He was called of God to fulfil both of them in His own person - roles that had hitherto seemed to be inconsistent with and contradictory to one another. It was recognition - and a proclamation, to those who had ears to hear - that the two divergent lines of prophecy did in fact converge and meet in Him, and that God's glorious, promised King was to be this by being His suffering servant, obedient unto death.

26) 3:13-17

In His baptism, then, Christ was stepping out resolutely on the road indicated in the prophetic scripture for the suffering servant of God. This is the real key to the meaning of His baptism, and no other explanation is adequate. For John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, and Christ was sinless, as the Scriptures, His enemies, the Roman government, and God Himself, all testified. What need, then, had He for such a baptism? He had no sins to confess, no past to look back on with regret, no stain on His life, that the symbolic waters of baptism needed to touch. Christ did not come to Jordan because He was a sinner, but because He wanted to number Himself with the transgressors (Isa 53:12), to identify Himself with men in their sin, to stand in with them in their plight and need, and to pledge Himself, in standing in for them, as their Saviour. He was in other words, baptised as a Public Person, as a Substitute, as our Representative. Christ was made, we are told, in the likeness of sinful flesh. And this shows how like sinful flesh He became. It was the beginning of His mission 'to be made sin for us'. And if we remember that repentance is a death, in which one says goodbye to sin, then baptism is in that sense a symbol of death. But only a symbol, and consequently powerless in itself. There needs to be someone who enters into the meaning of the symbol, before it can become real. And Christ did just this. His baptism was a symbol of the reality that was to come, i.e. the baptism of fire which He passed through on the cross, a symbolic representation of what He had come to do - to die for the sins of the world.

27) 3:13-17

The foregoing comments help us to understand our Lord's cryptic words to John, '.....thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness' (15). The word 'fulfil' is the word used by Luke when he speaks of the 'decease' which Christ was to accomplish at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31), and is also used of the fulfilment of prophecy. Christ means that without this act of baptism, righteousness would not be fulfilled, and the reference is (a) to His calling to accomplish all that was promised in the Old Testament concerning God's deliverance, thus saying that the salvation spoken of by the prophets involved no less than this for God's Son; and (b) to His death particularly, and His life-work generally, as something He must do, and He alone, in redeeming the world. It is the only way that God can be just and the justifier of the ungodly, for God's salvation is righteousness, and only when it is accomplished and fulfilled can it be made over to sinners.

But there is something else. The wages of sin is death, and we learn from Gen 3 that when man sinned he was cast out of the Garden, and the gates were shut against him, barred by cherubims and a flaming sword. But here we are told of the opening of the gates of heaven (16). Christ has opened a new and living way, by His blood, into the presence of the Father. What happened on the day of Christ's baptism was that God gave a foretaste of what would be when His Son died on a cross for the sins of men. The open heavens here correspond to the rent veil at the Crucifixion, and both signify the blessed truth that now, through Christ, the way back to God is open. 'Behold I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it' (Rev 3:8).

28) 4:1

The temptations of Jesus are a deep, deep subject, and one which provides much spiritual instruction. We must first of all view them in the context of His public ministry and of Matthew's presentation of the gospel message. We have already seen how Matthew speaks of Jesus as a second Moses come to deliver His people from bondage. Christ went down 'into Egypt' to identify Himself with His people; the Red Sea baptism of Israel (cf 1 Cor 10) corresponds to His baptism in Jordan; and now, here, he spends forty days and nights in the wilderness, to correspond with Israel's forty years there. This is not fanciful exegesis, for it should be noticed that the three quotations Jesus uses in the temptations are all from Deuteronomy, and refer to the testing of Israel in the wilderness after the crossing of the Red Sea. If Matthew had that crossing in mind when he gave the account of Christ's baptism, it may well be that he had the wilderness story in mind when he recorded the temptation. In Deut 8:2, we are told that Israel was tested to know what was in their heart. So Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tested. He is therefore presented here in the role of God's Israel, passing through similar testings and temptations; but where Israel failed, He was victorious. In this respect, the emphasis lies on the words 'to be tempted'. The temptations were not something that befell Jesus, but something in which He Himself took the initiative. Indeed, if we maintain Matthew's central affirmation in his gospel that here is Jesus the King, then we must regard the story of the temptation as that of the King going into battle. 'A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came'.

29) 4:1

Satan challenged the first Adam in the Garden; but the second Adam challenged Satan in the wilderness, and won the victory where the first Adam failed. It is here that we see the link between the temptation of Jesus and His baptism. It was for us, as our Representative that He suffered, being tempted. As the Son of God, He could have destroyed the devil with a word, but it was as man (and for man) that He submitted Himself to the ordeal. 'Man shall not live by bread alone', He said. This is why the temptations are so similar to those which brought down Adam in the Garden. Adam and Eve were tempted to eat unlawfully; so was Christ. Adam and Eve were tempted to presume on God's Word: 'ye shall not surely die' Satan said to them; 'He shall give His angels charge concerning Thee', he said to Christ. Adam and Eve were promised 'ye shall be as gods'; and to Christ Satan said, 'All these things will I give thee'. Adam and Eve fell before the onslaught; Christ stood firm; and this was the beginning of the great reversal of the effects of sin, the first stroke of the battle, which was to lead to final victory over sin and Satan.

30) 4:2-4

If our interpretation of the temptations of Jesus (given in the two previous readings) is correct, and if they do represent one stage of the warfare that was finally to destroy the power of the devil, then Satan's strategy must surely be clear: he concentrated on Christ's one supremely vulnerable point, the humanity He has assumed for our sakes, temptable humanity, and tried to beguile Him away from the path of the cross which He had voluntarily accepted as the divinely appointed way of victory. This, then, is the force of the 'If' in 3. But Satan is not only calling in question the reality of Christ's experience of the divine anointing at His baptism, and not only tempting Him to doubt God's word to Him, 'This is My beloved Son' (Yea, hath God said?), but particularly and supremely calling in question the nature of the path marked out for Him in the prophetic scriptures, the path of suffering. And in Satan's approach, we can discern a twofold thrust: 'If Thou be the Son of God' - emphasising the one aspect of His Messiahship only, not the other, underlining Psalm 2:7 but omitting Isa 42:1 (see Note on 3:13-17); and in the second place, suggesting a Messiahship without suffering - 'Alleviate your hunger by using the power given you, and turn these stones into bread. Why should you suffer hunger?' This temptation to avoid the path of suffering is one which came back to Jesus later, at Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16:22-23) and on the mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:4, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here', as if to say, 'This is how we like to think of you, as a glorious, kingly figure, not a suffering servant') and in Gethsemane. But Christ steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem and to the Cross, and would not be deviated. This was His victory.

31) 4:5-7

There are several points of importance to note in this, the second temptation. First of all, we see that Satan quoted scripture to our Lord, and therefore backed up his temptation with scriptural authority! This should warn us off the danger of basing either doctrines or specific course of action on single verses of Scripture. Jesus wisely countered the proposal with the words 'Again it is written', and this is a clear indication to us that we must learn to compare Scripture with Scripture. We must beware of looking for propitious verses to justify a course we have secretly decided upon in our hearts, or to 'authenticate' a doctrine we have decided to be the right one. Secondly, this was a temptation to put God to the test in such a way as to show that Christ did not trust His simple word. God had said, 'This is My beloved Son', but Christ (Satan suggested) must have a spectacular, unmistakeable proof that He meant what He said. But faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen, and when it is real, it renders the demand for proofs and tokens unnecessary. This is the force of Jesus' words, 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God'. The temptation to make our trust in God express itself in doing and daring something unusual for God, something brilliant and spectacular that will cause a stir, is often very real, but it betrays fear rather than faith, and is an evidence of uncertainty and insecurity, not of calm and unshakeable trust in God. This may lie at the root of much abortive activity in the work of the gospel. When will we learn that activity is not necessarily a sign of grace?

32) 4:5-7

The most important point, however, in the second temptation is that basically it is, like the first, a temptation along the line of Christ's Messianic calling. Why, it might be asked, this particular kind of spectacular action, jumping from the pinnacle of the temple? What lies behind it? Well, see Daniel 7:13, Matt 26:64, Jude 14, which portray the Son of man coming in the glory with His angels. Only one thing would be conjured up in the minds of pious Jews by such a spectacle as Satan suggested. It was a deliberate attempt on Satan's part to get Jesus to identify Himself with the messianic idea of the coming, glorious King, without reference to the suffering Figure spoken of elsewhere in the prophetic scriptures. 'Be a King, Jesus, not a Sufferer. If Thou be the Son of God, show thyself as a King, not a criminal on a cross'. Once again, then, the temptation is to bypass the cross, and take an easier way. To take lower ground and an easier way - how dear this is to the natural heart, which ever refuses the stern discipline of the cross and the duty of dying daily in order to live again in the power of Christ's resurrection! But there is no easier way for those who mean business with God. There came a time when the crowds began to see what Jesus' teaching really implied - a cross. And many walked no more with Him, saying, 'This is a hard saying, who can hear it?' And they turned away, to look for an easier way, the devil's way. This is the meaning of the second temptation for us.

33) 4:8-10

The third temptation is once more, in its central intention, an attack on the Messianic role of suffering accepted by Jesus in His baptism. We have already seen the association of the words 'This is My beloved Son' with Psalm 2, where they are immediately followed by 'Ask of Me, and I will give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession'. It is against this word of God that Satan's utterance here, 'All these things will I give Thee if Thou wilt fall down and worship me', is seen in all its blasphemous arrogance. For he is 'aping' Deity here, taking God's words on his lips in a foul, irreverent parody. This is one of the dominant characteristics of Satan: not only does he parade as an angel of light, pretending to be God and deceiving us into thinking that it is in fact God Who is speaking to us - this is part of the great subtlety of temptation, and one of its most confusing aspects, the terrible point of indecision when we can no longer recognize the distinction between Satan's voice and God's - but also this reveals the real heart of evil: Satan wants to be God. He wants even Jesus, and especially Jesus, to bow down and worship him; and he apes the Godhead in this blasphemous way by using His word for himself. Satan's offer, then, to Christ, is essentially an imitation of God's, an alternative to God's. And precisely here we see its malevolence and danger. For he is offering Christ an alternative way to attain His kingdom, an easier way, and one that involved compromise and that would by-pass the cross. Put at its simplest, both God and Satan are saying the same thing: 'All these will give Thee, if Thou fall down and worship Me', but 'worshipping God' involves obedience to His will, and obedience to that will means the cross. And Jesus said, 'Not that way, Satan. Not thus will I take My power and reign'. The alternative which He chose is expressed very fully by Paul in Phil 2:5-11; 'He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross,' and the kingdom was given Him on the basis of that obedience, and in virtue of the death He died in obedience to the will of God.

34) 4:1-10

The temptations of Jesus were therefore a threefold attempt on Satan's part to draw away Jesus from the cross, and there prevent Him from the outset of His ministry. It is clear that they must have assailed Him again and again- Luke tells us (4:13) that Satan left Him for a season. This must mean that he returned to the fray! We may in fact discern the approach of the devil in passages such as John 6:15, 'When Jesus perceived that they would come and take Him by force and make Him a king, He departed...' Peter's words at Caesarea Philippi we have already referred to (Matt 16:22-23), and the Gethsemane agony. We also see the tempter at work in the words spoken at the crucifixion by Jesus' enemies - and how startling is the echo of the wilderness temptation in them - 'If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross'. Even then, He could have come down if He had so chosen; but nothing moved Him, He had set His face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem, and He remained obedient, even unto the death of the cross.

This is the supreme temptation for the Christian also, to by-pass, to refuse the cross, to seek an easier way of discipleship. One thinks of the church at Corinth - somewhere the believers there had baulked at the challenge of crossbearing, and this was the explanation of their declension and barrenness. This is how Satan robs us of possible usefulness and fruitfulness in the service of Christ. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

35) 4:11

Only at the end of the testing, not before, came the ministry of angels. During the temptation, Christ stood alone. This is always true of temptation. The heavens often seem as brass, in order to test us, and prove us able to stand alone, by faith, without further assurance from on high. But how sweet and satisfying these angelic ministrations are when they do come! This is one of the rewards of faithfulness. The other result of the successful resistance of temptation is recorded in Luke 4:14 (which see). 'Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee.' G. Campbell Morgan makes this comment: "Plenitude of the Spirit (Luke 4:1) is the result and evidence of holiness of character, and is itself capacity and sufficiency for service. The power of the Spirit is the consciousness which is born of victories won, and triumphs achieved. He entered upon temptation full of the Spirit, that is to say, in possession of all power necessary for the fulfilment of His work. But power bestowed becomes truly powerful when it has been tested through the process of temptation. Fulness of the Spirit becomes the power of the Spirit through processes of testing.... (in the life of the believer) the power of the Spirit is never realised save through some wilderness of personal conflict with the foe. From such experience entered upon in the fulness of the Spirit, men go out either broken and incapable of service, or with the tread and force of conscious power".

36) 4:12-17

We come in these verses to our Lord's Galilean ministry (as it has been called). At first glance, it would seem that Matthew makes this Galilean ministry the beginning of our Lord's public work. But in fact it was not, nor does Matthew say so, but indicates that what took place here followed John the Baptist's imprisonment. John's gospel reveals that the Baptist ministered for some time after Jesus' baptism, and that Jesus Himself ministered for some time in Jerusalem and Judaea before John was imprisoned. Then, when this happened, Jesus moved back to the north, and began preaching in Capernaum. There is therefore a twofold significance in the timing of this new beginning. In the first place, it was a taking up of John's ministry where it had been cut off by Herod, and immediately it was cut off. It is significant that Jesus echoed the same message as John had preached, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'. One voice was silenced; another was raised with the message of the Lord. The word of God is not bound. Secondly, Jesus withdrew from the place which had refused in this way John's ministry. The word 'departed' in 12 has the meaning of 'withdraw', and is Matthew's characteristic word for the withdrawal from unbelief (see 2:14, 22). Matthew keeps on emphasising the idea expressed in John 1:11. The significance of Galilee is of course that it was called 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (15). Matthew is indicating that it was the offer of the gospel to the Gentiles when the Jews had refused it, just as, in ch. 2, it was the Gentile wise men who came to worship the infant Saviour, while the Jews, under Herod, sought to kill Him.

37) 4:12-17

A word is necessary about Matthew's quotation from Isaiah 9, and its fulfilment in Jesus' ministry. It is the context of the prophet's words that is so significant in a true understanding of its inclusion here. In Isaiah 8, the prophet has spoken of the withdrawal of the word of the Lord from the nation, and its concentration on the Remnant. In ch.9, the picture presented is one of contrast with the last verses of ch 8, which depict the moral and spiritual darkness of the land, and the Assyrian invasion that came upon it for its sins. And the prophet's new message is that Israel, that had been afflicted, would see no more affliction; and that same region which had been devastated by the enemy was to be hereafter the scene of a glory greater than Israel had ever known. G. Adam Smith says that no part of the land had been so given over to idolatry as Zebulan and Naphtali, and now the horrors of captivity had passed upon it, those regions being the first that would feel the force of the destroyer coming upon it from the east. 'The prophet, after prophesying judgment and doom, proclaimed the dawn of a new hope in the birth of a descendant of David who would establish a kingdom of peace. Yet not in Jerusalem or Judea will the light first dawn, but in the northernmost part of Israel, a region which lay in darkness and death at the time Jesus came to fulfil the ancient prophecy, and which even the Baptist had not been able to reach by his call to repentance.' This, then, is seen by Matthew as evidence of grace - the gospel goes first to the darkest places, and to those in greatest need.

38) 4:17

It is interesting to note that Matthew introduces Jesus' ministry with a form of words almost identical to those we read later, in 16:21, when Jesus began to teach His disciples about His coming suffering. This is significant. It shows that our Lord's ministry is divided into two parts by the confession Peter made at Caesarea Philippi. The first part of it was designed to prove, by miracles, wonders, signs and teaching, that He was the Messiah, Israel's promised king, while the second part was designed, once the disciples had recognised the validity of His claim, to convince them that as Messiah He had to suffer, in order to fulfil His mission to be the Saviour of the world. If this be so, then we may take it that the verses which follow, and particularly 23-25, give a brief précis of the first part of our Lord's ministry – the miracles, wonders, signs and teaching. And, following the long teaching passage known to us as the sermon on the mount (chs 5-7), 23-25 are elaborated in considerable detail in chs 8-16.

39) 4:18-22

If what we mentioned in the Note on page 40, about the Judaea ministry, recorded in John 1-4, is valid, as New Testament scholarship holds it to be, we must recognise that this 'call' of the disciples was not the first step in their discipleship. For in John 1:37 ff we read of the first contact they had with Jesus. Andrew and Peter, in all probability John, and possibly James also, were involved. What we read here is in fact a call not to discipleship but to service. They were to become fishers of men, and this is a call to what is sometimes referred to as 'full-time service'. First of all, then, there was the call to personal allegiance and discipleship - the 'conversion', if you like, that is recorded in John 1. This involved association with Jesus and fellowship with Him, but not in a way that interrupted their daily duty and calling. Then came this call, by which they forsook their nets and followed Him. Some think that this was also more or less intermittent, and that in Luke 5 there was a further call' which severed them completely from their secular employment. Then, in Mark 3, we are told of their appointment as apostles, and in Matthew 10, their commissioning and sending forth in the gospel. Finally, the anointing at Pentecost, and their use of the keys of the kingdom. Thus, in the making of the disciples there were several stages, and their development in that calling was gradual, as they were led on stage by stage, until they 'qualified' in the fulness of time. They were pupils in the school of Christ. More of this in the next Note.

40) 4:18-22

There are two things that must be distinguished here. On the one hand, it seems clear that the disciples were led on into ever-deepening levels of spiritual experience by our Lord. This is something that necessarily happens with all who go on with the Lord. On the other hand, however, we must beware of thinking that a call to service implies a deeper level of consecration than that involved in discipleship. There is only one level of consecration for believers, and that is expressed in Romans 12:1, 2. Also, in this connection, we must take care that we know what we mean by 'full-time service'. All service for Christ must be 'full-time service'; there is no such thing as part-time service in the kingdom of God. One cannot be a Christian for just part of the time, for this is a denial of the very nature of discipleship. The Christian in industry or in the professions is just as much in full-time service as the minister or missionary. What we often mean by 'full-time service' would be better called special or specific service. All are called to fulltime discipleship, but not all are called to give up their secular employment in the fulfilment of it. Not all are called to preach, for example, for preaching is a specific and special activity that only some are called to and required for. A comment on the meaning of the phrase 'fishers of men' follows in the next Note.

41) 4:18-22

Not all Christians are necessarily called to preach, but all may be fishers of men, that is, they may learn to win others to Christ. The positive, definite, distinct work of introducing others to Christ is what the Church exists for, and it implies two things: a) the man who fulfils this vocation must himself know Christ as his Saviour and Redeemer. We cannot introduce anyone to One we do not know personally ourselves; b) the 'others' whom we seek to introduce to Him are really 'outside' until they are brought in; they really need to be 'caught' and saved, and if they are not, they will be lost. This should make it clear that there is an eternal difference between being 'caught' and 'not caught' in the net of the gospel. Paul speaks of 'being apprehended of Christ Jesus' - caught, saved by grace, and brought into the kingdom of God. Spurgeon has a great sermon on the text 'He that winneth souls is wise', in which he points out that the word 'win' is used in various ways: a) in love-making. A man 'wins a bride' (cf 'From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride'). And how much this often involves, and what large expense of love, before he succeeds in doing so; b) in military terms. We win a city or a battle. And what skill, endurance and courage are needed to do so! c) in making a fortune. We win a fortune, often only after much toiling and saving; d) in the race. We win a race, but only the man who exceeds others wins the prize. What disciplines are necessarily involved in the enterprise of soul-winning and man-fishing! And the nature of these disciplines is implied in the next chapters which record the Sermon on the Mount. It was by subjecting His disciples to the deep and searching instruction of the Word and the application of the discipline of the cross to their deepest hearts that Christ was to make them fishers of men. And will it be otherwise with us?

42) 4:23-25

The last verses of the chapter give us a glorious picture of Christ's teaching, preaching and healing, and vast human needs being met by Divine power. There are several points to note. In the first place, Matthew distinguishes between various different kinds of ailment here. There are the physically sick, the mentally sick, and the demon possessed. The two latter represent an important distinction, in view of the assumption made so often today that the 'demon-possession' of olden days was really something requiring psychiatric help. But this is not really a valid position to adopt. Matthew is quite clear here that there is a distinction between demon-possession and mental illness. Also, it should be noted that this modern judgment and verdict assumes that by 'demon-possession' the New Testament is thinking of illnesses with mental symptoms. But this is not in fact so. The New Testament speaks for example of a woman with a spirit of infirmity, by which she was bent in body. The demonic is by no means confined to so-called psychological disorder! It can be cold and calculating and brilliantly ruthless, on occasion. Further, in the exposure of the demonic in human situations, there is often a decisive, not to say dramatic, healing and deliverance effected, which, alas, does not often obtain in. psychiatric treatment.

43) 4:23-25

The second point here must be a word about the theological meaning and significance of the miracles. They are best taken as the 'credentials' of the King, and the evidences that the Kingdom of God had indeed broken in upon the world. This is the four evangelists' whole point – to present Jesus as Lord and King in such a way that men will see He is such. He was approved of God 'by miracles, wonders and signs'. And here He is seen as Lord of devils and disease. This is the true interpretation of the miracles. They can of course also be applied to spiritual categories and allegorised or spiritualised, as indeed John does in his gospel - for example, the feeding of the five thousand is spiritualised in terms of the bread of life; but this is application rather than interpretation or exposition, and does not give the first meaning, which is the declaration of the Lordship of Christ. But with this understanding, we can and may so apply them, fruitfully. 'He, before whom no bodily disease proved incurable, is mighty to cure every ailment of our souls; there is no broken heart that He cannot heal, no wound of conscience that He cannot cure. Fallen, crushed, bruised, plague-stricken as we all are by nature, Jesus by His blood and Spirit can make us whole. Only let us apply to Him.' (Ryle).

44) 5:1

It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance of the next three chapters of Matthew's gospel, known to us as the Sermon on the Mount. We shall study it in considerable detail in the following Readings - only thus can any kind of justice be done to it - but it is also necessary to see it in the over-all context of Matthew's presentation of the good news. And this must come first, before we look at Christ's teaching verse by verse. We have already noted Matthew's design in setting forth the gospel as a parallel to the Old Testament revelation. Christ is the second Moses, sent to set His people free from bondage. His baptism corresponds to the crossing of the Red Sea by Israel, His temptations to their wilderness testings, and now the mountain He ascends in order to teach His disciples corresponds to Sinai and the giving of the Law. This typological symbolism gives us a significant key to the proper interpretation of the Sermon. It is a widespread fallacy to suppose that the Sermon on the Mount is the gospel, and that belief in and acceptance of the gospel is a matter of seeking to put its teaching into practice. This is to miss the point as completely as to suppose that the Ten Commandments were ever meant to be a way of salvation. Both the Old Testament law, and its New Testament counterpart, which we have here, are meant to be the expression of a true experience of grace, the response in the life of the believer to the blessing of Divine redemption. They are God's requirements from His redeemed people, as Exodus 20:2,3 makes clear: first the redemption, then the duty, because it is only on the basis of redemption that the duty becomes at all possible. In the same way, the Sermon on the Mount presupposes salvation to have taken place, and proceeds to tell how people saved by grace are to behave.

45) 5:1

Thus, it was to His disciples, not to the multitude, that Jesus spoke these words, to men who had responded to the summons to repent and follow Him (4:17, 19). Furthermore, in relation to His promise to make them 'fishers of men', we must see in the Sermon our Lord's teaching that alone can equip disciples to be fishers of men. Not only so: we should notice that Jesus, seeing the multitudes, turned from them and concentrated on His disciples, intent on training them, for their life's work - not because He had no care for the needy multitude, but because He had, and knew that the only way effectually to reach them was to equip His disciples and charge them with power through His teaching to become lights in the world. From this point of view, we might well entitle the Sermon, 'On becoming lights in the world'. Viewed from one basic point of view, we may say that the Sermon is an explication of Christ's words spoken on another occasion, 'If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me'. Only thus will we become lights in the world and fishers of men. For in fact it is the doctrine of the cross as applied to the life of the believer that Jesus expounds throughout.

46) 5:2-3

The doctrine of the cross as applied to the life of the believer' - this is seen: first of all in the Beatitudes themselves. At the heart of each of them there is a summons to a death we must die - to become poor in spirit is to die to our pride and self-sufficiency, and to our natural riches, of whatever kind; to become meek is to die to our self-importance and self-assertion, and to the inflated and distorted ideas we hold about ourselves; and so on. The point hardly needs to be laboured. In order to become lights in the world, disciples must learn the 'death/life' principle, for only when it operates in a man's particular and personal circumstances will he become an effective disciple. But there is another point that must be made here: the Beatitudes not only describe the attitude which must characterise the true believer's experience, but in fact describe also 'the way into' the kingdom of God in the first place, and into the adoption of this principle as an enduring attitude. The action of the Word in a man's soul is so to convict him of his sin that every natural prop he might lean upon is knocked away and he comes to realise his sinnerhood and his inability to do anything of himself to put him in the right with God. It is in this state of poverty of spirit that he begins to mourn for his sin, as he sees himself as one who has grieved God, and he learns to hate his sin. In this spirit, he develops a spirit of submission and meekness; gone is his rebellion and the kicking against the pricks, and he meekly waits upon God, willing for his salvation on any terms God is prepared to suggest. In this state, he can only be described as 'hungering and thirsting after righteousness'; he longs to be right with God and at peace with Him (cf Ps 132:4, 5). Then, and only then, does a man enter into the kingdom of God. But now, note the change in him. Having been shown mercy, he now sees the world with new eyes, and begins to show mercy to others; this is the sign that his conversion has been real. The work of sanctification follows, as the Spirit begins to purify his heart from sin, then service for God, the work of peace-making as an ambassados of the great reconciliation. And soon he will find that he will be sharing the reproach and sufferings of Christ (of 1 Cor 4:9 ff), taking up the cross for Christ's sake. Such is the door into the kingdom, and where it leads.

47) 5:3

We now look at the first beatitude in more detail. What was said about it in the previous Note does not exhaust its meaning. 'Stooping low', becoming poor in spirit, is not something that is confined to the entering into the kingdom of God, as if once in, one got rid of a very uncomfortable and unpleasant attitude and reverted to the former state of mind; it is meant to be the adoption of a certain way of life in which poverty of spirit remains as an abiding characteristic. We become that sort of people, and it becomes our life. The first and most perfect embodiment of the principle is Christ Himself. It is in Him that we see most of all that poverty of spirit is such an integral part of the kingdom of God that no-one can get into it without possessing it. The scriptural testimony concerning Christ is seen in such passages as 2 Cor 8:9, '...though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor....' This is the 'death-principle' that is embedded so centrally in the 'poor-in-spirit' beatitude, and what Christ requires of His disciples, as we see from Phil 2:5 ff, 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who...made Himself of no reputation...' He emptied Himself! He adopted the 'death' principle as the rule of His life, stepping cut on: the path of self-denial which led Him finally to the cross. And He says, 'if you would be My disciple, let this mind be in you'. And as the challenge is the same for us, so also is the blessing and the blessedness. As it was 'for the joy that was set before Him' that He endured the cross, despising the shame, so also for us who choose to become poor in spirit there is abundant recompense. He received a kingdom (Phil 2:9-11), and we also shall inherit, both as to the royal life of the kingdom that we shall experience and enjoy, and also in the fruit we bear for the kingdom in the lives of others (2 Cor 6:10). This is the ultimate issue and possibility of Christian discipleship.

48) 5:4

The general application of this beatitude in a literal sense to those who have lost loved ones is surely a legitimate interpretation of Christ's words, but it is open to question whether this is its deepest meaning. Poverty of spirit in the spiritual sense is followed immediately by sorrow for sin, and is a necessary sequel to it, and it is easy to see the blessedness of this beatitude is fulfilled to a man who has come to an end of himself and sorrows for sin unto repentance, for this brings him into the blessings of the gospel, where everlasting comfort and joy are his portion. One has only to think of the joy that came everywhere in Acts where first of all the preaching of the word wrought a real sorrow for sin. But this spirit must become the abiding characteristic of the believer's life if he is to know continually the blessing of the Lord. This does not, of course, mean going about with a lugubrious look on the face - we must beware of any morbid distortions of this spirit in our experience -but it does mean an increasing sensitiveness to sin and a deepening sorrow for it. Paul, at the end of his life, could speak of himself as 'chief of sinners', and in Romans 7 could cry, 'O wretched man that I am', indicating the basic experience of tension between the will to perform and the inability always to do so. The nearer to God we come, the more conscious we shall be of our unworthiness and sinfulness. It is quite certain that the loss and the lack of this deep sense of sin and of mourning for sin lies behind much of the superficial experience in the lives of many Christians today. The cult of frivolity in spiritual things is one of the tragedies of our time and has successfully hindered the advancement of the kingdom of God in this post-war generation. It is a loss that we desperately need to remedy in the life of the Church. Look at 2 Kings 22:8 ff for an example of what sorrow for sin wrought in terms of national reformation. This is a pattern that has repeated itself in all the history of revival and renewal in the Church.

49) 5:5

The meek are those who are humble in disposition and character, those who are submissive under the divine will (rather than those who submit without resistance to the wrongs of man). Meekness is that temper of spirit in which we accept God's dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting. It is not to be confused with weakness, for it is its opposite. Nor does it belong to the realm of natural qualities and characteristics, but is the fruit of grace in the soul, and the planted finger of God in a renewed heart. It is exemplified in Scripture supremely in Christ, in whom we see how mistakenly we think of it in terms of either weakness or colourlessness of character. His was a gentleness and meekness undergirt with strength and power and made possible by that strength. The truth is, submission to the divine will - which is the heart of meekness - can on occasion make a man silent in face of all provocation, but on other occasions make him a blazing fire, terrible and fearsome to be reckoned with. Christ is both the Lamb of God and the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Meekness, therefore, comes through the acceptance of the disciplines of the Divine will, with all that that involves in daily dying to self. It is never a once-for-all experience, but continuing, and on ever deepening levels, with the cross cutting across every natural affection and disposition in us. All growth in grace is growth in this grace, by which we are more and more conformed to the Divine will. And its purpose? The meek shall inherit the earth. Not this guilt-laden, death-doomed earth as we know it, but a renewed earth, as part of the new world wherein dwelleth righteousness. For His new creation, Christ needs a new humanity, and it is this that He is preparing now, as He calls men to discipleship. This is the blessedness of which He speaks, for He will make them such as shall be fit to reign as He intends them to do, namely, great in moral and spiritual stature, triumphant. This is what discipleship is 'for' - it is ultimately training for the future. Blessed are the meek, for the future is bright for them!

50) 5:6

We need to emphasise once again that the Beatitudes express a kind of life which is qualitatively different from anything merely natural in human experience. True, there is no lack of hungering and thirsting in this questing and disturbed age of ours, but the longing is for peace, happiness and security, not for righteousness. Yet this is a search that will always be doomed to failure, because it is a wrong search. True happiness is a by-product of something else, and never found by direct search, but only when something infinitely bigger captures our attention and draws our longing. We could very fairly paraphrase this beatitude thus: 'Happiness is found by those who set their hearts on righteousness, who take religion seriously, who come to grips with the message of the gospel'. No man therefore can find true and lasting happiness or blessedness until He gets right with God, until he finds that righteousness by which he is justified in His sight and accepted before Him. And only those really in earnest with God ever come to this point. Many want to be right with God, without wanting it enough, as witness the rich young ruler. Even within the context of a man's aching longing and yearning desire to 'be right' and 'get right' with God, there still needs to be asked the question, 'Do you really want this - more than anything else in the world?' As Jesus said to the man at the pool of Bethesda, 'Wilt thou be made whole?' And this is just as true within Christian experience as it is of the beginning of Christian life. There is a price to pay for the kind of life of dullness that we see evidenced in the New Testament, and many Christians are not prepared to pay that price, and therefore lay themselves open to the charge of being lacking in real seriousness. Only those who are in deep earnest with God can hope to find the blessing Jesus speaks of here. And the competitive claims in the heart are often too great to allow of this.

51) 5:7

We have already indicated the nature of the progression in the Beatitudes, and pointed out that mercy is the sign in a man that his conversion has been real. But there are two further points of significance to note here. The first is the close association between mercy and righteousness (6). This is important: for it is possible for the pursuit of righteousness to be such that it tends to the development of a hard and almost forbidding element (cf Paul's distinction between 'righteous' and 'good' in Rom 5:7), lacking in tenderness and mercy. Pharisaism is a real danger in every age. The other point is the difficulty that the Beatitude seems to teach that the reception of mercy depends upon, and is conditioned by, our showing mercy to others. But this is not the case, either here, or in the similar statement in the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'. For mercy in the Scriptures always begins in God, and refers to free, unmerited pardon and forgiveness, without price and without condition. The parable of the two debtors in Matt 18:23 ff will help us here. Its teaching is that the continuance of the unmerciful spirit in the man proved that he received the grace of God in vain, and that his reception of it had been unreal. Another parable, that in Luke 7:41-50, has a similar message. Christ's statement in 47, which seems to indicate that forgiveness was bestowed because of her love, and was its reward, does not in fact mean this at all; for in 50, He explicitly states that it was her faith that had saved her, not her love. In other words, the love was the fruit of her faith. Faith which works by love is true faith, and a merciful disposition is the only effectual evidence that we have obtained mercy.

52) 5:8

This Beatitude sums up in itself, in one sense, all that the gospel is about, and expresses the whole point and purpose of God in sending His Son to be our Saviour. It is the goal of all the work of Christ in the soul of man to make him pure and enable him to see God. Now it is heart purity that Christ has in mind. 'Heart' in the Scriptures is a comprehensive word, embracing affections, emotions, will, mind and all, the central personality of man. It is here that sin has made its attack, and here, therefore, that purity is needed (cf Mark 7:21). This makes it clear that things like the lust of ambition or for power, or pride, or malice, are unclean, defiling things, as well as the more obvious kinds of moral impurity. And from all these the power of the gospel can deliver us. How then to obtain purity of heart? There are two ways of looking at the question: on the one hand, purity is the gift and work of God, but on the other, it is something that costs us absolutely everything. There is no contradiction here; these are but two sides of the same blessed truth. We are to work out our own salvation, Paul says in Phil 2:12, 13, for it is God that worketh in you'; the one depends on the other. It is on the basis of the gift of God that the moral challenge to work with all our might becomes possible. The biblical teaching on sanctification proclaims on the one hand that in the death of Christ 'our old man' has been crucified, that the body of sin might be destroyed, and on the other that we are to mortify the deeds of the body. Thus, God alone can make the eye single, the heart pure, yet we are challenged - and it is a total challenge - to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. In other words, we are to be what God has made us, in Christ.

53) 5:9

There are two points in particular to underline in this Beatitude. The first is that the peacemakers are those who make peace between man and man and between man and God, the former depending on the latter and flowing from it. Christ Himself is the supreme example of this, in His mediatorial work, by which He has made peace between man and God, and it is this that makes the work of the Christian pre-eminently a ministry of reconciliation, not indeed of effecting reconciliation, but of proclaiming it, and of bringing men through the word of reconciliation into peace with God. And as there is nothing in the world so blessed as this, and no joy like the leading of a soul to the Saviour, so also there is nothing so costly, as Paul makes clear in passages such as 2 Cor 6:4-10 or 1 Cor 4:9-13, which simply reflect the cost of reconciliation that the Son of God Himself paid. The second point is that this Beatitude follows immediately upon that dealing with purity. Peacemaking is something possible only for the pure in heart. This is seen to be true first of all of Christ: it was because He was utterly pure and spotless that He could make atonement for sin and effect reconciliation 'There was no other good enough....He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in'. And it is true also of believers - only when their hearts are pure can they become channels for Christ's reconciling grace to others. The opposite of peacemakers is trouble-makers, and this is what we become when our hearts are out of joint and impure in God's sight. These are the only alternatives for us.

54) 5:10-12

The final Beatitude in the series differs from the others in that it is longer and fuller, and that it describes not so much what the believer is as something that happens to him.

This one follows naturally and inevitably on the previous one: it costs to be a true peacemaker, to be a minister of reconciliation in the gospel. And this is the paradox of Christian experience - peacemaking leads to conflict and war! And this is inherent in spiritual life, not confined to any particular time or times, as Christ's words, 'so persecuted they the prophets which were before you' make clear. It is significant also that while Jesus begins this Beatitude in the third person - 'Blessed are they....' He continues in the second, 'Blessed are ye', i.e. first of all He expounds the principle, then He applies it to the disciples, as if to say, 'This principle will work out in your life also; be sure of that'. It is not possible to have the blessings of grace without its implications, without adopting the principle which will lead inevitably to persecution and tribulation for Christ's sake. It is here that so many stumble: the man drawn by the preaching of the Word and convicted by the Spirit of his need for salvation may yet turn back as he realises that to commit himself in earnest to Christ will mean to go against the current and course of this world and bear shame and reproach (of John 12:42); the believer who is truly born of the Spirit may begin to find the life a costly one and look around for an easier way. In such a crisis of temptation, we must remember that Christ speaks of this way as a way of blessedness. The true goal of sacrifice and suffering in the New Testament is life, not death. 'He that loseth his life for My sake, the same shall find it.'

55) 5:13-16

These verses form in effect the conclusion of the Beatitudes, and they require to be interpreted in the light and context of what precedes them. The 'ye' is emphatic, and could be fairly rendered, 'it is you, the poor in spirit, the meek, the pure, the merciful, the peacemakers, the lowly, who are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and indeed none but you, who have allowed the message and challenge of the cross to touch and transform your life'. It is as if our Lord were saying, 'This is what I mean by discipleship. I am presupposing repentance and submission in obedience to My Lordship. I am presupposing true following in discipleship. I have told you what this means and involves in these Beatitudes in which I have unfolded the message of the cross. Now, given this, you will fulfill My purposes for you in the world: you will be salt and you will be light'. We see, then, very clearly why our Lord deliberately and of set purpose turned from the multitudes, to concentrate His attention - and ours - on the teaching of the disciples, the point being that when Christian disciples are brought to the place where they ought to be and need to be, the problem of the multitude and its needs will be inevitably looked after and solved. We look at these verses once again in more detail in the next Note

56) 5:13-16

The function of salt is to arrest or prevent the process of putrefaction or decay in food, 'to act as an antiseptic, so that the germs latent, for example, in meat may be rendered ineffective when salt is rubbed into it'. There is a whole theology therefore bound up in Jesus' use of the word. It presupposes, for example - and Jesus presupposes - that in itself the world has within it the seeds of decay and corruption, and there is no depth, morally or spiritually, to which it might not sink. And to stay this process, Christ has put His Church in the world, to act as a moral disinfectant in society. This both defines the function and indicates the limitations of the Church's work in the world: for salt will not indefinitely prevent decay and putrefaction, and the presence of the Church in society will not ultimately prevent the final morale disintegration of the world. Our task is not, then, to win the world for Christ, but to stay its over-quick corruption so that Christ may through His Church salt out a people from the world for His Name, through their shining as lights in the world. This is, in one sense, a negative function, but it is a 'positive' negative, for all that; for even when the gospel is refused by men, their life and action can be very extensively shaped and conditioned by it. One has only to think of the influence that one godly man can have upon the members of his group, in an office or workshop, in restraining corruption, because he stands for a certain level of conduct and behaviour and speech, to realise how true this is. It is to this, then, that we are called.

57) 5:13-16

Salt also, however, gives flavour to food. Without it, food can be very insipid and tasteless. And the presence of believers in society acts as a very necessary conditioner. It can hardly be doubted that the sickness and boredom and frustration evidenced everywhere in society today are due to the decline of spiritual influences. Take Christianity away, and life becomes dull and empty. It is the Christian message that brings meaning and vitality to life. We may think, for example, of the effect on society of spiritual awakening: the benefits, not only spiritual but also material and social, that the eighteenth and nineteenth century evangelical movements brought were quite enormous, adding richness to life and inspiring all manner of movements of social and cultural vitality. Salt may also, however, act as a fertilising agent. The purpose of fertilisers in agriculture is to promote and facilitate the growth of the seed that is sown. The force of this idea in the spiritual realm is surely obvious. A true Christian testimony is the likeliest thing to make a harvest of souls in a community a possibility. When times of refreshing come it is ever those places where there has been a faithful witness that know the showers of blessing. All the more reason therefore that the salt should not lose its savour. Let the Church, then, be the Church, and she will best fulfil her task and responsibility in the world.

58) 5:13-16

For comment on the metaphor 'light' we include the following two Notes (this and the next) from the Rev. William Still: "In a sense, light is another figure for salt, for it is the same Christian witness which has both effects, but in different circumstances or in different persons. Christian witness as salt affects the life of the community, whereas as light it attracts to Christ and to His Church. The former is negative, curbing evil and cleansing society from corruption, the latter positive, showing forth the virtues of Christ to those who have eyes to see. The former is distasteful to the lawless, because it calls in question their ungodly and unrighteous influence, and they hate it to be thought that they are heeding its rebukes, but it does in fact restrain them. This is a necessary Christian function, although it is not the primary function of the Church. The twofold witness of salt and light is not gospel-preaching, but Christian living (which never excludes fitting words). Note that Christ first says, 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12), then 'ye are the light of the world'. We are to shine with His light. Nothing is more important than to believe this is possible. The devil works hard to deny it, but he lies, for Jesus came to do for us, the Holy Spirit in us, this very thing. Indeed, so possible is it that Jesus boldly says the Christian shining with His light is a city set on a hill that cannot be hid.... But can the light not be hid? Certainly to cover a lighted lamp is foolish: domestic utensils were not made for that purpose. But why say 'Let your light so shine....' if it is not possible to hide it? It is possible, but it is wrong: a light is for shining. But not for flashing. The difference points to a profound principle; a light does not need to be flashed to make it shine - to shine is its natural property if it is not hidden - but to give a signal. And a signal draws attention to the flasher. The light of Christ in the soul, Jesus says in 16, draws attention to the light and its source, not to the person in whose life it is shining. For the light shines not to be seen, like a flash-light, but that we may see by it. The point of 'concealed lighting' is that we see by it, without being distracted by its means. In our northern Scottish climate we often have to see without seeing the cause of the light, which is the sun."

59) 5:13-16

"A light that shines with its own light does not need to be attended: it can be forgotten. This in human terms is what we call unconscious influence, one of the most powerful forces in the world, and most healthy, because consciousness that we are doing good tends to corrupt our motives. But there must be a light to shine, and it must not be covered up. Reality is everything here, and there is no possibility of deception; whereas in what is called witness - the button-holing of people and engaging them deliberately in religious or spiritual conversation - we may piously (and obnoxiously) pose to be what we are not. But nothing is said here about hypocrisy, except by implication. Apparently Christ is more concerned about our not hiding reality than about men trying to be what they are not. It may be that Christian witness suffers more from the hiding of reality (through fear of consequences, which fact alone admits the power of Christian witness) than from hypocrites waving unlit lamps. This word is to Christians, who alone have the light (but only those Christians who have undergone the character-forming process outlined in the Beatitudes of the foregoing Christian law have any visible Christian light). The 'so shine' does not refer to the regulation of the light, for it is Christian character which regulates that, but to not covering it up. We all need to be brighter, of course, but that does not come by carnal energy, but by growth in Christian grace through an increasing knowledge of Christ - not by mechanical tricks, but by increasing the 'candle-power' of our likeness to Christ. See here the unselfconsciousness of true witness: it needs thought and action to cover a lamp; none to let it shine, once it is lit. As it shines, it shows and men see by it."

60) 5:17-20

Having completed our studies of the Beatitudes, it will be useful to stand back, so to speak, and see what we have covered. We may sum up in four points: (i) the Beatitudes represent the 'door' into the kingdom, and give a picture of the work of grace in the soul; (ii) they also represent a 'principle' of life that speaks of inward realities; (iii) they give an illustration of the 'cross' life, an exposition of Jesus' words, 'Take up the cross and follow Me'. Each of the Beatitudes lays the cross over the natural man and passes the sentence of death on him; (iv) only by 'living' the Beatitudes, only by living the 'Cross' life can we be either 'salt' or 'light'. The command to 'let your light so shine' is equivalent to the command to 'take up the cross'. Now we come to the beginning of the explication and application of these statements and principles, and first of all Christ deals with a preliminary consideration full of importance for all that follows; the question of the Law. Now, it must have been obvious to all that when Christ came and preached as He did, something new was begun. And inevitably, sooner or later, the question would arise as to what was the relationship of this new thing to the old dispensation, to the Law. What is said in 17 is clear evidence that it was in fact being thought that Christ was destroying the Law itself by His teaching. This, then, is the first question that needed to be settled - what is our Lord's relation to the old economy, to the Law of Moses? That this is a major question will be seen in the Notes that follow this one.

61) 5:17-20

In our last Note we said that the major question to be settled in our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is that of His relation to the old economy and to the law itself. Now the starting point for us must be the fact that our Lord's hearers were of the opinion that He was destroying the law, speaking against it and contradicting it. But why should they have thought so? Does it mean that His teaching was not clear, that it was ambiguous? Hardly. But it was unquestionably different from what the people had been used to, not only in authority, but also in content. Yet Jesus could maintain that, far from destroying the Law, he was actually fulfilling it. The simple answer to this is that their understanding of the law was wrong. His teaching contradicted their interpretation of it, and it was therefore their understanding of it that was wrong; it was they, not He, who proved to be at odds with the law. To them, the law was a way of salvation, of acceptance with God, but this was never its purpose in the old economy, any more than it is now (If Gal 3:19ff). It is significant that the Ten Commandments are prefaced by a statement about God's redeeming work for His people: the commandments therefore express the kind of life that a redeemed people should live in His sight. And this is what Jesus indicates in the sermon on the mount, and in so doing corrects the Jews' misunderstanding of their own law (the relation of the O.T. to the N.T. is not that of law to grace, as the Jews supposed, for the O.T. is not a covenant of law, but rather that of promise to fulfilment. Faith in the old economy was faith in the promise, not in the law, and this is where we see the point of Jesus' words in 18 about fulfilling the law, for He is the fulfilment of all the promise of the O.T.)

