

THE JOURNEY: FROM HERE TO ETERNITY

THE JOURNEY - WEEK 1

What you see at the moment is my working title because sometimes one of the hardest things to do is get a title that reflects what is being talked about. So tonight my working title is an introduction to something we do every day but seldom pay much attention to. I can say with absolute certainty that every one of you has made at least one journey today – because if you hadn't made the journey from home to the church you wouldn't be here – and I take it that every one of you does know you're here.

Have you ever really thought about what life would be like without journeys both real and imaginary. What if Columbus had never sailed to America? No Elvis and no idea about superpowers. What if Marco Polo had never reached China? No Sweet and Sour or Chow Mein takeaways. What if Magellan hadn't sailed around the southern tip of the Americas to discover the Pacific Ocean – would we be having this problem over the Falkland Islands. And what if Vasco De Gama had not sailed around the Cape of Good Hope – would we on the one hand know about the depths social misery caused by an apartheid system and on the other hand the heights of joy when Wales beats the Springboks. And what if people hadn't dreamt of journeying to the moon? Space, the final frontier. Forty five years ago, Captain Kirk and the starship Enterprise set out to boldly go where no man had gone before – and according to the song – always going forward because they couldn't find the reverse button. That was followed by the Next Generation, Voyager and Deep Space Nine – and my favourite – Stargate SG-1 where they go through wormholes to parallel universes.

Today, in reality, we can journey to virtually every part of the world and if Richard Branston gets his way, it will only be a matter of years before we take to the stars as well. Books, films, TV, travel agents, maps, travel guides, means of transport to make journeys, songs like “Trains and Boats and Planes” or “Leavin' on a Jet Plane” are all examples of how journeys are part of our everyday existence. It may be an exaggeration, but I don't think any of us would get through one day without making a journey, thinking about a journey, or seeing or hearing something about a journey.

By now you might be wondering what on earth has this got to do with Lent? Well, its very simple, the period of Lent is all about a journey – a journey that started when Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem. When Jesus ‘set His face to go to Jerusalem’, he embarked on the most significant journey in history. Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday, is the story of the Cross, but the time of Lent is the story of the journey to the Cross, leading to the journey beyond it. Like the types of journeys I've mentioned, this one has consequences. Like the journeys mentioned, it involves meeting different kinds of people, visiting different places, facing pleasurable and often difficult situations and taking a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual toll on the One making the journey. For Jesus' journey is also our journey.

The great Welsh hymn – Guide me oh thou great Jehovah pilgrim through this barren land – says it perfectly. An old gospel song says “This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through.” John Bunyan's “Pilgrim's Progress” expresses in prose the same sentiment. We are all on this journey and Lent is a time of reflection not only on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, but also a time for reflection on our journey through life. Fasting, a Lenten tradition, is meant to aid this time of meditation. It's a time when we need to ask ourselves “Are we travelling with Jesus; or going down our own path hoping to meet up with Him along the way – believing the modern view that all religious paths eventually lead to God; or even at this moment in time travelling in the opposite direction to where Jesus wants us to

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go? Have we gone part of the way with Him in the past, but gave up after a number of miles and maybe now want to catch up with Him again?

So these talks are not about ‘head knowledge’ about Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. They are about a real journey, taken by a real person, in a real place, at a particular period in time. In that sense we should be able to personally compare and contrast our experiences of journeys with those of Jesus. To perhaps personally identify with the types of people He met, the places He visited, the events of the journey and His reactions to them all.

But just as last time, I want to start, not with the New Testament but with the Old Testament for Jesus used stories from their journeys as examples in various ways during His own journey. Also, it is here that we learn that from the very beginning of time, journeys have played an important role in God’s plans for humanity. The psalmist tells us that God knows about when we sit down and when we get up. A verse in Isaiah tells us that He also knows about our goings out and comings in. Time allows us only a quick dash through some of them, but I hope that you will be able to enter into the tremendous effort required to make the journeys and that you will be able to sense with some of the emotions and feelings that must have been involved and which ultimately show us, that from the very beginning, in a very real way, God knows and understands what we do go through not just on the macro journey – the pilgrimage “through this barren land” – but also on all the micro journeys we make in the course of our everyday lives.