62) 5:20

This is a verse that is open to misunderstanding, and it needs to be studied very carefully. The interpretation often placed upon it is to take it to refer to the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees; but surely if this were the meaning it would be so obvious as not to need saying, that a man would have to be better than that to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus' point here is not Pharisaism at its worst, but Pharisaism at its best: even that, He says, is not good enough. If we look at Paul's words in Phil 3:4ff, we will get some idea of just how devastating Jesus' words are here. 'Touching the righteousness which is of the law, blameless' - it is possible to be as dedicated and earnest as that, and yet not be accepted of God or acceptable to Him. Not only is this not good enough, but in fact it is in utter conflict with, and opposition to, the true and right way. It is certainly no accident that this dedication of spirit went hand in hand, in Paul, with a violent and virulent hatred of the gospel. The fact is, Paul had to recognise, as he did at last on the Damascus Road, that he was by nature 'under the law', and in the realm of law, and that in that realm he could not be justified, no matter how earnestly he tried. Hence the force of our Lord's word 'exceeds'. It means 'go beyond', and Paul had to go outside the realm of law altogether, into a new, the realm of grace, where he no longer worked for, but received God's righteousness as a gift, and was 'found in Him'.

63) 5:21-26

Having asserted that He was not come to destroy but to fulfil the law, Jesus now proceeds to illustrate this by several references to the law itself, in 21-48. And first of all He turns to the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'. The AV reads in 21, '....it was said by them of old time...', but the Greek reads 'to them of old time'. This is a very important distinction. Christ is not contradicting the law, as the AV might seem to suggest, but a wrong interpretation of it given to men of old by teachers who did not understand its true meaning. Christ is in effect saying, throughout the chapter, 'This was the report of the law given you by your teachers in school and synagogue. I give you another and truer report. Not what you so learned, but what I say unto you is the true completion of the law and the prophets.' First of all, Christ exposes the fallacy of holding to the letter of the law without penetrating to its real spirit, and therefore real meaning. The import of the phrase 'in danger of the judgment' is that it refers to the local court's judgment (not final judgment here) - i.e. the Jews had made the keeping of the law purely a legal matter, which could be dealt with at law. The implication was that if a man could keep out of the reach of the law in this sense, he was acceptable to God. This is so much a snare today, when people tend to think that provided they do not infringe the laws of the land no more can be expected of them. But crime and sin are not identical terms; all crime is sin, but all sin is not crime, or punishable at law. When the Bible tells us that we are sinners, it is not thereby calling in question our status as law-abiding citizens. We may be entirely innocent in the eyes of the police and yet guilty in God's. It is not merely the overt act, but the inward passion or motive that Christ's all-seeing eye challenges. There are more ways than one of committing murder, Christ means: you can do it in your heart, or with a look, or with your tongue. And all alike are accountable before God.

64) 5:21-26

It is striking to note that the 'whosoever' in 22 changes abruptly to 'thou' in 23-25. It is no hypothetical situation that Christ is dealing with, but something utterly concrete and, alas, tragically common even in Christian life (for a similar change from principle to personal application, see 10, 11). Christ is speaking of those who are in the habit of bringing their gifts to the altar, i.e. practising believers. Here we are in the realm of the petty resentments, the bitternesses, the grudges, the jealousies which corrode the human breast and make life such a hell, for ourselves and for those around us. And how extensively we can deceive ourselves into thinking that it is always the other person, never ourselves, who is in the wrong. But Christ is quietly insistent here: it is our brother who has something against us, not vice versa, i.e. we are at fault, and we must come to terms with our fault, and put it right. 'Go thy way', says Jesus. 'Do not come to the altar with thy gift in that spirit; get right with God'. We see, then, that what Christ is advocating is that we should live in the spirit of the Beatitudes: only thus will we be prepared to humble ourselves sufficiently to want to put things right between our brother and ourselves. That is to say, we must allow the cross, with all its wounding and healing grace, to touch our lives and put to death every ugly expression of self within us. Anything less will surely lead to trouble (25, 26), and from the spiritual point of view that trouble may be lasting and disastrous.

65) 5:27-30

It is possible to see in these illustrations Jesus gives (21-48) a commentary on the Beatitudes themselves as well as examples of the 'righteousness that exceeds' that of the scribes and Pharisees. Thus, the 'poor in spirit', the 'meek', the 'peacemakers' are all exemplified in the attitude of the man who leaves his gift at the altar and 'gets right with' his offended brother. In the same way, the 'pure in heart' are mirrored in this word about adultery, those who 'hunger and thirst after righteousness' in 33-37, the 'merciful' in 38-42, and the 'reviled and persecuted' in 43-48. Here, Christ once again applies the same searching, penetrating standard as in the other commandments, reaching right to the heart and spirit of the word – 'I say unto you' - giving it its real interpretation as God meant it to be understood. It can hardly be controverted that this is a challenge that is desperately needed in society today. True, Christ is setting forth His standards for believers, for those who follow Him in discipleship, but this does not mean that there is a lesser or less rigorous standard for those who do not. The laws of God are binding on men as men, not merely as believers; they represent a standard for life, not merely for Christian life. Now Christ has already indicated that His disciples are to be lights in the world and the salt of the earth, and it is their duty to witness to this standard, thus both making evangelic impact (as 'light') and exercising a restraint on the corruptions of society (as 'salt'). There can be little doubt that purity of life both commends the gospel in that it displays the attractiveness of the Christian gospel and proclaims that it is not loss, but gain, to die to sin and to the tendency of impurity which is present in all men - true life lies not in the gratification, but in the transformation, flawless instincts - and at the same time exercises a restraining and therefore purifying influence by introducing a note of moral strength and vigour into society. This is the task of the disciple.

66) 5:31-32

The object of the Mosaic legislation was to control and restrict divorce. The literal interpretation of the law (Deut 24:1), 'Because he hath found some uncleanness in her', led to the practice of divorcing a wife for almost any cause whatever. Within the Rabbinic schools the conservative teaching was that divorce was permitted only on the grounds of unchastity, while the liberal teaching allowed it on comparatively trivial grounds. Now, the tendency was to drift into the 'divorce on almost any grounds' attitude, and this led to chaotic conditions. And, inevitably, the wife would be the one to suffer: cast off, with no redress, she could very easily have been branded as unfaithful or an adulteress and stoned to death as such, at the mercy of an ununderstanding world. And so, to protect her, a bill of divorcement had to be given. It was therefore a provision of mercy, a restraint on the heartlessness of men. But it is easy to see how this might be deliberately misinterpreted even while it was literally being fulfilled. A man could very easily think that provided he attended to the matter of giving the bill of divorcement he had fulfilled the law of Moses, whereas he would simply be using the letter of the law to get himself free from an irksome relationship. The law would then be perverted into meaning that provided the legal paper was duly provided, divorce was possible as a matter of course. It is this heartless casuistry that our Lord attacks in His command here. But more of this question in the next Note.

67) 5:31-32

The question of divorce and remarriage has always been a grave one and beset with problems. Let us briefly sketch the Church's teaching today. The Roman Catholic Church expressly forbids divorce, and holds that anyone remarrying after divorce is guilty of adultery. There are no ordinary exceptions to this rule. The words 'Whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder' are taken in their strictest and most inviolable sense. The Roman teaching is that a valid contract of marriage forms between a man and a woman; a 'vinculum' or bond which can no more be abrogated than the relationship between brother and sister, parent or child. Divorce is not so much wrong but impassible. Judicial separation is possible, but remarriage means adultery.

The Reformers, however, held that Christ's teaching permitted divorce, with the right of re-marriage, in the case of adultery. There are two things to be said in this connection. The first is that many scholars believe that the 'excepting' clause 'saving for the cause of fornication' (32), which does not appear in Mark's gospel, constitutes a later addition to Christ's original words, and that therefore His teaching is quite categorical and admits of no exception, not even adultery. The difficulty, however, is that if we cut a clause out of Matthew we are doing despite to the accepted canon of Scripture, and this raises real problems concerning the nature of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Other scholars believe other clauses elsewhere in Scripture to be spurious. Are we to cut them out too? And where would this end? This is a problem to us, and would seem to support the inclusion of the 'excepting clause', and indicate that adultery does in fact constitute in our Lord's eyes a ground for divorce. The second point must be left till the next Note.

68) 5:31-32

Our Lord's words are: 'What God hath joined together let not man put asunder'. (Matt 19:6) Now, if the bond that unites man and wife is like that between brother and sister, parent and child (i.e. belonging to the natural order of creation), it cannot be broken, and there would be no point in Jesus' words 'Let not man....' His words must therefore be construed as a warning, not as the expression of impossibility, for if it were that kind of bond no one could put them asunder, however hard he tried. Calvin maintained that the bond is not so much a fact of the natural order, but essentially a divine decree, 'a chain which God hath made'. If so, then it is something that God Himself can break, and He does so, when adultery takes place. But and this is the real point in our Lord's words - on either view (and there are arguments for and against each side), the marriage bond is regarded as a sacred and holy bond, and it is a most serious and terrible matter when the marriage relationship is damaged. There is absolutely nothing in our Lord's teaching - whether on the Catholic or the Reformed interpretation - to give any support to present day trends towards easier divorce laws. Restraint, not relaxation, is the keynote of His teaching, and our modern emphasis represents a total departure from it.

69) 5:33-37

These verses require some thought in order to make their meaning clear. The teaching referred to may be seen in such passages as Exodus 20:7, Deut 6:13, Lev 19:12. What we have here is the Pharisaic interpretation put upon it. There are several points to be clarified and distinguished. We look first, therefore, at the practice obtaining in our Lord's Day and the corruption and dishonesty in the thinking and practice of the Pharisees. Their error, as we have already seen, was a legalistic, outward interpretation of the law. The commandment said not to take the Lord's name in vain. They therefore avoided swearing by the Divine name, and used equivalents for it, swearing by the temple or the altar, by heaven or earth. Not only so: they also drew distinctions in their oaths, saying that some were binding, others not (cf Matt 23:16 ff). This obviously argues an attitude which assumed that provided the name of the Lord was not used, and a man did not actually commit perjury, the taking of an oath was quite harmless. It would seem that indiscriminate oath-taking was rife among the Jews in our Lord's day; even on the most trivial matters men would take oaths, holding that there was no harm in it provided the Lord's name was not used and no perjury was committed. Christ's concern here, then, is twofold: (i) to expose the casuistry and dishonesty of the Pharisees' way of thinking. To take an oath at all is to involve God and His name. Any of their specious formulae, by heaven, by the temple and so on, if they have any force at all, imply a reference to God. You do not avoid dishonouring Him by simply not mentioning His name; (ii) to show how very far from the real point of the Mosaic law this attitude has strayed and deviated, indeed, how they had arrived at almost the opposite of the law's original intention. But more of this in the next Note.

70) 5:33-37

The purpose of Moses' enactment was precisely to underline that oath-taking was a solemn and serious matter, and that indiscriminate use of it was to be curbed and stopped. It was to be used only in solemn and serious issues. In this respect, it is in line with the other Mosaic enactments already spoken of in previous Notes. As the divorce law was meant to be a restraint upon the evil passions of men, so here the law about oaths was meant to lay a bridle upon men's tendency to irreverence and superficiality in life, and remind them that all life was under the eye of God. But more: it was to curb in men the natural proneness of their hearts to be untruthful and dishonest, and this is the force of Christ's injunction to let our Yea be Yea and our Nay be Nay. The Pharisees could, by skilful jugglery get out of vows and promises that had proved inconvenient and an embarrassment to them, and this was the exact antithesis of the law's purpose, which was to restrain such an attitude. Hence the exhortation so to live that one's simple word would be recognised as one's bond, and utterly trustworthy, without oaths to bolster it up. What Christ is therefore advocating is a standard of absolute truthfulness and honour. It is something, after all, to be known as a man who will honour his word, even to his own hurt; it speaks of bedrock character and integrity. It is one of the ultimate reflections on human dignity that it should be said of any of us, 'You cannot believe a word he says'.

71) 5:38-42

The words 'an eye for an eye' seem so incompatible with our Lord's teaching on love, and to support the contention that the Old Testament ethic is a harsh, brutal and barbarous one with which we can have nothing to do and cannot possibly condone. If this is so, then a wedge is indeed driven between the Old and New Testaments, discrediting the Old in favour of the New. But this is too simple an answer to the problem presented here, and that for two reasons. In the first place, it is simply not true that the Old Testament is a brutal and barbarous book or that the picture of God it gives is of a harsh and bloodthirsty deity. The real picture it gives is of a God of unaccountable tenderness, loving-kindness and patience, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. In the second place, to hold this view would be to fly in the face of our Lord's own teaching in 5:17. He said, 'I am not come to destroy the law but to fulfil'. He did not see a contradiction or incompatibility in it, at all events. And to imagine that there is simply to fall into the error of the Pharisees in their misinterpretation of their own law. In fact, what we have here is, not a crude and merciless primitive ethic, or law of the jungle, but a merciful enactment, designed to set a curb on the natural propensities of the human heart, to control anger, violence and revenge, and to prevent an injured party from taking a hundred eyes and more for the one injured eye. Justice lies at the heart of this enactment: in the matter of retribution, justice must be the keynote - an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and no more than that! The punishment must fit the crime, not exceed it. To look at the enactment in this light is to put an entirely different construction upon the situation, and to see it in harmony with the eternal righteousness in the character of God.

72) 5:38-42

Not only was this ancient law a restriction upon vicious and vengeful attitudes: it was given to the judges and magistrates of Israel (Lev 24:20) to administer, not to private individuals. We are not meant to take the law into our own hands, and when we do we are justly punished ourselves, since we thereby make the law a pretext for the exercise of private revenge. It is clear, then, that the issue here is that of retaliation. The Pharisees had turned the Mosaic law into permission to retaliate, which it was never meant to be. And Jesus says, 'No, do not retaliate; resist not evil'. And this, He maintains, is the real fulfilment of the law, which (as we have said) had justice and mercy at its heart. There is therefore no incompatibility between the old and the new - both breathe the same spirit. The real incompatibility lies between the Pharisaic misinterpretation and the words and meaning of our Lord. But retaliation is one thing, justice is another, and we must not confuse the two. One form that confusion sometimes takes is to regard Jesus' teaching here as forbidding any resistance to evil in any shape or form, on any occasion, on any ground whatever, and that therefore it is wrong to have soldiers, police or magistrates. Is this what our Lord means? For these do resist evil, very decisively, and punish it too. The teaching of the Scriptures is decisive against such extreme interpretations of our Lord's words. In Romans 13, we are taught that 'the powers that be are ordained of God', and it is He Who instructs magistrates to resist and punish evil. If a burglar breaks into my house and makes off with my valuables, my proper course of action is surely to call the police. I have no kind of right to take the law into my own hands and beat him up; but I also have no kind of right, on the basis of this word, to allow him to get off scot free or withhold information from the police that might lead to his arrest. That would make me an accessory after the fact, and make me guilty of not upholding law and order which are ordained of God. If I remain silent, the burglar may break into another house, and this time commit violence and even murder in an attempt to make a getaway. And my failure to help the police, through a mistaken grasp of the meaning of Christ's words, would make me responsible in part for such a disaster. No, justice and retaliation must not be confused!

73) 5:38-42

Paul gives an excellent application of Christ's word in 1 Cor 6, where he deals with the question of going to law against one another as against allowing problems to be settled within the fellowship. Here it is not the question of law, order and justice that is at issue, but the petty squabbles that sometimes arise regrettably between believers, when each 'stands on his own rights'. And Paul asks, 'Why do ye not rather suffer wrong?' Three things emerge as practical considerations from this discussion: (i) God has as His ultimate aim the ridding of the world of sin through the gospel of redemption. But He has also ordained in the meanwhile that sin will not be rampant and unchecked, but lays a restraint upon it by the institution of law, setting thus a bound upon sin. This sanction is inviolable, and is the same in the old economy and in the new alike. (ii) As Christians we are, it is true, no longer under the law, but when as Christians our behaviour lapses to a sub- (or pre-) Christian standard, then the relevance of the law is very real for us, and its strictures hold good. And this 'eye for an eye' word has something very pointed to say to us. Is it unknown among Christian people that one should maintain an attitude of spite or malice long after a hurt has been sustained, long after any malice should have, on any reasonable grounds, spent itself and been forgotten, Is there not a place for saying to such an one: Look, you've had your eye for an eye, and much more. Are you going to demand repayment forever?' (iii) The illustrations Jesus gives of this - turning the other cheek, the cloak, the second mile - are all illustrations of one particular truth. They all teach that we must not be concerned about our own personal honour, our own rights, and ourselves. We must however distinguish between personal rights as such and principles of justice and righteousness (cf John 18:22, 23, where Christ did not turn the other cheek, but protested against the action of the officer). Christ was prepared to let anything happen to Himself as to insults, injuries and even death, but He did have a burning passion for justice and righteousness. But - and this is the challenge of the word - to be prepared like this for anything to happen to oneself, there must be a death to self, and thus brings us back to the Beatitudes again. This is what Christian living is all about.

74) 5:43-48

The words 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy' are nowhere to be found in the Old Testament, but it is fair to say that they represent the interpretation which the scribes and Pharisees placed on Old Testament teaching. One can see how the misinterpretation arose: it was due to the Jews' misunderstanding of their own election and its purpose in the economy of God. God chose Israel as His peculiar people and set aside all other nations, not because He did not care for the Gentiles, but because He did. For this was the only way ultimately to bless them and gather them, all nations, kindreds, peoples and tongues, into His everlasting kingdom. The prophets of old glimpsed this truth, that Israel was chosen that through her light might come to all - a light to lighten the Gentiles - but the Jews as a whole never grasped this, and thought that their election was meant to exclude the Gentiles from His favour. Hence their contempt for them, and hence their misinterpretation of the law. And Jesus corrects them very forcibly here. He is therefore not contradicting the Old Testament law and instituting a new one, but emphasising the real spirit of the law as given and intended by God.

75) 5:43-48

There is a second misunderstanding at work in these verses, however - that of the meaning of the word 'love'. Scarcely any word has been so devaluated today as this, and our misunderstanding of it is similar to that of the Pharisees then, as is seen in 46, 'If ye love them which love you'. This is purely natural attraction, a being well disposed towards certain people. But love in the Christian sense is not a feeling at all, but an attitude, and there is much confusion between the two. It is this which explains the perplexity many feel when confronted with the biblical command, 'Thou shalt love...' 'How can you love to order?', they ask. But this is to confuse loving with liking. Liking is a feeling, not an attitude. We like something or someone because they appeal to us. In this realm, the liking is called forth by something in the other, and the spontaneous feelings of well-being and complacent pleasure that arise in us are evoked by those who share our interests, tastes and likes. But this feeling of complacent well-being is not what the New Testament means by Christian love, which is an attitude, not a feeling, an attitude which we make up our minds to adopt (as the fact that it is commanded makes plain). It is the adoption of a certain attitude towards people, at the command of God, and independent of anything in the people themselves. We are to love them not because they are lovable or likable, but because He is love and requires us to be like Him. To love means to live at the command of God and in such a way that our treatment of others must never depend on what they are or on what they do to us, but solely on the fact that God commands us to love them. But to live thus clearly necessitates allowing the principle of the cross to slay the natural 'ego' in us; no-one in his natural state could possibly live like this, it goes too decisively against the grain. This is why the initial 'death' we die at conversion has to be repeated a hundred times every day, a continuing attitude of self-crucifixion, saying no to the natural resentments and feelings in our hearts and determining to live moment by moment by the word of God and its command to love.

76) 6:1-4

In this chapter our Lord continues His exposition of His earlier statement on 'the righteousness that exceeds'. In 5:21-48 He has dealt with scribal law; now He passes to Pharisaic practice. Having told us of what sort this true righteousness is, He now indicates in what manner it is to be performed. We should note first of all that the word 'alms' in 1 is a mistranslation, and should read 'righteousness'. The first verse of the chapter is introductory and comprehensive, embracing the whole section (1-18) and dealing with three notable expressions of the Pharisaic religion, almsgiving (2-4, here 'alms' is the correct translation), prayer (5-15) and fasting (16-18). These were recognised by the Pharisees - and practised - as the three main expressions of righteousness (they are exemplified in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Luke (18:9-14). Jesus now takes them up, one by one. We have already seen how He has contrasted outward and inward religion, in 5:21-48. Here, He goes even deeper, and penetrates to motives, not the fact that men do certain things, but why they do them. Now Jesus assumes, as a matter of course, that disciples of His will do righteousness. He says in 1 'your righteousness'. Already, however, in 5:16, He has said, 'Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works', and now He urges that our righteousness must not be done to be seen of men. Is this a contradiction? Hardly. It is motive that distinguishes the two. Our righteousness is to be something that can be noticed, but we are not to do it in order to be seen of men. The paradox has been summed up thus: 'Show your Christianity when tempted to hide it: hide it when tempted (for unworthy motives) to show it.'

77) 6:1-4

Jesus assumes also, as a matter of course that one element in His disciples' righteousness will be to do alms. It is not the fact of aims, but the motive, that He challenges. The true Christian life must have an outward reference. Love to God implies love to one's fellows. It is significant that this follows the challenge to love in 5:43-48. Almsgiving is to be a demonstration of the spirit of love, and this is the antithesis of doing them to be seen of men. The motive is to be love and nothing else. This emphasis is uniform throughout the New Testament (cf Acts 20:35, Rom 12:13, Gal 6:10, Eph 4:28, 1 Thess 4:8-12, 1 Tim 6:18, Heb 13:16) and its implications are that a rightly ordered life will always have something to give away to others. There will be no lack, but a sufficiency and to spare when our lives are rightly related to Christ, for then a certain simplicity develops and needs become less urgent and insistent so far as the legitimate things of the world are concerned, since now there is a deeper preoccupation with the things of the Spirit. We do not need so much. This can be borne out if we take the example of the opposite. The believer who is out of joint spiritually is gripped by a great spirit of discontentment, and is thereby driven to try to buy contentment. And how much money is spent on this, in pleasure, or entertainment, or on the home, so much indeed that there is nothing left, through much self-preoccupation, for giving away. But when such a life becomes well-ordered through grace, a true stewardship begins to operate, and so much is then released for service. It is this that explains why when the spiritual temperature of a fellowship rises, its financial resources increase.

78) 6:5-6

Prayer is the second expression of Pharisaic religion Jesus deals with, and again the question is one of motive. We are not to pray to be seen of men any more than we are to give alms to be seen of men. Our motive must be pure, hence the emphasis on secrecy (6). This must not, of course, be made an argument against corporate prayer, as some have tried to do. No distinction between private and corporate prayer is in Christ's thought here, and no such distinction is made in the New Testament as a whole. He is thinking entirely about personal prayer, and distinguishing between praying with wrong motives and praying with a pure motive. In the previous verses the point stressed is that the Pharisees considered it more important to be thought holy than to be holy, and the same principle applies here: it is possible, in the life of prayer, to have wrong motives and wish to be thought a prayerful believer rather than be one. This challenge against unreality that Christ makes is a very basic one in the Christian scheme of things. There are so many areas of life in which we may be tempted, almost unconsciously, to play-act, and perhaps none more so than in prayer, and only the most stringent and thorough discipline of the cross can maintain a bedrock reality in our lives. This, basically, is the message of the Lord's Prayer, which we come to in the next verses.

79) 6:7-10

The objection to 'vain repetitions' (which are just another manifestation of the unreality referred to in the previous Note) is that they shift the emphasis from the real heart of prayer to something else, and something else than a true relationship with God the Father is made ground and efficacy of prayer. If we are not heard for our much speaking, then for what are we heard? This is the important consideration here. To answer this question, we may note two things in particular in our Lord's teaching on prayer throughout the gospel: (i) the emphasis on prayer 'in His Name', and on the relationship between the Father and Himself, and (ii) the double strand in this teaching, now stressing simple asking, and now wrestling and agony. The force of this is that in the first place our Lord lays all the emphasis upon the moral and spiritual character of the man who prays. To pray 'in His Name' is to pray in line with Christ's revelation of Himself and of God and of what they seek to do in the world ('name' is a revelation of character), i.e. the redemptive purpose of God(cf 'When ye pray, say....Thy will be done' - His will being redemption). To pray therefore in His Name is to pray as one who is identified with Him in His purposes of redemption, who is sharing His sufferings for the world; it is to enter into the infinite yearnings of eternal love for the souls of men, to pray in fellowship with a suffering God. Such prayer has therefore to do not so much with the prayer as with the one who prays. This kind of prayer means a certain kind of attitude, and it is possible only for one who abides in Christ - this is where the 'relationship' idea comes in. And it is this that Jesus stresses in 6:6 ('Enter into thy closet' i.e. into fellowship with God) and lies likewise behind the warning in 7 against vain repetitions. We are not heard for our much speaking, but because we stand in a certain relationship to God.

80) 6:7-10

This brings us to the 'double strand' of teaching mentioned in yesterday's Note, the 'simple asking' and the 'wrestling'. In references such as John 14:13, 14; 15:7, 16; 16: 23, 24, prayer seems so simple and elementary. But in these instances, 'relationship' is paramount. But in passages like Luke 18:1 ff, Luke 11:5-10, the emphasis is so different, and answer to prayer is not given without wrestling and agony. The explanation of the paradox is that the one is involved in the other. It is a battle to get through to the place of simple asking. It costs to maintain a close fellowship in the sufferings of Christ. The fight of faith is often a fight for faith, to get through to the ground where we can claim the promises of God. Satan knows how deadly the prayer of faith is, so he seeks to harm the relationship between the believer and Christ, and for us it is a question of battling against the snares he puts in our way, dying a thousand deaths in the process. It is therefore a matter of praying until we pray, or praying in the one sense, with a view to praying in the other, overcoming the moral and spiritual hindrances in us to prayer, bringing oneself into the true attitude of submission to the divine word and will. And what a battle and an agony it often is to get to that place!

81) 6:9-10

What was said in the previous Note is exemplified in the Lord's Prayer. There are two main sections in it, the first dealing with Godward issues, the second with man-ward; first of all the purposes of God for the world, then human and temporal needs. It is, one might almost say, a variation, not to say an exposition, of the words, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you'. The whole of this first section of the prayer has to do with a right relation to God, in terms of what we have already stated. Even the introductory words, 'Our Father', imply this, for they speak not of a relationship which is natural to men in the sense that God is the Father of all, but of a special spiritual relationship into which we enter through repentance and faith, as we saw at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. All Christ's teaching presupposes having come to terms with the challenge of His gospel. And this is seen even more clearly in the three following clauses of the prayer. To hallow God's Name is to set Him on a solitary throne and give Him the pre-eminence in our lives. This is possible only in terms of a daily application of the cross to every level of life, to all in life that is unhallowed and contrary to His great Name. It is to die to sin and self daily. This is the first step in the life of prayer. To pray for His kingdom to come is to renounce the kingdoms of this world, and to align oneself with His redemptive purposes in the world. It is to let Him have His way in our lives. What revolutions this might mean, to give Him full, unrestricted sway in our hearts! It is a dangerous way to live, infinitely costly to the flesh, but this is the basis of real prayer. The third petition means two things: (i) submission to His will, and this always means the cross, for our will is not naturally His will; (ii) desire for His will. This petition is not a dirge, but a battle-cry! Not a question of accepting it shrinkingly and fearfully, but seeking it out gladly, exulting in it wholly.

82) 6:11-15

If the first three petitions of the Prayer emphasise what we have before called the 'wrestling' aspect of prayer, the next three exemplify the 'simple asking' evident in so much of our Lord's teaching elsewhere, and flow inevitably from the former. For one who hallows God's Name, is concerned wholly with His kingdom and is intent on His will being done, simple asking is the order of the day. He is on praying ground. But there is not only simplicity in asking, but also simplicity of asking. The three petitions here are, basically, simple needs, elemental and elementary. Is it reading too much into them to suggest that the discipline of the cross and the demands of discipleship qualify prayer and limit it, so far as one's personal needs are concerned? We are certainly made to see here what things are most important in life. There are two possible reasons for this: (i) Christian discipleship is warfare in the spiritual sense, and what we have here may be described as 'the iron rations of a Christian'. One has only to recall how many things during the last war we had to do without, and were content to do without, in the interests of the war effort and final victory, to realise what a relevant idea this is. In a war effort, and where a victory is to be won, you are glad to make sacrifices, and you have to make them (cf 2 Tim 2:3, 4; Heb 12:1, 2); (ii) simplicity comes to one under the discipline of the cross because he has access to the bread that satisfies and by his very calling to a heavenly citizenship is weaned from the things that the world holds most dear, and they hang lightly upon him. He does not need to ask for them, for he is in the deepest sense indifferent to them. Paul, in prison in Rome, could say, "I have learned to be content" (Phil 4:11). For him, life did not consist of either having or not having. He was drinking at a deeper source.

83) 6:11-15

The three petitions cover the whole of life, past, present and future. The bread is for the present, and refers to daily, material substance. Bread is the staff of life. God is not unmindful of our earthly needs. He provides. But - this is the point - material things get their proper place in a rightly ordered life. One great lesson we can learn from this is that we must learn to trust God to add what He sees we need, and get rid of the stress and strain involved in striving after temporal blessings He has been pleased thus far to withhold from us. We must remember that happiness does not lie in obtaining our heart's desire, but in submission to the Father's will for our lives. Ask simply, therefore, and having food and raiment be content. Forgiveness is for the past, and the present can never know contentment and peace until the past is done away and forgiven. There is a once-for-all forgiveness, which relates to our standing with God, and is received at conversion, and there is daily forgiveness, and it seems that it is the latter rather than the former that Jesus is referring to here. Although it seems that Jesus is teaching that our forgiving spirit is the condition of our receiving forgiveness, this cannot be interpreted as referring to basic forgiveness, for that depends on nothing in us, but on mercy alone. But it does indicate how we receive God's forgiveness: our forgiving spirit shows the true repentance of sin which alone proves we have been the recipients of grace. We have to die to sin before we can live unto God, and this 'dying' is represented here as the laying aside of all resentments against our debtors. We leave the third petition, about temptation, until the next Note.

84) 6:11-15

The word about temptation speaks of victory for the future. The prayer is for God's keeping power, that we may be kept where we have got to, the place of the cross. Calvin paraphrases this rather difficult passage thus: 'That we may not be led into temptation, deliver us from evil'. 'Give us the necessary strength so that life's trials do not become for us occasions of spiritual temptation'. The meaning is: 'We are conscious of our own weakness and desire to enjoy the protection of God, that we may remain impregnable against all the assaults of Satan....We have no strength for living a holy life except so far as we obtain it from God. Whosoever implores the assistance of God to overcome temptations acknowledges that, unless God deliver him, he will be constantly falling'. But this does not wholly clear up the mystery in this petition. Are we to suppose that God tempts man (of James 1:13)? If it is an evil thing, do we need to pray God not to lead us into it? We must own to a certain ambiguity in the matter. It was Satan who tempted Job, but God allowed it. The word used here includes the ideas of testing, trial and tribulation as well as temptations to sin, and these can be good or evil dependent on our reaction to them. Was Christ thinking of the agony of the wilderness temptation when He spoke these words? He was led of the Spirit to be tempted of the devil. Or does He have the idea of the tribulation of the latter days in mind? We may recall in this connection Luke 21: 36, 'Pray that ye may be counted worthy to escape all these things'. Finally, there is the Psalmist's prayer, 'Keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins' (Ps 19:13). Whatever the meaning, however, those conscious of their weakness cannot but pray and cry thus!

85) 6:16-18

Fasting is the third expression of Pharisaic religion with which Jesus deals. The 'history' of fasting in Old Testament times is interesting: men fasted in time of national emergency or disaster (2 Chron 20:3, Joel 1:14, Judges 20:26, Esther 4:13-16), as a mark of penitence, personal or national (Joel 2:12-17, Jonah 3:5, 1 Sam 7:6, 1 Kings 21:27), when waiting upon God (Ezra 8:21, Jer 36: 9), and vicariously for others or for the nation (Neh 1: 14, Dan 9:3). In the Old Testament it was meant to be the outward expression of an inward attitude of heart and affliction of soul. But it is possible to lose sight of this and divorce outward expression from inward attitude. When this happens, not only is fasting useless, it is hypocrisy, and it is this that Jesus warns His disciples against here. For it is a danger not confined either to Old Testament times or to those of our Lord, but ever-present (cf Zech 7:5, Isa 58:3, Jer 14:12). From the reference in Jeremiah we see that fasting is analogous to prayer; it is a kind of prayer, and as with prayer, so here, if we regard iniquity in our hearts, the Lord will not hear. We gather then that fasting is meant to be the expression of a heart-attitude, and also a help towards that right heart-attitude of repentance (of Ps 35:13, 69:10). In the New Testament the latter is perhaps the more prominent. More of this in the next note.

86) 6:16-18

In 1 Cor 9:24-27 'I keep under my body....' Paul expresses the true purpose of fasting and the true motive. We are to mortify the deeds of the body by the Spirit. And this is not optional for the believer. It is something that is to be applied to all fleshly appetites, not merely food. And here we see the basic connection with what we have already said about prayer, and the necessity of living near the cross and having a right relationship to the will of God. Indeed the lesson here is exactly the same as that in the Lord's Prayer. It is the character of the man who prays that determines the worth and vitality and prevailing of the prayer. And fasting indicates the principle by which that character is come by, in that it shows us the pattern of dying in order to live, dying to self, to everything that might hinder in the Christian life. Eating is not wrong, it is true, nor is the enjoyment of eating; but the Scriptures warn against those whose god is their belly. He who would win the race must discipline his appetite, and this applies to body and soul alike. Indeed, the principle of fasting must be made to extend to the whole range of our lives. The only way to know whether we are free from the tyranny of 'things' is to see if we can comfortably do without them, i.e. fast from them for a time. And since none of us can ever reach a point at which we are no longer liable to be ensnared again by them, the principle of fasting must continue all the time over the range of life, not excepting the legitimate pleasures and joys and graces of life. We can hardly doubt that this is a relevant word for God's people in this pleasure-loving age - there are too many hindrances to the power of God sweeping through the life of the Church for it to be otherwise, legitimate interests and concerns, worthy and even spiritual, are cluttering up the channels. This is where the spirit of fasting comes in. Things will have to be done without, time will have to be sacrificed, to give time for prayer of the kind that moves the hand of God.

87) 6:19-24

Following upon the three expressions of righteousness dealt with by our Lord - almsgiving, prayer and fasting, we now come to the first of our prohibitions in His teaching, 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth' (the other three being 6:25, 7:1, 7:6). We might call them the principles and laws of heaven for life on earth. This one and the next (in 25 ff) deal with the believer's attitude to earthly things: towards superabundance and treasure we are to be without covetousness (19-24), towards the necessities of life, without anxiety (25-34). And the reason in both cases is the reality and pressure of eternity upon life. What Jesus emphasises here is in fact echoed again and again throughout the scriptures. It is a plea to let the solemn light of eternity to be brought to bear upon all we are and all we do in Christian life. He indicates that there are two alternatives in Christian life, and two levels of Christian experience; there are those who mind earthly things, and there are those who set their affections on the things that are above. Abraham and Lot are the classic examples of these two levels. We have to make up our minds which of the two we are going to be like -to live for time, treasure on earth, wealth, possessions, ambition, career, position, or to live for eternity, so to live with eyes fixed on the city that hath foundations that to die will be gain for us. Here, as elsewhere, Jesus is radical and extreme in His teaching. He presents these two possibilities as either/or. They are mutually exclusive. There can be no judicious blending of the two. This is the force of the words in 21: whichever has our secret love will claim our hearts. Our treasure is our master.

88) 6:19-24

The word about the single eye is also for those who secretly think in their hearts that it is possible to have two loyalties. No, says Jesus, it cannot be. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. Notice, it is not that He says, 'It will not be good for the spiritual life'. What He means is that it is impossibility. Those who do not believe this and think they are succeeding in balancing the two judiciously, are in fact deceiving themselves. Unknown to themselves, they are already giving one their loyalty rather than the other. The single eye is the sound eye that sees things in their proper proportion and in their relative value and importance. Happy is the man who sees that eternal things are the really important ones, and that in the light of eternity it matters little whether he is rich in this life or not. The evil eye is the eye that is out of order, that cannot see how much more important it is to be heavenly minded than to be rich in this world's goods. If we are dark here, our darkness is great indeed! Jesus rounds off the discussion by underlining once more the starkness of the alternatives facing us: no man can serve two masters, and these two are mutually exclusive, nor is the antithesis between God and mammon, but between God and the self that lies behind mammon. That self must be crucified, otherwise it will lord it over us and challenge the rightful throne of God in our lives.

89) 6:25-30

The 'therefore' with which this second prohibition is introduced links it with what has just been said by our Lord. He has been speaking about the single eye, which we saw to refer to seeing life in proper perspective and recognising its true priorities. This is important: what Christ is saying is that there is something more to life than eating and drinking and clothing: there is a deeper dimension. Man's chief end is not food and raiment but to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. These other things, therefore, must be seen in perspective and must not be worried about overmuch. It is a question of balance, of course. The true Christian life is not an impractical one, and Jesus does not advocate an improvident attitude to life. 'Thought' in 25 means 'anxious thought', and what Christ forbids is not a natural concern for food and raiment, but a preoccupation with these things to the exclusion of the higher realities. We shall be able to test this in ourselves by considering how much, even within the context of the life of prayer, our prayers are concerned with and confined to our earthly needs rather than spiritual needs, our own and others'. Do we, like the Prodigal Son, pray 'Give me' more often than we pray 'Make me'? Nor must this be thought to be too idealistic a way to live, too far removed from ordinary life. The reason why this is sometimes thought is that prayer is too often used as a 'give me' device, as if God were a celestial penny-in-the-slot machine. But God is not prepared to be used thus. He says, 'You are beginning the wrong way round, and putting the cart before the horse'. He points to the Lord's Prayer and says, 'Look at the order there: "Thy kingdom come" comes before "Give us this day our daily bread". Get that order right in your life, then you will see that it works'.

90) 6:25-30

The point Jesus makes about the fowls of the air is not that they are cared for without toiling, therefore we will be cared for without toiling, but that if they, mindless creatures, are cared for without toil, much more shall we, as intelligent beings, who can work diligently and who have been given the ability to do so, and the means whereby we can make an honourable living. It was God Himself Who instituted work as a means of grace (Gen 3:19), and the implication is that honest toil will be blessed by God to us without our being worried or anxious about it. We rightly incur the gentle rebuke in 30, 'O ye of little faith' if we become thus preoccupied. For consider the relative importance of God's attention to the flowers of the field and to creatures made in His own image: He clothes the grass of the field with ephemeral, passing beauty; the wind blows and it is gone. But He has destined us to share His eternal glory, and His purpose is to clothe us with glory and majesty that will never fade away, a glory and majesty in which we will delight to dwell throughout all eternity. Is it conceivable then, that He Who shows such painstaking care with the passing flowers, will have less concern for all that pertains to the well-being of those on whom He wills to bestow everlasting splendour? What have we, of all His creatures, to worry about?

91) 6:31-34

This second 'Take no thought' has a different connotation from the first in 25. The first is the enunciation of a general principle, and this is in the present tense, but the second, here, is in the aorist tense, which indicates a specific challenge, as if He were confronting someone with a fretting and anxious spirit with the words, 'My child, you must stop this, now'. This is the same kind of 'personalising' of the teaching as we have already seen in 5:10,11, and it bears all the thrust of the Holy Spirit's challenge as we read it. This is not an intellectual, theoretical discussion we are engaged in: Christ's words are directed to us, it is we who must pay heed. And one compelling reason for this is given in the parenthesis in 32 - to be anxious about food and raiment is how the world lives, and we as children of the kingdom of God are called to be different from the world; we have a heavenly Father Who knows our needs and is never slow to supply them. We can trust His care. Christ rounds off the discussion with a final statement of the theme that has been running through His teaching from the beginning: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God...' This is the secret of true living: when the things of God have paramount and primary place in our hearts, He will see that we lack nothing needful. As the Psalmist says, 'No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly'. Tomorrow is God's concern, not ours; and when we really leave it in His hands, we shall be able to live today in all fulness, carefreeness and peace.

92) 7:1-5

We come to the third of four prohibitions in our Lord's teaching (cf 6:19, 6:25 and 7:6 for the other three). It will be useful at this point to look at the general context so as to see the pattern of the teaching. The whole section from 6:19 to 7:12 is one, and belongs to the subject unfolded in 6:1-18, the threefold expression of righteousness - alms, prayer, fasting - with the man-ward, Godward and selfward references respectively. The first two prohibitions (6:19 and 6:25) – covetousness and anxiety - have reference to one's attitude to oneself, and correspond to fasting. The two prohibitions at the beginning of this chapter (7:1 and 7:6) have reference to our attitude to others, and correspond to almsgiving. And the challenge with which the section closes - 'Ask, seek, knock' (7) - is surely Godward in its reference, and corresponds to the teaching on prayer in 6:5-15. It is to our attitude to others, then, that Jesus now turns here (1-6), and He indicates in 7ff that a right attitude to others will depend on our maintaining a proper relationship with God. This last is fundamental - no kind of advance or development in Christian life is possible except in terms of our relationship with God.

93) 7:1-5

Jesus' words about judging have of course often been misconstrued and misapplied, and taken to mean that we are not to pass any kind of unfavourable judgment or verdict upon anybody. Calvin comments on this misunderstanding: "This passage is altogether misapplied by those persons who would desire to make that moderation, which Christ recommends, a pretence for setting aside all distinction between good and evil. We are not only permitted, we are even bound, to condemn all sins: unless we choose to rebel against God Himself - nay, to repeal His laws, to reverse His decisions, and to overturn His judgment seat". If this were a prohibition of the passing of any unfavourable judgments, then Christ Himself would come under the censure of His own words, as witness His stern and scathing judgments on the scribes and Pharisees in Matt 23:13-29. Not only so: in the fourth prohibition in 6, He warns against giving what is holy to dogs and casting pearls before swine, and this involves judging who are dogs and who are swine! No; it is not the exercise of the critical faculty by which we distinguish between good and evil that Jesus prohibits, but the habit of censoriousness and carping criticism which can be so damaging and hurtful in human relationships. Consider the following references - 1 Cor 2:15, John 7:24, 1 Cor 4:5, 1 Cor 11:31, 1 Cor 5:3, 12, 13, Rom 14:4, 10, 14, Heb 5:14 - to see how the two different senses of the word are to be taken.

94) 7:1-5

How are we to explain this critical spirit? Well, according to Jesus, those who have it suffer from distorted vision (3). Preoccupation with the faults of others is a sign of a spiritual disease far worse than those faults themselves. When someone criticises our friends to us, we may learn little new about our friends, but much about the critic! What are the reasons for such an attitude? There may be more than one. A self-righteous spirit may be at the root of it, a spirit which has never recognized its own sin. This is manifest in the attitude of the Pharisees who brought to Jesus the woman taken in adultery, and explains His words, 'Let him that is without sin cast the first stone at her'. In this sense, any point of criticism, however justified, is as a mote, compared to the beam of self-righteousness that refuses to recognise its own sin and need in the sight of God. But insecurity and unsureness about oneself can also be a cause of this kind of censoriousness of spirit. For example, there does seem to have come a time for Saul of Tarsus when he began to be terribly afraid that these gospel preachers in Jerusalem were right and he was wrong. They undermined his hitherto sublime confidence in himself and called in question all the positions he cherished. And whenever this happens, a kind of defence mechanism begins to operate, which seeks to bolster the sagging security of spirit. You have to be critical and censorious in order to blind yourself to the true challenge of the gospel and ward off the feeling of uncertainty and panic that threatens to envelop your heart. Doubtless there was much to criticise in the life of the early Church, their attitudes, enthusiasms, exuberances, but what were these compared with the fundamental wrongness of heart which they served to expose in those who resisted - and today still resist - the gospel message?

95) 7:6

As has already been pointed out, the words 'Give not....cast not ' presuppose a critical faculty, and the duty is laid upon us of judging who are dogs and swine and who are not. Discernment is needed. Here, the words apply, it would seem, particularly to the offering of the gospel to men, and thus does Calvin take them. It does not mean that we are to withhold the gospel from any simply because they are sinful - for the gospel is for sinners - but we are not to profane it by repeatedly offering it to those who by their attitude of contempt and hardening of heart show themselves to be 'incurable', as Calvin puts it. In this connection we should recall Peter's words in 2 Pet 2:22, 'The dog is returned to his own vomit, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire'. Calvin adds, 'The remedy of salvation must be refused to none, till they have rejected it so basely when offered to them as to make it evident that they are reprobate, and self-condemned, as Paul says of heretics (Titus 3:11)'. Remember Christ and King Herod. From being moved by the challenge of the gospel in the preaching of John the Baptist and in the ministry of Jesus, Herod moved to a position of such continued resistance and hardening against the grace of God that the time came when even Jesus had no more to say to him (Luke 23:9). He had passed the point of no return. There is a profound lesson in all this for us: we must beware of peddling 'cheap grace', without discrimination. It was not Jesus' way, and it must not become ours, through a mistaken, sentimental attitude towards holy things.

96) 7:7-12

The first and immediate reference of 'Ask, seek, knock' is to what has been said in the previous verses. To the question, 'How are we to know how to exercise discernment in such a way as not to fall into the very error of harsh, censorious judgment which Jesus has already condemned and forbidden?' the answer is now given here. We must ask for wisdom and discernment. We must fall back on God. He alone can keep us right. We shall be able to fulfil our Lord's teaching only if we stand in a proper relationship with Him. But the words have also, obviously, a wider and more general application to prayer as a whole. And we could hardly find any that are more beautiful or more comforting. For they tell us that prayer is answered, that there is a communication between heaven and earth, that the needs and desires, the distresses and agonies of men are a matter of concern in heaven and to God, and are not mocked by a meaningless universe. But - these words are not unconditionally and universally true. God is not an automatic penny-in-the slot machine answering prayers to order, and our Lord's words were never meant to be so regarded. And this is what serves to explain what many people have often felt about them - that 'they are beautiful, but they do not always, or often, work'. Why is it that so often, when men pray, they do not receive an answer? There are several things to be said about this, and we will deal with them in the following Notes.

97) 7:7-12

We must remember that these words about prayer - as also the rest of the Sermon on the Mount – pre-supposes a proper relationship to God. Jesus speaks (9-11) of children asking of their father; but this is not in fact a relationship that exists between all men and God, but a special one men enter into through the gospel and by which they are saved. But a man who has not come to terms with the gospel is one whose life is not right in the sight of God, and therefore excludes himself from the promise of these words. 'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me', says the Psalmist (Ps 66:18), whose words of course apply just as much to believers as to unbelievers. The believer who gets 'out of joint' with God will speedily find his prayer-life become barren. But it is also possible to ask without asking in prayer, that is, to ask without our hearts really being in it. Is this the force of the threefold intensification, 'Ask, seek, knock'? There is the famous prayer of Augustine, 'Make me holy, O God' - but, as he confessed later, he was, even as he prayed, making a mental reservation, adding, '....but not just yet'. This is the point. We have reservations. Our wills are not really in what we pray for. Should we be surprised then, that God does not answer? He sees the unreality in our hearts, and He cannot answer such prayers. This is a consideration of wide application in the spiritual life. Even in the context of the bitter cry 'O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' it still needs to be asked, 'Do we really want to be delivered? We want it, but do we want it enough? Is our will in it? That is the crucial question.

98) 7:7-12

Another point arises here with regard to seemingly unanswered prayer, and another insight into the threefold intensification, 'Ask, seek, knock'. It is this: Sometimes the prayer is not answered at the first, but answered later, at the seeking or knocking stage. In this connection, it is important to realise that never do we have to overcome unwillingness in our Father's heart. He is waiting to be gracious to us, and there can be no unwillingness with Him - 'No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly' (Ps 84:11). The importunity is not to overcome something in Him, but something in us: to overcome our own unreality or insincerity in prayer; and to overcome the defects in our faith, to purify and cleanse it, strengthen it and draw it out to be the thing God means it to be. This is the lesson taught us in the story of the Syro-Phenician woman (Matt 15:21-28). In other words we ourselves are answered before our prayer is, by being brought to a new place of faith and confidence. How much we can learn from this! When God calls us to prayer, He has His own gracious purposes for us, far beyond the answering of our immediate petitions. He has purposes in us. Thus the word in 11, 'If ye then being evil....' This is the assurance that, other things being in order, prayer will be answered. If the relationship is right, God will answer our requests. The right relationship will qualify our requests, it is true, nevertheless, no good thing will He withhold. Matthew says here 'good gifts' (11), Luke says 'the Holy Spirit' (Luke 11:13). There is a link. For here, the theme has been 'a right attitude to our fellows' and God gives this, by giving us the Holy Spirit Who enables us to maintain that right attitude, not only with regard to discernment and freedom from censoriousness but in everything - so 12, 'All things whatsoever ye would....' This is possible only when God enables us by His Spirit.

99) 7:13-14

The remainder of the chapter forms the conclusion to the Sermon, and sums up all that has gone before. The passage divides into two parts, 13-23 and 14-29. In the first of these, Christ lays upon His hearers a threefold responsibility - responsibility as to the beginning of the life of discipleship (13, 14), as to its continuance and progress (15-20), and as to its ultimate issues (21-23) - and in the second He lays before them the stark alternative issues that His gospel presents to all men. We look first of all at 13 and 14, which speak of the strait gate and the narrow way. There is a sense in which these words have reference to the whole of Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes which we have already seen to refer to the experience by which we are born into the kingdom of God, show us therefore the strait gate, and the rest of the teaching, unfolding the principles operating in the kingdom of God, show us the narrow way. The strait gate, we may say, is justification, and the narrow way is sanctification. Jesus' words here are very direct and very solemn. And the simple lessons that stand out must not be missed: the first is that His teaching calls for a verdict. It is no academic exercise: Christ never meant anyone to listen to His word and merely be interested or impressed by it, and nothing more. Men have to make up their minds. The solemnity lies in the fact that eternal issues are involved in the choice that is made, and that many, rather than few, make the tragic wrong choice and take the road that leads to destruction. But let us concentrate on the great positive note here: The narrow way, though one of discipline and cost, leads to life. This is the supremely important consideration. Beyond the cross there is resurrection; there is the joy set before us - not merely the prize at the end, but the experience of liberty and abundant life now. This is the heritage of those who cast in their lot with the people of God.

100) 7:15-20

The danger of false prophets is always a real one in the life of the Church and of the disciple. What Christ means here is that it is possible for us to be deceived, taken in, by teaching about the Christian way which claims to be true and seems to be true, and yet is in fact false. God, and the miracle was done.

101) 8:1-4

We must notice also, however, that there was an 'if' in the leper's approach to the Saviour. 'If Thou wilt, Thou canst cleanse me'. There was no doubt in his mind as to Christ's power to do so: that was clear to him from the authority with which He had spoken. But there was a doubt as to His willingness. 'It does not follow', he thought, 'that although He is able, He will also be willing to help me'. Why is this? We can hardly say that though the power of Christ shone through His preaching His compassion failed to do so to the same extent, for that would be to impugn our Lord's grace and perfection -besides, who could fail to catch the note of compassion in 7:25ff? No; it was rather the grey, dreary sense of hopelessness that accompanied the fact of his isolation as a leper, with the ostracism and loneliness and desolation that this involved for him, that bred such a dark doubt within his heart. Could Christ want to have anything to do with such as he? This is what kindled Christ's compassion (as Mark tells us, 1:41), and made Him assure the man immediately that He would cleanse him. And this was the force of the touch of His hand (3). It was not the touch that cleansed the leper: it was His word that cleansed him. The touch was not needed for the cleansing: what it did was to assure the man of the care and love of God. It was God saying, "Yes, I do have a care for such as you". The man had been an outsider for years; he had almost forgotten what the touch of a hand felt like. And the touch was Christ's discernment of the comfort he needed and the assurance that the long loneliness was over. It was his reinstatement into humanity, his welcome back into human fellowship, a touch that told the poor outcast that he mattered to God. This, then, is what the gospel is, and does!

102) 8:5-7

There is a wonderful simplicity about this next story in Matthew's selection, but there is a sense in which that simplicity is deceptive, for in fact it is a great and profound statement about some of the ultimate things of the Christian faith. People sometimes say they will have nothing to do with doctrine or theology because it obscures and makes difficult what is essentially simple. What is needed, they say, is a simple, straightforward expression of faith, such as we have here. But, simple as it sounds, there is a whole theology involved in this story, which reveals both the nature of true, saving faith, and also of our Lord's saving work. Theology and doctrine are inevitably involved in a true understanding of the gospel and of faith, and right interpretation - which is just another name for theology - is essential. To speak of a simple, non-theological approach is simply to put a wrong interpretation upon it and will consequently lead men astray. Everything here, and in Christian life in general, centres on the centurion's estimate of Christ. The central question in the Scriptures is: "What think ye of Christ?" or "Whom do ye say that I am?" And two things are clear, so far as the centurion was concerned: he perceived that Christ was One whose word was with power ('Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed'), and he also perceived that Christ was, like himself, a man under authority, and that this is what gave Him His power. We shall look at these two statements in more detail in the next Note.

103) 8:8-10

The centurion's faith in Christ's word is very impressive (8, like that of the nobleman in John 4:46ff, who 'believed the word that Christ spoke to him'). There is one great lesson we have to learn from this. Saving faith is believing the testimony God has given us concerning His Son in the Scriptures, and believing on Him, trusting in Him, because we believe what the Scriptures say concerning Him. But more. The centurion believed Christ's word was with power because he was a man, like himself, under authority. Here is the central, and deepest part of the story, and the operative words are also. With the eye of faith he saw that Christ was in precisely the same position as himself. In effect, he is saying, greatly daring: "You and I are both alike in this: I am under authority, and you are under authority, and therefore the same principles must operate for both of us. As I can command, and it shall be done, so can you command, and it shall be done". The centurion was under the authority of the Roman commander, and it was because he had been an obedient soldier that eventually authority had been committed to him. And just as he had obeyed unquestioningly the orders he had received from above, so now he could expect his orders to be obeyed. He could say 'come' or 'go' with authority. And knowing how it was with himself, he felt he knew how it was with Jesus. This is what so impressed Jesus about him. Why this so impressed Jesus we must discuss in the next Note.

104) 8:8-10

What in fact the centurion did was to penetrate the depths of the mystery of the Incarnation, and discern the true meaning of Christ's coming to the world. Christ was a man under authority, and had been utterly obedient to His 'orders' from above, obedient unto death, and for this reason authority was vested in Him whereby He could say to disease, 'Begone' and it would obey Him. Indeed, all the signs and wonders of His earthly ministry were wrought on the strength and basis of His obedience unto death, which He fulfilled throughout in principle before fulfilling in fact. This was the secret of Christ's authority, and the man saw how and why it was, saw His secret, and made the correct deduction therefrom. This obedience of Christ is the heart of the atonement. "By the obedience of one many are made righteous". Christ was willing to submit to Divine authority, totally, even if it meant a cross, in order that the world might be healed and saved. And because of this He was given a Name above every name (Phil 2:9, 10) and authority over all powers, earthly or heavenly. "All power is given unto Me," He said, after His resurrection. To have recognized this, and banked upon it, was the all-important factor for the centurion: Christ could do no other than heal his servant. Mountains would have obeyed such a faith that day, and been removed!

105) 8:11-13

It is one of the mysteries of the Divine economy that Israel, to whom was given the revelation of grace and the covenants and the promises (cf Rom 9:4, 5) should have been so blind to the meaning of that grace and so lacking in faith to respond to it. It is clear, of course, from Jesus' words in 11, that not all in Israel were blinded - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the heroes of old time mentioned in Hebrews 11, all walked by faith, and showed the kind of faith that so delighted Christ in the centurion here. There was a living church down all the line of promise in the Old Testament, and in our Lord's day also; but in the main, it is sadly true that the Jews never understood their own history grace-wise, and never grasped - and of course have not even yet grasped - the true meaning of their calling or their religion. And the gospel writers were at pains to emphasise that when His own covenant people failed and refused to rise to their calling, God could, would and did raise up a people for Himself from the despised Gentiles. Nor is it different today in His work in the Church. When those 'inside' are slow to respond to His gospel word, and react in opposition against it, comfortable in their entrenched misunderstanding of that gospel, God brings 'outsiders' in to supplant them and shame them into some awareness of how wrong and how far astray they have been. The 'children of the kingdom' have often mortgaged their interest in everlasting life by their intransigent and stubborn refusal to face the truth as it is in Jesus.

106) 8:14-15

The next miracle recorded by Matthew is one that took place in a private home. It is mentioned almost in passing, so to speak, as if it were a mere incident in a larger programme, worthy of mention, it is true, but not to be dwelt upon in any disproportionate way. There is a significant truth in this: the New Testament Church did not, as a matter of fact, allow itself to become excessively preoccupied with miracles of healing, because for them they were simply the outward (and almost incidental) expression of a far greater and more miraculous reality -the breaking in from beyond of Divine power in salvation and new creation. Why should they become over-excited about one particular manifestation of this glorious visitation when so many other aspects of it were everywhere abounding? Is physical healing more important, significant or glorious than radical moral transformation? The spiritual realism of the New Testament is, to say the least, remarkable. One could wish that it were emulated in our own sensation-loving day. The whole question of miraculous healing is a controversial one, and this is a good point in our studies to say something about it and this we will do in the following Notes.

107) 8:14-15

Healing is one of the endowments listed in the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:28), and it is clear from Acts that the disciples did in fact perform miracles of healing in the early Church. But the Scriptures are not nearly so prodigal in their record of the miraculous as we might at first suppose, for miracles are in the main confined to four periods of biblical testimony - Exodus, the decline of the divided kingdom, the Exile, and the beginning of the gospel era - and for this reason, that these were special times that required the special seal of God. Miraculous healing today is not an easy subject to discuss, and some things need to be said to clear away the difficulties all round it before we can properly pronounce upon it. Let us begin with the extreme views. On the one hand, there are those who, like Calvin, believe that the gift of healing applied only in the early Church and that it is now withdrawn; on the other hand, there are those who maintain that the gift is still present in the Church. As to the first, while the general absence of healing activity in miraculous form might lead us to agree with Calvin that the gift has been withdrawn, nevertheless the Scriptures nowhere suggest that it would be. This kind of argument is therefore scarcely satisfactory. On the other hand, if it is not withdrawn, what are we to say of its absence in the life of the Church today? Some say that lack of exercise of the gift has led to atrophy of it, and that it would still be valid today, only we have not enough faith for it. But this also raises real questions. For, in fact, the mainstream of spiritual awakening and renewal in the life of the Church has rarely been characterised by healing miracles; and surely these were times when faith waxed strong and mighty in the Church's life? Does it require more faith for a miracle that prolongs life for at most a few more years than for a miracle that lasts as long as eternity, the salvation of the soul? Such considerations underline the fact that the subject is by no means a simple one.

108) 8:14-15

There are also some misleading and dangerous misconceptions to beware of. There is, for example, the fanaticism of refusing medical help, in the conviction that 'sending for a doctor' is an evidence of lack of faith in God. But this is to forget that modern medical skill is one of God's gifts to mankind, and that it is in the great majority of cases His chosen means of mediating healing and restoration to human bodies. It is a sign not of spirituality but of muddled thinking to despise the medical profession, and the doctrine of Divine Providence is sufficient to correct this. It was, after all, Jesus who said, 'They that are sick need a physician'. There is also the danger of assuming that it must necessarily always be God's will for sickness to be healed. But this is manifestly not true, as we may see from the testimony of the Scriptures themselves. What of Paul's thorn in the flesh? What of Trophimus' sickness in 2 Tim 4:20, which was not healed, and of Timothy's ailing stomach (1 Tim 5:23)? To challenge a man's consecration to Christ (as is sometimes done) because he cannot claim healing from God is arrogant presumption, verging on blasphemy. It is also nonsense, for it assumes a logical position in which we would have to ask God to remove all unpleasantness from our lives. Which He is not prepared to do: it is not always His will to heal, as it is to save; He does not always remove sickness: He converts it, and presses it into His service. And this is often a greater miracle than healing itself would be.

109) 8:16-17

Matthew says all these miracles were done that the prophecy of the Old Testament might be fulfilled. Significantly, the prophecy he quotes is Isa 53:4, which we ordinarily take as referring to Christ's atoning work, and to spiritual sickness and disease. And it is impressive to see how Matthew regards both as belonging to one another. We may learn from this that our Lord's power to heal the physical ailments of men derived from His atoning work, and that He could do so only because He really took them upon Himself in order to take them away - i.e. He entered into them, identifying Himself with them, assuming them as His own. In some real sense which we cannot fully understand, Christ endured the loads that He took away. It is this that lies within the oft-repeated statement 'He was moved with compassion....' This, ultimately, means the cross. He was able to cast out the spirits with His word, because, in reality, He was the word made sin for our sakes.

110) 8:18-22

It is significant that these words about discipleship follow immediately on what has just been said, for there is a profound connection: healing ultimately leads to the cross and means the cross, both for those who heal and for those who are being healed. If we are to be followers of Jesus, associated with Him, we must be prepared to be like Him. Disciples are called to share in a redemptive activity, and for this they must adopt the pattern of the cross. This is why Jesus challenged the two men in 19 and 21. It is as if He said: 'Are you really prepared for what it involves, what it will mean for you, taking men's infirmities and bearing their sicknesses in the spirit of Calvary? Are you prepared for the costly loneliness and desolation it will demand, the turning away from the nearest and dearest on earth for My sake and the gospel's?' But healing means the cross also for those who are being healed. In 16 we read that Jesus healed by His word. Observe the challenge in this word that He speaks to these men. To both it was the word of the cross, full of moral and spiritual thrust. And in the spiritual sense that is often the only way that healing can come. Think of the rich young ruler - what a knife-edge Christ's word was to him - and he needed it, for that word was the only thing that could have healed his soul-sickness. We so often misunderstand the hardness and the solemnity of the challenge of the gospel, not realising that it is the drastic surgery that we need to make us whole. We do not see that it is healing we are thrusting away from us. We are too concerned with our homes (20) and our families (22) to risk receiving the wholeness Jesus gives.

III) 8:23-27

It is almost commonplace as it is well-nigh inevitable to make this story apply to the storms of life, and draw encouragement from it as we face the hazards and tempests of our experience. But although this is a legitimate application of the miracle, we must not forget it is true only because something else, and something greater, is true - the fact of the Lordship and Kingship of Christ. For this is the first lesson that the miracle teaches. Here is the sovereign Lord exercising His lordship over the elements He made, and as such it is a token of what He will one day do when He returns to reign - the whole creation, disordered and broken by the Fall, will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. And the same voice that stilled this disorder of nature is the voice that will in the end set free a groaning creation. Think of it - the disorder and chaos of a fallen world brought into harmony by a word of command! It is this fact that enables us to apply this story as an illustration of what He can do with all storms of life, whether disorders caused by our sin or those outwith our own control. But more: it is also a picture of what He came to do to the greatest storm of all, that stirred by the revolt of man against God, a storm whose first ominous rumblings were heard over the Garden of Eden and came to its awesome climax in the rending of the rocks and the thunderings round the hill of Calvary. And this is what faith sees there: the mighty Son of God lifted up from the earth, the great Master of the storm, towering over the raging of divine wrath with hands stretched out over a world's need, speaking the all-prevailing word, in the blood that He shed, that stills the storm of the Lord's controversy forever, saying 'Peace, be still' to the guilty hearts of men and to the holy heart of God, 'so making peace'. This is the central heart, from which all other stillings of storms, of whatever kind, take their origin; for here Christ removed the cause of disorder and storm, namely sin, by taking it to Himself and allowing it to spend all its tempest-making fury in Himself, exhausting it and overcoming it and destroying it. And this storm on Galilee was both a reflection and a rehearsal of that infinitely grimmer experience that was to come to Him on the cross.

112) 8:23-27

But we have not yet said everything that can be said about this story. There is good evidence for supposing that it was not our Lord's primary will to perform this miracle here, at least not in this way and context. If we examine the facts, we see that it was our Lord Himself Who directed them to cross over the sea (18). He must have known a storm was to come. Yet He deliberately directed His disciples into it. Surely He had a purpose in this? Was He not intending them to learn how to pass through storms, trusting in His unfailing presence with them? If this be so, then He stilled the storm not because strong faith called forth His power, but because weak faith required it. And He did rebuke them for their little faith (26). We need not, of course, impute unnecessarily low motives of fear and panic to the disciples. It was simply that they were committed to Him in discipleship and now, in their jeopardy, they must have thought that everything was lost. But our Lord wanted to teach them that no storm can wreck the purposes of God when He is there in the midst. And there is another consideration: what if this was a storm He wanted them to go through, and in which He wanted to teach them deep and lasting lessons for the gospel's sake in days to come? What if there were lessons that they could have learned only if the storm had not been stilled and they had had to endure right to the bitter end. Would things have then been different for them in another time of storm, in Pilate's Judgment Hall, if they had been able to learn the lesson of standing firm and immovable here? Is there a lesson here about the danger of untimely cries for help?

113) 8:28-34

Most of the commentators, when faced with this story, are very preoccupied with two problems which it poses - viz. the fact that Matthew speaks of two demoniacs while Mark and Luke mention only one; and the question raised by the destruction of the herd of swine when the evil spirits are said to have entered into them. These are problems, of course, and it is right and necessary to discuss them, but after all the story is really about the healing of the demon-possessed, and it is this subject, not the others, that should occupy our attention. The question of demon-possession itself raises far greater problems which require to be discussed. Is it to be taken seriously, as a reality? If it is, is it encountered today? How does it come about? How is it discerned? How can it be cured? These are the questions for which some answer must at least be attempted. The modern assumption tends to be that what is called demon-possession in the New Testament would be described today in terms of psychiatric illness. In other words, the demonism of the New Testament is equated with mental disease and disorder. Now, this contention is an extremely plausible one, especially since psychiatrists can give case histories to show that the symptoms which are often regarded as being those of demon-possession are in fact well-defined symptoms of recognizable mental and psychiatric disorder. But there are two points that need to be dealt with here. The first is that the New Testament itself distinguishes between mental disorder and demon-possession, as in Matt 4: 24, where three different categories of need are mentioned, 'divers diseases and torments', 'demon-possession' and 'lunacy'. This surely argues that in New Testament times a distinction was made between demon-possession and mental illness. But more of this in the next Note.

114) 8:28-34

Furthermore, the New Testament writers were certainly able to distinguish between possession and illness and disease when in fact the presenting symptoms were the same in both cases, as for example a comparison of Matt 9:32,33 with Mark 7:32 and Matt 15:30 will show. In the one account, the dumb man is said to have an evil spirit, in the other nothing is said of possession. And Christ cast the devil out of the one, but healed the other. The result was the same in both cases; but the cause was different (cf also Luke 13:11 ff). In view of this, it can hardly, with fairness, be said that the New Testament writers mistook mental illness for demon-possession.

The second point is this: confusion in this subject is undoubtedly made worse by the fact that we readily assume that demon-possession always expresses itself in mental symptoms and aberrations. But this is not what the New Testament indicates, as may be seen from the cases already instanced - a deaf and dumb spirit, a spirit of infirmity - these were not mental, but physical symptoms. It is not only in the mind that evil spirits can lodge, but in the body also. And not only there either, but in the will and in the spirit also (cf 2 Cor 4:3, 4). And what are we to say of Judas Iscariot? He was not a psychiatric or mental case. Yet it is said of him that 'Satan entered into him' (Luke 22:3). For further reference to the subject, see Matt 10:1; 12:22; Mark 9:25; Luke 8:2; Acts 16:16ff; 1 Tim 4:1.

115) 8:28-34

It is nevertheless as great an error in the opposite direction to suppose that mental or psychiatric symptoms are necessarily evidence of demon-possession, and an uninstructed attitude in this matter has brought biblical teaching into disrepute. But how are we to distinguish the two? Well, we must learn to know our enemy. Paul says 'We are not ignorant of his devices', but it is to be feared that such ignorance is widespread, and that little thought has been given to this whole field of spiritual experience. Not that it is easy to discern, in any given situation, what is demon-influence and what is mental illness, but it is possible, from experience and a certain judgment in these matters, to discern which is which, and seek to deal with it accordingly. We are, after all, told to 'try (discern) the spirits' (1 John 4:1), and 'recognizing the signs', even if it be with a 'sixth sense' is a possibility. How demon-possession comes about is essentially a mystery, yet it cannot be arbitrary. We are warned not to 'give place to the devil' (Eph 4:27), and it is surely clear that trafficking with evil and sin is one of the ways that this can be done. Dabbling with sin can allow the author of sin an entrance into our lives, as we see plainly in the Scriptures in the stories of King Saul and Judas Iscariot. But place can also be given to him through ignorance, for he is essentially a deceiver, and an angel of light (2 Cor 11:13 ff), and can lead men into a terrible morass of demonic influence that can break their health or their sanity, and lead to utter despair. And here, Christ's words have particular application, 'Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free', that is, the truth of His victory on the cross over principalities and powers, which we must learn to use against all dark powers, and therewith dispute their right to have any place in our lives, or in the lives of others.

116) 8:28-34

Now a word about the problems associated with this story in Matthew. Obviously the incident related here is the same as that related in Mark 5 and Luke 8. Why then does Matthew speak of two, and the others of only one, demoniac? This is a discrepancy that cannot be satisfactorily explained. A number of suggestions have been made, one being that of the two demoniac one was manifestly more prominent than the other by reason of the depth of the possession, and that both Mark and Luke concentrated on him. Others suggest that Matthew brings in the second here because he omits the reference to the other healing of a demoniac recorded in Mark 1:21-27 (compare 8:29 here with Mark 1:24). These are both possible explanations, but neither can be regarded as entirely satisfactory. We must just leave it.

The problem of the swine is, to some, even more difficult, and they are at a loss to know how to justify such an action as they here attribute to Jesus. It should be noticed that Jesus simply said 'Go' (although Mark and Luke say that He suffered them to enter the swine, i.e. did not prevent them). But wait. Demons need somewhere to dwell (see 12:43), they seek a place in which to rest. They feared, as we see in 29, to be sent to their proper place before the time, and for this reason sought refuge in the swine. But it was this that led to their being sent to their proper place, for the swine plunged to death, and the demons would be carried with them. If this was the way for the demons to be disposed of, is not the soul of one man - or two - worth more than many herds of swine? Another suggestion made is that the visual evidence of the swine being possessed might well have been needed to seal the man's cure, and convince him that the demons had really been exorcised; another that the people of Gadara were trafficking in forbidden employment in keeping swine against the Mosaic law, and that this was a divine judgment upon them. But problems remain which, in our present state of knowledge, may not be possible of adequate solution.

117) 9:1-2

Here is the record of another miracle performed by Jesus. There is much to learn from it. Consider first the poor man's friends; they brought him to Jesus, to where He was. Taken at its simplest, here is a word of great challenge and encouragement - we are to take our friends to where Jesus is to be found, i.e. where two or three are gathered in His Name. It does not say for what reason they brought him - we presume for healing, but who shall say they did not also discern his deeper need, as Jesus certainly did? The important thing for us, however, is that it was when Jesus saw their faith that He spoke the word of forgiveness. Faith calls forth the word of forgiveness from the Son of God, and it is when faith is present that He does speak it. Now the principle operating here is that of vicarious faith. Their faith prevailed for him; they believed for one who could not apparently believe for himself. Christ's word was the 'bridge' over which the gifts of faith 'came' to the palsied man (and the healing also) but the bridging of the gulf was made possible by the faith of those who brought him to Jesus, and who overcame all sorts of obstacles and difficulties in doing so (as Mark 2 makes clear) perhaps the most pointed application of all this is to the life of prayer. We can do what these men did through our prayers, but only if we are prepared to battle through all obstacles and oppositions - and they are many - to prevail with God.

118) 9:1-2

The fact that Christ pronounced forgiveness first upon the man before healing him presents us with a disturbing challenge. It is this: When we come to Christ with our needs, or bring others to Him with theirs, we must be prepared for the all-wise Physician to probe more deeply than often we care about, for He is more concerned to get to the root of our problem than to deal with its mere symptoms. What we think is the matter with us and what He thinks is the matter with us may be two quite different things. As to the relation between the sickness and the sin, several things may be said. It is known, of course, that there are some illnesses with definite physical symptoms for which there appears to be no organic cause, where something in the mind or soul can produce definite physical disorder. But there are other possibilities of interpretation. For example, the palsy may have been the direct result of some sin in the man's life. We know, for example, what disastrous physical consequences a life of drunkenness or a life of immorality can have. Further, it may have been a direct chastisement from God for sin, rather than a direct medical consequence of sin (cf John 5:14). We must beware, however, of drawing wrong inferences from this last, and make the mistaken assumption that sickness in general is a punishment for sin, for this is manifestly untrue (cf John 9:2,3). Whatever may have been the case, however, with this poor man, what is of greatest importance is the way in which Jesus addressed him, 'Son, be of good cheer'. It was an announcement of good news to one who was cast down and broken in spirit, bowed and crushed by the memory of the past, and gripped by dark shadows that effectively prevented normal living. It was deliverance from this that he experienced. And Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever!

119) 9:3-8

The question our Lord asked (5) was not 'Which is easier to do?', but 'Which is easier to say?' What He means is this:

"You think it would be easier to say 'Your sins be forgiven' than to say 'Arise and walk' for the former statement is incapable of proof or disproof (as you think), and therefore anyone can say it without much fear of proving an imposter, whereas if you said 'Arise and walk' and the man did not do it, you would be proved an imposter. Therefore, to prove that My word is valid in the unseen realm as it is in the seen, I will heal him also." Thus, the miracle in the visible realm was the evidence and proof of the greater miracle in the invisible, and its sign and seal. It is startling to see, in the midst of this wonderful story, such a bitter and implacable spirit of opposition in the scribes and Pharisees, focusing, be it noted, not on the healed man but on Christ. Startling, in that these were religious men, the Church leaders of their day, not atheists or men indifferent to spiritual values. In fact, their reaction was very similar to that of the people of Gadara who besought Jesus to depart from their coasts (8:34). Jesus was an embarrassment to them, as to the others, because He interfered with their way of life. In the case of the Gadarenes, it was their economic way of life that was threatened and called in question, with the Pharisees it was their religious way of life. And neither the one nor the other were prepared to tolerate such interference.

120) 9:9

The call of Matthew, recorded so simply in one verse here, bears a wonderful message for us. Tax-gatherers were a despised and hated class of men, and by none more so than by the Pharisees. Matthew was in the eyes of the people a sinner above all men, an obvious, flagrant sinner, a 'quisling' and a puppet of the hated Roman government, despised and shunned by all. But observe how Matthew records his own call: "Jesus...saw a man, named Matthew". It is as if he were saying to us: "When men looked on me, they saw the tax-gatherer, the sinner, the member of that despised and hated group. But when Jesus looked on me, He saw a man, a man with a heart and a soul; a man made in the image of God, capable of being made - remade -into a life with meaning and purpose, a man capable of being recalled to the true dignity of humanity and personality. He saw a man! Can you imagine what that meant to me? Oh, He knew I was a sinner, knew I had exorted money from my fellows, but He saw behind my sins, to me, and saw me as a soul in need, saw my need of forgiveness that I had covered and buried by long years of hopeless living. Do you wonder that I left all to follow Him? He gave me new life and new hope." This is the simple truth of the matter; Matthew was called out of that cold, dark, lonely life of isolation into fellowship with the Son of God. Sin is ultimately destructive of human relationships because it locks a man up in a citadel of his own making, away from God and man alike. And it is the glory of the gospel that in it Christ comes and stands outside that lonely prison and calls men to follow Him - into freedom, fellowship and friendship with God.

121) 9:10-12

Matthew's response and reaction to the call of Jesus is full of instruction. He did two things. In the first place, he arranged a gathering in his house to which he invited his friends and colleagues, so that they might meet Jesus and His disciples. In this respect, he did exactly what the friends of the palsied man did for him in the story at the beginning of the chapter, doing in the moral and spiritual realm what they did in the physical, and with just as much success (see Mark 2:15), for he succeeded in introducing them to the Saviour. This is the touchstone of reality in spiritual experience. If Christ has blessed us, we will find some way to share that blessing with our fellows. Bishop Ryle truly said: "There are few surer marks of an unconverted heart than carelessness and indifference about the souls of others". In the second place (accepting the traditional view of the authorship of this gospel), Matthew wrote a book about Christ, that is to say, his talents, such as they were, were put at the disposal of his new-found Saviour and Lord. This also is a mark of reality in spiritual life. To be redeemed means that we are no longer our own; all that we are and all that we have are His, as of right, and must be laid on the altar for Him. We may never know what a high destiny of service awaits a man when he turns in repentance and faith to Christ. Jesus saw a man, and this is what the man became, in the glad providence and mercy of God.

122) 9:10-13

Again Jesus encountered murmuring and criticism from the Pharisees. The situation was now rapidly becoming such that everything He did was liable to be frowned upon and condemned as wrong. It is impossible to miss the distaste and contempt with which they accused Him of associating with 'publicans and sinners'. There is a question of Jewish law involved in this. The tax-gatherers had, by their associating themselves with the Roman government, put themselves outside the Law. They were 'sinners' in this sense particularly. And therefore, to associate with them, above all to eat with them, was to defile oneself. The Pharisees' charge was, plainly, that He was defiling Himself by associating with them. But Jesus tells them that this is precisely what He had come to do, to heal the sick, and those who had by their lives put themselves outside the law. He had come to heal the sick, and that is why He sat with them. You cannot do this by proxy. Communicating the gospel to men involves communicating with them. The significance of the quotation from Hosea in 13 is that in the prophet's day the plaint of God against His people was that although their outward observance of the Law might be correct and exact, their hearts were far from Him. And this is the point of comparison with the Pharisees. Ritual correctness was a great issue with them, and association with 'sinners' taboo; but it had led them into a cold, loveless and merciless attitude that made their religion utterly false. There is nothing so frightening as a church so engrossed in religion that it has lost God, and mercy, and love, and compassion, and humanity. And this is the point of the final word of Jesus. The Pharisees thought themselves righteous. They were wrong, for there is none righteous. But so long as they thought they were, Christ had nothing for them. And God has nothing for any such; they are simply excluded from His presence.

123) 9:14-17

The three parabolic illustrations which Jesus gives in these verses are clearly linked to the account of the feast held in Matthew's house following his conversion. It was surely in relation to the feasting that the question of fasting arose (the association of ideas between feasts and weddings and garments and wine is also quite plain). In using the metaphor of the bridegroom Jesus is significantly reminding John's disciples of what John had once called Him. The Baptist at least would have understood His rejoicing, even if his disciples did not. What Jesus is saying is that while He is with His disciples it is an occasion of rejoicing. This is the abiding characteristic of the Christian experience. The days would come, He said, when the Bridegroom would be taken away – then would be the time for fasting. This is taken as one of the earliest references to our Lord's consciousness of His coming Passion. And this word was fulfilled – when He was crucified they mourned. But their sorrow was turned into joy by His resurrection, and His "Lo, I am with you always...." sealed rejoicing to them for evermore. This is not to say that there is no place for 'Christian' fasting in the economy of the gospel. But there it is no mere routine, or barren, or legalistic exercise -asceticism for asceticism's sake - but a vital expression of Christian discipleship that is an ordained means to a blessed and fruitful end. Is there a suggestion in the question John's disciples asked, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast?" that they fasted without really knowing why they did it? That should be unthinkable in a gospel dispensation.

124) 9:14-17

On closer inspection, we see that what Jesus is saying is this: "The reason we are feasting and not fasting is that we are celebrating the marriage of a soul with the Saviour. Matthew has been converted. The Bridegroom of the soul has revealed His love and power, and a sinner has come to repentance. And this is always a ground of rejoicing." The two illustrations that follow amplify this idea. The association of ideas is surely clear, for Christ is in fact indicating in these metaphors the nature of what has happened to Matthew, and happens to any man who responds to the call of the gospel. The first of these reminds us that there is a world of difference between putting a new patch on an old garment and making a new garment altogether. The way men are made Christians is not by attaching something new to the old 'status quo'. A true experience of grace may, for example, lead a Christian to practise fasting for the gospel's sake. But simply to adopt fasting as a practice and suppose that this makes one a Christian is like putting a new patch on an old garment. In the same way, a true experience of grace will save a man from drunkenness, but saving a man from drink will not necessarily save his soul. Reformation is not the same thing as regeneration, although regeneration always produces reformation of life.

125) 9:14-17

The idea of garments is important and suggestive in this context, for it illustrates one aspect of the gospel in a wonderful way. Christ did not come to patch up our broken, sinful lives, and Christianity is not a matter of improving a man's life here and there. When Bunyan's Pilgrim came to the cross, it was a change of raiment that he received (see Zech 3:1-5). We are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, as with garments of salvation. The natural life, as such, in its good bits and its bad bits alike, is utterly unfit for the kingdom of God. As it was once expressed in a 'Life and Work' editorial (we wish that 'Life and Work' spoke oftener in this way!), "The cross, as has been said in many different ways since St Paul's time, scores out this human nature of ours and says, 'This must be done all over again'." As C.S. Lewis puts it, Christ's concern is to make us, not 'nice people', but 'new men'. The second metaphor illustrates the inward reality of this experience as the first does the outward, speaks of the gift of new life as the 'garment' illustration speaks of justification. There is a good illustration of this in Acts 19:1 ff, in the account of Paul's meeting with the disciples at Ephesus. The apostle could see clearly that there was something lacking in these men. They were earnest and devout, but the principle of life was missing, and it was seen to be so. They had no experience of the Holy Spirit. This is the new wine of the kingdom; and it may still be asked today, "Did ye receive the Holy Ghost when ye believed?" i.e. is your faith such as to bring the Spirit of God into your life as a glorious reality? It is to this that Christ's words bear witness.

126) 9:18-26

Here are two stories linked together, with that of the woman with the issue of blood set in the heart of that of Jairus' daughter like a diamond set in gold, and since in order of time the woman was healed before the little girl, we shall look at her story first. The fact, however, that the two are so closely linked together indicates that they have a bearing on each other. And both comparison and contrast have something to say to us. Luke tells us that Jairus' daughter was twelve years old, and Matthew says that the woman had suffered for the same length of time. How true it is that one half of the world does not know how the other half lives! Twelve years of joy and delight with an only daughter who was the light of Jairus' life and twelve years of misery and growing despair for the poor afflicted woman. Should not this teach us to remember that when our cup is full and running over we should spare a thought and say a prayer for those whose circumstances may be very different, and be thankful for such blessings as we so often tend to take for granted. But there is a point of comparison here as well as of contrast. For here are two very different types of people with different backgrounds, but they are united by a common sense of need, a common agony, and a common faith. The needs of men may be widely different, but the need is ever the same, for His healing and saving power.

127) 9:18-26

Mark tells us that it was when she had heard of Jesus that the woman came pressing through to Him. And if we bear in mind what she must have heard - about the miracles and wonders and signs He had performed up to this point in His ministry - it seems clear that for her, faith came by hearing about Him. This teaches us an important lesson about evangelism. The task of the Church is not to press men into decisions they do not want to make, but to speak well of the Saviour, and magnify¹ Him before men in such a way that faith will be born in men's hearts that will draw them to Him for healing and blessing and salvation. We should notice how real and authentic her faith was, even though it was mixed with superstition and false elements. This should be a great encouragement for us. Not that Jesus is ever content to leave us in our superstitions - indeed part of His confrontation of her after her healing was precisely¹ to correct her misunderstandings (we shall look more closely at that point tomorrow). Meantime, we must see that what she was convinced about was that power resided in Him, and that it could be communicated to her, and would be, if only contact could be made. What she discerned, in fact, was the principle underlying our Lord's Incarnation itself. For in the Incarnation Christ has come into contact with needy humanity, and in His cross has accomplished what can best be called a great Divine exchange, in which all that is His becomes ours, and all that is ours He takes upon Himself. And personal faith is the 'bridge' over which this 'exchange' is made, whereby His power and grace become ours, and our sickness His. He took this woman's need, and took it with Him to the cross. We shall think further of this in the next note.

128) 9:18-26

One of the gospels tells us Jesus knew that virtue had gone out of Him. This in fact is the evidence that the 'exchange' referred to in the previous note had really taken place. But it is also the evidence of Christ's sensitivity to faith. There was a multitude thronging Him at the time, yet He could discern the touch of faith. The crowd was eager, curious, interested, but she had faith, and He met it. There is one further point, implicit in Matthew and explicit in the other accounts. We have already pointed out that Christ's purpose in drawing the woman out into the open was to correct her superstitions and get her faith grounded in Himself. But there was another reason. He was also concerned to teach her that His blessings are not to be enjoyed apart from fellowship with Him. This is of wide application and nowhere more so than in relation to the fundamental blessing of forgiveness. Sometimes one finds people who want forgiveness in isolation from the rest of the gospel, want to steal up quietly to Jesus and obtain forgiveness, then slip quietly away. But this is simply to make use of Him as a celestial blessing-purveyor, and stultify the whole issue of the gospel. No: one can receive forgiveness only by receiving Him, and this involves the whole gospel of reconciliation, justification, rebirth and renewal. To think that one has received forgiveness without submitting heart and will to Christ is simply to deceive oneself. There is no such thing in the gospel as forgiveness without entering into a saving relationship of fellowship with Christ. It was this that Christ made plain to the woman in His gracious dealing with her, and sent her into a future bright with the prospect of a new life.

129) 9:18-26

We turn now to the other figure alongside the woman, Jairus. Two very obvious thoughts arise immediately. The first is the impatience Jairus must have felt, even resentment, at the interruption which could only - so he would think - delay Christ when his daughter was at the point of death. The other is that the healing of the woman must in the event have been an enormous encouragement to his faith in his anxiety about his daughter. As to the first point, the delay was surely needful for him, and a necessary experience, to test his faith, and strengthen it. And indeed his faith was tested to the uttermost, as matters turned out. It was one thing for him to believe that Jesus could do something for her while she was dying, another when she was dead! And it was the delay that led to the transition from dying to death. And in the darkest hour of the man's life, when hope must have yielded to despair, Jesus set over against that despair a simple word, and called for faith. 'Be not afraid, only believe' He said (cf Mark 5:36). And Jairus was held and sustained by the bare word of Christ. It is something to trust in Christ like this, in face of all that cries out in one's circumstances that such faith is mad and in vain. Yet he believed, and his faith was rewarded. And who shall doubt that he was decisively helped in maintaining that faith as resentment at the woman's interruption gave way to growing wonder when she was healed?

130) 9:18-26

Christ's words 'the maid is not dead but sleepeth' have caused some to question whether in fact this miracle does after all represent a raising from the dead. But this is needlessly to misunderstand what He said. The word 'sleep' is used by our Lord more than once to denote death (of 11:11), and His use of it in the story of the raising of Lazarus, where He plainly defines its meaning, should settle all doubt as to the meaning of His words here. The final point relates to His putting out everyone from the mourning home. It is said that they laughed Him to scorn (24) when He asked them to put aside their mourning, and it was doubtless this bitter, unbelieving spirit that He was intent on removing from the scene, as something that could hinder the flow of Divine power to the maid. It is recorded in Mark that in one place He could do no mighty work because of their unbelief (Mk 6:5, 6), and clearly this is the key to His action here. Unbelief, then, spreads an evil aura which hinders the work of God and straitens the spirit of the Saviour. Well might the Apostle warn us in Hebrews against the 'evil heart of unbelief' (Heb 3:12), when its malign power is so great a hindrance in the work of the gospel. Christ's word to Jairus takes on an even deeper significance in this connection: 'Only believe'. From the human standpoint, everything depends on this.

131) 9:27-31

The emphasis in this further miracle is exactly the same as in the story of Jairus, that is, on faith. 'Believe ye ...?' asked Jesus, then 'According to your faith...' The fact that the two blind men addressed Jesus as 'Thou Son of David' is very revealing and significant. For this was a Messianic title, and it indicates that they had come to a certain conviction about Him, having heard of Him, and of His miracles, wonders and signs, and believed in their hearts that He was the promised Messiah. This is all the more impressive when we remember that it was not until later, at Caesarea Philippi, that His own disciples finally confessed Him as the Messiah. Christ's reaction, however, is striking, for it would seem that first of all He did not heed their cries. He kept on going, with the blind men following Him, until He came to the house, and only then did He speak to them. This may mean that He was concerned to get them alone, to speak to them personally, away from the crowd, or that He wanted to test their faith and its reality, or both. Viewed in this way, one sees that their meeting with Jesus was a real crisis-encounter with truly tremendous consequences, which we are to discuss in the next note.

132) 9:27-31

It was certainly the beginning of new things for the two blind men when they met with Christ. They had come to certain definite conclusions about Jesus; to them He was the Messiah, the promised One, who could open the eyes of the blind and make them see (cf Isa 35:5). But it is one thing to believe this while sitting at the side of the road with your beggar's tin, asking for alms; for such belief could be almost no more than a day-dream of wish-fulfilment, a projection of the deepest longings of their hearts. It is quite another thing to believe when you are face to face with the mighty Saviour, sensing even with your sightless eyes the majesty and glory of His Person, when He is probing into the very depths of your soul, when you realise that 'believing' is going to mean an incalculable transformation and an utter and complete handing over of oneself to Him as Lord and God. For this is the point at which we tend to shrink from anything so total. This has very direct and challenging bearing on us today. For there is a belief in Christ, an evangelical understanding of His Person and Work that may be held with real conviction and earnestness, corresponding to that shown by the two blind men as they sat by the way-side. And Christ challenges it, to find out how real it is, to make it real, in a personal encounter and challenge that goes to the depths of our being. 'Do you really believe', He asks, when it comes to the point? Do you really believe?

133) 9:27-31

We continue the thought of the previous Note. Christ is asking if our belief in the doctrines of the Faith, in the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and the Holy Spirit is after all an intellectual belief, a theoretical faith, however sincerely held, however earnestly and systematically thought out and grasped. Is our grasp of justification, of reconciliation, of regeneration, of the sovereignty of God, just a grasp, not a reality in our experience? Has it ever touched the deepest places of our hearts and changed us there, to burn and blaze like holy fire within us so as to burn up all dross and make us pure? Do we really believe? And allied to this searching question there stands another, at least implied here, and explicitly stated elsewhere: 'Do you really want this?' In the story of the paralysed man at Bethesda this is in fact what Jesus asked, 'Wilt thou be made whole?' on the face of it, it seems an extraordinary question, yet even in the physical realm one does find people who secretly and unconsciously prefer to be ill than well. And in the context of the misery and wretchedness of sin it is still necessary to ask the question, 'Do you really want to be made whole?', when 'being made whole' is a drastic and revolutionary process that may turn life upside down and inside out? These two men passed from abstract though earnest conviction and belief in the Son of God to living, abandoned faith in Him. Have we?

134) 9:32-34

The interesting distinction here is that while in the previous verses, the blindness of the blind men was evidently purely a natural affliction, the dumbness was of the devil. The man was demon-possessed. Nor are we to assume too uncritically that his condition would be described as psychiatric in modern times, for we have already seen in these studies that the Scriptures in fact make a distinction between problems of mental disorder and demon-possession. It is the reaction, however, to the miraculous restoring of his speech that is important. The common people marvelled, accepting it at its face value, and sensibly attributing it to the manifestation of the power of God; but the Pharisees moved by jealousy and deeply disturbed by Christ's power and authority, attributed it to the devil. We may recall the cry of the prophet of old, 'Woe unto them that call good evil and evil good', and see with a shudder into what spiritual danger these unhappy men were unconsciously drifting as they said what they did about Christ. For when the distinction between good and evil becomes so blurred and confused that men are no longer able to see either clearly for what it is, the sands of hope are running out for them. To be confronted with Incarnate Good, and neither like it nor recognise it, is to be in a perilous state indeed!

135) 9:35-38

These verses bring us to a new section of Matthew's gospel, and begin a second section of teaching. This is a shorter section than the first (chs 5-7), and comprising only one chapter (10) which gives instructions to the disciples as they go on mission for Jesus. The words in 35 seem to be a kind of summary of His ministry up to this point in the story, then comes the wonderful statement in 36 about the compassion of Christ, which also has reference to His attitude throughout His ministry towards human need. We are told that His compassion went out towards the people because they were as sheep not having a shepherd. But why should this be? Had they not the ordinances of religion? Had they not the Temple, the Synagogue, the priesthood and the scribes? Ah yes, but they were blind leaders of the blind. In all the imposing religious structure of the day, there was no sure word from the Lord to His people. The hungry sheep looked up and were not fed. Christ saw this, and it was for this reason that He urged His disciples to pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers - His concern was to raise up men who would have a message for the people, who would be able to feed them and lead them into green pastures. This is Christ's answer to the needs of the multitude. And if there is any ray of hope today, in the midst of the imposing structure of a religious life that does not seem to have any sure word for men, it is that God is raising up men with a message in the Church in our time, men with something to say and able to say it.

136) 9:35-38

We should pay heed to the rebuke Christ is gently giving to the Church in our time. For - let us be honest enough to admit it - the word that is being given almost exclusive prominence and emphasis today - a word about unity and ecumenicism - is not a word that meets men's needs. It is 'another gospel' which is no gospel, and it is effectively drawing men's minds away from the way of salvation in Christ. It is a sad commentary on the Church's failure when even the newspaper editorials in the responsible Press have to remind ecclesiastics that it is more important to preach the gospel than to preach unity, and that if half the energy and dedication expended in propagating the message of unity had been devoted to a passion for the salvation of men, the Church would be in a happier and healthier state than it is.