Going back to the “What ifs?” What if Noah had decided that building an Ark was a ridiculous idea? Would we be here today? Unlikely, unless God had decided to make a second human creation. But, for 120 years Noah persevered and built the ark, in spite of the ridicule of his community, in spite of the physical effort it took, in spite of maybe his own doubts of those of his family. He invested his whole being and resources into building the ark in preparation for what turned out to be a year-long cruise. But this was a cruise with a difference. Can you imagine looking out of your window every morning for a year and seeing nothing but water? Can you imagine how difficult it would be to find conversation among just 8 people, who, like you had seen nothing but water, done nothing except the daily drudgery of life on board the boat and been nowhere except on board the same boat? Can you imagine the boredom of a daily routine that seemed to be never-ending. Yes, God understands what it is like for us when life is hum-drum and repetitive. He knows when we are stuck in circumstances that give us no choices to change them. **Oswald Chambers said “requires the supernatural grace of God to live twenty-four hours of every day as a saint, going through drudgery, and living an ordinary, unnoticed, and ignored existence as a disciple of Jesus. It is ingrained in us that we have to do exceptional things for God—but we do not. We have to be exceptional in the ordinary things of life, and holy on the ordinary streets, among ordinary people—and this is not learned in five minutes.”** We are also told that Noah lived for 950 years and in all that time, we are only told about three high points in his life. Firstly, when God told him that he and his family would be saved from the flood and he was to build an ark – that was when he was nearly 500 years old. Secondly, 120 years later, when he saw God’s promise coming to pass and thirdly, a year or so later when God made a covenant with him manifested by one of the most beautiful sights in creation that we enjoy to this day – the rainbow. For 350 years after that, Noah lived an ordinary life with all the ups and downs it entailed. To Christians today, the story of Noah’s watery journey and the coming of a rainbow is a reminder that God keeps His promises. Generally speaking the rainbow is seen as a sign of hope. To see one is usually uplifting and even a worldly song sees something greater “somewhere over the rainbow.”

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And what if the Patriarchs had not made some of their journeys. What would the Church know about the meaning of faith if Abram had refused to follow God's instructions to leave the relative urban comforts of his family home in Ur and travel to Canaan, knowing for the rest of his life he would be living a nomadic existence? The writer of Hebrews sums it up in chapter 11:8-12. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." Read these stories in Genesis and see the sheer physical effort of travelling each day only to have to set up camp at night and constantly knowing that sooner or later you would have to move on again. Having to find water and food, fight off hostile people along the way and find yourself in other threatening situations in places you stopped at. Think of all the decisions that had to be made to make it all work and then the emotional burden of waiting for a promised heir only to face the prospect of using that heir as a human sacrifice. If it were not for Abraham's example of a life of faith in spite of all the ups and downs of life, Christians today could not be classed as his heirs. We are the heirs that are as the "stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." We are those who are justified by faith and live by faith, still looking towards the city with indestructible, eternal foundations "whose architect and builder is God." The writer of Revelation calls it "The New Jerusalem."

And that brings us to the journey that is the cornerstone of the existence of the Jews as a nation to the present day – the Exodus. But the Exodus would not have happened if a young boy, probably hurt and fearful because he had been sold as a slave by his brothers, had not made a forced journey to Egypt. God knows when we have to go places we don't want to go or circumstances force us into. Think of those same brothers who were forced into a different kind of journey – this time a shopping trip for food and ending up getting more than they bargained for. From those two journeys stemmed the growth of a community that would eventually become God's chosen people, from which would come the Saviour of the world.

Time just does not permit us to explore the physical details of the 40 year desert wanderings, or the decisions that had to be made about the organisation of such a large body of people and the emotions that ranged from Miriam's song of joy after the Red Sea crossing to the discontent and ambition of those that fuelled rebellion against Moses and the anger of Moses himself in an incident that kept him out of the Promised Land. What if that journey had never been made. Today we would not have two spiritual planks of our faith. The Ten Commandments and the Passover, which points us to the blood of the Cross protecting us from the wrath of God. Obey the Ten Commandments and you will never offend God or humanity.

Many, many more examples of journeys are depicted in the Old Testament. When we come to Samuel, Kings and Chronicles we can talk of Hannah's journey to Jerusalem in prayerful desperation for a child and then the journey back to dedicate that child – Samuel, one of Israel's greatest prophets -to God's service. Infant dedication- still practised today. What if David hadn't journeyed to the battlefield that gave us one of the most heroic stories of the

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Old Testament – David v Goliath – a template for God’s support for us when we face the “giants” that threaten to overwhelm us. What if Elijah hadn’t fled in fear from Jezebel after his triumph over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and ended up feeling suicidal. Was God angry that he hadn’t had more faith? Did God tell him to pull himself together. Would we know that God understands fear and despair? God’s response was to nourish through sending food from ravens and to nurture Elijah through a ‘still small voice’ until he was able to face the world again.