The two metaphors Jesus uses here - sheep and harvest - are theological in intent. The first depicts something of the nature of man's lost estate. Man is the lost sheep that has wandered from the fold and is unable to find the way back again. And - this is a wonderful thing - when we see mankind with the eyes of Christ, when our hearts are full of compassion for men, we see them as a harvest to be reaped for God, as precious souls for whom Christ died. And when we see like this, we will not fail to pray the Lord of the harvest for His Son.

137) 10:1

There are a number of questions that arise as to how we are to understand this chapter. What was the significance of this sending forth of the disciples? What part did it play in the scheme of the gospel at this point? Does it constitute a pattern for us today? Very different constructions have been put upon such questions. Some have taken our Lord's words literally, and sought to fulfil them to the letter; others have insisted that they have no relevance for us as a pattern of ministry today that they applied only to the disciples and that only on this specific occasion.

Matthew's comment in 11:1 makes it clear that chapter 10 is our Lord's charge to His disciples, in relation to His compassion for the multitude, and to His command to them to pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers. Calvin says that here we have not so much 'perpetual apostleship' as 'temporary preaching, which was fitted to awaken and excite the minds of men, that they might be more attentive to hear Christ'. Christ employed them as assistants only, to secure attention to Him where His voice could not reach - to arouse expectation that the time of the promised restoration was at hand. The chapter divides into three parts, 1-15, which have reference to the immediate purpose of their being sent out; 16-23, where Christ seems to lift His eyes to further horizons, and 24-42, in which the further reaches of the Church's work is envisaged, reaching to our own time.

138) 10:1-6

The first and most obvious lesson here is that the disciples were being commissioned to be channels of Christ's compassion, and the way in which they were to be this was to be through preaching the kingdom of God, proclaiming the good news concerning Christ to men. Another lesson – a very topical one for us today! - concerns the transmission of divine authority to the disciples. We hear much about apostolic succession, about who stands in that succession and who does not. But we should notice two things in particular in this connection: one is that when there is a true transmission of divine authority, those who have received it show it in the signs that follow their preaching of the Word. 'By their fruits ye shall know them', said Jesus, and this is particularly true in the matter of apostolic succession. And where the signs are absent, there has not been a transmission of that authority. Tested by this biblical criterion, it will be seen that there are ominous gaps in the historic succession. The other point to note is that this bestowal of authority was purely a temporary matter, and that on a later occasion, after this successful and fruitful ministry, they again tried to cast out devils, and could not (Matt 17:16). And it was because they were not the right kind of men that this was so. In other words, a true understanding of apostolic authority is to see that it lies in the moral and spiritual realm, not in a mere historic succession, which, in itself, is simply irrelevant.

139) 10:1-6

It will be recalled that this is not the first reference to the disciples' call that we have had in Matthew's record (cc 4:72-25, and Notes thereon). First there was the call to discipleship, then the call to service. In the making of Christian disciples and soldiers there are several stages, and the apostles' development in their calling was gradual; they were led on little by little, step by step. They were pupils in the school of Christ, led on to ever deepening levels of spiritual experience. And the fact that the authority which they undoubtedly possessed on this occasion was merely temporary seems to indicate that it was only an anticipatory glimpse of what Christ was planning and intending to make of them in the future. Perhaps it was even a test, to see if they could stand having authority (many cannot); and if so, then the subsequent withdrawal of it from them, it might be argued, showed that they could not. This may be going too far; at all events, they were still under training. It was only on the day of Pentecost that they graduated from this school! In an earlier Note, on the story of the centurion (8:5-13), we noted that authority is bestowed only where authority is submitted to. Here again is the moral issue. It is the kind of people we are that determines the authority our lives have. This authority is not something stuck on to our lives, as something distinct from our lives, but is the Holy Spirit regnant in a redeemed personality, and it is this that is authoritative, and unmistakeably so - built in, not stuck on. This is our Lord's aim and purpose for His people.

140) 10:7-15

There is no need to assume any literal interpretation of these instructions, as some have done, to make them an invariable rule of conduct or pattern. They were not so even for the early Church, except in principle (of Luke 22:35, 36, for a very different directive). This is not to say, however, that they have no meaning or significance for us today. We may gather three things in particular from their teaching. The first is that the keynote throughout is simplicity. One thinks of Paul's metaphor of the athlete, who is in training and stripped of anything that might hinder him from attaining his objective. There is a great challenge here, both for personal life and for the corporate life of the Church. If we have a work to do and a message to proclaim, then all must be subservient to this one aim of getting it across and getting it done. And anything that might prove an encumbrance to its fulfilment must be resolutely cast away. The Church - and the believer - has always been most effective when content to be simple in this sense. It is when many encumbrances have obscured her real purpose that she has lost ground and lost influence. Another note in these instructions is that of urgency. It is not a question of anything hysterical, but a steady, pulsing consciousness that destiny is involved; it is qualitative rather than quantitative. And therefore the question of putting first things first is always paramount. It is this note that rings through the passage. The third note is that of utter self-giving, and is implied in the other two, becoming quite explicit in 8 (cf 2 Cor 12:15). A well known missionary¹ once said, 'Blood of our own must attest our faith in the precious blood of Christ if we would share and show forth the victory of the Cross'. To live like this is to stand in the true apostolic succession. Is this what we mean today when we speak of it?

141) 10:16-23

In this second section of Christ's commissioning of His disciples, our Lord seems to lift His eyes to further horizons, beyond the immediate context of 1-10. But whatever interpretation we may place upon the passage, let us not miss the real point in our concern for exact division, which is that we, the disciples of our Lord, are to go out, and reach men with the compassion of Christ and that going flows from praying. If there is no going, there must be more and better praying. In this connection we may say that over the past years several have gone into service from our fellowship, and there have been those who have been quick to point out that they have not all - or even most - been the product of Holyrood, but have come to us from other places. This is true, and we are not concerned, as some suppose, to 'claim' them as our own work, or magnify our importance. This is not the point. But it still needs to be asked why so many should have come from other places to this, and want to come, and want to belong to Holyrood. And the answer is, on their own confession: "We want to go out from a praying Church and have praying people behind us". They have felt the need for real prayer, and real fellowship, and they have not found these things where they came from, and found them here. And it is not a little thing for us to have been given such a stewardship in the city of Edinburgh. Please God we as a fellowship will always be found faithful to it.

142) 10:16-23

These verses are very striking and startling in the revelation they give, for they speak of bitter opposition to the gospel, and persecution for those who proclaim it. The fact that our Lord actually forewarned His disciples of such things instead of letting them find out for themselves by bitter experience is a sufficient answer to those who think it wiser to conceal the cost of discipleship from those who would serve Him. It is not only misleading but dishonest to give the impression that becoming a Christian means that henceforth life will be a matter of 'rolling along, singing a song'. This is false and lacking in the realism of the New Testament. Dangers to face, oppositions to endure, heartbreaks and disappointments to meet and overcome - this is the lot of the disciple. There are glorious compensations and a sufficiency of Divine provision, yes, but the facts remain, and they should not be concealed. Furthermore, the opposition is to the gospel itself. It is a fallacy to assume that the simple preaching of the gospel will always awaken the response of faith. It sometimes does the opposite, as Christ points out here.

Nor is this the only time Jesus teaches this: He does so also in the parable of the sower, where in three of the four instances of sowing the seed the ultimate purpose of that sowing was not fulfilled, and only the fourth part bore fruit. The repeated insistence on this seems to indicate that there may have been a falsely optimistic attitude in the disciples that betrayed a lack of understanding of the real principles of the gospel. We are to learn from this that there is such a thing as failure in gospel work, in the sense that there are those who will not respond. And we need not necessarily assume that when our witness has not prevailed it is because of some defect or failure in us. There were some places where Jesus could do no mighty work because of their unbelief. Our calling is to be faithful, not successful.

143) 10:16-23

The metaphor of the sheep is a well-known one, but careful thought will reveal unexpected depths of meaning. It is used in a variety of ways, describing the nature of man, the nature of sin, the nature of the believer's relation to Christ, and so on. Common to all these usages, there is the thought of weakness and frailty. And when Jesus speaks of sending forth His disciples as sheep in the midst of wolves, He means us surely to think in terms of what Paul expresses so graphically in 1 Cor 1:27, "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty". Why should this principle be so firmly imbedded in the gospel? Because weakness is the 'door' through which God can come to bless the world He longs to save, and this ensures that salvation is all of God. "Neither is he that planteth anything, nor he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase". Christ Himself is the truest illustration of the principle. He is the Lamb of God thrust into this pitiless world of men in rebellion against God and implacably opposed to His will. And in Him supremely the weakness of God is seen to be stronger than men. This reminds us that the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual. The servants of Christ do not resort to fleshly means and expedients in order to fulfil His will, but rely on weapons which the world counts impotent or irrelevant, so that to the world they seem as defenceless sheep.

144) 10:16-23

There are two further points to be made about the metaphor of the sheep. It indicates, as Calvin points out, that the disciples have no means of defence. They are vulnerable. This is where a great part of the cost of discipleship comes in. For to go forth as channels of the love and compassion of Christ is to open oneself to the possibility of being hurt. And it is not possible to do Christ's work without thus exposing oneself. Furthermore, the sheep is above all a sacrificial animal. To go forth as sheep is to go forth to sacrifice. "Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps" (1 Pet 2:21). That example is followed and fulfilled when we present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God. It is this that makes the witness prevail. "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus", cried Paul, and souls were born into the kingdom of God all over the ancient world. In this warfare only the wounded can serve!

145) 10:16-23

We note finally in this section the nature of the persecution, and the compensations that accompany it. As to its nature, there is a three-fold emphasis: religious persecution (17) in the synagogue, civil persecution (18), from the state, and family persecution (21) in the home. The state's opposition is, of course, understandable for, as John says, "the world knoweth us not" (1 John 3:1). That of the Church (in those days the Synagogue) becomes not only understandable but inevitable when the Church (and the Synagogue) breaks adrift from its true anchorage and loses sight of the real meaning of its existence. Perhaps the most painful and distressing of all is the opposition encountered within the family. The divisive power of the gospel within a family and household, with the hurt, the estrangements, the divided loyalties, the bitternesses that are engendered and often implacable hostilities, is often the hardest to bear. And who shall say that those things are not realities? But the compensations are sure, and ineffably blessed. There is the divine endowment (19) of help and support. When most needed, help will be most near, and need will be most surely supplied. "It shall be given you, in that same hour", and that by "the Spirit of your Father". And in the end, salvation. To be saved will make up for all trials. Final victory will be ours, and it will more than compensate for all the sufferings. One glimpse of glory will suffice to offset all the pain and the privation. As Paul was later to express it, "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18).

146) 10:24-42

The final section of the chapter deals with the further reaches of the Church's work, down to our own time, and as such has direct relevance for us. To deal with general observations first of all before turning to particular exposition, we should note in the first place that underlying all that is said here is the thought and reality of fellowship with Christ in the service that we render, as we see in 24, 25, 29, 30, and 40. These verses breathe the glad assurance that we do not stand alone as we serve Him; He is with us, and His care and love, and the strength of His presence, surround us indeed, we could use another word in this connection, and say that the theme of the passage is identification - the disciple's identification with his Lord in the work of the gospel, implied throughout the passage and seen very explicitly in 40, "He that receiveth you receiveth Me". It is just as clear also that fellowship and identification with Christ means fellowship and identification with Him in His sufferings (cf 1 Pet 2:21), and the record of Stephen's martyrdom in Acts 7, where Luke seems deliberately to use, in describing Stephen's sufferings and reactions to it, the language in which he describes the death of Christ. Our Lord's words in 25 are fulfilled to the letter. We should note also the association of ideas throughout the chapter, which begins with the words "He gave them power" (1), then speaks of fellowship with Him and the sharing of His sufferings. This is what Paul expresses in theological terms in Phil 3:10, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings". This, as we have seen, means an identity of treatment and conditions for the servant as for the Master. But it also, by the same token, means a growing assimilation of character. The disciple becomes more and more like his Master, and the grace, stature and dignity of the Son of God become progressively evident in the lives of those who thus walk with Him. Christ-likeness is the end-product of this holy identification.

147) 10:24-42

Three times, in the course of these verses, our Lord commands His disciples to fear not. Such words are never spoken in the Scriptures - or anywhere else for that matter - except in the context of the possibility of fear being present. And it is quite clear that in Christian discipleship of the sort that Jesus speaks of here there is the undoubted presence of much that, naturally speaking, we might fear and dread. For one thing, there is the discouragement, not to say desolation, that comes when the believer's witness is misunderstood so completely that it is attributed to the devil (25). To raise a gospel standard, even in the Church, is often to be branded as working against the Church's best interests and, worse still, to be thought extremist, eccentric or mad. And often for young people to bear witness in home or family is to open themselves to the charge of having been moved by hysteria, that they are "beside themselves" (was not this what Jesus' family said of Him?), and to have the hope expressed that they will soon 'get over' this unhealthy phase. This kind of pitying condescension and patronising can be deeply desolating, and it has sometimes dampened or even extinguished a true testimony and witness. And Jesus says, "Fear not. Keep at it. God will honour your testimony. Do not be afraid of misunderstanding. Your work is to reveal and make known what is at present hidden to them - the kingdom of God. It must be made known sooner or later, for truth will ultimately triumph (26, 27)." Here, then, is the challenge: over against the temptation to discouragement and desolation, the 'Fear not' of our Lord Jesus. Should that not be enough for us?

148) 10:24-42

Then there is the fear and dread that come when the pressures become great upon us (28). And the temptation is very real in such circumstances to tone down our witness, for safety's sake. We know little of this in our land today, thank God. But it is not inconceivable that Western Christians may yet be called to this kind of challenge, as believers certainly are in other parts of the world. And if Christian witness can be fulfilled only on pain of hurt, danger to life or limb, and even death, then we must not flinch or hesitate. Fear of hurt, persecution and even the loss of all our hopes, may be very real. But it is more fearful to disobey God than to lose life for His sake. Nothing that men can do to us can 'kill the soul'; that is sacrosanct from the bitter hatred of evil men. But God can destroy both body and soul in hell. He is the One to fear, not men! It is better to suffer the loss of all things, all earthly hopes, prospects, comforts, than to live with a conscience that has been violated by doing something we know has grieved and displeased God. That is the only thing that can really hurt us. If however the temptation to compromise is yielded to, and we fail to confess Him - well, Christ is very straight with us here: If we deny Him, He will deny us. This is not a question of 'paying us out', rather it is something basic and fundamental; denying Him does something to us, and makes us incapable of being acknowledged by Christ at the last. But the rewards and compensations of faithfulness are not in any doubt. Suffering for Christ's sake is fruitful, as 26 implies. The very suffering that faithful testimony elicits from the opposition of the world acts as a fertilizer for the Word we are seeking to sow in men's hearts, and the tears that persecution draws from our eyes and hearts water the Word and make it bear fruit. And in all the hazards experienced, the personal, guardian care of God is over us (29-31); we can trust Him to look after us; He will not fail. And in the end, final vindication. Well might Jesus say, "Fear not".

149) 11:1-15

We now come to a fresh section of Matthew's gospel, comprising chapters 11 and 12. It will be useful as a preliminary to look both at the main theme of the section and also at its connection with what has gone before it. In ch. 11, we have the record of a series of different reactions to Jesus - the perplexed (1-15), the unreasonable (16-19), the impenitent (20-24), the babes (25-30); and in ch. 12 we have argument and conflict with the Pharisees, and their plotting to destroy Jesus (14). Jesus withdraws (a highly significant act) and speaks of the gospel going to the Gentiles (18). The Pharisees accuse Him of being in league with the devil, and He warns them of the sin against the Holy Ghost, and of judgment. We see, then, that the theme of the section is men's reactions to Christ, with faith and unbelief, blessedness and offence. And this also links up with the sense of conflict that we have already seen in ch. 10, in the power of the gospel to divide men and families, and elicit opposition and persecution. Thus, in one real sense, this section proves to be a turning point in the gospel. The Kingdom has been announced by John (ch. 3), and by the words (chs 5-7) and deeds (chs 8, 9) of Jesus and His apostles (ch. 10). But Israel as a whole rejects it because of unbelief. This is very like Paul's presentation of the truth in Romans 9-11. And because they refuse and reject the gospel, it begins to turn to the Gentiles. What Matthew therefore wishes to stress here is the importance of making up one's mind about the gospel, and that there comes a time when it must be made up.

150) 11:1-15

Three differing interpretations have been placed upon this incident. At this time John was in prison, and had been for probably some considerable time (If 4:12), and it is thought by some that a dark prison mood had settled down on John's spirit, like Elijah under the Juniper tree, in which black doubts were assailing him about Jesus. This is the first interpretation, and a variation of it is that it was not so much a mood of depression that made John doubt as the fact that Jesus had turned out a different kind of Messiah than he had expected. Another interpretation held very widely by the early Fathers was that John himself was sure about Jesus, but that he wanted to convince his disciples that He was the Messiah. But this seems to be decisively negated by the fact that Jesus sent them back with the message, "Go and tell John...." A third interpretation is that John was only now coming to a firm faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and that what we see here is the dawning of faith in his soul. This also raises difficulties, notably with the other references in the gospels particularly in John, which seem to indicate that John did in fact know that Jesus was the Messiah (cf Whatever the interpretation, however, it John 1:29, 36). certainly represents an attitude of doubt, whether of faith wavering or of faith just beginning to form, and this is its significance for us, in relation to what Jesus says in answer to it. There are several reasons why John was in such a state of doubt and perplexity. For one thing, his ministry had lasted only a few short months, at the most, then suddenly and finally cut short and brought to an end. The voice in the wilderness had been silenced, and God had allowed it. Was not this mysterious? And would the mystery not be further accentuated by the fact that Christ Himself seems to have done nothing at all about it? John had heard of the mighty works Jesus had done, healing the sick, cleansing the leper, raising the dead. Was it beyond His power to set the prisoner free, especially such a prisoner? Besides, this Jesus was not fulfilling the prediction that he, John, had made concerning Him, as a coming Judge, with fan in hand. And where was the baptism of fire (cf Matt 3:11, 12)? There was so much John could not understand.

151) 11:1-15

There is much to learn from. Jesus' answer. He directs John's attention to His words and works, from which we may learn that the way to dispel doubt and come to faith is to consider the deeds and words of the Lord. This is the true biblical prescription and is echoed again and again in the Scriptures. Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God. As John puts it in his gospel. 'These (i.e. the deeds and words of Jesus) are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ....' (John 20:31). Furthermore, in this time of doubt, John was to consider again (4) these things. It was no new prescription, but a repetition of what he had already heard. The Word must be preached, heard, considered 'till faith shall dawn and doubt depart'. Notice also how Jesus speaks of His words and works. He couches the message in Messianic terms, and the words He uses are all filled with Messianic ideas (If Isa 29:18ff, 35:5ff, 61:1ff). It is as if He were saying, "What kind of Messiah were you thinking about, John? Is not this His work, that I am doing?" Jesus is doing here exactly what Peter did later on the day of Pentecost, when He said, "This (that you see today) is that (prophesied in the Old Testament). Can you not put two and two together, John, and see that I am He?" Now, Jesus did not answer the questionings in John's mind. There was no explanation of why he was left to languish in prison although after his disciples had left Jesus said something that indicated that that imprisonment was perhaps integral to the Divine purposes and was fruitful in the work of the Kingdom. And Jesus gave him no explanation for this reason: there are some things that will necessarily remain in the dark, some questions that will never be answered, some perplexities that will never be clear. But these are never real barriers to faith. There is always enough evidence for faith to dawn and doubt depart in the Word that is preached. What Jesus is saying to John and to us all is, "Even if there are things you cannot understand, trust Me, there is ample evidence for you to do that".

152) 11:16-19

Here is another kind of reaction to the gospel. Jesus compares His generation to children in the marketplace, playing at weddings and funerals. And they are complaining to one another that they would not play. It is a familiar scene: the children are tired and nothing will please them, the one thing or the other. The point of comparison here is obvious - the joyous and the solemn notes of the gospel. John had preached a searching, piercing summons to repentance, and the terrors of the unseen world had come upon men; but that generation of scribes and Pharisees had not responded. Christ, on the other hand, had proclaimed the wooing, tender grace of the gospel, its attractiveness, its wonder and glory, and still they had not responded. This is a very important point. Those who oppose and resist the gospel and continue in unbelief often tell themselves that they have good reasons for doing so. The message, they say, is too blunt and personal, or too light and unsubstantial, it is too emotional, or it is far above their heads intellectually - and so on. And, of course, it is always possible to find fault with the preacher. But it needs to be said that the real objection is not to the preacher but to what he stands for and - in spite of his faults - shows forth. It was the very men who had opposed John's ministry and objected to it as too severe that also opposed Jesus' message when it was gentle and full of grace. The truth is, says Jesus here, when men are opposed to the gospel, they will oppose it whatever way it is proclaimed to them. And not only so, when people do this, they are playing with the gospel, trifling with holy things. It is no idle game, when we are confronted with the claims of Christ, nor simply a matter of opinion, but of life or death.

153) 11:20-24

These verses follow inevitably upon those that precede them. There is a price to be paid for opposition to Christ, especially when it is as unreasonable as Chorazin's and Bethsaida's. For there most of His mighty works had been done, and these had been an invitation and a summons to men to repent and believe on Him. Again, as with John, Christ points to His works as the way to faith. It was this that Chorazin and Bethsaida had had opened to them, and they had refused it. What was there left them, but judgment? The explanation of their failure and refusal to repent is given in the AV as pride. Capernaum was exalted to heaven, lifted up in pride. This ultimately is always the issue. The gospel challenges the basic pride in every man, as it tells men they are in the wrong, and must humble themselves and take the lowly place. To so many, this is a death that they just will not die; it is too humbling and hurtful to human pride. And so they remain impenitent. What a terrible verdict on a human life - lost eternally because he is too proud to repent and take the lowly place. The RSV however takes 23a as a question, reading "And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven?" The meaning then would be, "If you do not repent, do you suppose that it will be all right with you in the end? If you refuse the King, can the Kingdom be yours?"

154) 11:25-30

The reference here is not to literal babes, but to the humble and lowly (elsewhere called 'little ones' and 'disciples') as contrasted with the 'wise and prudent', i.e. those who, like the Pharisees in their arrogance and pride refuse to repent. Here, then, is another possible reaction to the gospel - that of the simple-hearted. It may be wondered whether in this fourfold division of the chapter we may have a parallel to the parable of the sower with its record of different reactions to the seed of the Word. It is true that in any gathering of people, although there may be those who are perplexed, those that are frivolous, those that are opposed and impenitent, there will also be those who will hear the voice of the Son of God and respond with simple-hearted faith to His offer of salvation. It may be that the words of the great invitation (28-30) were spoken for such as these, and we doubt not but that they responded; but they reach out to the others also, for when He warns men of the danger of continued impenitence, He does not leave it there, but still invites them to come to Him, and promises rest of soul to those who do. The perplexed and doubting are encouraged to bring their doubts to Jesus, the perverse to bring their perversity to Him for healing, and the impenitent to let the warmth of His love melt the hard core of pride within them so that He might lead them into His rest. Each may come, with his different burden, and all will find the promised rest.

155) 12:1-13

This chapter continues the theme of the previous one - the conflict and opposition to the gospel which by this time were assuming sinister proportions. Two incidents are recorded in these verses, but before looking at them separately, we take them together, for Matthew seems to bring them together with a particular purpose in view. The story of the healing of the man with the withered hand is the key to the section in that it stands as a symbol of what our Lord could see all around Him. For the Pharisaic attitude to the Sabbath symbolised their religion, and Christ saw it as a withered thing. It was meant to be as a hand pledged to lift the burdens of the weary and lead them into rest, but instead it was shrivelled up and withered and powerless. And the presence of the man with the withered hand in the synagogue was itself an eloquent illustration of Pharisaic religion's helplessness to be what it was supposed to be - a source of life. And Christ's healing of the withered hand is a symbol of what He wanted to do for the religion of the Pharisees, to restore it to life and usefulness. And they would not be healed. They would not stretch forth the hand. And so, finally, He turned from them to the Gentiles (this is the significance of the quotation in 17). The other connection which the incident of the Sabbath has is with our Lord's words in 11:30, "My yoke is easy, and My burden is light", for these words are in sharp and striking contrast to the yoke of the Pharisees evidenced here in a barren and burdensome legalism about the keeping of the Sabbath day. The choice is between the learning of a system with innumerable rules and regulations, prohibitions and shibboleths, and learning of Christ in terms of a personal relationship, which is the secret of rest and life and peace.

156) 12:1-8

The Pharisees' criticism of the disciples for plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath illustrates and bears out what was said in yesterday's Note. It was a violation of the letter of the law which said that no work should be done of the Sabbath day. Our Lord's reply is significant. He refers them to the Scriptures and to the story of David in 1 Sam 21. Now it is important to realise that the point of the comparison is not to consider what David did on the Sabbath day, but what he did when he was hungry. The force of this is that it cannot be wrong to meet real human need on the Sabbath day, and that if doing so seems to break the letter of the law, in a far deeper sense it fulfils its real meaning. For the Sabbath was made for man - i.e. for his renewal, refreshment and blessing – not man for the Sabbath. There is nothing empty or meaningless about God's enactments; they have their purpose for the good of mankind. Hunger is as real on the Sabbath day as on any other, and must be met in just the same way as on other days. The law of the Sabbath was not given to deny or encumber the true needs of humanity, but to restrict man's sinful propensities; as a help and blessing, not bondage. So Jesus is challenging not only the legalism of the Pharisees' attitude, but also its inhumanity, as is seen very clearly from the Old Testament quotation in 7. He is indicating, in referring to these words that 'ritual correctness' has become in the Pharisees a hard, merciless thing, lacking in the milk of human kindness, a harsh, condemnatory spirit which in itself is a far greater violation of the law than anything the disciples had done in infringing its letter.

157) 12:9-13

The inhumanity of the Pharisees is highlighted in the most graphic and appalling way in the question they put to Jesus, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day?", asking it so that they might accuse him if He answered in the affirmative. With simple dignity He exposed them with His words in 11, "What man of you....?" In Mark's version (3:4) He is even more pointed: "To do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" They were actually plotting on the Sabbath day to kill Him; He was planning and purposing to heal. Which was the real fulfilment of the Sabbath? Here, then, is the crux of the matter – the inhumanity that strict observance of the law brought to these men's lives. Now, we must be clear about this. True religion does not make a man inhuman, but a perversion of it can, and often does. Nor does strictness in religion do so, although perverted strictness can and does. What we must realise is that somewhere, at some point along the line, the Pharisees took a wrong turning, that led them into inhumanity and harsh lovelessness. Is it possible to discover what and where that danger point is? Yes. It is when outward observance becomes a substitute for inward reality, when a form of godliness does duty for godliness itself. Putting on religion like a cloak is easier than putting on Christ, because dressing up the old man in religious garb is vastly easier than letting the new man emerge from the death-throes of the old. In other words, there are deaths that such men have refused to die - perhaps through ignorance of their very existence as challenges in the gospel, or perhaps, appalled by the cost of them as they faced them, because they said No. But this is always the way that the caricature of godliness appears. It is not that such men are over-religious: in the truest sense of the term, they are not nearly religious enough.

158) 12:9-13

The healing of the withered hand is a remarkable parable of human need. The man was unable to help himself; there was no power in his arm, and no will power of his could coerce it into movement. This is a picture of the soul dead in trespasses and sins. And Christ's command is an illustration of the gospel word. "Stretch forth thy hand" was a creative word. It was the one thing the man could not do, yet at Christ's command he did the impossible. And in the obeying, the miracle took place. Christ's command is His enabling; the summons of the gospel becomes the gift of grace. Virtue went forth with the word from His lips, and communicated itself to the man. The healing was in the word of the Lord. As Wesley accurately puts it,

'He speaks! and listening to His voice
New life the dead receive'.

This is the paradox of grace; the word of the gospel is a life-giving word, and this is why the preaching of it holds the place of supreme importance that it does in the New Testament. There is no healing, no life-giving power in Pharisaic religion, nor in anything so inhuman, barren and sterile. But it has pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. And faith, as Paul puts it in Romans 10:17, comes by hearing.

159) 12:14-21

The withdrawal of Jesus from the Pharisees, recorded here, is of deep significance, in that it indicates the withdrawal of grace and opportunity from these men. There comes a time when He sees it is useless to make further overtures to those who have deliberately and consistently hardened themselves in unbelief against Him. This is the fulfilment of His own word in the Sermon on the Mount (7: 6) about giving what is holy to the dogs and casting pearls before swine. He is rich in mercy, but men presume upon it at their peril. And so He turned to others, who would hear Him, and they inherited the blessing instead. But Jesus also withdrew Himself from them because He had no desire as yet for an open confrontation with them and deliberately provoke them: to conflict, since His time was not yet come. This reminds us that it was very much He Who 'called the tune' in the whole action of His public ministry; the initiative was always His. Not only so: His meek withdrawal and His desire to avoid publicity (16) through the miracles He performed was in conformity with the character of God's ideal Servant as portrayed in Isaiah 42:1ff, which Matthew quotes. This emphasis, which depicts the unobtrusiveness of our Lord's work, rather than spectacle or notoriety, rings strangely in modern ears that itch for the exciting and the dramatic, and challenges us to ask ourselves whether the desire for great things that dazzle and dumbfound may not perhaps be the measure of how unsure we are of ourselves in the work of the gospel. How little willing we are to allow our Lord to work gently and unostentatiously, or to recognize gentle and unostentatious work as being His!

160) 12:22-27

The contrast between faith and unbelief continues throughout the remainder of the chapter. The healing of the demon-possessed man (22) who was blind and dumb prompts the observation that this was in a different category from, e.g. the healing of blind Bartimaeus (who had no demon), and reminds us not only that the New Testament makes a distinction between physical disease and demonic, but also that demon-possession is by no means confined to conditions with mental symptoms. The miracle produced a reaction of amazement in the people, and awakened a hope and a dawning faith and realisation that Jesus was the promised Messiah. "Is not this the Son of David?" This, of course, is precisely the reaction that His miracles were meant to evoke, as we have already seen. And it is against such a background of faith struggling to form in those hearts that we must see the reaction of the Pharisees, and its seriousness. For they immediately took steps to negate and crush any possible dawning of faith in the people by suggesting that the power by which Jesus performed His miracles was from Satan, not God (24). This led to Christ uttering some of the sternest and most solemn words recorded in the New Testament. Consider the terrible and dastardly thing these Pharisees were doing undermining and interfering with and attempting to undo the work of the Spirit in men's hearts. Just how serious this is may be gathered from what Jesus says about the danger of committing the unpardonable sin. The sin of undermining the Spirit's work in men's hearts is not in itself the sin against the Holy Ghost for which there is no forgiveness. But it may be associated with it, and lead to it; and it is a measure of its seriousness that it is associated with it here. The Apostle Paul, before his conversion, would have done anything to hinder souls from coming to Christ, so opposed to the gospel was he. But, as he says, "I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly and in unbelief" (1 Tim 1:13). And the difference between him and the Pharisees here is that their sin had already progressed beyond the point where there was ignorance in it; their attitude had become one of pure malignity and implacable opposition to Him. This was the danger of their position.

161) 12:24-30

In answering the Pharisees' appalling charge, Jesus first of all exposes the unreason of their unbelief. If He were casting out devils by the prince of the devils, this would mean civil war in the kingdom of evil, and would be an indication that that kingdom was breaking up. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? Not that this clear and obvious observation would avail to make them see the error of their ways, for they were hardened in their unbelief, and not amenable to reasonable argument. The only alternative to their interpretation is that He is casting out devils by the Spirit of God. And this Jesus compares to entering into a strong man's house and spoiling his goods. The metaphor is a very striking one, but it is also very profound and comprehensive, and describes our Lord's work in the gospel. The world is the strong man's house, the kingdom of Satan (which the apostle John says 'lieth in the wicked one' and which Satan himself said to Jesus was in his power to give Him, Matt 4). Jesus is 'the stronger than he' (Luke 11:22) who enters that house and kingdom, in His Incarnation, and who by His spotless life, His resistance of temptation in the wilderness, and above all in the cross, binds the strong man, the devil, then spoils his house. This is the gospel - the breaking into the dark prison house, and the setting free of the prisoners on the ground of the binding of their goaler (cf Col 2:15). The word of Christ's cross is a liberating word. It was as a great Liberator that He stood among men, and every miracle He performed was an evidence of His power to set men free from sickness, disease, demons, and death itself. And it was in the face of this that these men were committing the final blasphemy. The finger of God was at work, but they had no eyes to see it. The captives of the mighty were being delivered, and they thought Jesus had a devil!

162) 12:31-37

Having made plain to them the nature of His work, and the meaning of His coming, Jesus then gives the warning about blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, for which there is never forgiveness. This is admittedly a difficult and complex question, which has proved hard to interpret clearly. But if kept strictly in its context, it will be seen to have to do with the attitude of implacable opposition of heart against Christ which makes men attribute His works to the devil. Let us think again of Saul of Tarsus. He was finally converted, and of course did not commit this sin. But if he had not been converted, if he had persisted in his opposition and unbelief, he might have become unconvertible. That would have meant the sin against the Holy Ghost - the deliberate and settled malice and opposition of a heart that finally refused all appeals of the Spirit of God. It is no longer a sin of ignorance, but sin against light and knowledge. This is what the Apostle refers to, surely, in Hebrews 10: 26, 27, "If we sin wilfully...." - the final opposition of the will against God and His Christ and His gospel. This is the point to which these men were fast moving; they were in danger of placing themselves beyond the reach of mercy. This is the ultimate blasphemy - to close all doors finally against the gospel. We see, then, that it is not a specific sin that Jesus is referring to - and this should be a comfort and assurance to all tender and sensitive consciences that suffer agonies of apprehension and dread when they reach such words as these - but, a state of sin and that state a wilful opposition to the present power of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, even at this late stage, Jesus does not say that they had committed it, but warns them of its danger. This is the force of His words in 33. "Don't attribute good fruit to a corrupt tree (the reference is to the healing of the demon possessed man). Recognise the unreasonableness and absurdity of your attitude, and turn while yet you may".

163) 12:38-42

The demand for a sign was one that must necessarily be refused by Jesus. They had had so many signs - His signs and wonders had been designed to lead to faith, and would have led to faith, if they had had any will to believe. But this was a demand in its very nature impossible, and for this reason: to have faith means that you submit yourself, and give over your independent existence, to Christ; it is to burn your boats, to give yourself away. Only then is it possible to enter into the kingdom of God. But this kind of demand, for an unmistakeable proof that would make faith unnecessary, means, deep down, that we want the kind of knowledge and conviction and assurance that come only by making this surrender, without making that surrender. And it is impossibility. It is the desire to be a Christian without being a Christian, to have the benefits and blessings of Christian experience without making the commitment which alone enables one to enter these blessings. It is true that one seeks as much evidence as possible on which to make up one's mind about the gospel and about Christ; but there comes a time when not only no more evidence is needed, but no more is possible, and the only thing left to do is to make that committal, and taste and see that the Lord is good. When this point is reached, and still a man does not enter in, then we must conclude that there is no will, desire or intention to be converted. But there is another point. People who ask for this kind of unmistakeable sign are really asking God to reveal Himself openly and directly. They do not know what they ask. For God to do this would mean the end of the world. As C.S. Lewis puts it, "When the author walks on to the stage, the play is over". Such a sign would be no good to them, least of all would it help them to faith; indeed, the opposite, for it would be too late then for them to choose. The revelation would simply show which side they had already chosen, and they would be confirmed in their unbelief.

164) 12:38-42

Our Lord's reply to the demand for a sign is full of significance and meaning. On the one hand, He refused them a sign; on the other, He promised them one. And both these things are connected. They had no will to believe on Him; indeed, they were so set against Him that they were bent on crucifying Him. And yet, mysteriously, that death He was to die would constitute a sign to them - and this in fact was the only sign that could have influenced them. And it did, so far as some of them were concerned, as we see from Acts, following Pentecost. So that we see, even at this critical stage, the appeal of mercy, and the open gate, for these evil men. Yet Jesus did not hold out much hope of them in general, as may be gathered from His reference to the Judgment Day. And the basis of their judgment was their failure to repent. The people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, the Queen of Sheba came from afar to hear the wisdom of Solomon, but this generation had failed to do either, although a greater than Jonah or Solomon had appealed to them. If outsiders responded to partial light and found grace thereby, what excuse could there be for those who were within the covenants of promise for failing to respond to the Light of the world? As John puts it, "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

165) 12:43-45

We pass now from unwillingness to believe to incomplete or partial belief. Jesus had said earlier (30), "He that is not with Me is against Me", and His words here seem to be connected with and to amplify the earlier statement. This generation had been influenced by the preaching of John and Jesus. In this sense the 'house' had been swept and garnished, and the demon cast out. But this had been only a momentary impression, no more. And the 'house' had remained empty; it had never been taken over by a new power, and therefore the demon had returned with reinforcements, and the last stage was worse than the first. This teaches the danger of an imperfect and partial religious reformation. He that is not 'with Me' is 'against Me', and 'with Me' means more than sympathetic interest or benevolent neutrality, which indicate no more than that the 'house' is swept and garnished, but empty. It has not been re-occupied by a new tenant. And therefore this will lead to repossession by the old powers. Neutrality, or partial commitment, can only lead to a worse state than before. This may be the lesson that is taught by the solemn words in Hebrews 6:4 ff about tasting the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, then falling away. And what was true of that generation is also true of individuals, as we may see from the parable of the sower in the next chapter, where the sowing showed good promise but in three of the four instances had fulfilment, representing a negative religion, empty and unpossessed by the Spirit of God. It must be all or nothing with Jesus. He is essentially an extremist.

166) 12:46-50

A word about the background of these verses seems necessary. Why did Jesus' mother and brothers come? It was out of solicitude for Him (see Mark 3:21), thinking He was beside Himself, and fearing He might have got Himself into trouble with these men; they were alarmed and concerned for His safety, and desired to protect Him from them - and from Himself. This constitutes a most subtle challenge in the realm of discipleship in the kingdom of God. "Those whose intentions towards us are best are the most dangerous to us when their intentions are merely human. How often, alas, are a man's foes those of his own household; his friends who love him best, become in their worldliness his worst enemies. They drag him down from the heights of sacrifice to the vulgar, the contentious, the commonplace" (Farrar). This was the temptation that assailed Jesus here - we can imagine how fierce it was and He thrust it away. Here is faith assailed by unbelief when the unbelief is the most painful to bear. The kingdom of God cannot be established on natural lines. The only relationship He recognizes is that of a common obedience to God. This is hard for relatives to bear but of course there is an answer to the heartbreak it brings - they too can enter a life of obedience to the will of God! It is hard for those who take such a stand of obedience too, for true discipleship never makes us less tender or loving in natural relationships (if we become so in the course of our obedience to God something has gone wrong), but more so. But if the cost is great, the compensation is ineffable, for consider the dignity Christ confers on those who do the Father's will. They are His brothers and sisters and mother. What fellowship this affords, and what a family it brings us into!

167) 13:1-23

This chapter brings us to the third teaching section of Matthew's gospel (the first being chs 5-7, the second ch.10). It is the central one, there being five altogether, and therefore probably marks the central point of the gospel. Also it marks a difference from the others, in that here Jesus first teaches the crowds, then leaves them and goes into a house, where He explains the parables to His disciples. Thus, at this point in the story, there is a break, in which there is a turning away from the multitudes, and a concentration on the disciples. This is significant in itself, for it helps us to understand the mysterious and perplexing words of Jesus in 10-17, where we are told that the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled in those who have not believed in Jesus. It is in fact at this point that we must begin the study of the parables of the kingdom recorded in this chapter, in order to grasp the real significance of what Jesus is saying. For He spoke in parables, not, as we might suppose, to make His message clearer to those who heard it, but to conceal it from them. Matthew indicates that the preaching in parables is a punishment upon Israel because of their blindness. If 13 stood alone, without 12 before it and 14 following it, we might conceivably take it to mean that because they did not see or understand, Jesus used parables in order to bring light and understanding to them. But 12 is very plain; it speaks of something being taken away from those who do not have. It was not given to them to believe, and therefore the possibility of believing was also taken away. And the only point of the 'quote' from Isaiah 6 is just this judicial blindness coming upon the people because of their sin. And if there were any doubt about this interpretation, the parallel passage in Mark 4:11 settles the matter beyond controversy (cf also Luke 19:42 ff). What we see, then, in this chapter is a withdrawing of the Saviour who has been spurned, and a judicial blindness beginning to come down upon those who had done so.

168) 13:3-8, 18-23

The interpretation which Jesus Himself places upon the parable of the sower must be regarded as definitive and conclusive for us. And He makes it plain that it is 'a parable about the hearing of His message, an appeal to His hearers to take heed how they heard, to ask themselves which sort of soil they were, which sort of reception they were giving to His message, an appeal to them to be good soil, not merely to hear the Word with their ears and then forget, but to allow it to penetrate right down into their hearts, to keep it and cleave to it, and to let it reign supreme in their lives' (Cranfield). This, undoubtedly, is its central message. But it also indicates in general terms a number of other lessons about the work of the gospel. For one thing, it indicates that there is such a thing as failure in gospel work, in the sense that there are those who will not respond to its message. And we need not necessarily assume that when our witness has not prevailed, it is because of some defect or failure in us. Christ Himself had His failures, in this sense (of the rich young ruler); there were some places where He could do no mighty work because of their unbelief. For another thing, we learn that the harvest in the end is great; but it is only in the end it is seen to be so. In the meanwhile there seems so much failure and ineffectiveness. This is something to remember when we tend to become discouraged at the seeming insignificance of the work of the gospel. The ransomed Church of God will be a great multitude which no man can number; the roll of God's elect will be made up as planned, never fear, and His purposes will all be fulfilled. Furthermore, we may learn from Jesus' words that persistent lack of success in His work is finally crowned by a great and mighty harvest, for God's words shall not return to Him void (Isa 55:11), but shall accomplish that which He pleases and prosper in the thing whereto He sent it.

169) 13:3-8, 18-23

The central message of the parable of the sower concerns the hearing of Jesus' message, and this once again underlines the primacy of the ministry and preaching of the Word. The seed is the word, and this is the weapon God has placed in the Church's hands for the work of His kingdom. This is how He speaks to men and effects moral and spiritual transformation in their hearts and lives (cf 1 Pet 1:23, James 1:18). If, then, what is being sown is a living, life-giving word, surely one would expect the harvest to be inevitable and unerring. But no; three times we are told that this precious, life-giving seed came to grief and bore no fruit. This is mystery indeed. Some seed fell by the wayside, on ground that was hard and firm, made so by the trampling of many feet, ground that no ploughshare had ever touched; and by-and-by the birds of the air came and picked up the seed and no harvest was possible. And, says Jesus, there are human hearts like that wayside, hearts which no good seed has ever penetrated, that the grace of God seems to have been powerless to influence, hearts from which the evil one has ever snatched the living seed. They have listened to the words of eternal life, but have never understood (19); it has all been, in the deepest sense, unintelligible, and even uninteresting. The gospel has been hid to them, and it has been hid because they are lost (2 Cor 4:3). And the realities of the unseen world have been ignored by them because this world has so taken possession of them that every receptive quality has been deadened in them. The heart has been exposed as a common road to every evil influence of the world until it has become as hard as a pavement. Some seed fell by the wayside!

170) 13:3-8, 18-23

In the case of the seed falling on stony ground, it is not a question of stubborn resistance to the truth, but of a superficial reception of it, which gives it no real chance to take root. As an example of this we may instance those mentioned in John 2:23 ff who believed in Jesus, but whose profession did not impress Jesus. Later, they turned back and walked no more with Him (John 6:66); similarly the crowds who sang 'Hosanna to the Son of David' cried only a week later, 'crucify Him'. When the word is not allowed to go deep down, all is in vain. The 'sun' is interpreted here as tribulation or persecution. The point is that the sun always arises on growing grain, and the implication is surely that tribulation and persecution are an inevitable part of christian experience. The growth has therefore got to be of a quality that will withstand these, and make capital out of them, so that the life-giving power will not be death to it. And, mysteriously - or perhaps not - the same sun that scorches and withers the rootless grain brings the deep-rooted to fruition and harvest. Only what takes root downward will bear fruit upward. This is the sad and melancholy story of many lives. The soil is not deep enough to allow of any real growth.

171) 13:3-8, 18-23

The third category in the parable speaks of seed sown in soil that appeared to be clean, but was full of thorn seeds, which later grew up and choked the good seed. The thorns in the interpretation are the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches. Spiritual life and fruitfulness as a possibility is choked by the things of this life, its burdens and its pleasures, both of which militate against that basic trust which commits all to Christ. This world's empty glory can cost too dear; to have a foot in both worlds will never do in the Christian life. In the case of Felix the governor (Acts 24:24ff, these thorns took up the room that the word required, and ousted it against a more convenient season that never came. Now, thorns do not require to be cultivated, and it is often not the cultivation of certain such things that causes the trouble in spiritual life, but simply neglect of what happens already to be present in it. The gardener has only to neglect his flower-beds for a little time in high summer to court horticultural disaster, and the believer has only to lose his watchful spirit for a little time to jeopardise the fruits of months or even years of patient discipline. If we have an eye to the ultimate harvest, is any risk of this nature really worth taking? If it is better to pluck out an eye than to be in danger of hell fire, is it not better to pluck up ruthlessly the weeds that spring up from the old nature or are planted by the devil, and have done with them, so as to give the seeds of God's planting the opportunity to grow as He intends?

172) 13:3-8, 18-23

The seed falling into good ground represents those who hear the word and understand it, as Mark says (4:20). To understand and receive the word is not only to acknowledge in our hearts its 'rightness' and its authority, but also to submit to that authority, and allow its sharp and pointed challenge to do its gracious work in us, however painful it may be. Someone has well expressed this as follows: "Christianity means a life in which we expose our whole existence at every point to the cutting edge, the trenchant judgment, the drastic operation of God's word to us in Christ, a word which as 'living' is incompatible with stagnation and death, and as 'active' gets things done". But what are we to say about the different measures of fruitfulness, hundred-fold, sixty-fold, thirty-fold? Must it not surely mean that even within the context of fruitfulness there are some lives more fruitful than others? One scholar speaks of 'different grades of disciples' and quotes Jesus' words about those who are called least and those great in the kingdom of heaven. Another comments that while the fact of fruit will follow from the preparation of the soil, the measure of the fruit will follow from the nourishing and culture of the plants. There is a difference between lovely garden flowers grown for the pleasure of the home and prize-winning blooms nursed and tended with particular care for the flower-show. If we have an eye on the prize, we must have one track minds, and give our growing absolute priority over everything else.

173) 13:24-30, 36-43

As with the parable of the sower so also with that of the wheat and the tares, we have an authoritative interpretation from the lips of our Lord Himself, which must be our basis for a true understanding of it. The general idiom of the parable - the sowing of seed - is the same as in the story, but there are both differences and developments. In the first place, the seed is the word, but here it is the children of the kingdom. This is an inevitable development from the first, as a little thought will make clear; for the good seed of the word brings forth the children of the kingdom (cf 1 Pet 1:23). What is the world in which this seed is sown? Paul says, "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth together in pain until now". Christ plants His children in such a world, and gives them a job to do, a ministry of compassion and pity for the weary and heavy-laden, the tempted and tried, bringing the mercy and grace of God to the lost, the fallen, the broken. And He sows His people in the world for the purpose of reaping a harvest among such. The teaching of the parable is that wherever the children of the kingdom are set to do good and work for Christ, evil will be present and tares will be sown. The existence of tares is inevitable in any real work of God, for it is the real wheat that draws the enemy and his seed. It is important for us to realise this. It is a mistake to interpret the fact that it was while men slept that the tares were sown as an evidence of carelessness on the servants' part. They may well have been careless; but it is the stealth and craft of the enemy that is stressed, not their failure. Wherever the good seed is sown, the enemy is around, and this applies to the children of the kingdom and the seed of the word alike, whether on the mission-field or at home or in the human heart.

174) 13:24-30, 36-43

The significance of our Lord's rejoinder to the servants' question, when he said, "Let both grow together until the harvest" is very considerable, and merits careful study. It is well known that the parable has been a battle-ground between those who seek to achieve the ideal of a pure church and those who do not believe it is possible to have a pure church on earth. Those who hold the latter view take the parable, with its exhortation, as supporting their contention. Those who advocate the former maintain that the parable does not refer to the church at all, and cannot therefore be cited in favour or otherwise. But this is to misunderstand the passage. Jesus does say that it is a parable of the kingdom, and it therefore must have to do with the church. As Trench points out, the seed is sown in the world, and then that becomes the sphere of His kingdom. The parable consequently does have a clear word to say in warning to those who are too ready to separate from congregations and denominations on the ground of the existence of tares among the wheat of God's planting.

But there are several lessons to be drawn from our Lord's rejoinder. For one thing, it teaches us that the work of the kingdom has to be done in the context of the evil, and often in the teeth of it, in competition with it. And the assurance of the ultimate vindication and triumph of the good does not lessen or alter the fact that the strife will often be fierce and the battle long. And this is so because evil is left in the world unchecked until it reaches its full stature, being given its head and drawn out to the full, so that it might the more effectively and completely be destroyed. To root out the tares before the appointed time would mean that this would be only half done.

175) 13:24-30, 36-43

Prefacing the words "Let both grow together...." is this: "Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them". This reminds us that Christ's supreme concern is for His harvest, and to do as the servants suggested might harm or even imperil the harvest. Do we not feel the throb of the heart of God in this, His compassion for those who might yet be saved? He is sure enough that the good wheat will survive the existence of the evil as perhaps it would not survive the pulling up of the tares. The presence of the evil is not such a great danger to the harvest as the risk attached to pulling up the tares would be. In this connection we should note something significant. The idea behind pulling up wheat by mistake is that it might be difficult to distinguish it from the tares. And yet, at the beginning the servants could see that tares had been sown; so they were recognisable. Is there contradiction here? Thielicke finely observes that what this suggests is that the tares of the evil one, the godless, the impenitent, are never merely the godless and the impenitent, but also behind the godlessness and impenitence are unhappy, misguided, erring souls for whom Christ died. Ah, says Christ, do not risk pulling up the wheat with the tares, removing the wheat from the world. The world needs it. What is more, as Augustine says, "What are tares today might be wheat tomorrow". To anticipate judgment day would be to bring all hope of repentance and faith to an end. Is that what we want?

176) 13:31, 32

The next parable, that of the mustard seed, and the one that follows, that of the leaven, have a common theme, namely the contrast between the beginning and the fruition of the gospel. There are two differing and opposing ways of interpreting them. Some take both the mustard seed and the leaven in a bad sense: the picture of the great tree with the birds of the air sheltering in its branches is taken to represent a false church, coming into a great but unsubstantial place in the earth (with the fowls of the air proving it to be an insecure refuge, as in Dan 4: 20-22); and the leaven is understood as the entrance of corruption working secretly in the church to produce ultimately an apostate church. There is some ground for such an interpretation, to be sure: the growth of the mustard seed into a great shrub is evidence of unnatural growth, and the growth of the church into a vast, unwieldy organisation often lacking in real vitality seems to be reflected in it; leaven is uniformly a symbol of evil elsewhere in the Scriptures. Besides, to think of the gospel as permeating all society and converting the world to Christ is against the teaching of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, there are serious objections to this view of the parables. Even granting the contention that the vast organisation we know as the church is an unnatural growth, and that the world will never be converted by the gospel, we are still not obliged to come to the above conclusions. For one must recognise that Jesus does say that it is the kingdom of heaven, not a false kingdom, that is like a mustard seed. The parable describes, and says something about, the true kingdom, not a false one. And He does say that it is the kingdom of heaven, not the principle of corruption that is like leaven. This should be decisive in indicating our interpretation of His words.

177) 13:31, 32

It is instructive to look at the progression of the parables in this chapter. That of the sower counteracts any falsely optimistic view of gospel work, reminding us there is such a thing as failure in the sowing of the seed; that of the tares reminds us that there are great obstacles and oppositions facing us in the work of Christ, that there are no ideal conditions, and that the work has often to be done in the teeth of the fiercest competition. But now that of the mustard seed teaches us that failures, oppositions and difficulties notwithstanding, the seed is, after all, a living thing and, small and insignificant as it may seem, it has within itself the virtue and power to issue in a blessed and extensive fruitfulness. And the point about the illustration is not the size of the tree that emerges, but the greatness of the contrast between the smallness of the seed and what it becomes. In fact, the mustard tree is not the greatest of trees, and not even if it grew unnaturally large would it be so. The point Jesus is making is not that His church will grow into the biggest tree in the forest, but that from small and insignificant beginnings it grows and develops into something which by contrast is immeasurably great. "The inevitability of growth from what appears a very small beginning to a result seemingly out of all proportion to it is the truth set forth in the parable of the mustard seed" (Tasker). And it is a truth imbedded in the fundamental principles of the gospel itself: the babe of Bethlehem is the seed of God cast into the soil of this pitiless world which confounds the mighty, breaks down empires and leads men into captivity to the obedience of Christ. The crucified Saviour, object of shame, reproach and contempt to the world, foolishness to the Greeks and stumbling-block to the Jews, is the repository of all divine power. The weakness and foolishness of preaching reaps an incalculable harvest for God.

178) 13:33

The parable of the leaven shares common ground, as we have seen, with that of the mustard seed, but it has of course its own particular insights. For one thing, it stands as a complement, indeed contrast, to the mustard seed. Jesus indicates that disciples are to have a twofold function as the light of the world and the salt of the earth. The parable of the mustard seed corresponds to the idea of direct influence, as light in the world, whereas that of the leaven corresponds to the indirect influence of the salt of the earth acting as a leaven, so to speak, in society. The gospel has, in fact, this other influence in the world, as well as the direct one of winning men to Christ. There are those in society who will never respond to His claims, but society is influenced for all that and in spite of itself by the presence of the saving gospel in its midst. It has been known in times of spiritual awakening for the whole moral and spiritual tone of a community to be raised and cleansed by the impact of the truth of God. The gospel is a living thing, and has the power of penetrating a foreign mass in such a way as to permeate the whole with its influence. But the parable has another insight also: it underlines the hiddenness of the kingdom's working. Leaven is not only insignificant, like mustard seed; it is hidden and invisible in its working, as the mustard seed is not in its growth, and its operation is not evident to the eyes of men. Only in the end does its influence appear. This is as true for the individual as for society. The seed of the word planted in a man's heart often acts like a hidden leaven, by which the slow, gradual and effective transformation of his whole being takes place, in the mystery of regeneration. This hiddenness calls for faith on our part. We must learn to believe that God is at work. The kingdom of God cometh not with observation. But His word shall not return unto Him void.

179) 13:44-46

The next two parables, that of the pearl of great price and of the hidden treasure, are open to the same kind of difference in interpretation as that of the mustard seed and the leaven. And the same group of expositors who take the mustard seed and leaven in a bad sense generally take the merchant and the farmer in these next two parables to refer to Christ, and the pearl and the treasure to the church for which He died. In support of this interpretation it is pointed out, "The field is defined (38) as the world; the seeking sinner does not buy, but forsakes the world to win Christ; furthermore, the sinner has nothing to sell; nor is Christ for sale; nor is He hidden in a field; nor, having found Christ, does the sinner hide Him again". But in fact, the field is not necessarily the world in this parable. The symbols are different in different parables - the seed is the word in the first parable, but the children of the kingdom in the second - nor is it necessary to interpret the parables (if we differ from the above view) as teaching that a man 'buys' salvation or has anything to 'sell' in order to procure salvation. It must be insisted once again that it is the kingdom of heaven itself that is said to be like the pearl and the treasure. And the interpretation which follows this plain lead, taking both the man and the merchant as the individual who finds salvation in Christ, is both satisfying and scriptural, and can be shown to be in harmony with the rest of Scripture and the doctrine of the gospel and of salvation. Here, then, are two parables, which stress the individual aspect of the gospel, the individual's relation to the gospel, and what the gospel can mean to the individual. As one commentator puts it, they speak of 'the offer and cost of citizenship in the kingdom of heaven'.

180) 13:44-46

The first lesson from the two parables comes from a consideration of the difference between the two men in them, and it is this: sometimes a man can find the joy and wonder of the gospel of salvation without searching and looking for it, stumbling upon it unexpectedly, so to speak, being overtaken by the grace of God, after a history of indifference, even hostility, to spiritual things. Sometimes, on the other hand, another man may find the way of salvation only after long search and as the fulfilment of long yearning and seeking, being led on step by step from one position to another into the full light of the gospel. The Philippian jailer is an example of the first, Cornelius the centurion of the second. Some have thought that there may be a hint here about the contrast between Gentile and Jew in their respective experience of salvation (cf Rom 9:30, 31). The sudden, unexpected discovery of grace can take place in the most unexpected and unlikely circumstances. 'A field under the plough is not a likely place to find treasure' (R S Wallace), and it is sometimes in entirely unlikely places that the miracle of grace is wrought. Likewise, it is often a most unexpected thing for this to happen in the house of God in the sense that the 'foolishness of preaching' is to the eyes of the world a most unlikely and unhopeful method and means for life-transforming events to take place. Even a 'dud' sermon can be the 'field' in which a man may stumble upon the treasure of the gospel!

181) 13:44-46

We note next the terms in which Christ speaks of the kingdom of heaven. It is spoken of as treasure, as a pearl of great price, something incalculably precious and wonderful, beyond all our wildest dreams. It is the greatest thing in the world. This is something that needs to be emphasised; the way some people oppose and resist and despise the blessed gospel one would imagine they were being sentenced to some terrible doom to have to be converted and born again, and that the gospel sounded the death-knell of all their hopes. No one has seen the gospel aright who conceives it in terms of some restriction on life. The rich young ruler did not understand it aright when he went away sorrowful: his mind was on the cost of discipleship, and he missed the all-important reality that Jesus had called him to Himself. In the 'Follow Me', he was being offered ultimate beatitude, and he missed it, foolish and benighted man that he was! There is a cost involved, for all that, in the kingdom of God. It is true that we cannot pay for the kingdom or earn it in any way, nor can we bargain with God for it. But there is a price to be paid for the blessings of God's salvation. It costs a man all he has. This is what Jesus says here. If we are going to grasp the pearl of great price we need to do it with empty hands. We must let go everything else in order to be able to do so. This is exactly what Paul means in Phil 3:7 ff, "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ; yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ..." He had to loosen his hold on all these riches, these other pearls that he prized, in order to win and gain Christ. This is the price of the kingdom, in the sense Jesus means in the parables. One last thought: the two men were probably in very different financial circumstances, the one wealthy, the other not. But both were able to pay: the price was not beyond the reach of either. For the cost in both cases was the letting go of all possessions. The kingdom can be gained by any man, no matter what his circumstances, if only he will let go. The one condition is to be wholeheartedly eager for it.

182) 13:47-50

The last parable in the series concerns final judgment, reminding us that it will not be all the same in the end, that it will affect us eternally what we do with the seed of the gospel. It teaches that a final judgment will be made on the response men make to the message of the kingdom, and as such it forms the necessary climax to each of the previous parables. There are real points of similarity between this parable and that of the wheat and the tares, particularly in its teaching on the mixed nature of the church and the kingdom. But it is not a mere repetition of the earlier parable, which stresses the present intermixture of good and bad; here, it is the future separation of good and bad that is in view. In the one, we are warned that the separation is not to be done by men; in the other it is insisted that this separation will be done, and by God. In the one, the kingdom and the world are, so to speak, side by side; in the other, not only is the net taken out of the sea, signifying a separation of the kingdom from the world, outwardly, but also another separation takes place within the net itself, between the good and the bad. That which is gathered into the net, says Jesus, i.e. the visible church, is to be regarded as a mixed body. And with whatever care gospel work is done, this will always be true. Membership of the visible church, therefore, whether entered by profession of faith, adult baptism, or any other means, is not to be automatically equated with a place in the kingdom of God. As Calvin says, "Christ warns us in this parable that it is not enough to be gathered into the fold unless we are His true and chosen sheep". Another commentator points out that the chapter begins with a parable about the acceptance or rejection of the word of God by the souls of men, and ends with a parable about the acceptance or rejection of the souls of men by God. Well might Jesus say, "Who heath ears to hear, let him hear" (43)!

183) 13:51-57

The words with which Jesus concludes His series of parables may be taken to refer to all of them, although they have particular point in relation to the last. Let us ask ourselves, in the light of what was said in yesterday's Note, whether we realise that it is possible for us to be in the church without being in Christ, to perform many of the outward observances of religion and still not be in a state of grace. It is very striking that the chapter finishes with a contrast drawn between the belief of the disciples (51) and the unbelief of those of Jesus' own 'country', Nazareth, where people were offended with Him because they thought Him proud and arrogant in the claims He made for Himself. Matthew records this for us with set purpose, as if to underline and exemplify the earlier words in 10-15 about judicial blindness coming upon men for their resistance of the truth. Here, then, on the one hand, as the disciples, those who understand. And for them life is going to be fruitful, for they are going to teach aright the mysteries of the kingdom to others, teaching things new and old - the old eternal verities that have been since the world began (52), the things that cannot be shaken, and yet blazing with new life in their baptism into the new covenant; and the new things, the gospel, not contradicting, but fulfilling the old. On the other hand, there are those who did not believe, His own people. They are the stony ground, the tares, the bad fish, and it is as if Jesus were saying: "This is not just a theory I am propounding, but something that can be seen, in visible, concrete form, in the persistent unbelief of men. And - this is the solemn, frightening thing - Jesus did no mighty work among them because of their unbelief. Having refused to own His Messiahship, they had His blessings withdrawn from them. Taking the attitude expressed in the first parable, that of the sower, they end by having the attitude of the last adopted against them. They rejected Him; and therefore He rejected them. Faith or unbelief: this is the challenge and the choice.

184) 14:1-12

This chapter brings us to a further new section of Matthew's presentation of the gospel, mainly narrative (chs 14-17), which, it would seem, is meant to be an extension of the implications of the previous section, which dealt with faith and unbelief, response and resistance to the gospel. We now see the further development of this twofold pattern in the lives of individuals and groups. On the one hand, we see the disciples being led on steadily into the full light of faith, the process culminating in Peter's great confession at Caesarea Philippi; on the other hand, we see the growing and deepening antagonism and blindness and opposition of the scribes and Pharisees. On the one hand, the responsiveness of those outwith the Jewish race, on the other, the unbelief of the privileged, chosen people. Such is the general outline of the section, and it begins with the story of King Herod, which is of a piece with the general teaching as a whole, for it portrays a man who had wilfully resisted the claims of the kingdom upon his soul. As was remarked in yesterday's Note, the possibility of resistance and rejection that was the theme of the parables of the kingdom is something that can be seen working out in the lives and experience of men. And this is surely the force of the story about Herod, for it shows in a particularly graphic way the manner in which the evil heart of unbelief grips a man, and finally leads him on to darkness and loss.

185) 14:1-12

Matthew's story begins with the statement that Herod heard of the fame of Jesus and that he seems to have had a moment of blind terror at the thought that this was John the Baptist, whom he had executed, come back from the dead. Then he explains to us why that moment of terror should have gripped the king, and tells of the circumstances of John's execution, which had obviously taken place sometime earlier. The evidence of the Scriptures and of the literature of the time is sufficient to indicate the kind of life Herod lived. Early history said of him that he was 'cruel, scheming, vacillating, utterly evil', a luxurious profligate, living a life of sensuality and indulging every whim and passion, as see in the record here of the carousal that was his birthday party. Yet, it seems clear that he had come under the influence of John. There is a hint of this in 3-5, and it is even more explicit in the parallel account in Mark 6:14 if (especially 17, 20). A comparison of the two accounts make it seem at the first glance that Matthew and Mark are saying two different things about the king, for Matthew indicates that he wanted to put John to death, but did not, for fear of the people, while Mark suggests that he put him in prison to keep him safe from Herodias' hatred. But the contradiction is only apparent: both statements are true, for Herod both wanted and did not want to put him to death. And this strange, contradictory attitude is described explicitly in Mark 6:20, which the RSV renders "When he heard him, he was much perplexed, yet he heard him gladly". It is common for people to react in this way to the gospel word, and be pulled in two directions at the same time. Herod, then, presents the picture of a man whose conscience was stirred and awakened by the word and Spirit of God, as John's fiery preaching ploughed in to his soul. But it is one thing to be stirred, quite another to be stirred enough To let no other consideration come between one and peace with God. This was Herod's problem, as we shall see in tomorrow's Note.

186) 14:1-12

In view of the comments in the previous note on the apparent difference between Mark's and Matthew's account, we may conclude that in imprisoning John Herod was in fact temporising. The intolerable thing for Herod, in his awakened, conscience-stirred state, was to be compelled to make up his mind decisively, and so he tried to sit on the fence, and gain time, so to speak. But it is not possible to reach a compromise with the word of God and its devastating challenge, for in a circumstance of this nature a situation is bound to arise sooner or later, which will force a man's hand and force the issue. God sees to this, for it is always He who is on the initiative in the gospel. And that situation did arise for Herod. And it is significant that it came to a man already weakened by the fact that he had violated his awakened conscience in not heeding John's warning voice when he challenged him about Herodias (4). The drunken feast that celebrated his birthday set the stage for the showdown. No doubt, with what remnants of clear-headedness that remained to Herod he must have cursed himself for being trapped in this subtle fashion by the scheming Herodias into making such an unreserved promise to her -but if it had not been this it would have been something else that precipitated the crisis. He was sorry, indeed (9) - this, we need not doubt, was genuine - but there was something else that militated against his sorrow and prevented it working repentance in him - his resistance to the word of God and the cost of doing what he knew to be right. Something else besides John died that day - Herod's conscience; from this point onwards he progressively hardened against the gospel. The moment of blind terror mentioned in 2 was not a real working of conscience, but merely the final, convulsive twitching of something that had already died, responding insensibly to outward stimulus. He had passed the point of no return, and the dark evidence of this is underlined in Luke 23:6-12 when the Son of God had nothing to say to the man who had resisted too often and too long.

187) 14:13-21

The account of the feeding of the five thousand stands in marked contrast to the story of Herod's unbelief and ultimate rejection by Christ. It is the only miracle of our Lord's that is recorded by all four gospel writers, and this is clearly a measure of the importance with which it was regarded by the early church; and it is a useful and profitable exercise to compare the four accounts and see the various emphases the four evangelists make, and pool the insights to give a full, if composite picture. We have already in those Notes emphasised that the miracles demonstrate the Lordship of Christ, and it was never seen so graphically or clearly as here. For this was a truly glorious manifestation of divine power. The miracle, like the others, has been a problem and difficulty to many, but it can be so only for those who do not realise or understand Who Jesus is. When one remembers that this is He who was from the beginning, without whom nothing was made that was made (John 1:3), He by whom all things consist (Col 1:17), then there can be no difficulty in believing that He multiplied the loaves and fishes. He created the world out of nothing: why should this be difficult for Him? The miracle really tests the worth of our estimate of Him. For it is saying, in effect, Behold your God! (cf 1 Chron 29:10-12). Nor is the picture it affords a merely pious one, for we read here also of the compassion of Christ. Almighty power is wedded to infinite compassion, and since Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, this means that there is nothing He is not able to do, or willing to do, for the fulfilling of the needs of our hearts. This is the real symbolism of the story for us - what He did then in the physical realm He can do in the spiritual. It is a picture of the gospel and its provision, a picture of the mercy of God towards men.

188) 14:13-21

John explicitly states (5:4) that the time of the Passover was nigh, and it can hardly be an accident that the miracle was performed at this particular time; for the Passover was itself an illustration of Christ's death on the cross, by which He became the bread of life to men. Someone has called the miracle 'the Galilian Lord's Supper', and this is surely an apposite title if we think in terms of His standing and breaking the bread of life to men, offering them, in symbol, as it were, the fruits of His passion and victory. There was a Jewish belief that the coming of the Messianic kingdom would restore again the gift of the manna from heaven (see John 6:33). The association of ideas is unmistakeable: Passover - manna - the divine provision for the needs of the people of God in olden time and here it is enacted before their eyes. Bread from heaven indeed!

A word about the means whereby the miracle was wrought. Jesus did not feed the multitude by an act of pure creation, out of nothing, but made use of means that were ready at hand. The simple mention of the five loaves and two small fishes is meant to convey to us the idea of just how little He had to work with, and the seeming inadequacy of the resources. "What are these among so many?" and yet there was enough and to spare. And it is so also in the means by which souls are fed today. To many the gospel seems a weak and foolish thing, so little suited to the vastness of the needs of men. But the weakness of God is stronger than men, and the foolishness of God wiser than men. There is bread enough and to spare in the preaching of the gospel, and the Christ of God takes the humble and unpretentious efforts and offerings that His servants bring Him - offered to Him with what diffidence and sometimes trembling and sense of inadequacy only He could know - and makes of them a feast for the souls of men, makes of them the living bread of salvation to those who are hungry and needy. What grace and encouragement here, for those who seek, however great their sense of inadequacy, to serve Him!

189) 14:22-36

Scholars think there is a real significance in this story following immediately upon the feeding of the five thousand, in that Jesus was intent on teaching His disciples something very important about the nature of His kingdom. In John's account of the feeding of the five thousand it is recorded that Jesus withdrew from the multitude because they were intent upon making Him a king. This was the last thing He wanted, and this next miracle showed a very different kind of power and lordship, for it manifested the spiritual nature of the kingdom, and the powers of the world to come, as if to teach that His kingdom was not of this world, and that it was spiritual, not temporal, realities that were His concern, however important in themselves the temporal might be. We should notice also that it was Christ Himself that sent His disciples out on that voyage, and therefore into the storm that blew up. This has lessons to teach us that are important for Christian life and service. It teaches for one thing that no one who is sent out by Christ into His service may expect an easy time free of testings and trials. There are storms in Christian service and we should be neither surprised nor dismayed when they arise, nor should we assume that things are necessarily going wrong when they do. Christian service has often to be performed in the context of such storms. But when Christ sends His people into them, He always comes to them, as the All-Sufficient One. And in the difficulties, hazards or oppositions we encounter, the circumstances that prove trying to our patience and goodwill, the crises that threaten to overcome us, we must remember this story and look for the coming of Jesus to help us, even if it is not until the fourth watch that He finally comes, when resistance is lowest, hope faintest and discouragement apt to be greatest. Was His intervention not worth waiting for here, and will it not also be so for us?

190) 14:22-36

Matthew focuses our attention especially on the Apostle Peter, and his reaction to the sudden appearance of Jesus. Peter, characteristically, is the disciple who ventures out on the water, doing the wild, unheard of thing, in response to the command of Christ. Christian service is a call to faith to venture on the word of Christ, and in response to that word, and it sometimes means venturing out against all our natural inclinations, and our natural aptitudes and capabilities. And when His call is likely to involve us in something that we naturally shrink from and think impossible of fulfilment for us, we should remember that we do not know what Christ's enabling can do for us and make us do until we venture on Him. The history of the Christian Church is full of the story of ordinary folk who did extraordinary things for Christ and His gospel. What is more, it often means venturing forth in face of and in spite of the misgivings and criticisms of those around us. One can well imagine the reactions, spoken or unspoken, of Peter's companions in the ship - "Peter, come back, you are mad, come to your senses!" And often, when we realise this is what people are likely to say to us and of us, it acts like an effective paralysis on all true endeavour for Christ. But to the soul that ventures, Christ gives His all; there is no end to the things he will enable that soul to be and do. The message of the passage is not merely of a Christ who bestrides the storm, but of that Christ giving manpower to bestride the storm too! Finally, we are taught, by Peter's faltering, that although to have enough courage to take the first step of venturing on Christ is a great thing, it is only the first step; and we must go on as we have begun, and resolutely face hazards and problems with the same courage of faith as at the beginning. It is he that endureth to the end that shall be saved.

191) 15:1-9

Christ's words here are among the sternest He ever spoke. It is clear that He saw something very solemn and frightening in the perversion of true religion evidenced in their whole system. In their origin, the Pharisees were a 'protest' movement against the godlessness of their day. But what began as a movement in the time of the Maccabees, ended as a deadly disease, with sinister and fatal symptoms of decay evident in it. Jesus turns their question about tradition back on themselves (3), challenging them on their transgression of the commandment of God by observing tradition. He instances the fifth commandment and shows that by their casuistical approach to it and their observance of the tradition of the elders they actually made the word of God of none effect (for helpful translations of 5, see RSV and J B Phillips). Nothing could show the harshness and inhumanity of Pharisaism more graphically than their attitude to parents instanced here by Jesus. We should remember that Paul regards being 'without natural affection' (Rom 1:31) as one of the marks of depravity and being given up by God to a reprobate mind. True religion does not make men inhuman, nor indeed does great strictness; it is the perversion of things that does so. And it is not a relaxation of strictness that Jesus calls for here, but a change of heart. If the heart is right, He means to say, all else will be right too, and strictness will not be harmful in such a context. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

192) 15:10-20

The heartlessness, inhumanity and barrenness of Pharisaism are to be explained in only one-way: heart religion is too costly for many, and outward observance becomes a substitute for the reality. There is a death men refuse to die. And this raises a dilemma. For men want so much religion. And so outward observance is retained, while inward reality is sacrificed. This is the point at which hardening begins, and finally leads to a caricature of true godliness. The danger of Pharisaism is always real when the form of godliness is thought desirable to retain but its price is too great for men to pay. Always where men refuse the word of the cross! The road of non-conformity is fraught with peril, lest the power and virtue of the protest we make should be lost and overlaid by the appearance and outward expression of that protest. To take a stand for some needed truth is a good and often urgently necessary thing, but if the initial virtue that led to it spends itself, the result is an empty shell, without power or grace. Some form of Pharisaism will appear, with its subsequent harshness, lovelessness, inhumanity and barrenness. This is why it is so necessary, in the words of Proverbs 4:23, to keep the heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life. Jesus makes this only too plain here.

193) 15:22-28

To turn from the first half of the chapter to this story is like entering another world altogether, for it affords one of the brightest and most decisive illustrations of faith in all the New Testament. And, from the point of view of Matthew's presentation of the gospel, it is important in that it represents an act of faith outside the main stream of the house of Israel. The chosen people were repudiating their Messiah, but here is a Syro-Phenician woman, an alien from the commonwealth of Israel, and a stranger from the covenants of promise, rising and claiming them blessing of the Jews' Messiah for her tormented daughter. The supreme value of the story for us is its teaching on the nature of real faith. And it is the quality of faith shown by the distracted mother that is the great and impressive miracle. The surprising thing is that such a faith should exist at all outside the covenant people of God, and there are two points to note in this connection. The first is that the Spirit of God is often secretly at work in the most unexpected places, preparing the hearts of men and women to meet the Saviour. We can never discount this possibility. The second is that she had heard of Jesus. Matthew does not tell us this but Mark does (7:25). And faith, we are told, cometh by hearing. But there are two sides to faith: there is faith as assent, and there is faith as trust. And while there is certainly an element in faith which is a question of 'holding firmly something to be true', we must realise that a man may hold all the doctrines of the Christian faith and still not be a believer in the New Testament sense. It is the 'something else' in faith, shown supremely here, viz, trusts in a Person, and commitment to Him, that is of cardinal and ultimate importance. Without this, all else - even impeccable orthodoxy - is in vain.

194) 15:21-28

What is true in relation to salvation is just as true in the further reaches of Christian life, in the battle for Christian character, the work of sanctification in the soul. The restoration of the divine image and the formation of true and stable Christian character are not things that are won overnight, nor are they won on the cheap. The kingdom of God suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. The Syro-Phenician woman kept on asking and asking after first she had been ignored, then discouraged, then rebuffed. If she had become disheartened or allowed herself to sink into despair after the first setback, she would never have got anywhere or anything. Calvin is quoted as saying, in this connection, "We must not imagine that progress in the Christian life is attained through a quiet and passive yielding to the influence of the Spirit as He quietly moulds our whole being into a blessed and harmonious unity with His will and purpose. God's grace and our own nature never come together in such harmony. They are always as antagonistic to one another as fire and water. The truth is rather that the more God obtains the control of our lives the more inward opposition to His rule is aroused within us and therefore the more we are forced to deny the perverse and rebellious natural inclinations which rise up at the presence of God". We need not be discouraged, therefore, if our Rome is not built in a day, but rather press on, and press in, refusing to be ultimately discouraged.

195) 15:21-28

This story also affords an important lesson in the realm of Christian service, for the woman's faith exemplifies the kind of faith that alone prevails and wins through in the work of the gospel. She was prepared to keep on knocking at the door without remission until answer was given, and no discouragement or rebuff deterred her. Not that it was merely a matter of automatic or mechanical repetition of her request, with little variation in spiritual tone. Rather, she advanced from position to position, gaining ground all the time, becoming stronger and stronger, capitalising upon every seeming rebuff, making it a base for further purposeful advance. Not only so: we sometimes speak of a story like this illustrating the principle of vicarious, i.e. faith on behalf of another. This is true: and we should particularly note the quality of that vicarious faith in this instance. For the woman was utterly identified with her daughter's need, and felt it as if it were her own. It is only when such an identification obtains that it works. We must be one with the suffering of the needy, weeping with them, sharing their agony, if ever we are to pray divine help for them. But this is the quality of asking that God delights to answer.

196) 15:29-39

The lessons of the miraculous feeding of the four thousand are clearly similar to those of the earlier miracle (see Notes on 14:15 ff), and need not be repeated here. This is not to say we can learn nothing fresh, however, particularly if on this occasion we consider, not the miracle itself so much, as Him who performed it. A fellow minister once said, in a discussion about gospel work, "It is not a decision that people need to make for Christ, so much as a discovery of Him, of how great and ail-sufficient He is. This is unquestionably the whole point of the four gospel writers' presentation of their message. Their concern is to be able to disclose to men who Jesus is, and how great and glorious a Saviour. And if we allow this miracle to speak to us of Him, it will tell us that He is all compassion, and that the healing of the lame, the blind, the maimed, the dumb, was its expression, and the feeding of the multitude an illustration of that compassion in the spiritual realm, indeed more than an illustration, a summing up of all He can do for men in the spiritual realm. What in effect He is saying is: "For life men need bread; I am the only Bread, and in Me there is more than sufficiency". And He becomes our sufficiency, first by becoming incarnate, living, dying and raising again for us, effecting a complete reconciliation with God on our behalf, through the atonement made in His blood, and then by indwelling us by His Spirit. This Christ, Matthew means, Whom I have sought to portray, as Lord of nature and the elements of sickness and disease, of devils and death itself, this all-glorious Lord - He is the living bread, and He it is Who gives Himself to us in the gospel.

197) 16:1-4

This was not the first time the Pharisees had asked Jesus for a sign (see 12:38, and Note), and He dismisses this further request as categorically as He did the other, and for the same reason. His words here about the signs of the weather are significant. They speak of the most obvious kind of weather forecast - red sky at night or morning indicating fair or foul weather. He says, "You can discern that, because it is plain for all to see. But the signs of the times are just as plain, yet you are blind to them". And His implication is this: They had had, in His miracles and teaching, clear and unmistakeable signs from God that could have, and were meant to have, led them to faith in Him, yet they had resisted and refused them, closing their eyes resolutely to them. One thinks of the words of Dives to Father Abraham in the parable in Luke 16:19 ff - he too wanted his brothers to have a sign from heaven so that they might believe; to which Abraham replied, "If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead". This exactly echoes the spirit of what Jesus says to the Pharisees here. They too had had His word, and His mighty deeds. If these did not persuade them, what sign from heaven could ever do so? The signs were all present, but they were blind to the things that belonged to their peace. And so it is today. There is the word, there is the evidence of changed and transformed lives -and still men will not believe - because they have no will to believe. There are none so blind as those that will not see.

198) 16:5-12

Having left the Pharisees on the other side of the sea, Jesus proceeds to warn His disciples against what He calls the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (6). They misunderstand His meaning, and imagine He is reproaching them for having forgotten to take bread with them. This is a strange misunderstanding indeed, and gives some indication of how little they were really 'with' the Lord in His teaching. And He rightly reminds them of the two miraculous provisions of bread for the multitudes as if to say, "Do you think I have less concern for your bodily wellbeing than I had for theirs? This is a good example of how important truth - in this case, the warning about the leaven of the Pharisees - can be missed and neglected because pre-occupation with material needs is obsessing our minds and excluding more important considerations. How prone we are to allow relatively unimportant matters to fill our whole horizon and blind us to the true riches! But what is the meaning of this leaven here? It refers to the encounter mentioned in 1-4, which speaks of the utter blindness of the Pharisees to what must surely have been obvious to any who had eyes to see. To be infected with that spirit, means Jesus, is a highly dangerous possibility. The story of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18 gives us some indication of wherein the danger lies. The characteristic note in the parable, so far as the Pharisee was concerned, is complacency - the complacency of a religious pattern and ethos that has an almost sublime confidence in itself, and no sense of need or of sin. It is partly that it was a religion of works, and partly that there was such a pride in it, and such a self-confidence, that it robbed men finally of any sense of need that would make faith a possibility in their lives. The end product of such an attitude, as seen in 1-4, is frightening indeed. The leaven of the Sadducees we must leave for another day.

199) 16:5-12

We have come across nothing on the subject of the leaven of the Sadducees better than or as good as the following comment by Dr James Denney: "Religion for the Sadducees was an institution, not an inspiration. It was part of an established system of social order with which all their worldly interests were bound up, and their one concern was to maintain the existing equilibrium. Living religion the Sadducees dreaded. A religious movement perturbed them, and they did not know what to make of it. When the Christian religion began to put forth its irrepressible expansive power after the Resurrection, we are told that 'they doubted whereunto this would grow'. They did not want growing things at all in that sphere. A religion that grew, that operated as a creative or re-creative power, that initiated new movements in the soul or in society - a religion that gave men new and infinite conceptions of duty, making them capable of self-dedication and martyrdom, so that you could never tell what mad, disturbing thing they would do or try - a religion that disclosed another world, and made a power so incommensurable with all present interests as immortality a present motive in the lives of common men - such a religion the Sadducees could only regard as the enemy. They did not like it; they had no mind to it, and no time for it.... They were more than willing to give religion the formal acknowledgement which its place in the social order required, but a religion which for anything they could tell might explode the social order was something with which they could hold no terms".

200) 16:13-20

This is a passage of quite cardinal importance in the unfolding of the gospel story and of our Lord's ministry, and requires very careful study. We can see from the gospels that there were two distinct stages in Christ's teaching ministry. Up to this time His concern had been to manifest Himself as the promised Messiah, and thus far, all had pointed in this direction. His baptism and the coming of the Spirit upon Him announced Him, to those with eyes to see and ears to hear, as God's anointed, the promised Messiah. Throughout, there was the steady and consistent development of His claim to be that Messiah: the authority He displayed in the mighty works He wrought, miracles, wonders and signs - the credentials of His kingship, proofs that His claim was not an idle one. Then, having demonstrated this in every possible way, at the end of nearly three years' ministry He put this question. "Whom do ye say that I am?" He presented His claim, in other words, and waited for their response and reaction. And this was given by Peter, in his twofold confession of Christ as the Messiah and as Son of the living God. Born and nurtured in the Old Testament faith, Peter's whole spiritual background was that of the prophetic, messianic scriptures - and suddenly, it became clear and real to him that this historical figure he knew and loved was that that the Scriptures had foretold. This was insight and discovery indeed! But it was not the natural insight of a peculiarly gifted man, but God given. It is the work of the Spirit to enlighten the mind. This, however, does not take place 'in vacuo', but by looking at the evidence before our eyes. It was wrought in Peter through having seen and heard for himself - and in us by the reading and hearing of the Word, which displays and manifests the Lordship of Christ. This is God's appointed means of illuminating the minds and hearts of men.

201) 16:13-20

Something requires to be said about the meaning of our Lord's words to Peter in 18, 19. There are three issues involved, the first being the meaning of 'on this rock will I build my Church'. The reference cannot be to Peter as the foundation of the church, since Christ Himself is the only foundation (1 Cor 3:11), but to Peter's confession of faith. A moment or two later, Jesus said to Peter, 'Get thee behind me, Satan' (23) - an uncertain foundation to build a church on, such a man would be! The question of the keys is more difficult. If we compare these words with Matt 16:18, where binding and loosing are again mentioned, we see that the other disciples are included also. There it is 'ye' not 'thou'. No exclusive claim is therefore possible for Peter in this. The disciples were all to have the power of the keys. Keys are the symbol of rule or authority, entrusted to him and them by the real holder, Christ. And the reference is not to the right of admitting souls into the kingdom of God, or excluding them, but to the right of opening the door of salvation to the Jews (Acts 2) and to the Gentiles (Acts 10) by the proclamation of the word. If we compare these words with Matt 23:13, "Shut up the kingdom of heaven", and Luke 11:52, "the key of knowledge", it will become clear that what is in view is surely the proclamation of the truth of God that makes men free. And this links with Peter's confession in the previous verses. For only when we have ourselves discovered who Christ is can we possibly open the kingdom of heaven to others. A true confession of Christ means that He commits the word of salvation to us, and this in turn means that we have the power of the keys.

202) 16:13-20

If 'binding and loosing' meant power to forgive and absolve sin, where in the New Testament is the evidence that Peter used this power in the early church? This consideration weighs heavily against the interpretation placed upon these words by Roman Catholics. Rather, apostles were commissioned specially to teach with authority the way of salvation, and to give rules and principles for the guidance of the church. This is done, in fact, once for all, in the canon of the New Testament itself. The words 'binding' and 'loosing' refer to the declaration of what was obligatory or optional, a practice already common in the Jewish church (e.g. "Hillel looses this", "Shammai binds it", referring to liberal and strict interpretation respectively of any particular issue). In Acts 15:19 we have an example of this very binding and loosing, an authoritative pronouncement by the apostles, binding certain things, and loosing others. The keys are therefore symbols not of priestly office, but of moral interpretation. This is the teaching of the Reformers on a difficult and controversial issue.

203) 16:21-27

From this point forward in our Lord's ministry there is a significant change of emphasis in His teaching given to the disciples (21), and He begins to teach them about the cross. The over-all pattern is thus: first of all to establish that He is the Messiah, and then to affirm that the Messiah must suffer, in order to fulfil His God-given task in the world. In so doing, Christ was simply following the Old Testament pattern laid out for Him in His Father's Word. For in fact the teaching in the Old Testament concerning the Messiah is in two strands, with prophecies on the one hand representing the Messiah as the glorious King who was to come, and others representing Him as a suffering figure whose travail would be for the healing of men. We should also remember that the early Church thought this twofold teaching was of the supremest importance and significance, since it was the burden of so much of their preaching and teaching (cf Acts 17:2,3). It must clearly have presented an argument calculated to impress Jewish listeners very deeply - but not Jews only, for what in effect it is saying is this: Here is a book -the Old Testament - which for centuries had prophesied the coming of a King who would establish a kingdom in righteousness through suffering and death. And then, suddenly, the prophecy became fact. In the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth the prophecies were seen to fulfil themselves. He suffered and died and rose again, according to the Scriptures, as God had said He would, and then the kingdom began to be established in the hearts and lives of men. This argument from the fulfilment of prophecy is too obstinately insistent and compelling to be ignored. "What do you make of that?" it says to us. Well what do we make of it?

204) 16:21-27

It is significant to see how Christ immediately linked the teaching about His cross with a challenge to His disciples to take up the cross and follow Him. This He did in connection with Peter's expostulation (22) at the very idea of a suffering Messiah. It is very impressive and striking to see that Jesus regards the whole concept of a Messiahship or a discipleship without a cross as being of the devil. It will be salutary for us to remember this, when we are tempted to opt for an easier, less arduous consecration and separation unto God. What does such a pattern of discipleship mean and involve? The cross meant for Christ something outward and something inward. Outwardly it meant suffering, shame and reproach, enduring resistance, antagonism and reproach of evil men, and finally submission to their wicked and murderous design to destroy Him. Inwardly it meant a complete and utter death to sin, and a refusal of any but the way and will of God. It is this outward and inward pattern of cross bearing that becomes inevitably reflected in the life and experience of any man who becomes associated with Jesus in a life of discipleship. This is implied in the very idea of fellowship with Him, for "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" Thus, in the doctrinal and theological statement of this reality in the New Testament epistles we read both of sharing the sufferings of Christ and of being united with Him in His death, our old man crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed. Peter's reaction in 22 is therefore a denial of discipleship, and finds its ultimate and logical issue in the moral disaster that overtook him in Pilate's judgment hall. He denied his Lord rather than face shame and reproach and possible suffering that confessing Him would have involved. It was only later that he allowed this 'cross-life' to grip and master him, as witness the Acts of the Apostles and his first epistle. This, then, is the way, says Jesus, walk ye in it.

205) 17:1-8

The story of the Transfiguration of Christ is marvellously deep and mysterious, and full of symbolic meaning and allusion. It is the kind of passage that repays long and prayerful contemplation. Consider first its association with Old Testament ideas. We have already seen how Matthew regards Jesus as the New Testament 'Moses' (Matt 2) and how both Christ's baptism and His temptation have borne allusions to the experience of Israel of old crossing the Red Sea and battling in the wilderness. Moses also ascended the mount of God at Sinai, accompanied by Aaron, Nadab and Abihu (Exod 24:1 ff); and Jesus ascended Mount Hermon (so the scholars think it must have been) accompanied by Peter, James and John. We are told in the afore-mentioned passage in Exodus that the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days, and that Moses was summoned into the cloud and went up the mountain to meet with God, and that his face shone after this holy converse. The association of ideas is unmistakeable -the 'six days', the 'voice' speaking out of the cloud, the 'hear ye Him' (cf Deut 18:15). The appearance of Moses and Elijah obviously links the scene to the Old Testament, as they bear witness to the fact that both the law and the prophets find their fulfilment in Him. Even the tabernacles Peter offered to build are reminiscent of the Old Testament feast of tabernacles, and there may have been something of this in Peter's mind as he puzzled over the meaning of the vision. And the point of all this association with the Old Testament is surely that the Transfiguration is not something that stands in isolation from everything around it, but is integrally related to the whole of the Divine revelation of redemption.

206) 17:1-8

The Transfiguration story has a twofold connection also with other New Testament events, which seems to be significant. On the one hand, the voice that spoke "This is My beloved Son..." is the voice that spoke at the baptism of Christ; so that there is necessarily a common significance in the two events. At His baptism, Christ took His place by the side of sinful man, on the road set forth in the Scriptures for the suffering servant of the Lord. On the other hand, Peter, James and John, who shared this experience with Jesus, were also to share the experience of the garden of Gethsemane, which also had to do with the idea of the suffering servant. This twofold consideration certainly seems to associate the Transfiguration with the sufferings of Christ. This is further emphasised by the fact that the story is linked with Caesarea Philippi and our Lord's teaching about the cross. And it should also be borne in mind what has been said earlier about Christ's teaching, first that He was the Messiah and then that the Messiah must suffer. For each part of His teaching is therefore introduced with the words "This is My Son". It is the Divine seal upon His willingness to walk the way of the cross. We may see, then, the Transfiguration, and what followed it, as a kind of 'acted parable', an enactment in dramatic form of His whole purpose on earth, and the meaning of His coming into the world. He was transfigured before them, and He went down from the mount to the demon-possessed valley below. He was 'in the form of God...but He made Himself of no reputation and....became obedient unto death'.

207) 17:1-8

An attempt must now be made to assess the meaning and significance of this mysterious event of which Peter later was to say, "We were eye-witnesses of His majesty" (2 Pet 1:16), and John "We beheld His glory" (John 1:4). G. Campbell Morgan suggests that the glory was that of Christ's victorious manhood shining out, but we shall perhaps be nearer the truth if we think of it as the glory of His essential being. Christ is King of glory, and here was a foretaste of the glory to come, when He comes to reign. As Matthew Henry puts it, "Here, Christ tries on His robes". Campbell Morgan suggests that for all we know, the lonely hillsides of Galilee and Judea may often have witnessed such a blaze of glory as the Son of God communed with the Father in prayer. In relation to the disciples, we may say that it was God's seal and imprimatur on Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, as if to say Amen to it. How truly Lord He is! Here, for a moment, the veil is drawn aside. Already and all along it had been gleaming through, in His mighty works and words ("What manner of man is this?", "Never man spake as this Man"), and now for a moment it burst through. But if it was the outshining of His glory, we have still to ask, why, at this particular point in the story? The key to the answer to this question must be found in the words "This is My beloved Son". What we have here is a glimpse into the Godward, Divine side of redemption. We devote tomorrow's Note to an attempt to explain what this means.

208) 17:1-8

God's great preoccupation, and the desire of His heart, is that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Only in Christ is that will fulfilled. No one else has ever perfectly fulfilled the will of God. In coming forth from heaven to accomplish the work of atonement and redemption, that which was nearest to His heart was the glory of the Father. It was this that pleased and delighted God so much (of Luke 2:49, John 4:34; 6:38; 8:29; Heb 10:5-7). The grand passion of Christ's life was to glorify the Father's Name in a life of obedience. He knew the hurt and injury done by sin to the nature, name and character of God; He knew the intense yearning of God for the response of holiness in His creatures, hence His desire above all else to give pleasure and satisfaction to God by perfectly fulfilling His will. That desire was always there, but on this occasion, on the mount and in prayer, it reached a visible climax when He was transfigured before the disciples. The ineffable love and devotion Christ had to the Father's will were so intense, so burning, so mighty, that they became incandescent, and blazed forth in glory, the body no longer able to contain it. What the disciples saw was holy fire, moral glory, breaking forth in a grand oblation to the Father of lights. The Son's delight in the Father, and the Father's delight in the Son, both breaking away beyond words, in the glory that shone from Christ, and the Shekinah cloud that came down from the Father, hiding from the view of men that ineffable fellowship. Truly, the secret things belong unto the Lord our God!

209) 17:1-8

One final word on these verses. The transfiguration took place before the disciples, and therefore for their instruction and profit, and this in a threefold way. First of all, Christ has just spoken to them of the certainty of suffering and cross bearing. This unveiling was to strengthen them for what was to come, to fix their eyes on the glory to follow, that the suffering might lose its terrors. In the second place, it was to teach them the true way of discipleship, viz. that the cross comes first, the glory follows. The voice from the cloud said, "Hear ye Him" and He had said, "Take up the cross". Thirdly, it was to encourage them in the way of the cross, once they had begun to walk in it. In Luke's version of the story (9:28 ff) Moses and Elijah are said to have conversed with Jesus about the death He was to accomplish at Jerusalem, and the word translated 'death' is the Greek word 'exodus', meaning 'a way out'. They were being reminded that the cross is not a forbidding, cramping thing, but emancipation. Jesus once said, "I have a baptism to be baptised with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished". We are straitened in our experience, and in our service, until the baptism of the cross is a reality for us. Then we enter the broad tableland of fruitfulness and power, as we shall see from the verses that follow

210) 17:9-13

The conversation between the disciples and Jesus as they descended from the mount gives an interesting instance of how the prophetic Scriptures can be misunderstood. The disciples' question arose from Jesus' reference to His rising from the dead. Perhaps they thought that Elijah's appearance on the mount was a fulfilment of the ancient prophecy in Malachi 4:5, 6. If so, how did this square with His insistence that He was to die? Surely the coming of Elijah was to herald the establishing of Messiah's kingdom, and how could it be established if Messiah was slain? Christ's answer indicates that 11 represents the Pharisaic and scribal tradition and that His own interpretation of Malachi's prophecy is different from theirs: the second Elijah has already come (and from the disciples' reaction in 13 they realised He meant John the Baptist), and far from restoring all things, they have put him to death. If they do this to John, the Forerunner, how should He expect different treatment? Implied necessarily in these words is the thought that the establishment of the kingdom and the restoring of all things must be dependent on His death - and this is the heart of all His teaching from this point onwards.

211) 17:14-23

This healing miracle belongs to the story of the Transfiguration of Christ, and constitutes part of its general movement. Christ came down from the mount, into the valley of demons, turning His back upon the glory, which was His, making Himself of no reputation and ultimately becoming obedient unto death for man's sake. And it was His adoption of this pattern and principle that enabled Him, here as always, to exercise such healing power. It would be difficult to find a more complete contrast than that between this passage and what precedes it. There, the majesty and glory of Christ, here the misery of man in this fallen world, represented by the demon-possessed boy and his distracted father. And this is the strength and wonder of the gospel message: over against the dark shadows and terrifying enigmas of life and the tragic plight of man, God has set the glory and sufficiency of His Christ, a Christ Who comes down to where men are in their need, to heal and save them. What we are meant to see in this story is an enactment of the gospel of the Divine condescension. And wherever Christ went, enactments of this gospel took place, because His whole life was lived in obedience to the unvarying, fundamental principle of obedience to the will of God. He did not heal because He was God, nor did His power derive from the fact He was God, but because He was God Incarnate, the God-man, and came down, in obedience unto death. This has the greatest kind of importance for His disciples. The reason why they could not cast the demon out was that they were not like Jesus in this particular respect, i.e. they were not walking the way of the cross as He was. Jesus says in 20 it was because of their unbelief. But unbelief is not an unfortunate disability, but a sin to be repented of; it has a moral root, and is inseparably linked with obedience to the will of God. To have the kind of faith that can cast out demons you have to be a certain kind of person. It is the cross-bearing believer that knows the secret of power.

212) 17:23

Christ's final word to His disciples about prayer and fasting simply underline the principle spoken of in yesterday's Note. For prayer and fasting are the spiritual disciplines that are meant to bring us to, and keep us in, obedience to the will of God and the path of the cross. Prayer must not be thought of in semi-magical terms as something we add to the rest of our work to make it effective. When we think of prayer like this it is clear that it could quite easily become a substitute for the kind of obedience that is in view here. And, in fact, prayer is often made a substitute for the death we have refused to die. Do we really think we can deceive God in this way, let our prayer be never so vehement and earnest, when what is needed is a new obedience? In the same way, fasting can also become a substitute for this obedience; it is easier to deny ourselves things than to deny ourselves ourselves. Fasting is a principle, and like all good principles it can be corrupted, and become a substitute for the death we refuse to die. For example, the whole principle behind what is known, as 'puritanism' is that of fasting. But there is a wrong narrowness and a wrong-spirited narrowness that bears little relation to true self-denial, and where this obtains, fasting is not only valueless, but also misleading and harmful. But when it does mean the principle of sacrifice, it is the pathway to power. Jesus turned His back on glory - that was His fasting, and that was what brought the power. "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone". This is the law of spiritual harvest, the pathway to power, and the road to Pentecost.

213) 17:22-27

The incident of the tribute money accords with the rest of the chapter, which has as its aim the setting forth of the Divine Sonship of Christ. Here, in the miracle of the piece of money in the fish's mouth, this is also the emphasis, and in the claim Jesus makes. As Son of God He regards Himself as exempt from the tax due to the Temple (Exo 30:13). But something else is also true: it is that Jesus once again waives His right to the privileges of His Divine Sonship, for the sake of others - 'lest we should offend them'.

As such, then, the incident is an illustration of the principle of the cross, of self-denial, which is the road to real discipleship. The miracle, as such, is not the real point in the passage; the point lies in the teaching. But the miracle stands, of course, as a further evidence of Christ's Lordship. (Do we find it difficult to accept? More difficult than the miracle involved in the answer to prayer given to a poor widow who loses her purse and tremblingly asks the Lord to guide her to it again? How does He know where her purse is? He knows everything, knows where the purse is, and knows also where to find a shekel in the fish's mouth). Here, then, is the abiding principle, whose teaching is carried into the next chapter, as we shall presently see: "The way up is down". We die to live in the Christian life, and there is no other way.

214) 18:1-4

In Mark's version of this passage (Mark 9:30 ff) the question about who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven is introduced in the context of the disciples' quarrelling among themselves, as they vied with one another and jockeyed for position in the disciple band. It must have been a sorry experience for our Lord, in view of their impotence, to heal the demon-possessed boy. There was no kind of greatness about any of them! But they had ideas and ambitions in the matter, and our Lord's teaching here is the answer to them. Jesus took a child and put him in the midst of them and said, "Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye will not only not be great in the kingdom of heaven, you will not even enter into it at all". Apart from this 'coming down', this 'stooping low', this denial of self, this 'dying' process, there can be no entering in. We all need to be clear about this, and that in two ways: On the one hand, we must recognise that the gospel comes to us, points to our lives, and says, "This needs to be done all over again. Something has gone wrong, necessitating an entirely new beginning ". On the other hand, we need to realise that the conditions of discipleship and those of conversion are in fact identical. Jesus has been saying that unless a man takes up the cross and denies himself, he cannot be a disciple; and here it becomes clear that this is also what conversion means. There are not two standards, one for converts and another for disciples, and it would have been well for the life of the Church if this had been recognised, instead of allowing the tragic and unfounded notion that it is possible to be a Christian without taking the claims of discipleship seriously.

215) 18:1-4

It will be useful to think today of what Jesus meant by the use of the 'child' analogy. There are three characteristics of childhood applicable here. Jesus does not mean that a child is a good illustration because by nature a child is automatically a member of the kingdom of heaven - how could this be, for were we not all children once? - Nor because children are innocent (they are often far from it). The point of the comparison does not lie in that direction. First of all, we are to become as little children because little children are utterly dependent upon their parents. It is in this way that we are to receive the kingdom and to live in it. A child has no independent existence, and this is to be the abiding characteristic of Christian experience. By' nature man does have an independent existence, and it is this that must be laid down and surrendered. The self must die. And the cross of Christ is God's claim upon our lives that we should not henceforth live unto ourselves, but unto Him. Secondly, a child is utterly carefree. Sometimes the life of faith is described as a leap in the dark, and this may be, but it is in fact a leap into the everlasting arms! We might tend to think that a life of utter dependence on God would cause us moments of worry and anxiety, wondering what is going to happen next. But the very opposite is the case. It is the independent lives that are worried, not those dependent on God. Does a child worry? He trusts. He is carefree, leaving the worrying to his parents. This is to be a characteristic of the Christian life. "I would have you without carefulness" (1 Cor 7:32). In the third place, a child is utterly trusting. There is something in the heart of a child that makes it so, not innocence so much as essential simplicity of heart. Doubt is foreign to a child's mind; he does not doubt what he is told. It is this essential simplicity that Christ is advocating here, and how needful, for our lives sometimes become so incredibly complicated! There is a time in a little boy's life when the world stands or falls by what his father says. 'Daddy said so' - that is the final court of appeal, and more than enough for him. This is what the Christian must be like. A child of God utterly trusts his Father's word.

216) 18:5-14

The theme of the opening verses of the chapter is continued here, and although some of the verses are rather obscure, in the sense that it is difficult to see their connection with other things that are said here, the main line of thought is clear. One important general lesson is this: Life in the Church, and in the kingdom of God, is very much a family affair. It is certainly no accident that Jesus uses a child as His text, and speaks of a Father in heaven. The Church is supposed to be a family and the kind of care that is supposed to exist within it is family-care. Now, a family is something we are born into (one does not join a family!), and once born into it we are in a particular and special sense the objects of the Father's care and love; we matter to Him, and belong. And our relationship to one another must bear the mark of this relationship we have to God the Father. Thus, sins against love within the family and fellowship are the most serious of all sins. For example, the callous and unfeeling poking of fun at some 'lame duck's' oddities is far worse than even the gross sips that sometimes mar the lives of the weak. This, then, is the kind of relationship Jesus has in mind in this chapter, and with which He deals in various ways. And, clearly, although Jesus takes a child as His illustration, He does not confine His observations to literal children. The words 'who believe in Me' in 6 obviously refer not only to little children but also to those who are young in the faith. What 'receiving' and 'offending' (causing to stumble) mean in this context we must leave until tomorrow's Note.

217) 18:5-14

Jesus does not mean in 5 that simply receiving a little child, to care for it and love it, as most parents do, is the same as receiving Christ. The operative words are 'in My Name'. But to exercise care for a child in the spirit of Christ does mean and involve receiving Him. C. Campbell Morgan applies this literally, e.g. to Sunday School work. "If we are like the child (i.e. if we have 'come down', and been born again) we shall receive the child". To lack the child-heart will cause the child to stumble. This means that an unconverted teacher (or parent) will only do harm to a child in his attempts to instruct it. Of course! How can the blind lead the blind? But the reference is just as relevant for the young in the faith as for little children. Those who 'receive' one another and care for one another are in fact receiving Christ, and doing it unto Him. Those who do not, cause them to stumble. One thinks of Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, and Christian's encounter with Mr Worldly Wiseman. Here was an awakened soul, stirred by God's Spirit to seek salvation, and someone came along and urged, "Don't take it so seriously. It is not really necessary for you to be converted; carry on as you have been doing, and all will be well". And under the influence of this kind of false assurance, the awakened soul is lulled into a false security, and the work of the Spirit of God is undermined. And Jesus says of the one who thus 'offends', it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck..." A man who destroys one of God's 'little ones' in this way destroys himself. Hence Christ's solemn warnings in 8 and 9 - hand, foot or eye, if they offend, had better be destroyed, if so be our souls be saved. This is just as true within the context of the Christian faith itself. Backslidden believers sometimes pour cold water on the dedication of the young - "I was once like that, but I got over it, and so will you". How terrible! Some of the bitterest and most cynical Christians today are those who 'used to be' evangelical, but have 'grown out of it'. How we need to beware, and heed our Lord's solemn warnings

218) 18:5-14

Jesus gives three reasons in these verses why we must beware of causing His children to stumble. First of all, there are the angels (10). The idea of guardian angels is not a childish fantasy, as some suppose. The angels are ministering spirits (Heb 1), sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation, and they can deal very faithfully with those who try to hurt and harm God's children. Read Acts 12, for a startling and grim corroboration of this. Peter's guardian angel (12:7) dealt Herod a death-blow (12:23). In the second place, the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost. It is the master-passion of His heart that all the lost and straying sheep be gathered into His fold, and therefore to cause any of them to stumble is to fly in the face of His purposes in the world. Finally, there is the Father's care (14) that they should be preserved. The angels, the Son, the Father - all united in their compassion for the 'little ones' - and if we understand 12 and 13 aright, those specially in mind are those who have gone wrong, who have fallen, or drifted, or grown cold. What a message and what a challenge! Do we show forth such a care and compassion for them as this? How closely do Paul's words in Gal 6:1 if echo this teaching of Jesus - "Brethren, if any man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness....Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ".

219) 18:15-22

Our Lord continues the theme of relationships within the church, and now it is the question of church discipline. The passage is not without its difficulties; indeed it is clear that Peter himself was in some perplexity about Jesus's words, due to the seeming disparity between the emphasis in 15-20, with the ultimate exclusion of the offending brother from the fellowship, and that in 21ff where the idea of forgiveness is pressed to the extreme. But the disparity is only apparent, for in fact two different aspects of the subject are 'being dealt with in the two sections of the passage. In 15-20 discipline is the keynote, and the contrast of the next part indicates and is meant to teach us that a strict discipline is not incompatible with a spirit of forgiveness, and that severity is not incompatible with love. We are not to interpret 15-20 in terms of forgiveness of the offending brother, for only three times is the man given opportunity to change his attitude - in private, before two or three witnesses, and before the church. If these three do not avail, he is regarded as a publican and a heathen. It may be that Peter was misunderstanding our Lord's teaching here when he said what he did in 21. The rabbis actually taught forgiveness three times on the basis of Amos 1:6; and Peter was perhaps trying to show that he went beyond the rabbis' teaching in being willing to forgive seven times. But Jesus is not speaking of forgiveness here at all, or limiting forgiveness in a hard and severe spirit; in fact the hardness and sternness of the discipline is itself an act of love, and is done in love with a view to gaining the offending brother. There is a particularly tender love involved in the New Testament idea of discipline. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

220) 18:15-22

It is significant that the two themes - disciplines and forgiveness - stand together in the teaching of Jesus, as if to show us that discipline in the church must be permeated with the spirit of Divine love and pity, and never be allowed to degenerate into harsh, loveless and censorious dealing. The history of the church would read differently if more heed had been paid to this. We may put the matter in this way: no limit is being placed on forgiveness in 20-25. Forgiveness is being offered: but it is also being refused. This is the point. The forgiveness is always open, and towards men. In this connection Calvin distinguishes two kinds of forgiveness and forgiving, and the distinction is helpful in this whole subject: (i) The bearing of no grudge against the offending brother, continuing to act and think lovingly towards him; (ii) The giving of pardon upon evidence of true repentance. For an example of the two distinct attitudes we may recall the matter of the offending brother in 1 and 2 Corinthians (1 Cor 5 and 2 Cor 2), where we see the severity of Paul's dealing with him, yet having at its heart the deep pastoral concern and love of Christ, that was quick to rebuke and check any undue harshness in the Corinthian believers towards the man. The whole incident shows how the discipline had the effect of restoring and bringing him to repentance, i.e. to the place where he received and was able to receive the forgiveness that was always there. Here, it is as if Jesus were saying to Peter, "See to it, Peter, that in your binding and loosing in the church the spirit of love is never limited, and that My pity and compassion shine through. Not otherwise can you be great in the kingdom of heaven".

221) 18:23-35

The parable that follows illustrates the teaching given in the previous verses, although in fact it is rich in general teaching of a fundamental nature and can stand by itself as an illustration of the kingdom of God. At the beginning of the chapter the question of entrance into the kingdom was discussed, and we saw that it was the spirit of utter dependence characteristic of a child that is all important. And this is what is stressed in the parable. Here is a man who is a debtor, owing something he can never repay, a bankrupt and at the mercy of his lord. And a citizen of the kingdom of God, as one commentator puts it, is one who has made a full reckoning with God over the question of sin and guilt, over the debt he owes Him. We are meant to see from the parable just how and where we stand in the sight of God - in a position of utter Helplessness, bankrupt and in debt. Until we see this we have not come to a full reckoning with God. And only when in this reckoning we see the enormity of our debt, and cry for mercy, are we forgiven. That is the first part of the parable; the other part sets the contrast between the greatness of the first debt owing to the lord, and the insignificance of the second debt owing to the man, the point of the contrast being that no debt any man could owe us can ever compare with the debt we owe to God. If therefore He forgives, we must also be forgiving of others.

222) 18:23-35

We should not become preoccupied with the question of how God can withdraw His forgiveness once He has bestowed it, as the application of the parable seems to suggest. Christ does not answer this question for us in His teaching here, and we are not to be sidetracked by this technical question, but rather concentrate on the moral issue involved. Calvin is very wise when he deals with the question in a sentence: "Though God offers mercy to all, yet severe creditors, from whom no forgiveness can be obtained, are unworthy of enjoying it". The real lesson of the parable is this: Those who receive mercy ought to, and will, show mercy. Not to show mercy puts us in a very dangerous position indeed. If no debt anyone could owe us, and no injury anyone could do us, can ever compare with the debt we owe to God, and the injury we have done Him, then a true realisation of this on our part will make us essentially compassionate and merciful to those who wrong us. When one thinks of the petty, trivial and often imaginary things that cause years of bitterness in families and in the church - hurt pride, vanity, standing on one's dignity - and even the real hurts and injuries which make a man say "I'll never forgive or forget that!", and set them against the greatness of the Divine forgiveness, they are as nothing. Let us pay heed to Jesus' solemn words in 35, "So likewise shall My heavenly Father do also unto you, if yeforgive not...." Do we have an unforgiving spirit? Do we cherish bitterness in our hearts towards someone? Then it will exclude us from the kingdom of God, and we will be delivered to the tormentors, notwithstanding our profession of conversion. Faith without works is dead, and the work that faith is to produce is the spirit of forgiveness.

223) 19:1-12

Matthew begins another new section here. Jesus now departs from Galilee, to which He had gone (4:12) after the execution of John the Baptist. This is the movement, which leads to His final rejection by Jerusalem. It is a varied section (19:1 - 22:46), with encounters with scribes and Pharisees and other individuals giving rise to teachings on various subjects, both in parable and otherwise. It begins with a provocative question by the Pharisees, on the subject of divorce. It was a loaded question, intended to trap Him whatever He answered, for the liberal school of rabbinic teaching among them allowed divorce on trivial grounds while the conservative school allowed it only for the gravest of breaches. Our Lord's reply is deeply relevant for our time, especially when there are forces at work in our society, which seek to undermine the sanctity of marriage and the family. First of all - and this is of great importance - Jesus gives us a fundamental statement on the nature of marriage itself. This is the real approach to the question of divorce, for a true understanding of the nature of marriage as an institution ordained by God will do much to clarify the issues involved in the question of divorce, and indicate what ought to be the proper attitude to it. Now, in giving His statement on marriage, Jesus does not so much say something new as refer His hearers to the Scriptures, "Have ye not read.... (4)?" We may learn from this something that is often forgotten even by believers today, that problems of breakdown in marriage, as in any other sphere of human relations, will be found to involve a transgression or violation of biblical principle. To live by the Word of God is the healthiest and safest way of living!

224) 19:1-12

The scriptural teaching on marriage indicates that God does something when two people are united in His sight -there is a forging of an indissoluble bond, indeed of a new thing, a 'family unit', which is inviolable in God's sight, and in which the new relationship that is created takes precedence over every other consideration (5). Now, unquestionably, it is because of the loss of understanding of this teaching that the sanctity of marriage has been so undermined. What, in fact, is the attitude held generally today? It is this: marriage is regarded simply as a social contract, an arrangement man-made which is not in any sense organic in structure, but merely and only an association, "an association based on free-will, having its foundation in certain purposes; therefore, like every other association brought about by consent, it can also be dissolved by consent" (E. Brunner). To take a simple illustration: A footballer, dropped from the first team, becomes discontented and wants a change. He applies for a transfer. His contract is then annulled by mutual consent, and he goes to another club. Now, the relationship between him and his club is an association, by civil contract, with various binding clauses so long as the contract is in being. But it can be broken by consent. And it is because marriage is thought of in this way that men feel free to break and dissolve it. But marriage is not a civil contract. In marriage, God has done something, created something new, 'one flesh'. The words 'they are no more twain' (6) make it impossible to think of marriage as a mere association which can be broken at will and by consent. It is a new thing that is brought into being, and to break up a marriage is therefore 'to tear oneself in pieces', as Calvin puts it. "He who divorces his wife tears from him, as it were, the half of himself. But nature does not allow any man to tear in pieces his own body".

225) 19:1-12

A word at this point is necessary about Moses' bill of divorcement (7). The object of the Mosaic legislation was to control and restrict divorce. The literal interpretation of the law permitting a man to divorce his wife 'because he hath found some uncleanness in her' (Deut 24:1) could have led to divorce on almost any pretext whatever, and clearly the wife would have been the one to suffer. Cast off, and without any redress, she could easily have been branded as unfaithful or an adulteress and stoned to death as such, at the mercy of an un-understanding world. And so to protect her, a bill of divorcement had to be given, and this was a provision of mercy, a restraint upon the heartlessness of man. But even this could be misinterpreted and abused, even while literally fulfilled. A man might use this enactment as a convenient way of getting his freedom from an irksome relationship, and assume that, having issued a bill of divorcement he had fulfilled the law, whereas he had done the very opposite of what the Mosaic law intended. Merciful provision for a wronged woman through legal restraint was thus perverted into permission to wrong her at will, under the supposed shelter of the law itself. It is this dangerous misunderstanding that Jesus challenges here. It is not that God has in effect given two standards, one in Genesis and the other in Moses, the one contradicting the other. He did not abrogate the original law of marriage when He promulgated in Moses the law about the bill of divorcement, but simply introduced it for the hardness of men's hearts.

226) 19:1-12

The so-called 'excepting clause' in 9, 'except it be for fornication' is a much debated and most controversial issue, and something must now be said about it. Differing interpretations have been placed upon the meaning of the word Jesus uses here. Some take it as referring, not to adultery, but 'to unfaithfulness on the part of a woman before marriage. If this is discovered subsequent to marriage, the Lord's words oblige the husband to put the woman away, because in God's sight there has been no marriage' (IVF Commentary). But the point is debatable whether the word has always in fact this technical meaning of fornication. On the other hand, critical scholars take the 'clause' as a later addition and not as the actual words of Jesus, and maintain therefore that His teaching (as in Mark 10) is categorical and forbids divorce in any circumstances, with no excepting clause. Our difficulty here is 'cutting out' a phrase in the Word of God and doing despite to the accepted canon of Scripture, and this raises very real problems of inspiration and authority. But this also must be said: Even if it is a later addition and insertion by the Church, expressing the mind of the Church as well as its interpretation of our Lord's teaching, it could still be an authoritative, Dominical pronouncement as from Christ, for this reason: Jesus bestowed upon the disciples the power of 'binding and loosing' (cf 16:19), and what the apostles 'loosed' in this sense is 'loosed' in heaven. This is something very important indeed, and it goes a long way, we think, to resolve the difficulty about this vexed 'excepting' clause (cf Acts 15:28, "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us....")

227) 19:1-12

A word now about the nature of the 'bond' that binds a man and woman in marriage. Roman Catholic teaching here is that a valid contract of marriage forms between a man and a woman a bond or 'vinculum' which can no more be abrogated than the relationship between, say, a brother and sister can be abrogated, or between parent and child. Divorce is therefore not so much wrong as impossible. Judicial separation is possible, but not the breaking of the bond, and therefore remarriage is sin because it leads to, and means, adultery. The Reformers however held a different view. They taught that the bond is not so much like the natural bond between brother and sister, parent and child, but rather, and indeed essentially, a divine decree, 'a chain which God hath made', and one which God Himself can also break, and does break, when adultery takes place, and when death supervenes. In this connection, we should see that if the bond between man and wife is like that between brother and sister (i.e. of the natural creation), it cannot be broken either by adultery or death, and there would therefore be no point in the words, 'Let not man put asunder'. Jesus surely meant these words as a warning, not as the expression of an impossibility. But death does break the bond, and then a man or a woman is 'free to marry another'. And so also, said the Reformers, does adultery break it. Let us remember, however, that the 'excepting clause' does not speak of any other category except unfaithfulness. The divergence of interpretation in the teaching of the Scriptures on divorce and remarriage all centre on whether or not divorce is possible on the ground of adultery. There is no divergence of view on any other cause, but complete unanimity and clarity. Divorce must not be.

What of those who have, in ignorance, or faulty understanding of biblical teaching, entered into other unions, having obtained divorce for causes other than unfaithfulness, or those whose unfaithfulness has been forgiven, and there has been no separation or divorce? Let us say this in all tenderness: these are no longer theological or doctrinal, but pastoral problems, and must be committed to Him of Whom it is said, "The bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench".

228) 19:13-15

It is surely significant that immediately following the passage on marriage and divorce we have these words about the children. It is as if the Holy Spirit were saying to us in relation to marital problems and disorders: "Remember the children". It is true in any department of life that no man lives unto himself, and it is particularly true in those areas of life where relations are close and intimate, and supremely so in the family. One of the things that 'one flesh' means for married couples is that we have to surrender our independence in marriage. One wonders if parents realise what they do to their children when they refuse to make this surrender, and thereby introduce tension, conflict and misery into their homes. This is one of the ways in which parents prevent their children from coming to Christ.

We should not miss the implication of Jesus' words in 14 and His action in 15, for a principle of major importance is established. It is this: He blessed the children, without either faith or knowledge on their part, and simply on the ground of their parents having brought them to Him. This establishes that divine blessing is not conditional upon faith, but preceded it in this instance. It is this that underlies the doctrine of Infant Baptism and authenticates it. When we baptise children we are bearing witness, in accordance with this word, to the priority of grace over faith in the Christian life. It is not that children are made Christians by baptism, but that in baptism "they are claimed by God for a destiny of salvation, earmarked for faith and bespoken for Christ" (P.T. Forsyth).

229) 19:16-22

The connection of this passage with what precedes it is not at first obvious, but nonetheless real. The emphasis in the word about little children in 18:1ff was that of dependence on God - only thus can people enter the kingdom. And here is a young man who is not prepared to surrender his independence of life in order to enter that kingdom. The very nature of the question with which he approached Jesus is significant. For to ask what he must do to inherit eternal life is itself evidence of a consciousness within him that he did not possess it. It is not usual for those with a religious background and tradition such as this man had to have such a consciousness, for they usually take it for granted that their background and tradition guarantee eternal life for them. Obviously something had disturbed this young man into an awareness that all was not well with him. And it may well be that he had followed the teaching of Jesus with increasing interest and concern, and had been brought to this awareness by the operation of the Spirit of God in that teaching. This is often what happens when the gospel comes into a situation where the true teaching has been obscured by years, perhaps generations, of confusion and error. First of all there is the opposition and the resentment against the emphasis that is now made - this is sometimes the biggest hurdle to be overcome, and some never surmount it. But some do, and then they are like the rich young ruler. They become aware in an entirely new way that they do not have eternal life as a real possession, and they become disquieted and begin to ask questions and seek it. The first point therefore in this story is to show how religious and devout it is possible to be and still be without God.

230) 19:16-22

There is a highly important lesson for our modern day in this young ruler's admission of need. He was a wealthy man, the world was at his feet, and there could have been few earthly doors that his wealth and position could not open - and yet he confesses to a deep lack in his life. We may learn something from this. There is a great absorption and preoccupation today with material things not necessarily in the crass or derogatory sense. It is not all greed and avarice, but rather a hunger for security and peace, and men think this is where to find it. Well, let us take a good look at this man, who had far more than most of us will ever have, and yet was deeply unsatisfied. The reason for this is that God has set eternity in our hearts, and only He can fill the need there. We must learn, even - and perhaps particularly as believers, not to try to satisfy deeps in our beings with finite things that can never meet them. It is perilously easy for believers to fall imperceptibly and insensibly into an attitude which, for all practical purposes, is no different from that of men of the world embroiled in the endless 'rat-race'. It is sometimes assumed as a matter of course that those engaged in full-time Christian work, at home or abroad, should not be, and generally are not, concerned with material resources, but that it is both natural and legitimate for believers not thus engaged to be so. But is it? Is it only full time servants of God who are strangers and pilgrims on the earth? This is something that will bear thinking about.

231) 19:16-22

Concern is sometimes felt that the answer Christ gave the young ruler in 17 - 'keep the commandments' - is a different kind of answer to that given by Paul to the Philippian jailer - "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved". But we must remember that on another occasion Jesus said, in answer to the question, "What shall we do that we may work the works of God?". "This is the work of God that ye believe in Him whom He hath sent". Obviously Jesus did not contradict Himself. Why then did He take this particular line here? Two things may be said:

(i) Following Calvin, we may say that this is no doctrine of salvation by works or merit, but that Christ is simply answering the ruler on his own level. He did ask, "What shall I do", after all. And if he wanted an answer on that level, here it was. But of course no one can attain eternal life that way, for no one has ever fully kept the law. And consequently this approach of our Lord's is designed to bring the man to an utter end of himself. And, as we shall see, this is what did happen, when Christ probed more deeply into his claim to have kept the law.

(ii) In the fullest sense, salvation is a question of fulfilling the divine law, and the gospel is designed to make it possible. Man was originally made for obedience to the will of God, and but for sin and the Fall this would have been the pattern for man. And the gospel has come to enable it to be so. There is no real contradiction between the two kinds of statements therefore. It is only by believing in Christ and yielding to Him that we can keep the commandments.

232) 19:16-22

Jesus refers to the 'second table' of the law, relating to our duty to man, not the 'first table' relating to our duty to God. There is great significance in this, for He knew that the man was not in a right relationship to God. But He started with the other, as if to show the man that even on lower ground he was falling short. He mentions the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th and 5th commandments, and misses out the 10th altogether, then adds the 'summing up' commandment from Lev 19:18 about loving one's neighbour as oneself. But what of the 10th commandment? When the man claimed to have kept the aforementioned commandments from youth and said, "What lack I yet?" Jesus thrust the 10th commandment at him in the words, "Go and sell that thou hast". And suddenly the man's real condition was exposed. Like Paul, who said, "I had not known lust except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet", the arrow of the Lord touched his heart, and the real issue of his life, and the cause of his dis-satisfaction was made plain. There was an idol in his heart - his wealth - and he was not prepared to let it go. He was challenged to a great surrender, challenged on the basis of the law to yield himself to the claims of God on his life, to yield his independence, to die a death to his idol and live unto God. And he could not face it. It is as well, is it not, that men are made to see what it is they are doing when they turn from Christ. God was calling him to life, to joy and fulness, to the realisation of his true destiny. And Jesus refused to lower the price. He let him go rather than try to get him with a lower standard. There is no cut-price Christianity with Jesus.

233) 19:23-26

"A.B. Bruce says the figure in 24 is to be taken as it stands, and not to be 'civilised', as in suggestions that the eye of the needle was some low or narrow doorway. Our Lord is not afraid of extremes or of combining extremes: it is part of His policy, apparently, because He is engaged in a work of dividing men. The elect will respond even in the face of the greatest rebuffs or enigmas (of the Syro-Phenician woman addressed as a dog) whereas the rest will not respond although Jesus tears out His heart and gives it to them. This is part of the reason why Jesus' words are so often rough diamonds! It is almost impossibly hard, then, for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The hardness is not related to the mere possession of riches, but to the hold they have on their possessor. It is a question of who possesses whom. The instance of the rich young ruler is an excellent example of this power; his riches held him, not he his riches, and therefore although his moral life seems to have been extraordinarily blameless, he was in fact a devitalised soul who at the time of the encounter set more store by his possessions than by the very eternal life he so longed for. If we ask why Jesus said such impossible things and then qualified them, the answer is simply that the entrance of a rich man into the kingdom of God is a miracle as great as the passing of a camel through the eye of a sewing needle. On that level we may say that the entrance of every sinner into the kingdom of God is a miracle of grace, but may we not also say that grace, for all its sovereign power, has an easier task with needy souls, such as Lazarus at the gate, than with the rich man in the story, or with this rich young ruler? Just as the word in Paul is 'not many mighty' and 'not any mighty' (as the Countess of Haddington gratefully remarked to Samuel Rutherford) so the word here is hard, but not impossible, for with God all things are possible. Some conditions of life are less conducive to saving faith than others; but while this is true, it is also true that electing grace gives power to overcome every obstacle - and exults in the victory too! If the Christian rich man needs more grace than the poor man - the poor man has his problems too! - then He giveth more grace." (Rev. William Still).

234) 19:27-30

The truth that Jesus expresses in these verses is what the rich young ruler failed utterly to understand or perceive, and they hear witness to the fact that the real goal of sacrifice in the teaching of the Scriptures, and especially self-sacrifice, is not death and negation, but life and fulfilment. It was the tragedy of the situation that he did not realise the implication of being invited into fellowship with the Son of God. That is the ultimate beatitude, both now and hereafter, alongside which every other delight, however rich and satisfying, is secondary and even incidental. The simple and comprehensive answer therefore to Peter's question in 21, "What shall we have?" is "Ye shall have Me". And we need to understand that even the privilege of sitting on the thrones of glory with Christ, and the 'hundredfold' in 29, would be meaningless apart from this. The old hymn which says, "Where Jesus is, 'tis heaven there" expresses this truth deeply and simply. As to the specific nature of the rewards Jesus mentions, they can never be known or experienced if sought for, or if discipleship is entered into 'with a view', for this would indicate not self-sacrifice but self-seeking. One really 'dies' before life can be bestowed, and here, 'dying' involves renouncing all future prospects. And Jesus did say elsewhere (Luke 6:35) that we were to do our good deeds hoping for nothing again. Only thus will there be reward. . It is all a question of motive.

235) 20:1-16

We could easily get bogged down in the numerous interpretations put upon this parable of the labourers in the vineyard. And one of the complicating factors is that we cannot always or often say that the lessons these interpretations offer are wrong or misleading. It is only that they are legitimate applications of the parable, rather than its true meaning. For example, the early fathers were used to interpret the parable to refer to the various labourers in successive ages from Adam to Christian times, and also to those who give themselves to God's service at successive ages in human life until old age. Now, undoubtedly, these suggestions give real insights into the nature of the kingdom of God. We are sure that Spurgeon for example is within his rights in applying it to various different ages at which conversion can take place, childhood, youth, manhood, old age. But is this the real point; is this what Jesus was really intending to say by it? We may surely question this. Others take the parable to emphasise particularly the equality of rewards in the kingdom of God; but though this seems to be the point in the story, it certainly does not agree with the words that end it - "the last shall be first", not "the last shall be as the first", i.e. all the same. Others take it to stress the truth that God does not regard the length of time men are occupied in His service, but their fidelity and diligence. But there is nothing in the parable to suggest that the later workers were more industrious than the earlier, nor does it suggest, as Calvin takes it to mean, that the earlier labourers had grown slack, and that the parable is a warning against over-confidence because we have begun well. Others will take it to refer to the reaction of the Jews to the admission of the Gentiles into the kingdom, in much the same way as the parable of the prodigal son is so interpreted. Now all these, it may be, are legitimate applications of the parable, and none are without value, but not its primary and essential meaning. We must therefore learn to distinguish between application and exposition, otherwise we do despise to the Spirit of truth, and become victims of our own arbitrary interpretations. With that by way of introduction, we shall look at the parable in its context tomorrow.

236) 20:1-16

The context of the parable, viz. the incident of the rich young ruler and our Lord's subsequent comments, is the key to a proper understanding of its teaching. Christ speaks of the rewards that those who forsake all will be given, and then comes a warning 'But' in 19:30, "many that are first shall be last..." Next comes the parable, then a repetition of the word about the last being first (16), as if to say, "That is what I mean by saying that the last shall be first and the first last". The parable is supposed to illustrate, then, the twice-repeated phrase, that is, an illustration of the truth that a change of places will occur as between the first and the last. And, of course, this is what causes the difficulty in interpretation, for the parable itself seems to illustrate not that there will be an exchange of places but that in fact there will be a leveling of distinctions, and that all will be the same. The labourers were all paid the same wage. But let us leave that difficulty for the moment and look again at the origin of Jesus' teaching in Peter's question (19:27). "What shall we have?" Now, Jesus gave a very full answer as to the facts of what Peter had said. Those who forsake all for His sake shall indeed have a bountiful reward. But there is a difference between forsaking all for Christ's sake and beginning to think all unnecessarily of it in terms of forsaking all for the reward's sake. And Peter's word "What shall we have?" seems to have indicated to Jesus that there was rather more preoccupation with reward in Peter's mind than was healthy. And it is as if Jesus were warning Peter, "Be careful of that attitude, Peter, watch your motives in this matter". God's rewards are reckoned of grace; there is no question of deserving them. We are all unprofitable servants. And Jesus reminds Peter that the benefits of the kingdom are the same for all who come to Him. There is only one level at the cross, and no one has precedence over another. But does not this interpretation contradict our earlier point that the parable was meant to illustrate the exchange of places between first and last? True, the difficulty seems still to remain; but there is also a hidden meaning that must be brought out, and this we turn to in tomorrow's Note.

237) 20:1-16

This hidden meaning should be clear and plain to those who take the parable, as it was undoubtedly meant, as a warning to Peter. And it can be brought out by reference to the parable of the prodigal son, which commentators are quick to point out is very similar in some of its ideas to this one. Consider what the elder brother said to his father. What was he working for? A sense of loyalty and duty, or for a fatted calf (Luke 15:29)? The whole question of his motive arises here, and his attitude calls his motive in question. He should have been glad about his brother, but he was not. He had a wrong spirit, and it nullified all his righteousness and his industry at home. He also was a prodigal son, and his heart was far from God. This is the point in our parable here. These men had a wrong spirit, and this is what caused them to grumble and murmur. And this is what earned them their rebuke. Their complaint was that - they were being unjustly treated; but the Lord of the vineyard quietly points out that no injustice has been done. An agreement had been made with them - and had been honoured. Where was the injustice? It is not justice that is the problem here, but jealousy. And it is this wrong spirit that Jesus is warning Peter against. It is possible, He means, to give up all in a wrong spirit and with a wrong motive, in such a way as to nullify and negative all the good of one's sacrifice, and instead of being in the forefront of the rewards find oneself in the background. It is the kind of spirit that can make the first last. Take the story of the two brothers in Luke 15: which would we put first, the younger or the elder? That is what this parable is about.

238) 20:17-19

These verses record another instance in which Jesus insisted on the centrality of the cross in His work and ministry, as He had done earlier at Caesarea Philippi (16:21ff). Here, His words stand as a graphic 'text' for the 'sermon' which the verses following provide. They are in stark contrast to the spirit of 20-24, and provide the basis of His teaching in 25 ff, and coming immediately after the parable in 1-16 in which He warns Peter of the danger of wrong and unworthy motives in Christian life and service, they clearly indicate our Lord's concern to recall the hearts of the disciples to the word and spirit of the cross. Let us therefore learn this simple, all-important lesson, and let it be our meditation for today: Into all the complex pattern of our lives, Jesus again and again thrusts the challenge of the cross, to remind us that this is the only possible basis of discipleship, and the only safe way of living. All our dearest hopes and most fervent desires must be brought under the gracious discipline and judgment of the cross. Not otherwise can we walk with Him.

239) 20:20-24

The incident recorded in these verses is a sufficient indication of how necessary it is for all who name the name of Christ to be brought under the discipline of the cross. One can imagine how a sense of desolation must have gripped the heart of our Lord at the realisation of how little His meaning was getting home to the disciples. To be faced with the kind of request that James' and John's other brought Him was ample proof that great areas of carnality existed in them that had never been touched by His teaching. It is almost terrifying to think that immediately after He had warned Peter that "the last shall be first and the first last" there should have been this uncomprehending request on her part that her sons should be first in the disciple band. Well might Jesus say in 22, "Ye know not what ye ask". Once again, in infinite patience, He directs them to the cross, in the words about His cup and baptism, and reminds them that true discipleship was a sharing of His passion, not a question of coveting place in the kingdom. We can hardly think that the other disciples' indignation breathed the spirit of Christ. They were incensed at James and John not so much because of the unrighteousness of their request as because they would have been envious of any advantage gained over them. One has only to recall how they had disputed among themselves which should be greatest (Mk 9:34) to realise that this is what underlay their indignation. How very sad! And what an eloquent testimony to the need for the slaying of self in these men. And ourselves?

240) 20:25-29

Jesus teaches the disciples the real secret of greatness in the kingdom of God. 'To go up, you go down', He means to say; 'To live, you must die, and to be chief in any group you must become servant of all'. And the basis of this teaching for His disciples is the example and pattern of His own life (28). The connection between His taking up the cross and theirs, is therefore emphasised and established once again. How, then, does this work out in our lives? What does it mean to be identified with Christ in His death? According to Calvin, the pattern of dying with Christ has to be worked out in our Christian life both inwardly and outwardly. There is an inward process of mortification - a dying to self - of which Jesus in His perfect surrender to God's will and His complete self-control is the perfect example. There is also for the Christian an outward process of mortification to be undergone in union with Christ, just as Christ, as well as mortifying His self-will, laid down His life on the cross and bore excruciating physical and outward suffering in body and estate and reputation. Thus, while there are many passages in the New Testament, such as Romans 6 and Col 3:5, where our mortification is seen to be an inward process of self-denial, there are also those in which to 'die with Christ', to be conformed to His death, means 'actually to be made like Him in outward form before the eyes of the world in suffering and shame'. Without this twofold conformity, we cannot be His disciples.

241) 20:29-34

For comment on this passage, another Note by the Rev. William Still: "These two blind beggars sitting by the wayside of sultry Jericho believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Jews: that is what calling Him 'Son of David' means. Whence had they the insight that Peter had at Caesarea Philippi (16:16)? It was the insight that comes by desperate need, a need, as it turned out (cf Gen. 50:20, John 9:3), which God permitted to arise in order to provoke their cry of faith. They believed that the Messiah when He came would do for such as they the thing they sorely needed, namely, give them their sight (of Isa 35:5,6; 61:1-7), and having heard that this man was doing these things to whomsoever sought His aid, they naturally concluded that He must be the Messiah. Mind you, it is one thing to get the King to do you a favour, but another to become everlastingly indebted to Him for it. A great many want God to serve them - as their servant, but that cannot be. He will serve us only as our Lord and God. The crowd, and possibly those nearest to Jesus amongst them, may have thought that these were two creatures like so many more that just wanted sight to their eyes for purely selfish reasons. Even so, Jesus would have given them sight, but as it turned out He knew that there was real saving faith there, because when He, overruling the discouragement of the crowd, gave them their sight, they followed Him. They wanted their sight in order to follow Him as Messiah. Their importunity is therefore seen to be something more than the clamant demands of men seeking to turn the Messiah into their mere servant, rather the humbly imperious demand of a faith seeking healing in order to follow and, presumably, serve. For Christ to show mercy on such is to pour out grace to some profit. Ultimately grace is not wasted, as may seem, for at least judgment vindicates the righteous which offers it, but does it appear to be wasted on you? Has He healed you but you have not followed as you ought?"

242) 21:1-11

We have seen repeatedly in our studies in Matthew that there is often a hidden meaning and significance in the association of one incident with another, and that the writer saw a particular message from God in such association. The passage before us now is in this category, standing in a significant relation to what immediately precedes it, viz. the story of the healing of the blind men. Indeed, that incident, in which the compassion of Christ shines forth in the healing of the men, forms a link both with what precedes and what follows it. And there is a sense in which it gives the theme of the entire passage. The subject is blindness, and its healing by the Son of God. In the earlier passage, James and John had shown their blindness and insensitiveness to the things of the Spirit in the request they made to Jesus to sit on His right hand and on His left in His kingdom, and just as the two blind men needed the touch of the Saviour to make them see, so also James and John needed their eyes opened. And now, in this great passage, we have a further evidence of the spiritual blindness of men, in the people's refusal of their King when He offered Himself to them. It is true that the popular demonstration that heralded His coming seemed to welcome Him gladly, but their attitude changed very quickly, and within a week the crowds that cried 'Hosanna' were to cry 'Crucify Him'. They were blind to Him (of Luke 19:42, Luke 23:34; John 1:10, 11). The King came to His own, and His own received Him not; in a terrible, fatal blindness, they led Him away to be crucified, repudiating His claim to reign over them. Such is the real significance of these verses.

243) 21:1-11

What particular construction are we to place on this offer of Himself by the King? Does Matthew mean to illicit from us the reaction: "What a shame, that Jesus should thus be rejected. Poor Jesus!" Hardly. This would be to miss the point, and much too near the misinterpretation of His work which sees in it nothing more than the 'failure of a mission'. Matthew, we must remember, is writing from the standpoint of the Resurrection victory. We should recall how in Acts the apostles rubbed home the enormity of the Jews' guilt in crucifying the Son of God "Whom ye crucified, Whom God raised up", "Let all the house of Israel know that God hath made this same Jesus, Whom ye crucified, both Lord and Christ". The point was to bring about conviction in their hearts; and in this they' surely succeeded. And this is precisely what Matthew must be understood to be doing here in his readers not to awaken sympathy for 'poor Jesus' in the people's rejection of Him, but to proclaim a victorious, kingly Saviour, and to show both the enormity and the inexcusability of their having rejected Him. For, of course, Jesus made His purpose and intention and meaning quite plain in what He did that day. Everybody knew the prophecies, which He deliberately acted out. For Isa 62:11 and Zech 9:9 were recognised and recognisable Messianic prophecies, and they must all have realised and understood the claim He was making in the way He enacted them. Nevertheless, they did not really grasp the significance of His action - "This is Jesus, the prophet of Nazareth" – that was all: a prophet, but no more. Not only so: their deep emotion was only emotion, which soon evaporated. This was not the first time that all Jerusalem had been stirred and moved (cf Matt 2:3 - this also at the coming of the King!), but it did not lead, either then or now, to faith and trust in Him. To have come as He did at Bethlehem, to have spoken as never man spake, to have come to the city as its rightful king, and yet for people not to have acknowledged Him and be stirred only to a superficial and meaningless enthusiasm - this is what Matthew is intent on emphasising, to show that those who reject Christ are without excuse.

244) 21:1-11

Matthew has however another purpose than simply to expose the inexcusability of the Jews. His gospel is a witness to Christ. And the point of application of this story for all who read is to emphasise this twofold factor in every human reaction to Christ - the blindness and the inexcusability - and to make us all ask ourselves the question, "What have I done with the Son of God? Am I guilty, as they were, of this sin of refusing the claims of His kingship?" For just as truly as Christ came that day to Jerusalem as its rightful and lawful King, so also does He come to us in His Word and by His Spirit, as the King whose right it is to reign over our lives. This is the plain and unequivocal challenge of the gospel. It is understood best as a summons to give Christ His proper place as King and Lord of the lives of men. In relation to this two things must be said. On the one hand, there is a great blindness in men's minds to the reality of Christ and His claims. They simply do not see or understand the nature of the gospel that He wills to have the control of their lives and the homage of their hearts. Inasmuch as this is so, they are the objects of His pity and compassion. But on the other hand, this is a culpable blindness. They are without excuse, because for those with eyes to see the issues have surely been plain enough all along. And men just do not want to yield to Christ this kind of control in their lives. And inasmuch as this is so, they are rebels against the living God, who need nothing so much as to surrender to rightful authority. And this finally leads us back to the incident of the healing of the blind men. For Christ our King has a healing touch. He is full of compassion, and when the blind know their need, and call on Him to have mercy on them, He is not slow to respond to their cries. He can still open the eyes of the blind.

245) 21:12-16

This incident, and the one that follows, are to be interpreted in connection with our Lord's coming to the city as its rightful King, as things that the King did. We look first at the incident of the cleansing of the Temple. In the previous verses Matthew recorded a Messianic prophecy from Zechariah as having been fulfilled in what Jesus did. He could just as easily have quoted another, from Malachi, which is well and amply illustrated by what happened here, "The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His Temple; but who may abide the day of His coming?" This is the meaning here. When the King comes to His Temple, crisis is always precipitated, and things are liable to happen. The first lesson, therefore, in Matthew's story here, is that judgment must begin at the house of God. This is true of every 'coming' of Christ to His Temple, and this incident is but the illustration of what His coming meant and did to the religion of His day. He turned it upside down. "I came", He said, "Not to send peace, but a sword". And at every time of new beginnings, when Christ has come in mercy to His people, there has been a cleansing of the Temple. When Christ came by His Spirit in the preaching of the apostles there was disturbance in every synagogue of the Jews -this is the one constant factor in Acts. Why should this be? Why this inevitable disturbance and upheaval? Because it is a King Who comes, and men are rebels against His authority. It is as simple as that. Nor is it different in individual life. There is a throne in every human heart that is designed and made for the Son of God as King. But other lords have had dominion over us, and when at length the King comes to take His rightful place, all sorts of upheavals are likely to take place, as He clears out the accumulated rubbish of years and seeks to bring the Temple back to its original intended purpose and destiny. Or in fellowships: when a congregation enthrones Christ as Lord of its life and witness, the accumulation of the years of visionless life begin to be overturned, just as drastically as the tables of the moneychangers in our Lord's day. Who indeed may abide the day of His coming?

246) 21:17-22

It may be thought that having one's world turned upside down (as described in yesterday's Note) is too costly a business. But it is infinitely better than having happen to us what the incident in these verses describes; for there is a finality about the story of the fig-tree, and its message is withering and judgment. The story is not without its difficulties for interpretation, because it seems so different from the other examples of Christ's exercising His divine power. But we best understand this miracle as a parable of judgment. The whole section of the gospel in which it occurs is highly symbolic, and here is another symbolic act. In Luke 13:6-9 we see that the fig tree represents Israel as a nation, and there can be little doubt that this is the reference underlying the passage here. Mark gives a fuller account of the incident (11:12 ff) and tells us that Jesus saw the fig tree afar off. Now, the whole district was a fig-growing area ('Bethphage' means 'house of figs') and there would be many fig trees to be seen. Why was this one particularly singled out? Because it was showing leaves, as the others were not. The reference books tell us that fig trees put forth their fruit first, before their leaves. It was not the season for figs then (Mark 11:13), but here was one particular fig tree that was well in advance of the others, and prematurely covered with foliage. It was thus so conspicuous that Christ could see it afar off. And if it was already bearing leaves the assumption would be that it was also bearing fruit, for first came fruit, then leaves. The presence of leaves was a good argument and evidence that it was bearing fruit, and it was a reasonable deduction for anyone to make that there was fruit on the tree. But when Jesus came to it, He found that it was in fact untrue to its nature. It had promised much, but belied its promise. It held out a hope, but disappointed. It is this that constitutes the lesson, as we shall see in tomorrow's Note.

247) 21:17-22

We continue the comment from yesterday. The fruitless fig tree provides a dramatic symbolism, in that Jesus had come to another fig tree, Israel, a tree that He Himself had planted and cared for with such love. The other nations of the world were still in darkness - the time of fruit had not yet come for them - out here was one that had been specially cultivated, full of light, knowledge, and privilege. And, seeing these leaves, He had come expecting fruit, but when He came and 'looked round about on all things' (Mark 11:11), He saw nothing but barrenness and destitution. Israel, the Lord's specially cared-for fig tree, was fruitless and unbelieving. And in pronouncing judgment on the barren fig tree Jesus was in fact pronouncing Judgment on barren Israel. We may now read all this back into the incident of the cleansing of the Temple. What had Jesus seen, when He came to His specially cared for fig tree? Instead of a house of prayer, a den of thieves. Instead of a passion for the souls of men, worldliness and carnality, and cold, empty formalism. Let us take the challenge of this word to ourselves. When He comes to make a reckoning with us, what does He find? The leaves are there and, it may be, can be seen afar off, but is the fruit to be found? Many say they are happy to be associated with our work and witness in Holyrood. Well, what is that association producing? Is there fruit? Are we bearing fruit in our witness for Christ? Notice what Jesus said to His disciples in 20-22, "If ye have faith and doubt not..." This is the answer to fruitlessness. Faith. Israel was fruitless because she had made no real response of faith to the word of the gospel. There is a place deep down in the recesses of the heart where the whole issue of fruitlessness is decided and settled. It is the central citadel of the being, where God wants to erect a cross, on which to nail and crucify the will of a man. When this is allowed, faith is born, true, fruit bearing faith that will remove mountains. This is the response that is needed to the word of divine grace.

248) 21:23-27

We should not miss the continuity in Matthew's record in these chapters through concentrating on individual incidents. Jesus has presented Himself to Jerusalem as its rightful King and Messiah, and the Jews have rejected Him; but there is the still more solemn fact of the Messiah's rejection of them for their rejection of Him. It is this that explains the continuing emphasis on judgment and reckoning throughout, culminating in the terrible word in 23:38, "Behold your house is left unto you desolate". It is in this context that we are to understand our Lord's refusal to answer the chief priests' question as to the authority by which He wrought His mighty works. He refused to answer them because there was no point in doing so. For He had already demonstrated abundantly clearly that He had come from God and wrought in the power of God given Him by His Father, and they had refused His testimony. There is such a thing as giving that which is holy to the dogs and casting pearls before swine, and this He was not prepared to do. These men had forfeited any right to have anything further revealed to them because they had wilfully refused light. To refuse light is ultimately to have light withheld. They had closed up almost all the avenues of approach to their hearts along which grace might yet come to them, to bless and save them. The truth is, they asked this question about His authority not because they were prepared to submit to it if proved to them to be of God; but rather in order to trap Him and incriminate Him, so that they might take and destroy Him.

249) 21:23-27

Yet, paradoxically, there is a sense in which Jesus did answer them; but it was in an oblique way. He did not say outright that He was sent by God, yet His own question to them about the ministry of John the Baptist does imply the answer which He believes to be true. For Jesus knew they would not dare deny that John was a man sent by God, and therefore since John had testified concerning Him that He was the Lamb of God, they must surely concede that John's testimony was true, and that therefore He was from God. Not that they would have been amenable, at this late stage, to rational deduction, however logical and compelling the argument presented to them. There comes a time in the hardening of men's hearts when the most obvious, not to say, persuasive, of arguments will fall on deaf ears, and to this point these men had already come. Our Lord's answer to them was not, then, and should not be taken as, an evasion of their question. Jesus was not on the defensive; on the contrary, He skillfully turned their question against them, and seized the initiative in this debate about authority, as He proceeded to reply to them in His way and on His terms.

250) 21:28-32

It is clear from 32 that the parable of the two sons is linked directly with the previous verses and with the question about John's ministry. It is therefore, a commentary on the response that was made to that ministry by those who heard him preach. The contrast portrayed is that between the publicans and harlots on the one hand, and the scribes and Pharisees on the other. The former had said 'No' to God's call and summons to go and work for Him and thus fulfil their destiny in the kingdom. They were careless and indifferent to the things of God. But a great change was wrought in them under the ministry of John. They changed their minds and went after all. They repented, and entered the kingdom. The latter, however, had by their profession of religion said 'We go', but their action had belied their profession, for they had not gone. They had resisted and opposed the gospel. And having seen the truth about themselves, seen that in fact their attitude was saying 'No' to God, they did not repent, but rather hardened themselves in unbelief and resistance of the truth. It is a simple, but also devastating parable. Jesus is holding up His word as a mirror to them, that they might see themselves, and He does so, not in harshness, but in love. For He is still concerned, even at this late hour, to win them to faith. And even in His word about the publicans and sinners entering 'before you' (31) He is surely implying that it is possible for them also to change their minds as the publicans and sinners had done, and enter the kingdom. Right to the last it is possible for those who have said 'No' to Christ to change that 'No' to 'Yes'.

251) 21:33-46

There is a progression of thought here from the previous parable, as we shall also see there is from this one to the next (22:1-14). The situation is more critical here than in that of the two sons, for what is portrayed is a time of reckoning - this, as we have seen, is the main emphasis in this section of Matthew's gospel. Here it is the end of the long day that is spoken of, when the opportunities afforded by the first parable have all been spurned, and the time for giving account has come. At the same time, this second parable is an elaboration of the first, and a commentary on the meaning of the attitude of the son who said he would go but did not. And it shows in very plain terms that the refusal that was made was no isolated thing, but a continued and settled attitude which finally led to rejection and judgment. The second son in the first parable corresponds to the wicked husbandman in the second. In speaking thus, Jesus showed the Pharisees the whole situation in perspective, showed them their whole history in such an unmistakeable way that they knew He had spoken the parable against them. The vineyard represents the kingdom of God. To the Jews was given the privilege of realising or bringing it in. They were the chosen instruments of God. But all along, from the beginning, they misunderstood their destiny and purpose, and refused it. At stated points God sent His servants the prophets to 'receive the fruit', i.e. the obedience of His people, but all in vain. And the Pharisees simply confirmed in their attitude the whole earlier history of the Jews.

252) 21:33-46

One of the values of this parable for us is that it gives us a key to a true understanding of the Old Testament. This is how we are to interpret the history of Israel in the Scriptures, as (i) the desire of God to fulfil His will and purpose through His people whom He chose to be His instruments of revelation to the world, and (ii) the persistent refusal by Israel of this destiny. This is certainly how the Apostles interpreted the Old Testament, as witness Paul's and Stephen's sweeps through the history of Israel in the messages they preached. In the second movement of the parable, however, Jesus passes from history to prophecy and in parabolic form reveals what was about to happen, in telling that the husbandman took and killed the son and heir of the vineyard. It must have been a dramatic moment, and a devastating experience for these wicked men to hear our Lord so calmly and so deliberately reading their inmost thoughts and exposing their evil designs. In 40 Jesus poses a question to His hearers, and then elicits in 41 a pronouncement of condemnation on themselves from the Pharisees, which He Himself ratifies in 43. The words with which He concludes the parable (44) are most significance and cap all He has said. For they refer of course to His resurrection and victor. They were going to put Him to death, but God was going to raise Him from the dead, and set them at nought. They were rejecting Him, but God was vindicating Him, and appointing Him as Lord. The rejected stone was to become the head of the corner. And so they are finally proved to have made the wrong choice. If ever there was a plain lesson it is this: Take sides with Christ and His gospel, not against Him, for in the end being against Him will mean eternal loss.

253) 22:1-14

This is the third of the parables Jesus spoke in connection with the Pharisees' challenge to His authority (21:40ff). We have seen a progression of thought from the first to the second, the situation being more critical in the second than in the first; and this is true also with the third; the situation is even more critical here, for now we see the final consequences of saying 'No' to God. It is a parable which confronts us with the inescapable reality of eternal issues. Eternity is writ large upon Jesus' words, from beginning to end. And yet something else must also be said: throughout, the emphasis is also upon the attractiveness of the gospel, and the grace of its invitation to men. Indeed, solemn as the parable undoubtedly is, it is impossible not to hear the note of joy that rings throughout it. It is very remarkable that in a parable of judgment the invitation of the gospel, and all its attractiveness and grace, should be so more prominent and indeed decisive. Not only so: it is even more striking to realise that our Lord was even at this late stage inviting those who were His bitter and implacable enemies to enter the kingdom of God and come home to the Father's house. This is some indication to us of how judgment ought to be preached and spoken of. There is nothing here of the grim self-righteous complacency that has sometimes, sadly enough, marked the Church's preaching on this solemn subject. When, later, Jesus pronounced final doom upon Jerusalem (Luke 19:41f1), He did so with tears, as He wept over the impenitent city.

It is that spirit alone that entitles us to preach judgment to men.

254) 22:1-14

The first application of our Lord's words is to the Jews and their refusal of the gospel, and its subsequent offer to the Gentiles. The going out into the highways and byways is a certain reference to the displacement of the Jews by the Gentiles. In this respect it repeats and underlines the emphasis already made in the parable of the vineyard (21:40ff). But, though this is the primary thrust of our Lord's teaching, it cannot be confined to that narrow application, for it is surely clear that the principle it contains is also very relevant for all men, inasmuch as the gospel is offered to all, and is still refused and rejected by many. We should note the kind of emphasis our Lord gives the gospel here. In the first parable, what was underlined was a command to be obeyed, and that was disobeyed, and there the nature of sin is understood as being disobedience to the command of God as He summons us to His will, as in the second it is revolt and rebellion. But the emphasis here is different: not indeed that it contradicts the other two, for the gospel is always both a summons to obedience and a challenge to lay down one's arms. But behind all this, and as a glorious backcloth to it, there is this other decisive factor: the gospel is like an invitation to a marriage feast. And the whole point of this metaphor is to underline the attractiveness of its offer to men. Salvation is, first of all, something that God gives. He invites us to Himself, for He wants to bless us. And all the challenge and summons must be seen against the great joy that He seeks to bestow upon men. It is this fact that so transforms the challenge that in spite of its radical nature and devastating demands it is still the most wonderful thing in the world to become a Christian.

255) 22:1-14

To continue our understanding of the attractiveness of the gospel offer, we next note that the heart of its blessing consists in being invited into fellowship with the King. He loves to have fellowship with His people. As Thieliicke puts it, "The gospel tells us that there is One Who rules the world with a Father's heart; that He is interested in me; that I am not too paltry and vile for Him to love; and that He wants to love me out of the terrible loneliness and alienness and guilt of my life and bring me to the Father's house". In face of such an invitation, one would have thought that all who were invited would have been eager to accept and go gladly to the feast. But no. The invitations were spurned, the guests refused to come. Some made light of it, and went their way; others showed active opposition and maltreated the king's servants. Now it is significant that Jesus classes these two different types of people together as being equally evil, and subject to the same severe judgment. Why, of course, what does it matter for what reason you stay away, if in fact you are staying away? Indifference and opposition here have the same effect. It does not in the least matter what is the reason for you failing to come to the feast; if you do not come you are turning down Christ and you are excluded by your own act from the blessings of God. And Christ was warning those among His hearers who were not actually siding with the Pharisees in their opposition to Him, but merely sitting on the fence. In the parable, it came to the same thing in the end for both sets of people. This is borne out very graphically by another point in the parable, to which we shall turn in tomorrow's Note.

256) 22:1-14

It is harder to convince the merely indifferent of their danger, for they tend to think that because they 'have nothing against' the gospel they are therefore acceptable even though they do not accept the invitation. And so Christ adds a very solemn and startling and dramatic conclusion to the parable, and speaks of a man who came not having a wedding garment or, as the Greek suggests, having neglected to put on the garment. Some suggest that eastern practice was for royal hosts to provide their guests with garments in which to come to their banquets. This may be; but it may be that the emphasis is simply upon the fact that the man turned up in unsuitable apparel. At all events it is clear that since the man was speechless when challenged about it he saw that he was in the wrong, and could make no excuses then. He stood self-condemned. And the meaning is that although we can come as we are, as sinners, we cannot enter the Divine presence as we are, but must be clothed in the wedding garment of Christ's righteousness, by which and in which alone we can stand in the presence of God and live. This part of the parable provides a conclusive answer to those who think to enter the kingdom of God dressed in the ordinary raiment of their own righteousness, forgetting that God says that "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags". Why should people be so averse to putting on Christ's wedding garments to go to the marriage feast? As Thieliicke says, "Who ever thought it a sacrifice to change his clothes and put on festive garments in order to go to a banquet he has looked forward to for weeks? This dressing up and preparing for the occasion is itself a part of the celebration and is full of joy and anticipated excitement". Well, are we going to the wedding? We have been invited! But we must remember that we have to be properly dressed. Our old clothes won't do!

257) 22:15-22

After the three parables we now have the record of three encounters Jesus has with the various groups of His enemies, the Pharisees and Herodians (15-22), the Sadducees (23-33) and the lawyer (34-40). One lesson common to all three incidents is to see the marvellous wisdom and consummate skill with which Jesus answered them. It is the easy Lordship of Christ that stands out. He towers over them, making their devilish attempts to trap Him look juvenile and ridiculous. The effortlessness with which He confounds them prompts us to speak of Him as "the incomparable Christ". In today's encounter, we note first the evil coalition between the Pharisees and Herodians. Humanly speaking these two groups had little in common, but a common hatred united them against Christ (in much the same way as Pilate and Herod became friends over His death, later on). This was indeed opening the door to the devil, and what devilish ingenuity there is here, in the question they put to Him, for it was something which it seemed impossible to answer without peril. For if He had said 'Give', the Pharisees would have accused Him as one who regarded the Jewish nation under subjection to Rome; and if He had said "Do not give" the Herodians would have accused Him to Pilate as one who was teaching sedition and rebellion against Rome. Either way they considered Him trapped. But with consummate ease He not only evaded the cunningly-laid trap but carried the war into their camp, laying before them a terrific challenge in the words He spoke. They said, "Give tribute". Jesus said, "Render". There is a profound philosophy underlying that distinction. The Jews bitterly resented having to pay taxes and tribute to Rome. Jesus, by using this word, indicated it was a duty to give. Tribute was not a matter of giving but of owing; it was a debt they' owed to government. The powers that be are ordained of God, and it is a duty to be law-abiding. To go no further than this part of Christ's answer, here is a message full of challenge. The concept of duty to society is one badly needing to be recovered today. It cuts right across the "I'm all right, Jack" attitude so prevalent everywhere in our time, and reminds us of the need for public-spiritedness. Every man has a contribution to make to the public good, and he ought to make it. He owes it to society to make it.

258) 22:15-22

The challenge in the second part of Jesus' answer to the Pharisees and the Herodians is even greater than that in the first. The mark of Caesar on the coin proved that they owed this tribute to him, and that it was their duty, and a matter of honesty to render it. But men bear another image and superscription on their souls - that of God. And if Caesar can rightfully demand his due, how much more God the homage of the souls He has made for Himself. This puts the challenge of the gospel in proper perspective. Christ's claims on men are royal claims, and the call of the gospel is the call to give God His rightful due, to render Him what is His by sovereign right. We are His in a twofold way, by virtue of our creation and by virtue of redemption. We are not our own, but bought with a price. This is the point underlined also in the parable of the vineyard. The Lord of the vineyard wanted and expected his rightful fruit, as Christ wanted and expected fruit from the fig tree, which represented Israel. The question that this incident poses to us is therefore: "What have we done with the life God has given us to steward for Him?" The words of George Matheson's great hymn express this truth perfectly: "I give Thee back the life I owe". This is what it means to be a 'living sacrifice' (Rom 12:1); it is the rendering of our due to God. When Paul said, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision", and dedicated his superb intellect and his great heart of affection, and indeed all that there was of him, to the service of Christ, he was simply rendering to God the things that were God's. This is what Jesus means here.

259) 22:23-33

The next encounter is with the Sadducees. We are bound to say, on reading this passage, that their question is pretty poor stuff, showing that their minds were barren of real ideas. Their intention was of course to bring the whole doctrine of resurrection into disrepute. It was not an intellectual argument, or a logical proof showing the impossibility of resurrection, but a frivolous, flippant and irreverent concoction, which did only one thing - it revealed these men for what they were, frivolous, flippant and irreverent men. And this is the end product of rationalism and the denial of the supernatural. It is hardly surprising, in view of this, that Jesus warned His disciples against the leaven of the Sadducees, for it does something to a man, bringing upon him a creeping paralysis of the spirit that kills everything real and noble and deep. Our Lord's reply to them is of wide application. We should note the association of ideas in what He says in 29: not to know the Scriptures excludes a man from knowledge of the power of God. But did the Sadducees not know the Scriptures? Well, they had read and studied them, but to no purpose, for they had clearly missed their whole meaning. Christ could find the doctrine of resurrection, and of the supernatural, in the Old Testament, though they could not (32). God does not say, "I was Abraham's God", but I am Abraham's God. He is still Abraham's God, Jesus means, because Abraham is still alive and will live eternally.

260) 22:40-33

The power of God was the other thing they did not know. Two things may be said here: on the one hand, it is the tragedy of the Sadducees attitude that it is powerless - it does nothing, it has no gospel, no message of deliverance. To them, religion was an institution, not a dynamic; their rationalism had sapped all power from them and all but sapped their life. On the other hand, are we to suppose that even if the kind of problem, posed here in their foolish parable, did exist, it would present any difficulty to God? 'Your God is too small', Jesus says to them, in effect. The living God is able to create a completely new order of life, and will do. This is the point in 30 about neither marrying nor giving in marriage. We are not to suppose from these words that this situation would have disquieting and dismaying implications for those who are happily married, as if in the life to come they were to be separated from their life-partners with whom they were made one by God Himself. Marriage was instituted by God as help towards closer fellowship with Himself, and this is what its function is meant to be here on earth. But in heaven, we shall see His face, and will need nothing to bring us nearer Him. Marriage will therefore, in this sense, be unnecessary. We must consider marriage, at its sweetest and best, is simply a pointer, a shadow, and a token of something infinitely more grand and glorious beyond all our imagining and almost beyond belief. But one does not thereby toss marriage aside contemptuously when it is no longer needed. As C.S. Lewis says, victorious warriors hang up their swords after battles are won. They do not discard them. "What is no longer needed for biological purposes may be expected to survive for splendour". Neither man nor woman will be asked to throw away any weapons they have used victoriously. It is the beaten and the fugitive who throw away their swords. The conquerors sheathe theirs and retain them.

261) 22:34-40

Now it is the lawyer's turn to tilt at Christ. Clearly the man sought to elicit some unorthodox statement from Jesus, which would give His enemies cause to accuse Him as a heretic. If this were so, then the lawyer's attempt was doomed to disappointment, for our Lord's reply was orthodoxy itself. He enunciated not a new commandment, but an old one. He went back to the law, and substantiated it. One recalls His earlier words in Matt 5:17, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law; I am not come to destroy but to fulfil". The first and greatest commandment was the one that had been given long ago, and so far as Jesus was concerned, it was still valid, and always would be. Nothing could underline more graphically the continuity of Jesus' teaching with that of the old economy, or emphasise more clearly that law and legalism are not the same things. It is true, of course, that there is an attitude to the law that is legalistic (as witness that of the Pharisees, who made it into a hopeless and crushing bondage); but this does not mean that we must therefore depart from the law itself. And it is a serious confusion of thought to suggest that when Law as such is emphasised and stressed, this is legalism. It is not, for example, legalism to lay a serious and wholehearted stress on the commandment 'Thou shalt not steal', and to allow no deviation from its absolute standard. Is it legalistic for an employer to expect an absolute adherence to this standard in his employees, and is the true Christian position one in which such a command is not pressed to extremes? It is true that the Christian does not live by the commandment in the sense that the only reason he refrains from stealing is that the commandment says 'Thou shalt not steal'. He does not steal because, in Christ, he is a new creature, and as such does not want to steal. But this does not alter the fact that it is still wrong to steal. The sanction of the law remains, even for the Christian, and stands as a warning not to steal, if the temptation ever were to come to do so. We must beware of bandying about the word 'legalism' when we are dealing with the holy law of God.

262) 22:41-46

Having silenced His critics, Jesus now turns to challenge them with a question about the Messiah of the prophecies. The Pharisees answered readily enough that the Messiah was the Son of David, for they were familiar with the thought that the Promised One would come of David's royal line. Jesus, however, shows that this answer raises a very real difficulty, which He brings up by quoting Psalm 110, where David, He says, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, calls the Messiah his Lord. How then could He be David's Son? To the Pharisees this was an unanswerable question. Not that it was essentially an unanswerable question. There is an answer to it, but it was an answer they could not give, holding the views they did about the Messiah. For they thought of Him merely as a human figure, greater than David, but similar to David himself, another David, a warlike, lion-hearted hero. Well, if that is how one thinks of the Messiah, there is no answer; for His question requires the Messiah to be more than merely David's Son. He is not only Son of David, He is Son of God (f Rom 1:4). Jesus' words here therefore constitute an oblique confession of His deity, and as such take us to the heart of His gospel. For everything of decisive importance in the gospel depends on the fact of His God-manhood. Without this, there can be no gospel to preach, there can be no atonement, and no forgiveness. The Messiah, in order to atone for sin, had to be God as well as man. But there is also an oblique challenge to His questioners in this word. David called Him Lord. This is the point and emphasis throughout the chapter, which has in fact demonstrated His easy Lordship. David knew he had been confronted by Deity in this vision; but they, face to face with Deity, were refusing to bow the knee to Him. This, ultimately, was why they could not answer His question. A moral surrender is necessary before basic intellectual problems are capable of solution.

263) 23:1-12

This chapter is a long one, but it is all one movement and is perhaps best studied in one. We can do this the more easily since we have already dealt in detail with similar teaching of our Lord's elsewhere, e.g. 15:1-10, which deals with the same kind of casuistry as He mentions here, and 5:33-37 which are a remarkable parallel to 16-21. Christ closes His ministry as He began, with a protest against the falsity which had replaced the commandments of God with the traditions of men. In the first 12 verses we have severe strictures against the emptiness and hypocrisy of Pharisaic 'officialdom'. The truth is, the Pharisees had fallen into the error of assuming that because they were members of a separate order they should have the unquestioning respect and reverence of men. The heart and life of their movement had long since disappeared, but their claim to authority was still being made in all arrogance. Of them it could be most truly said that they had a name that they lived and were dead. And wherever authority is claimed in such circumstances, distortion and perversion of true religion are always the result; laughable pomposity at best, and at worst cruel and heartless lordliness, caricatures the true spirit of lowly service (11, 12) which is the hallmark of reality in the genuine servant of God. Well might Jesus say, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees".

264) 23:13-36

Jesus began His ministry with the sublime words of the Beatitudes (5:1-16); at its end we have the grim and fateful Woes, recorded in these verses. In between the blessings and the woes, we have the appeals of Christ to the souls of men, described with great poignancy in the words of 37, "How often...." Some think that Matthew has arranged the Woes to match the Beatitudes, in reverse order, others that he presents Jesus as the second Moses, and arranges them material like the song of Moses in Deut 32:1-40. Whether this be so or not, the seriousness of the charges against the Pharisees is seen in the first woe - they shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, and would neither go in themselves nor suffer others to go in. It is this that warrants the most serious kind of condemnation. It is a terrible, monstrous tragedy when, by teaching or by life, men shut up the kingdom of God for others. But now, in the larger setting of the gospel as presented by Matthew, we see the 'case' he is making. He is writing to the Jews and is showing how justified their rejection is, since (a) in face of 'living religion' as exemplified in Christ they preferred dead orthodoxy, and (b) in face of repeated pleadings throughout the years they preferred to harden their hearts against God. This last is the point of the reference in 34ff - the whole history of the Jews is in view here. And what they were doing with Christ was simply confirming all their previous history of revolt and rebellion against God. The words of Stephen before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:51) admirably sum up that chequered and perverse story "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye".

265) 23:37-39

Our Lord's closing words make it clear that the language of stern reproof in the previous verses was spoken with a loving and tender heart. The contrast between Jesus' 'Would I' and their 'Would not' is itself a proclamation of the grace of the gospel, and of the truth that the heart of the Eternal is inexpressibly moved by the stubbornness of men. The 'How often' takes us back through our Lord's entire ministry, to the many times, and the many different Ways in which He pleaded with men to come to Him. Every miracle He performed, every parable He taught was a call, an invitation, to come to Him for rest and salvation. A well-known hymn says, "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide", but this is not how it was in our Lord's ministry. Not once, but again and again, opportunity was given them to taste and see that the Lord is good. And since this was so, their 'would not' cannot be construed as mistake or misunderstanding or ignorance. In face of such repeated opportunity, it could only have been a settled and determined attitude of rebellion and rejection. Hence the die was cast, and desolation was pronounced on the Jewish nation. And all that happened following this point simply confirmed both their rejection of Him and His rejection of them- The point of no return had been reached and passed.

266) 24:1-3

Two sections of Matthew's gospel now remain - a final teaching section, comprising chapters 24 and 25, and the record of our Lord's death and resurrection, in chapters 26-28. The section we begin now is eschatological, i.e. it deals with the doctrine of the last things, and the first part of it, in chapter 24, is amongst the most difficult and most controversial in all the New Testament. What makes it so difficult is the fact that more than one perspective is in view - e.g. some of the things Jesus says clearly refer to a doom that was to fall on Jerusalem within the lifetime of the disciples, while other things equally clearly refer to the end of the age; but sometimes it is not at all clear whether a particular verse refers to the one or to the other, or both. At all events we can begin well and clearly in our interpretation, for there seems to be a definite link between what Jesus says first of all in 2 about the destruction of the temple and what He has just said in 23:38. The destruction of the temple, then, is the direct result of the Jewish nation's rejection of their Messiah. Just as clearly, then, the disciples' question in 3, "When shall these things be?" relates to that national judgment which, as we know, took place in A.D. 70, when the Roman armies sacked Jerusalem and slew over a million people. But in the verses that follow it is not immediately clear that in fact Jesus does refer to that event, for in 4-14 He speaks of general matters, principles almost, which are equally applicable to the more immediate judgment of 70 A.D. and to that of the End. It is this kind of double reference that makes interpretation so problematic.

267) 24:4-14

Jesus' warning in 4 seems to relate particularly to the fact that in 3 the disciples, in placing their two questions close together - "When shall this be?" and "What shall be the sign of Thy coming?" - associated the two things together in their minds. And Jesus decisively teaches that the judgment on Jerusalem would not be the sign of His coming and of the end of the world, as we see in 6 - "the end is not yet", i.e. when the war that was to mean the destruction of Jerusalem came, they were not to suppose that it heralded the coming of the end. And yet - here is the subtlety and complexity of the situation - they were not wholly wrong. For not only was that disaster a kind of coming in judgment, but also it was a prefiguring of the great Day of Judgment: And the two things are alike, and the confusion can easily be made, because the same principle is involved in each. In fact, deep spiritual principles underlie all human history, and the great crisis-points are all similar to one another because essentially they are all expressions of the same thing. This is why we cannot dismiss as mere fanatical error the claims Christians have sometimes made in various ages about the appearance of Anti-Christ. Nero was Anti-Christ to the early Church, the Pope was Anti Christ to Luther, Hitler was Anti-Christ in our modern age - these were not the Anti-Christ, but only expressions of the Anti-Christ who will come at the last in all the terror of his blasphemous power. With these thoughts as the background of our understanding, the teaching of these verses will become clearer.

268) 24:4-14

We have established that because of the spiritual principles underlying history, our Lord's words, spoken originally to His immediate disciples in relation to the conditions leading up to A.D. 70, are applicable equally to any disciples in any age. This is an important consideration for us, and we may learn from them three things. Jesus is saying to us, in effect: "These are to be the general characteristics of the age; in greater or lesser degree this is how things will be in the world until I come again, for this is the nature of sinful existence". And He instances three facts - imposters in religion (5, 11), wars and rumours of wars (6, 7), affliction and persecution (9, 10), and because of this coldness of heart (12). There will be times of respite, of course, but this will be the main trend. And it is usually when these pressures are greatest that e.g. the danger from false prophets and false claimants will be most rife. Wars and heresy tend to go together - it is generally in times of turmoil that heretical religions tend to flourish. But Jesus exhorts against discouragement (6). These are precisely the circumstances in which the gospel is to be preached in every age. There are no ideal conditions in which to work for Christ, it is always against opposition and in the teeth of it that the work must be done. And, says Jesus, the gospel shall be preached in all the world. The sovereignty of God is the deepest reality. Evil is in the control of the living and omnipotent God. It is He Who calls the tune, and His gospel will not brook hindrance. Even in the most difficult and intractable circumstances His purposes will be fulfilled. And patient endurance will result in final salvation (13). Those who stay the pace will find that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.

269) 24:15-28

These verses describe a time of terrible tribulation, with, at the end, another warning against being deceived (23,24). It is here, at this point, that complications arise in interpretation. And we should realise that there are things in prophecy which we shall not understand, and that we have perforce to be tentative in the conclusions we reach, and very cautious in any dogmatism we express. For example, the passage speaks of tribulation, then in 29 we read "Immediately after the tribulation of these days...the sign of the Son of man..." This would seem to make it clear that the verses that speak of the tribulation necessarily refer to the days immediately preceding our Lord's coming. Yet 15 seems certainly to refer to the disciples to whom Jesus then spoke, and therefore the following verses to the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and this seems substantiated in 34 where Jesus says that "this generation shall not pass away until all these things shall be fulfilled". Are we to say, then, that Jesus also was mistaken when He spoke of His coming following immediately after the tribulation associated with the Fall of Jerusalem? This possibility is so unthinkable that some have interpreted the whole chapter almost in terms of the sack of Jerusalem and assert that there is no reference to any other time at all (see A.M. Stibbs Tyndale Commentary, pp 224 ff). Yet, as Bishop Ryle says, "If the solemn words here used mean nothing more than the coming of the Roman armies to Jerusalem, we may explain away anything in the Bible." But it is easier to disagree with a particular view such as Stibbs' than to find an alternative interpretation that does not also raise real problems and difficulties, as we shall see in the Notes that follow.

270) 24:15-28

The 'therefore' in 15 is ambiguous, and could refer to the immediately preceding words "then shall the end come" in which case what follows would require to be interpreted as referring to conditions obtaining at the end time. On the other hand, it could also be taken to refer to all the preceding verses (4-14), in which case what follows would require to be interpreted as an example of the kind of conditions that are to be expected throughout the course of the age, and this would open the possibility of a reference to the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Certainly the more one reads these verses the more one agrees with many commentators as to their applicability to AD 70 and as to the distinction Jesus seems to be making between that event and His coming. For 15ff speak of signs which are to precede a catastrophe and which would be a warning that it was about to take place, whereas His coming would have no warning, but be like a sudden, unheralded flash of lightning (27). The 'double' meaning seems to be confirmed when we consider the significance of our Lord's reference to the book of Daniel (9:13, 11:31, 12: 11, and possibly 8:13). It is interesting to see what Matthew adds in parenthesis - 'whoso readeth, let him understand', as if to say, "See what a deep and sinister interpretation Jesus places on that prophecy of Daniel relating to Antiochus Epiphanies". Certainly there was a fulfilment of this prophecy about the abomination of desolation in Antiochus in 168 BC, when he desecrated the sanctuary of the Temple by erecting an image of Zeus there. And this is the significant thing we are to note: If the abomination of desolation refers to Antiochus in 168 BC, and yet Christ refers it to something still to happen at a time future to that at which He spoke, then clearly He is giving this word a double meaning and interpretation. Let us suppose, for argument's sake, that Matt 24:15 refers to AD C0 - well, this gives Daniel's 'abomination' two distinct fulfilments, one in 168 BC and another in AD 70. But if it is true of two events, why may it not also be true of yet another? If Daniel's word had a more immediate fulfilment, in 168 BC and a later one, in AD 70, why should it be thought unlikely that that word, as quoted and used by Jesus, should also have a more immediate fulfilment, at the time of the end?

271) 24:15-28

It is precisely this 'double' reference in prophecy and apocalyptic writing that can confuse us if we do not grasp its possibility. It is not confined to our Lord's words: we see exactly the same kind of ambiguity in Daniel's prophecies as a whole - this is what makes them so problematic of interpretation. Here, then, in Matthew 24, there is the ambiguity of the 'near' and the 'far' telescoped together. All that is spoken of here is in fact applicable to AD 70, and took place then; and yet, some of the language certainly seems to indicate further and deeper fulfilment at the approaching end-time. The emphasis on tribulation in 21 indicates that in this time of crisis, what is always true (viz suffering and affliction) will be intensified greatly - i.e. the afflictions mentioned in 4-14 will become very much greater - but they will simply be an intensification of something that is always there. But we should note that the terms of 21 make it clear that something else is also in view. For it is not true that AD 70 brought greater tribulation for the Jews than anything else could possibly do - Nazi Germany did something much greater and more terrible. This is clearly looking on to a further fulfilment of crisis, at the end-time, the great climacteric of evil prior to the coming of the Lord. But, for our assurance, we should note in 22 that these terrible pressures are in God's control. He permits them, and decrees their duration. This is something we must never forget in all the tribulation we pass through for Christ's sake - it is under the hand of God.

272) 24:29-31

A word is now necessary about 'the tribulation'. Those familiar with 'schools of prophetic teaching' will know that for dispensationalists and millennialists this looms very largely in two ways: (a) as referring to a special time of unparalleled affliction, lasting a specified period of time, and (b) as referring particularly to the Jews ('the time of Jacob's trouble') and not applicable to the Church. In view of the widespread nature of these views, something had best be said on the subject. In the first place, an examination of the references to tribulation in the New Testament oblige one to the conclusion that there really is no case for asserting that the phrase 'the great tribulation' is anything qualitatively different from tribulation as a whole. Neither grammatically nor theologically does the distinction stand. All that we can deduce from the reference is that tribulation will be the characteristic of the Church's life and experience on earth, and that every time a crisis heads up, and particularly the final crisis of history, there will be a marked intensification of the tribulation and affliction. In the second place, it is clear from the words of Jesus that His second coming takes place after the tribulation of those days (29), i.e. He, comes to deliver His people in the context of tribulation, and they will have passed through all the tribulation that comes upon the world. In this connection we should note that the terms describing Christ's coming, 30,31, correspond to (a) 1 C or 15:51 ff, (b) 1 Thess 4:15 If, and (c) Revelation 8/9. The clouds of heaven, power and great glory, the sound of a trumpet - these are the same in all these references, and consistency of interpretation demands that we take these passages as all referring to one and the same event, otherwise we open the door to complete anarchy of interpretation.

273) 24:29-31

The reference to cosmic disturbances in association with the end-time is significant. It is not enough to say, as some do, that it is simply apocalyptic language. Of course it is, but to say this does not explain it or give it its significance. It is in fact the biblical teaching, that the sin of man causes the whole creation to 'fall', that explains our Lord's language here. In the last days, when evil men shall wax worse and worse, cosmic disorder will result. Just as there is good reason to suppose that the judgment of the Flood on the ancient world was a cosmic crisis caused by the enormity of the sin of man (cf Gen 6:5, 'only evil continually'), so also in the end-time, when evil rises to the summit of its arrogance and its defiance against God, it is only to be expected that the very universe will reel under the impact of the clash. And indeed, the idea of cosmic disturbance is not nearly so far-fetched today as it might have been thought a century ago. After all, man has reached the moon, and is aiming for the planets! It is the solidarity of man with the whole created order that is the key to understanding here. As Paul teaches in Romans 8:22, the whole creation groaneth, waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God, that it might also share in the divine redemption wrought in Christ. And until that glad time, it shares and is involved in the tribulation of the age.

274) 24:32-35

Some take the parable of the fig-tree as a quite ordinary metaphor, with the meaning that as it is certain that summer will follow when the first leaves are seen on the fig tree's tender branches, so also these things will follow the signs just mentioned. But we may question whether there is not more to the illustration than that for, as we have already seen in 21:18ff the fig tree was a well-known symbol of the Jews as a people. What if Jesus is looking into the far future here, and indicating that the Jews are God's signpost in history, and saying that when things happen with the Jews, it is a sign that God is going to act in history? This makes the parable gleam with light. Consider the words 'this generation' in 34. If this means the people then living, then the prophecy must refer to the judgment of AD 70. But the word 'generation' can refer to a race or family of people. And the extraordinary truth about the Jews is that they have persisted as a race down the centuries amid the disappearance of empires and dynasties, amid untold persecution and suffering. Why? Because God chose them as His peculiar people, and even when they resisted the purpose of their election and in their rejection of Him they are made to bear witness to His purposes, albeit in a negative way. And no power can ever destroy the people that He wills to remain in existence. What, then, can the budding of the fig tree signify? That after the long winter of affliction and persecution and suffering the signs of spring are to be seen (If Song of Solomon 2:4 ff). Well, one thinks of the movement of the Jews in our own time. After nineteen centuries, the Jews are returned to Palestine. Is not this the budding of the fig tree? This is why the present tension in the Middle East is fraught with such incomparable significance from the spiritual point of view. This is one of the 'signs of the times', signs that God is about to act in history.

275) 24:36-51

Christ's remarkable prophecy draws to a close with a series of solemn exhortations in face of what was to come, in which the attitudes of carelessness and watchfulness are contrasted. On the one hand our Lord indicates that the state of the world when He comes again will be as it was prior to the judgment of the Flood - an attitude of unthinkable, uncomprehending complacency, indifference and ignorance with 'God not in all their thoughts'. What this illustration from ante-diluvian times indicates is the practical godlessness and complete secularisation of society, and it is this that gives it significance for our own day. On the other hand, He stresses the necessity of watchfulness in view of the sudden and unannounced nature of His coming (42-44), and combines the two attitudes in the final parable of the faithful and evil servants (45-51). The significant implication of the parable is the moral emphasis that it gives to the whole question of prophetic teaching. Faithfulness to the work committed to us is to be the keynote of all true believers, and this serves to remind us very forcibly that the real purpose of prophetic teaching is not speculative but practical. This is a much-needed warning for us. It is all too easy to become preoccupied, not to say obsessed with the minutiae of prophetic schemes and theories, and when this happens we have simply lost sight of the real issues in an excess of self-indulgence that panders to the fleshly in our experience. The blessed hope is held out everywhere in Scripture as an incentive to holy living, and where it does not produce this, it has been misunderstood and misinterpreted, however well-versed in its teaching we may be. The reference in 45 to the giving of meat in due season may have particular significance for the disciples themselves in the calling to which they were committed, for they were being set over the Lord's household, to break the bread of life to the family of God. Faithfulness there or unfaithfulness would be critical. As it is for us all. In Mark's record of this passage we have the words, "To every man his work" (Mk 13:34). This is the point: in preaching or in any other service, it is all the same. We are to be found faithful at His coming. This is the message Jesus wants us to learn.

276) 25:1-13

The parable of the wise and foolish virgins continues our Lord's discourse on the last things, and the note it strikes, and the words with which it ends, reinforce what He has just said at the close of the previous chapter (cf 24:42,44). The first lesson is one which the parable shares with the two that follow, in 14-30 and 31-46, and indeed with what has preceded it, namely that the day of the coming of Christ will be one in which there will be a sifting of men, and the final separation of the saved and the lost. If there is anything that is clear in the teaching of Jesus it is that it will not be all the same in the end for everyone. One shall be taken, the other left (24:40, 41); the foolish virgins are excluded from the marriage feast, and the door is finally shut; the man with the one talent is judged and cast into outer darkness (30); and the sheep and the goats (32, 33) are finally separated. The second lesson is even more disturbing, and it is this: if we ask ourselves who these wise and foolish virgins are meant to represent, the answer is found in the context of the parable. It is a marriage scene, and the ten virgins all go out to meet the bridegroom, i.e. they all represent the Church. And the message is that it is precisely within the professing Church that this sifting will take place. The contrast is not here between the professing Church and the godless world, but between those within the Church who have a living and true faith and those, also within, who have not. The ten, as Trench remarks, include all who would desire to include themselves in the number of His believing people. They all took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And if others were deceived about them, they were most likely also deceived about themselves. This is the critical note in the parable, and we must spend some time examining it.

277) 25:1-13

The contrast between the wise virgins and the foolish is between profession and reality, between those who have merely the outer posture and habit, dress and demeanour, and those who have the inner, living principle. In the parable it is the possession of all that is the determining, distinguishing factor. "Whatever is merely outward in the Christian profession is the lamp (they all had that); whatever is inward and spiritual is the oil laid up in the vessels" (Trench). Now the force of the hiddenness of their unpreparedness is seen in the fact that they companied with the wise virgins and apparently were classed with them. This means that the distinction between the two groups was an inward one, not outward, and perceived only by the discerning. And we ask: Could such a thing be so concealed, and could the wise be so deluded by the foolish, and the foolish by themselves? But - and this is one of the complications of the parable - it is not a simple contrast between those who have oil and those who have not (oil being the symbol of the Holy Spirit), for the foolish apparently had oil to begin with, but it did not last, and was found lacking at the critical moment. Hence the emphasis that the distinction is not made evident until the moment the Bridegroom's arrival is announced and heralded. We must discuss this problem further in tomorrow's Note.

278) 25:1-13

Two things are to be said about the problem raised in yesterday's Note. One is that the parable may be regarded as a pictorial representation of our Lord's words earlier in 24:13, "He that endureth unto the end, the same shall be saved". It is not how we begin but how we continue and persevere, that is all-important. He that has oil in his lamp when the King comes back shall be saved. This is the point the parable is making. But how can a man have the oil of the Spirit and then be lacking in the Spirit at the great Day? Well - and this is the second point - there is a correspondence here in this parable with that of the sower (Matt 13). The foolish virgins correspond to the seed that fell on stony ground, of which Jesus says, "It dureth for a while". This is opposed to "dureth to the end". The stony ground refers to a superficial reception of the seed of the Word, which is fruitless and hopeless and doomed to failure. These are the foolish virgins - they began well, with oil in their lamps, but by and by the lamps began to flicker and grow dim, and go out, and they became empty, vain things. They did not last (cf also Hebrews 6:4ff). Thus the parable is a clarion call to all: "Examine yourselves", it says, "whether ye be in the faith". And now is the time for that examination to take place, and steps taken to put the matter right, before the Bridegroom comes. For there can be no borrowing oil from another in that Day. Every man has to stand for himself, and no other can help him. "Buy for yourselves" is wise advice. It must be a personal transaction. The tragedy of the parable was that they were too late in doing so. And Christ means to teach that with people who leave and put off their soul-preparation to the last moment it is a thousand to one against their being in time.

279) 25:14-30

The parable of the talents continues the theme of watchfulness (13), but from a slightly different standpoint. The emphasis in the parable of the virgins was on vigilance; here it is on diligence. In the former, it was the contrast between those who had the inward, living principle of faith and those who had simply the outer form and nothing more. Here it is the complementary truth that is stressed, namely that faith without works is dead. Works are the only valid evidence of a true faith in the heart. And we may gather from this parable that to be watchful and ready means to be up and doing in the Master's business. The lessons of the parable are clear and unambiguous, and the first is that ample time is given to each one for working for the kingdom of God. The householder did not return until 'after a long time' (19). This is true for human experience in two senses, both with reference to restricted periods of time and also to the whole long day of life. For God sometimes gives us a limited time of opportunity - a period of years in a certain place, for example, then takes us off somewhere else - a spell, say, at the university, or in a particular job - then there comes a time of reckoning, and opportunity to have worked for Him there passes, never to return in that particular way again and in that particular place. Paul has a word for this in Col 4:5, 'redeeming the time' ('buying up the opportunity'). Life is a time of opportunity, and it was opportunity wasted that rendered the wicked and slothful servant without excuse at the end.

280) 25:14-30

The second lesson of the parable has to do with the nature of our service in the kingdom. That kingdom demands service from all its members, and none is allowed to sit back and do nothing. No-one is without some talent; but we must be careful to realise that the word 'talent' in modern use is quite misleading for an understanding of the parable's meaning. For 'talent' to us so often refers to natural aptitudes or gifts that some possess, and to carry this meaning into the parable is misleading, for this would entitle some to say with sincerity, 'I am not gifted, and have no aptitude for things that others are good at'. But the parable is not dealing with people who are 'talented' in this sense. The 'talents' here represent money - it was a weight or measure of money -and were the goods belonging to the master that were given by him to his servants as a solemn stewardship, to be worked with gainfully for him. It is true of course that 'natural talents' 'in our sense can be thought of in this category too, for all that we have by way of natural endowment comes from God; but this idea is not particularly prominent and can be misleading in a true interpretation of the parable.

281) 25:14-30

If Christ is the Master in the parable, then His goods are surely the gospel of His redeeming grace, which He has committed to His servants, and with which He bids them work gainfully for Him in the world, earning for Him a harvest of fruit. This may be the thought behind Paul's words in 1 Thess 2:19, 20. If it were asked how some can have five talents in the work of the gospel, and others have two and one, we should realise the force of the phrase 'according to his several ability' (15). Paul had a 'bigger' gospel than Peter, because he was a bigger man. Some have a much profounder grasp of the gospel than others - yet it is the same saving gospel. We must not be concerned about this. A Barnabas does not have the same tremendous aptitudes as a Paul, but he can still exhort men with purpose of heart to cleave to the Lord. The important contrast is not between the five-talent and the two-talent man, but between both and the one-talent man who did not do anything with his. There are those who receive this inestimable deposit, and do nothing with it, Christ means to tell us. Another application is to the gifts of the Spirit, which Christ has given to His Church (cf Eph 4:8ff, 1 Cor 12:28, Rom 12:3ff). In the economy of God no believer is left out of this gracious distribution; we are all members in particular of the body of Christ, and specific tasks are allotted to each one of us, whether they be in the forefront, such as preaching, or in the hidden ministrations that no-one is likely to see save those who receive them. The great thing is faithfulness and diligence - doing our job with all our might. It is this that is rewarded.

282) 25:31-46

The parable of the sheep and the goats concludes our Lord's prophetic teaching, underlining what it is to be ready and how to be ready (24:44) - practising mercy to the poor and the suffering, and therefore, in them, to Christ. The passage has been variously interpreted, and widely different constructions have been placed on our Lord's words. Some take them to refer to a judgment of nations as units, and think He means that whole nations will be separated from one another. But how can it be said that nations as such show mercy and compassion to the poor and needy? This is a forced, artificial and needlessly literalistic understanding of what Jesus says here. Others think that the reference is to the principle of judgment that will operate among the heathen (just as the parables of the virgins and the talents refer to those who have heard the gospel and had opportunity to respond to it). In support of this view it is pointed out that believers could scarcely be said not to know that their kindnesses to others were done to Christ, for all they do is in reference to Him. Those therefore referred to cannot be the covenanted servants of Christ, but rather those who have never known Him. And the love that is expressed in their compassion is taken for faith in Him. It can hardly be denied that this is an attractive idea, and indeed one, which has some truth in it, so far as the assessment of those who have not heard the gospel is concerned. Yet it may be doubted whether this is the real meaning of Christ's words. Nor does the real meaning lie in the thought that it is the judgment of non-Christians for their treatment of Christians in the world. All these are in the nature of application, rather than exposition. Rather, we should take the phrase 'the nations' as a general term, referring to a general judgment, just as Paul says 'We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ', meaning all men everywhere. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

283) 25:31-46

To base judgment fairly and squarely on works, as the parable does, has been a source of great perplexity for evangelicals. But we must not be afraid to face the truth of what Jesus says. Paul was not afraid to assert in Romans 2 that by patient continuance in well-doing men will receive eternal life. In so saying, the Apostle does not in any way contradict what he goes on to teach in the next chapter that justification is by grace through faith, apart from works. For in ch. 2, he is not speaking of justification but of judgment. And although justification is by faith, judgment is by works, and he speaks not of the beginning of the Christian life, but of its end. Paul and Jesus are at one here. We can quote both of them on the question of entrance into the kingdom so as to make it conclusively clear that salvation is entirely by the rich, sovereign grace of God, apart from anything a man can do (thus John 3:7, Eph 2:8). But it is also possible to quote both, as here, and Rom 2:6-10, where man's works are clearly seen to be all-important. And there is no contradiction, simply two different standpoints. Thus, good works do not in themselves argue that a man will be justified before God, but the absence of them does argue that a man will not be justified. For faith without works is dead. This is what lies behind the exclusive reference to works here. Faith is presupposed. A true believer is 'created in Christ Jesus unto good works', and where these are lacking, a question mark must be placed over against a man's profession. 'Faith without works is dead', 'Faith that worketh by love' - these are the propositions Jesus is dealing with here, and they sum up the meaning and point of His words.

284) 25:31-46

As a corroboration of the views expressed in yesterday's Note, we should notice how the King addresses the 'sheep' (34), 'Come, ye blessed of My Father...inherit...' Note the juxtaposition of 'inherit' and 'blessed of My Father'. One does not earn or deserve an inheritance; one receives it as a fortunate gift. It has nothing to do with our earning it, but is rather a question of standing in a certain relationship to the one who bestows it. And above all, those who do inherit it are said to have been blessed by the Father. Christ, as Calvin says, "begins with the undeserved love of God by which those who, under the guidance of the Spirit in this life aim at righteousness, were predestinated to life". It is this that forbids us to turn Jesus' words the opposite way and argue the possession of salvation from the evidence of good works. For this would mean that every merely humanitarian or philanthropic work would argue a Christian testimony which, as we know, is not true. A cup of cold water given may be a kindly act, but it may or may not be a Christian act. It is only a Christian act if it is done by a Christian. And it is the question of motive and motivation that makes the same act different in the two cases. It is possible to give a cup of cold water from very questionable motives - to be seen of men, to give oneself a feeling of wellbeing, or because if we do not, we shall feel mean - in which case we are simply buying peace of conscience. But is this love, this self-ministering, this self-regarding? The question of why we do good is just as important as the question of whether we do it.

285) 25:31-46

Another most important consideration in Jesus' teaching is that it is sins of omission, not of commission, that are condemned here. Why were these things omitted? Why are men blind and impervious to human needs? It is because they are so preoccupied with themselves and their own needs. And if we are too preoccupied with our own concerns to have time for those of others, we are too preoccupied! When a man says, "It never crossed my mind to do so", Christ says, "Well, it should have". The reason why it did not is that so many other things were occupying all the tracks across our minds, things of our own, our own selfish preoccupations. This is why the primary need is to be blessed by the Father, for the blessing He gives is that of a cross that slays the self-life and recreates us new in Christ unto self-forgetfulness. Judgment, then, is on the basis of love. Acts of love, attitudes of love - this is what the blessing of the Father, when real, always produces. The fruit of the Spirit is love, and love is what Christ will look for on the Day of Judgment. "Have you loved?" He will ask. That is all He will ask. But it is a big 'all'. This is what it means to be ready - to love. This is salvation. Where salvation is, there is love.

286) 26:1-5

This chapter brings us to the final section of Matthew's gospel, and to the record of the sufferings and death and resurrection of Christ. It is surely clear, from the great detail with which all four gospel writers describe these events, that for them this was the heart and centre of the gospel they had to proclaim. The introduction of the chapter is a word of prediction from our Lord about the imminent approach of His death (1, 2). But Matthew goes on to describe the scheming and plotting of the chief priests and scribes and elders of the people to put Jesus to death. Two days before the Passover, and this is what was in their minds! The great festival and memorial feast of the Jewish faith, commemorating the mighty acts of God in their past history which constituted them His people, a day of solemn worship and remembrance - and this is how their hearts were inclining: Yet, clearly, a higher Hand was at work in all this. While their dark hearts were burning with malice and hatred against Him, the heart of God was planning in love for our eternal salvation. In 5, their unwillingness to take Him on the feast day is particularly nauseating and hypocritical - as if any day would have been an innocent one for doing what they were about to do! But in the event, that higher power forced their hand, for when Judas offered to betray Him they did not hesitate to make use of him, even on Passover night. God was at work, decreeing that another Passover Lamb might be slain, another deliverance affected, another covenant sealed in blood.

287) 26:6-13

In contrast to 1-5, these verses show a very different attitude - the worship and devotion of a disciple, an act of adoration. This was the woman's attitude of spirit as the Passover approached. It is in relation to both the Passover and the plot to kill Jesus that the anointing must be considered, i.e. in association with His approaching death. This is so, not only from the point of view of our Lord's consciousness that He was to die, but also from the point of view that Mary also was conscious, and that she discerned the meaning and purpose of that death. The anointing was certainly a spontaneous, even impulsive, gesture on Mary's part, the expression of the love and adoration of her heart for Jesus. But it was love for Him not merely as a Teacher and a Friend, but as one about to become, by His death, a Saviour. We can hardly escape the implication of the context here, and our Lord's own words about her act, that it had to do with the death He was going to die. If this is so, we are obliged to believe that Mary, more than any of the disciples, indeed alone of all the disciples, had an intuitive appreciation and discernment of Christ's death and what it meant. They say love is blind, but in the spiritual realm it brings discernment; it is the key, in fact, to everything of final importance in the Christian life. If we really want to learn in the things of God, and to penetrate the mysteries of the Faith, we must allow our hearts to go out in love to Christ. Long ago, Thomas Boston once said, "The best commentary on Holy Scripture, is a heavenly state of mind", and this may be amplified to mean the state of a mind which is towards Christ in love and devotion.

288) 26:6-13

Anointing in ancient times was used in the act of separating something or someone to God. Priests, prophets and kings alike were anointed with oil and thus installed in office. Above all, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word 'Messiah' means the anointed one, as does 'Christos' in the Greek. All this has significance for Mary's action, for she was thus acknowledging Jesus as her Messiah and Lord. It was an act of homage in which she proclaimed to Him and to the world that He was king of her life. But Jesus had said she had anointed His body for His burial. Here is an association of ideas - kingship and burial. He was to receive His power and authority through death. Did Mary see this? Perhaps she did; who shall say that her discernment did not penetrate to such a depth? But there is something more. Mary had the ointment (or oil) in a cruse or bottle. Another gospel tells us that she broke it and emptied the contents upon Him. And whether she realised what she was doing or not, she was in that act proclaiming to them all, "Look! This is what He is about to do; His precious body will be broken and an odour of salvation will pervade the whole world, as that of the spikenard is filling this room. And the fragrance of His self-giving love will be for the healing of the nations". This is surely what Christ saw in her action - a prefiguring of His own passion and the kind of effect it was to have on the world He loved. This is why her consecration expressed in this way was sweet and lovely and acceptable to Him. How glad Jesus must have been, at this point, to have received such love, adoration and homage, and to realise that Mary was at one with Him in spirit in what He was about to go through. In a very profound sense she had fellowship with Him in His coming sufferings and was identified with Him in the cross, He was about to bear. This is the lesson - and the challenge of the story for us.

289) 26:14-16

There is a certain stark significance in the fact that these verses which tell of the plan to betray our Lord stand in such close proximity to the institution of the Lord's Supper - the covenant between the chief priests and the traitor on the one hand and the covenant between Christ and His disciples on the other (28) That the Last Supper should be set in the context of such a foul and unspeakable betrayal seems to be meant to indicate how closely our Lord became implicated and involved in human sin (yet without sin) in order to become our Saviour, and how low He stooped to reach down to where we were. The disciples' "Is it I?" (22) has perhaps a deeper significance than lies on the surface, for there is a sense in which it was all humanity that betrayed Him and handed Him over to the cross. All the available evidence points to the fact that the tragedy of Judas was not a sudden, inexplicable failure and disaster, but rather something that grew and developed gradually and imperceptibly over a long period. This is always so. The open disaster of a moral collapse, although it may take others completely by surprise, always has a history, and is simply the visible fruit of something that has been going on for a long time. It is true, of course, that there had to be a Judas (24), but this gives no warrant to think of him in fatalistic terms, as if he could not help himself. He was a responsible being, and the traitorous spirit grew in him, and was allowed to grow. At the beginning, his life was surely bright with promise. Not only so; it is certain that Judas never meant to go as far as he did. Most men never dreamt they would go so far in their sin. It was just that it went out of control - as sin always does. This is the frightening, terrifying thing.

290) 26:17-29

In its original context, the Lord's Supper was, and was clearly meant by Christ to be - a fulfilment of the true meaning of the Passover feast. And this is how the early Church interpreted it ('Christ our passover is sacrificed for us', 1 Cor 5:7). This, then, must be the key to an understanding of our Lord's meaning. The association of the Supper with the Passover is too clear and obvious to need any argument to establish it. It was no accident or coincidence that our Lord was crucified at the time of the Passover; it was planned thus by God and even the high priests' desire not to capture Christ on the feast day was set aside by His sovereign purpose, because God determined that it should be at that time. Furthermore, it was while eating the Passover that Christ instituted the Supper, using the elements of the Passover meal - the unleavened bread and the wine cup - as symbols. What, then, was the Passover? Chiefly two things; it commemorated the great deliverance of God's people out of Egypt, and it commemorated the covenant initiated at that time between God and Israel. The association of ideas is dramatic and inescapable. There is another Passover, Christ means, and another Lamb, another deliverance and another covenant. "This is the truth about the Passover", He says, "It foreshadowed Me. I am the truth of all the sacrifices, they are but shadows cast on the course of history by the death I am about to die". Thus the divine visitation on sin at the cross becomes the deliverance from the bondage of sin and the establishing of a new covenant with all who believe in Him, a covenant of forgiveness and fellowship with God in Him. This is what Christ offers men and what He was indicating and illustrating in the new Passover meal which was the Lord's Supper.

291) 26:30-35

The question that we must ask ourselves here is: How was it that Jesus could predict so confidently that His disciples would all be offended in Him and forsake Him before the night was out? And the answer must be, quite simply, that they knew Him only 'after the flesh', and it is only 'in the Spirit' that faithfulness is possible. An important contrast therefore is suggested in these verses between 'flesh' and 'spirit'. To know Christ 'after the flesh' (cf 2 Cor 5:16) is, from the Christian standpoint, virtually not to know Him at all; and Peter's words, when he did deny Jesus, "I do not know the man" (72) are truer than he knew or realised, for he did not know Him in the way that alone can keep men from falling and denying Him. The disciples knew Him merely on the natural level, and had no spiritual knowledge of Him, as their uniform reaction against His teaching about takings up the cross showed only too clearly. They had not understood the cross and had been unwilling to bear it. And why? Because the cross puts the old man in us to death, and this is what the natural man rebels against so much. It is only living henceforth unto Him (2 Cor 5:15), being made new creatures in Christ, that enables us to know Him 'in the Spirit', and therefore to stand firm in time of testing and crisis. Where this is lacking, even the greatest confidence in his own powers will not suffice to carry us through - as Peter proved to his cost.

292) 26:36-46

One almost hesitates to make comment on this awesome scene in the Garden of Gethsemane; to read it slowly and with a great reverence seems to be the proper attitude to take with this 'holy of holies' in our Lord's experience. And yet there is so much of deep significance in it that we must needs probe into the essential meaning. The very name of the Garden has its significance, for 'Gethsemane' means an 'oil-press' or 'wine-press'. The Garden was a grove of olives fitted with a winepress; and as such, it was for Christ the beginning of the action of the winepress of God. "I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the people there was none with me" (Isa 63:3). This does much to explain why the disciples were left outside this experience. Even the inner circle could not penetrate this awesome loneliness. Furthermore, the Garden here corresponds to that other Garden, Eden. A great deal is made in the New Testament of the symbolism and significance of what took place in these two gardens; for in Eden Adam fell into disobedience, but in the second garden the second Adam triumphed where the first tragically failed. And as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. If, then, there is a contrast intended between Eden and Gethsemane, we have a key to the understanding of Christ's agony. For Adam was tempted in Eden, and Gethsemane was likewise a temptation experience for Christ; part of the agony at least was a battle with temptation. He suffered being tempted (Heb 2:18). In the wilderness temptation we are told that Satan left Him for a season; and he returned with all his malignity in the Garden - with the same temptation: Messiahship without a cross. This is the force of "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (39).

293) 26:36-46

The apostolic comment on Gethsemane in Heb 5:7ff is full of interest and illumination. We are told that Jesus "was heard, in that he feared". What was heard? Not the prayer that the cup might pass from Him, for it did not, but rather the prayer that the Father's will might be done, that is, that He might have strength to go through with what He knew to be the Father's will. This was answered, as witness the serenity which from this point rested upon Him, right through to the crucifixion. In this, says the Apostle, He 'learned obedience'. This must be taken to mean, not that He learned, to be obedient - was He not always so? - But rather He 'learned the cost of obedience to the Father's will'. And He was thereby 'made perfect' in the sense that by His sufferings He was brought into His true destiny as Redeemer of the world.

Note particularly, in 37, the phrase sorrowful and very heavy". The latter word in the Greek, rendered elsewhere as 'distressed', has as its root meaning "to be away from home", and this serves to emphasise that the experience Christ was passing through was the beginning of the horror of great darkness in which He was separated from the Father's presence for our sakes, and which is expressed in its fulness in the cry of dereliction on the cross. This indeed takes us to the heart of the mystery. Christ spoke of a cup, referring to the death He was to die. But it was not death as we know it, but death as the wages of sin, death as a "being away from God". This is what appalled the Son of God - that His Father's face should be turned away from Him when He should become the world's Redeemer

294) 26:36-46

Christ is represented as shrinking from the cup He was to drink. Yet elsewhere He says "The cup which My Father has given me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18:11). This apparent contradiction is to be explained by the fact that on the one hand His delight was to do the Father's will - this is what is envisaged in the Old Testament picture of the burnt offering which was a sweet savour to God - and on the other hand He shrank from separation from God - and this is what is foreshadowed in the Old Testament sin offering, the non-sweet savour offering - in which He bore the sins of men. But why should He ask, "If it be possible ...?" Surely He knew that it could not pass from Him, if atonement was to be made? This is the same question as is raised by the cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Did He not voluntarily accept the cross, knowing it would mean separation from God? Ad, yes, but this belongs to the essence of 'being made sin'. To do so was to cut Himself off from God, and this is to cut oneself off from light; and His consciousness of what was happening was clouded. That is the real heart of the agony. To have been able to go through it and still know that all was well would not have plumbed the depths of the mystery of iniquity. He must forego even that knowledge; and it was this that made it a real hell for Him. It was there, where the Son of God lost the last consciousness of the Father's love and presence - there that atonement was made and pardon bought and won for men. And Gethsemane was the beginning of that terrible experience.

295) 26:47-56

From the seclusion of the Garden the story now moves into the open, and into the feverish atmosphere of brutal soldiery and fickle crowd. One senses the acceleration of tempo, as if, the essential issue having been decided in the Garden, all that now remains is its outworking in the course of events about to take place. Jesus is utterly in command of the situation, and is alone calm and self-possessed in the midst of the rising passions of men. He is not disturbed by the traitor's kiss, but we think that the traitor himself must have been discomfited by the greeting he received from the Son of God who, even thus late, was prepared to call him 'Friend'. Christ's reaction to the instinctive defensive move by one of the disciples (does it not seem astonishing that one of them should have been wearing a sword?) is an indication that the kind of interpretation placed on the Garden scene in the three previous Notes is a right one (53,54). For He clearly indicates the voluntary nature of His self-giving, He has accepted the role prepared for Him by the Father, and is not prepared to be diverted from it by any well-meaning but misguided efforts to extricate Him from the crisis-situation. Indeed, so far from being the hapless victim of a wicked and cunning plot, it is He who is on the initiative in allowing Himself to be taken by them. Not otherwise, He indicates, can the Scriptures be fulfilled. If we do not see this, we have not grasped the real point and significance of the gospel message.

296) 26:57-68

The trial of Jesus was a twofold one, ecclesiastical, before the Jewish authorities, and political, before Pilate (and Herod). Before the religious rulers, the charge against Him was that of blasphemy, because He claimed to be Messiah. Before Pilate, however, the charge was not blasphemy, but treason against Caesar. There is a significance in this. The Jews desired Jesus' death on the grounds of His blasphemy. But they had no power as a subject nation to sentence anyone to death themselves, and they realised it would be useless to prefer a charge of blasphemy against Him in the eyes of Rome, for Rome would be indifferent to such a consideration. It was not an indictable offence. So it had to be another charge. And they cunningly turned His claim to be King into a treasonable claim against the Emperor (hence Pilate's question "Art Thou the king of the Jews?"). Even a cursory reading of these verses makes it plain that the trial, as such, was a shameful farce, from beginning to end, without a vestige of either justice or legality. It was hurried through in indecent haste; it was unlawfully convened; there was no attempt at hearing evidence; the accused was not allowed to state a case. Everything that could have been wrong about it was wrong. But then, it needed to have been thus if they were to secure a verdict against the Sinless One. The only way for them to do so was to pervert justice. It was an Innocent One who was condemned to die. And this is echoed in the later apostolic teaching: Christ suffered, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.

297) 26:57-68

Basic to the apostolic interpretation of Christ's death is that it was a substitutionary act. It was for us; He stood in, in our place. And this is really the key to an understanding of the trial also. He stood trial for us. Let us think of this for a little. The question that arises here is: Why a trial? The rulers wanted rid of Him. But could this not have been done without the pretext of a trial? Was the trial only a cover for their evil deed? Would a death without a trial have been the same? An assassination or a secret poisoning, for example? From their point of view - yes. But God decreed otherwise. There had to be a trial, and it had to be this kind of arraignment, and there had to be these particular charges against Him. For the trial was part of the great substitutionary atonement that He made for us. Furthermore, the charges He bore - blasphemy and treason, of which He was innocent - are precisely the charges against man the sinner. The blasphemy involved in sin is seen very clearly in Gen 3, in Satan's tempting bait, "Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil". Man snatched at this, and became guilty of blasphemous pretensions against God, determined to put himself on the throne that rightly belongs to God.

298) 26:57-68

But, continuing the thought of yesterday's Note, the sin of Eden was something else also. It was the expression of a revolt against the rightful authority of God and as such treasonable. These are the charges against man as sinner. And they were laid on Christ when He took our place. Hence the significance of our Lord's attitude during the trial. In 53 He had spoken of His power to summon legions of angels to help Him. But this He did not do. We see Him silent and unprotesting before His accusers, submitting to the injustice of the trial without demur. Why? Are we to suppose He could not have out-argued them in pleading His cause? Is this why He was silent? Or was it to show an example of noble patience and forbearance? Doubtless His attitude does teach us this, but there is surely something much deeper and more important for us to learn. The conclusion we are meant to draw is that, if He could have defended Himself but did not, then He chose to be found guilty, and He chose this because He was standing in for us.

299) 26:69-75

The story of Peter's denial is a sad, but human one, and has much to teach us. It has not been without its misconceptions, one of which lies in the contrast it presents to the case of Judas Iscariot. The view which thinks of Judas as a black villain and of Peter as essentially right at heart is not only superficial: it is erroneous. There was very little to choose between the two failures. Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, Peter denied Him with a curse. Betrayal and denial amount to the same thing: both disowned Christ. And Peter was restored but Judas not, not because Peter's sin was less heinous than the other's, but because Peter showed true repentance, while Judas showed only remorse. And the lesson we are taught is that Peter was restored that none need despair of mercy, having failed like this; and Judas went out into the darkness of night that none might presume on mercy.

300) 26:69-75

But now, as to Peter's denial, does it not seem almost incredible that a man who had had three years' constant companionship with Christ - with all this meant of love and care and the intimacy of the inner circle - should have thus denied Him - not once only, in the spur of the moment, betrayed by a wayward impulse, but three times, and therefore consciously and deliberately. A failure, a lapse, and a mistake we could understand, but this? - To deny that he knew Jesus? There is an answer to this question, and it is implied in Luke 22:31, "Satan hath desired..." We must bear in mind that this was the crisis hour in history building up to its climax. Dark malignities were about that night, and cosmic currents were flowing with sinister flood tides. It was in this that Peter was caught and involved. Small wonder that he was swirled like a cork in a raging stream. This does not excuse his fall, but it serves to explain how such a disastrous fate overtook him. Christ had seen it coming, and knew that Peter, being the man he was, would never stand. Only a spiritual giant could have, one who was utterly crucified to self and therefore having access to spiritual power and grace.

301) 26:69-75

When we look back on Peter's rash boast, "I will never deny Thee, Lord" it becomes clear that here was a man who did not know his own heart, did not know that there was that in him, as in all of us, that would not only deny Christ but also, Judas-wise, betray Him. And especially in a crisis of this magnitude, when ultimate issues of good and evil were let loose in the world, he did not stand a chance. But more. His words, "I do not know the man" were truer than he knew, for he did not know Jesus in the only way that can keep a man from failing in the evil day (cf Ps 9:10, Dan 11:32, Phil 3:10). To know Christ in this necessary way is to know His cross, and Peter had never come to this point. And every Christian who denies his Lord, saying thereby, "I do not know the man" is also proclaiming something unmistakeable about his own experience - that he is a stranger to the cross or has forsaken the place to which Christ has called him. Indeed, every sin we commit proclaims openly that we do not know Him (cf 1 John 2:4, 3:6). When we commit sin it means that for that particular moment we have chosen to part company with Christ and find Him an embarrassment to us. The practical value of this disastrous experience for Peter was that it brought him to an end of himself. It was in that place of abject failure and collapse that he learned the truth about himself at last, and that the foundations of the new Peter, the rock, the man of the cross (of 1 Peter) were laid. His faith, such as it was, was purged and purified and reborn, as it were, and emerged a new thing.

302) 27:1-10

The dark deed of Judas now comes to its final denouement. The word in 3 translated 'repented' is not the usual word denoting a change of mind or heart but one which merely expresses regret and remorse and a desire to wish it undone. This indicates that the black heart of the traitor was by this time incapable of repentance in any wholesome or hopeful sense of the word. The attempts to whitewash Judas by suggesting that his motives in betraying Jesus were sincere though mistaken, and that he was really trying to force His hand into displaying His power and establishing His kingdom are therefore wide of the mark and miss the point; for this is not the view taken by the New Testament or by Jesus either (cf 24). Nor is it callous on our part (any more than it was or. the part of the apostles of our Lord) to refuse to admit of any more 'charitable' interpretation than to say, with them, that Judas "went to his own place" (Acts 1:25), but simply realistic, since this is the clear testimony of the Scripture concerning him. And this tragic end stands as a terribly solemn warning and reminder of the ultimate issues of sin. As James says, "Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (1:13-15). The other dark actors in this scene are the chief priests. They, ritually correct and precise to the end, cannot defile themselves or the treasury by putting 'blood-money' into the temple coffers, but put it to other use, and buy the potter's field. Few things could have highlighted the essential hypocrisy and the terrible falsity of their religion more than this. How revolting to see men with murder in their hearts and on their hands so hidebound and hypocritically punctilious in barren outward observance. So tragically far had they departed from truth and righteousness.

303) 27:11-14

For the significance of the trial of Jesus, see Notes for 7th and 8th December. This passage deals with the political aspect, before Pilate, and the charge, as Pilate's question in 11 implies, is that of treason. One further point of significance may be added to what has already been said, and it concerns the silence of Jesus (12:14). Bearing in mind what was said in the earlier Notes about Jesus standing in for us as our Substitute, this may be said: In another great part of Scripture that also takes the form of a trial - the Epistle to the Romans - Paul presents the Divine case against man the sinner, and sums up as follows: "Now we know that whatsoever thing the law saith it saith to them that are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped and all the world may become guilty before God". This is why Jesus was silent before His accusers, and dumb as a sheep before its shearers. He was assuming upon Himself the guilt of the world's sin, and guilt stops a man's mouth. He had nothing to say because there is nothing to say for guilty man before a holy God. So completely did He take our place in what He did for us!

304) 27:15-23

The story of the involvement of Barabbas the robber in the condemnation of Christ is deeply interesting and significant, for unwittingly- he provides a perfect, and we may say, literal illustration of what has already been said about our Lord's substitutionary work for us. He was an insurrectionist, a violent rebel leader who had at one time led a revolt against Rome, was imprisoned for his crimes and was awaiting execution. It seems likely that already three crosses had been prepared by the authorities, two for them thieves, and one for Barabbas. At all events, Pilate's attempt to bargain with the crowd and the priests made it inevitable that it should be a case of either Barabbas or Jesus to be released. Barabbas knew, as the dying thief knew, that he deserved to die, but when Pilate's offer of clemency to one or the other was made, and the crowd indicated their choice of Barabbas, then, in a very literal sense Jesus took Barabbas' place, and went to the cross prepared for the robber. One can imagine a rough figure - if we may anticipate for a moment -standing on the edge of the crowd gathered at Calvary, and if we could hear him he would be muttering to himself: "I cannot understand this. I am released, and He has taken my place. That is my cross He is hanging on, prepared for me, for my sins. It was His release that I got. He should have been set free, but I was instead, and because of this He is dying there in my place, for me". Barabbas, in fact, stands in this story as representative man, man the sinner; and Jesus takes his place.

305) 27:24-26

The figure of Pontius Pilate also demands our attention in the story of the trial. If ever a man was placed on the horns of a dilemma, he was. He saw through the treachery and duplicity of the Jews; he saw that this was indeed a unique Person before him, and he wanted to release Him. He would have given anything to be relieved of the agonising task of making a decision concerning Him - this was why he remitted the case to Herod, in the hope that the responsibility of condemning Him might pass from his shoulders. But he could not do so, not even by 'washing his hands' on the matter (24). In this, Pilate also stands as a representative man. For Pilate's dilemma is every man's dilemma, when faced with the gospel of grace and the challenge of Christ. Pilate wanted to release Him, but other considerations weighed more heavily - his position and his prospects in the world - and he chose wrongly, as the Jews also did (25) to their irreparable loss. It is a question (22) that by nature we would all gladly shelve, but none may do so, since it is one which in its very nature demands a decisive verdict: For or Against. Neutral we cannot be. It is all or nothing, acceptance or rejection, loyalty or denial, submission or betrayal, crowning or crucifixion. Admiration, sympathy, fellow-feeling will not do. Pilate admired, sympathised - and delivered Him up to be crucified. That is something to think about, is it not?

306) 27:27-31

The soldiers had no axe to grind in the matter of Jesus' condemnation and execution. Of all the participants in this awesome drama they were naturally the most indifferent. Yet two things stand out clearly. One is that in their obvious desire for some diversion in the context of their grim duty as executors of the Roman decree, and in their brutal and heartless treatment of the, to them, hapless prisoner, they nevertheless inadvertently bore witness to the deepest truth of what was happening. For it was a King they were insulting and about to crucify, and God intended that His kingship should be proclaimed to the world that thus rejected Him. The other point is that simple indifference to Christ, as well as active and diabolical opposition and hatred, is deeply culpable in the sight of God. In the end, the one comes to the same as the other. The mockery of 29-31 and that of 41-43 have little to choose between them; indeed, that of the chief priests is more understandable than that of the soldiers, and prompts the reflection that indifference to Christ and the things of God may often be only 'skin-deep', and that when probed and exposed for what it is, may reveal an elemental and implacable heart enmity and rebellion against God. When all is said and done, is there, after all, much difference between those who are conscious tools of the devil and those who are unconsciously in his control?

307) 27:32-37

Simon the Cyrenian has achieved immortal fame by the role he was compelled to play in the drama of the crucifixion, bearing the Saviour's cross to the hill of Calvary. Was it a rough gesture of sympathy on the part of the soldiers for the One they had so derided, and were they smitten in conscience at what they had done in face of the regal dignity with which He had submitted to their mockery? We do not know, but would like to think that this may have been one of the signs of a dawning realisation of Who He was that led later to the centurion's confession in 54. In his Notes on this passage, the Rev. William Still acutely remarks, "It was another Simon who should have borne that cross!" Yes, indeed. And when God was unable to get one of His chosen men to demonstrate the meaning of discipleship, He chose an otherwise unknown 'outsider' to bear that testimony. Behold, then, the lonely Son of God, repudiated and rejected by the chosen nation, rejected by His own family, forsaken by His own disciples, cast out of the holy city, lifted up from the earth, as if even the very earth He had made disowned Him, and above all (46) forsaken by God, when He bore the world's sin and took it to Himself, to destroy and put it away. Behold and see if there was any sorrow like unto His sorrow.

308) 27:38-44

There would surely be general agreement if we described the mockery of these verses as diabolic, but it is as well to see, on closer inspection, just how diabolic it is. The derisory challenge, "If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross" is in fact the echo of the satanic temptation in the wilderness to aim at a Messiahship without a cross, to find some other way of doing the will of God. It was a temptation that came again and again to Jesus -on the mount of Transfiguration (of "Get thee behind me, Satan" in answer to Peter's protest against His teaching about the cross at Caesarea Philippi, and his subsequent rebuke on the mount when he wanted to bask in the glory of the transfiguration instead of going down to the sufferings that were to come), as also in the Garden, where part of our Lord's agony lay in the fact that it was still possible to refuse to drink the cup. And even at this late hour it was still possible for Him to have invoked the help of the legions of angels to bring Him down from the cross. But His Messiahship and Saviourhood depended precisely on His not coming down from the cross, and it is only a Saviour who does not come down that men can believe in unto salvation (42).

309) 27:45-49

One of the lessons that stand out in the solemn story of the cross is the utter loneliness of the Son of God as He bore away the sins of the world. In an earlier Note we spoke of His rejection by men and by God, and referred to the prophetic word in Isa 63:3 about His treading the winepress alone. Let us now think of this from another standpoint. The loneliness He endured was part of the price He paid for our sin. One of the tragic consequences of sin is that it separates men from God. Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden because of sin. And all that was involved in that when they were rejected and cast out happened to Christ in its final intensity at Calvary. It is as if He intercepted them at the gates of Eden as they were cast out, and said, "This burden is too great for you to bear. I will bear it for you. All that is due to you for sin I will take upon Myself. I will walk your lonely road to the bitter end, and in the fulness of the time I will bear it to the utmost, once for all and forever, that you might be saved".

310) 27:50-56

When Jesus died, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom. The veil referred to was the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holiest of all. In the Old Testament economy, the holy of holies, where the presence of God dwelt, was sacred and unapproachable. No one was allowed to enter save the high priest, and that only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for the sins of the people. The veil was the 'sign' that there was not a way into the divine presence. It was therefore equivalent to the shut gates of the Garden of Eden. The way to God was barred by sin. But when Jesus died on the cross, that barred gate was breached and opened, and the way to God made accessible to all. This is the meaning of the rent veil. Christ has broken every barrier down and opened up the way into the divine presence.

311) 27:50-56

The earthquake and the opening of the graves was another symbolic happening. It is hardly surprising that there were dislocations in the natural order when we remember that God was at work in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, and that Christ entered into death, to destroy it from the inside, in so doing breaking its power over men. The message is therefore plain: Christ by His death brings life and immortality to light in the gospel. It is the setting free of the prisoners from the dark bondage sin has brought upon them. Such is the symbolism here. The impression made on the centurion (54) by the death of Christ is a fulfilment of His earlier words, 'I, if I be Lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me' (John 12:32), and a foretaste of a great movement down the centuries. Jesus was crucified because the rulers did not believe His claim to be the Son of God. But this man saw, and understood, and confessed that His claim was true and valid. And it was seeing the way He died that convinced him of it. He had never seen such a death, accompanied with such awesome signs. The uplifted Christ drew him, by the power of His dying, into a knowledge of the truth.

312) 27:57-61

What was true of the centurion is also true of Joseph of Arimathea. One could hardly have a greater contrast than between these two, one a rough soldier, the other a rich Pharisee and counsellor of the Jews - yet at the cross they were both on the same level, and the same thing happened to them. Joseph, as John tells us in his gospel (19:38), was a secret disciple, for fear of the Jews, but by His death on the cross Jesus drew him out into the open to declare his interest and allegiance, and nail his colours to the mast. John in his gospel tells us of another in just that position - Nicodemus - who was drawn out into full commitment by the cross. Nicodemus had not understood Christ's teaching at first about being born again (John 3), but he was gradually drawn into the light (John 7; 50,51) until at the cross he seemed obliged to take a stand; as stand he did, coming right over to Christ's side as a declared disciple. This is what the cross does - it is a great sifter of men, compelling men to declare their interest and intent. This, then, is a passage for secret disciples, to those who have become convinced of the truth of the gospel as they have read and pondered the story of the cross, but as yet have been, it may be, hesitant or afraid to declare their interest. And it proclaims a simple yet decisive message; let it be known where you stand. Ask God for a suitable opportunity to open up, and tell it to someone - today.

313) 27:62-66

Was there unconscious irony in Pilate's words in 65? In fact, no power on earth could have kept Christ in the grave. For by death He had destroyed death, and it was therefore not possible that death could hold Him. There is something of the humour of God - if we can speak thus of such a solemn time - in the determined attempts to make sure that He could not rise again - the guard of soldiers, the watch, the seal - as if these could ever prevent it! All they did was to prove that there could be no possible deception by the disciples about His rising again. And their very precautions became, a few hours later, the witnesses to the truth that He had risen. People try to stamp out the work of God like this. And for a time they appear to succeed - but lo! a resurrection takes place, and their designs are confounded. Sometimes individuals do this in their own hearts; they bury the impressions made on them by the Word, pushing them down and crushing them out - but they have a habit of rising again to confound them. It was in vain that Saul of Tarsus sought to bury the pricks of his conscience in a mad flurry of restless activity. They would out, in spite of all he could do, and finally overcame him. Resurrection life is always stronger than death; death is swallowed up of victory!

314) 28:1-4

Matthew's narrative of the Resurrection seems to partake of the symbolism of much of the rest of his gospel. It is as if he were seeking to convey, in the kind of language he uses to describe these tremendous events, something of the inner significance of what happened on that first Easter Day. This is something we would do well to ponder. For although, of course, the truth of the resurrection is of quite cardinal importance, it is not something the gospel writers, or the apostles, for that matter, set out to prove, as such. They state the facts, yes; but their concern is not to prove that it happened. What they do is to bear witness to it. And one suspects that if we had the apostles here with us and spoke of proving the resurrection they would politely say, 'Quite so; but are you not missing the whole point?' It is not the fact of the resurrection - that was assumed - but its significance that was so important. And even to prove, from the evidence, that it happened, is only an elementary preliminary to the real issue, namely, that of being touched and gripped by a sense of its meaning and significance. The early Church did not try to prove the resurrection: they proclaimed it, proclaimed it, moreover, in a context which makes it plain that the real problem for them would have been, not that Jesus should have risen from the dead, but rather if He had not risen. That, from the New Testament point of view, would have been the unsurmountable difficulty; to them, it was not possible that He should be holden of death (Acts 2:24) because of Who He was. But His victory over death was something that needed to be demonstrated, and demonstrated it was, decisively, in His being raised from the dead.

315) 28:1-4

The language, then, in 1 is highly suggestive - 'it began to dawn' -for the resurrection means the dawning of a new day for the world. And when the message of the resurrection really gets home to men, it means a new day for them. How clearly this is seen in Acts, and in the history of the Church down the ages. Every genuine conversion is the grasping of the reality and significance of the resurrection, and is the beginning of new life for those concerned. The same kind of idea is expressed in the words in 2, 'there was a great earthquake', for the resurrection was destined to turn many worlds upside down (cf Acts 17:6, 'These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also' - the word in the Greek is akin to that for 'resurrection'). Rightly understood, the message of the resurrection is dynamite, and it produced earthquakes wherever it was preached, blessed and beneficent earthquakes which left a trail of new life throughout the ancient world.

The rolling back of the stone (2) was not for the purpose of letting Christ out of the tomb, but to show the world that He was already out! Being raised from the dead by the glory of the Father would have required more than a stone to hinder or prevent it! This is a point that seems to be substantiated by John's account of the grave clothes (2C:6,7): These were not taken off Jesus, rather, He miraculously passed through them, being 'extracted' from them by the power of God, as He was also from the sealed tomb. The resurrection of Jesus was a real miracle!

316) 28:5-8

The angel's 'Fear not' (5) sounds one of the great characteristic notes of the gospel (compare, for example, the same word in the Old Testament promises of the good news, in Isaiah, and in the story of the Annunciation, and the birth of Jesus, in the New, Luke 1:13,30, 2:10). A similar association of ideas is seen between 'Emmanuel - God with us' in Matt 1:23 and 'Lo, I am with you always' in 28:20. This is neither accidental nor surprising, for the resurrection is but the completion of the work for which Jesus was born into the world. There is a whole world of theological significance in the words 'He is risen, as He said' (6). For they underline the fact that both His death and resurrection were parts of a Divine plan. His death was not an unfortunate happening, but something He accomplished, and His resurrection was something He-foretold, and was indeed foretold in the Scriptures themselves (cf 1 Cor 15:3, 4, 'according to the Scriptures'). It was therefore not a story invented by the disciples to give the record of His life a happy ending. Peter stresses this foretelling in his sermon at Pentecost, quoting Psalm 16:10. The resurrection was integral to the whole strategy of God in His plans for the redemption of the world. For resurrection means victory, and the whole Old Testament throbs with them expectation and promise of the final victory of God over evil.

317) 25:5-8

The angelic command in 7, 'Go quickly, and tell His disciples' is also of symbolic significance, for in a deeper than literal sense, this, above all, is what the disciples of the Lord in every age need to know! They were transformed from defeated, bewildered and despairing men, whose whole world had come toppling down upon them, into men radiant with a new life and joy, and finally 'filled with a new power, when the full significance of it gripped their minds and hearts, as happened at Pentecost. And it is not too much to say that this is what happens when the power of the living Christ teaches bewildered, disillusioned and despairing lives today. We have sometimes pointed out that there was a difference between the disciples' first reaction, in their joy, when they obviously thought of Jesus' rising again as a return to the status-quo, and their later appreciation of the significance of what had happened, when they realised

- (a) that forgiveness had been procured and won for them, and that God had accepted as sufficient the sacrifice for sin made by Him on the cross;
- (b) that all the dark powers that enslave mankind had been vanquished in His death, and that victory over them was proclaimed in His rising again;
- (c) that He ever lives, to walk with us and company with us in glad fellowship for ever more. This is what Paul means by knowing 'the exceeding greatness of His power' to us-ward who believe (Ephesians 1:19). Well might the angel tell the women to go and tell the disciples that He is risen!

318) 28:9-15

The women accepted the testimony- of the angel and on basis of it went to tell forth the news of His rising again. And it was as they did this that Jesus met them (9). This also is something that has relevance in another than literal sense, and that in a twofold way. On the one hand, it illustrates the response of faith men make to the gospel. We are called to believe the testimony of the messengers of the good news, and when we do, stepping out in faith, Christ the living One meets us. In other words, it is a matter of putting him, and the gospel, to the test. After all, if He is really a living Saviour, He can be met! On the other hand, it illustrates Christian service. When we go forth with the message of the gospel, and in obedience to His command, He meets with us, giving us the glad assurance of His presence and the promise of His power to enable and energise us. We do not go to this warfare on our own charges!

319) 26:16-20

As we come to the final verses of Matthew's record of the gospel, we may well recall how John sums up, surely on behalf of all four evangelists, the purpose of their having written: "These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ...." (John 20:31). It will be fitting, then, in our closing meditations, to point out the nature and implications of faith and belief, and it can be done in two words. The first is: Committal. Faith is not an intellectual assent to the truth of the gospel, but a surrender of the will to the Lordship of Christ, and this is implied in the attitude of the disciples in 16, 17. The true parallel to this chapter is Romans 12:1 ff, which tells us that consecration and committal to God is our reasonable service in face of the mercies of Divine redemption.

And for this reason: His victory entitles Him to the allegiance of our hearts. As C.T. Studd, the founder of W.E.C., once put it, "If Jesus Christ be God, and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him",

320) 28:16-20

The second word is: Commission. This is the necessary implication of the resurrection. Receiving Christ, 'coming' to him implies 'going' and 'giving'. The glorious invitation of 11:23 leads to the radical challenge of 28:20, and the operative word is 'obligation'. It is a matter of debt. We should note also that it is in the context of the unbelief and opposition of the authorities that Jesus bids the disciples go forth – yet they went forth conquering and to conquer. This should be an enormous encouragement to us today. Our task is fraught with precisely this kind of difficulty, but we must learn that it does not matter how hard or difficult circumstances are, if only we have the assurance, as they had, that all power is given to Him and that He has promised to be with us always. For 'all power' includes power to break down the hostile forces of unbelief, the oppositions of evil men, the contempt of men for the gospel and their unwillingness to yield to the truth. Who could but venture forth, in obedience to the 'Go ye therefore' of Jesus, in face of such an unassailable assurance?