There are so many others we could mention. What if the Queen of Sheba hadn’t visited Solomon to see if his wisdom lived up to the reputation it had achieved and to see the magnificence of his court which was regarded a wonder of the ancient world. Would we be reminded that there are wonders in this world – they are all around us in God’s creation and we know that we are going to see even greater wonders. What if we didn’t have the examples of the self-righteous petulance of Jonah not to go God’s way and his anger because the people of Nineveh turned to God. Or the journey of the Exiles to Babylon because God’s people had chosen not to go His way – ironically very near where Abraham had started his journey. Would we know or understand that in spite of deliberate disobedience and rebellion involved in those circumstances, God cared about Jonah and he raised up Nehemiah and Ezra to re-establish His people in Jerusalem. And the principle is the same for us today – in spite of all the ways we offend God – He wants to establish us in a New Jerusalem.

Throughout all these journeys made by Old Testament characters we see the whole range of human experiences and we learn that their stories were not just filling out the history of the Jewish people, but, in themselves, helped to build up the character of the people both individually and collectively. We learn so much about what was right or wrong about the way people did things and about their motivation and treatment of each other during those journeys; about what God saw as the proper attitudes towards circumstances and specific events which occurred in the course of the journey; about the reactions of the various people as they journeyed along the paths God had determined for them. The locations, circumstances and situations might be vastly different today, but human nature has not changed since time began – we are all still subject to the same virtues and vices that have always existed. What does our reflection on these journeys tell us about ourselves?

And finally, I am not going to finish with the last journey mentioned in the Old Testament but the very first one – for that was the journey that determined all those that followed. The journey of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden into a fallen world. Can you imagine their physical shock at the condition of world beyond the Garden, the ferocity of the predatory animals, the sheer physical and mental effort of having to build shelters, find their own food etc – in effect to learn how to survive by their own efforts.

And emotionally and spiritually, perhaps the sense of loss not only of all the physical comforts they had enjoyed, but also the emotional loss of perfect relationship with God and with this the sense of failure and associated guilt – knowing it was their own fault they were in the situation they were in. But from that journey came the greatest spiritual gift and blessing that this world has ever known and will ever know. Because only one other human being has had the experience of coming from an absolutely perfect environment into the sordidness of a sinful world – Jesus Christ, who left the glorious perfection of heaven to enter our world and share the experiences of fallen humanity. According to Paul, Jesus is the second Adam, but unlike the first Adam, Jesus has reversed the direction of humanity’s journey.

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When Jesus 'set His face to go to Jerusalem', He embarked on a journey that would enable humanity to once again have a realistic expectation of returning to Paradise. And that is why I have chosen to entitle these Lenten talks

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Because, if we are Christians, that is the journey we are all on. And, as we look at Jesus' experiences on His Lenten journey, I hope we will see that He has not only shown us the way to cope with our own journeys, but also that He really knows what we go through, because He, Himself, has been here.

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WEEK 2 OUR GUIDE

Just after Christmas there was an article in a newspaper about “whisk away Wednesday” – apparently this was a new expression even to newscasters. What it was reporting was that the Wednesday after Christmas was when many people started booking their summer holidays. And one of the most popular types of holidays was the guided tour. When you think about it, it is easy to see why. If you’re going somewhere you’ve never been before, especially if there is an element of danger from the environment or offending the local culture or even from the local inhabitants, it makes perfect sense to have someone who knows both the highlights of your journey as well as the pitfalls. Out of curiosity I looked up the qualifications for a tour guide. These were given by the Institute of Tourist Guiding

Level 2 qualification

- offer fixed route tours on foot in a specified site, or exceptionally on a moving vehicle like a boat or open-top bus
- have an in-depth knowledge of your site
- have a range of communication skills essential for the delivery of an effective commentary and presentation.

I thought that if these qualifications are needed for perhaps just an hour long tour of somewhere, how much more do we need someone to guide us through life’s journey – which is far more important than even the most exotic guided tour. David Cameron talked about Britain having lost its ‘moral compass’ which, I was delighted to hear, he regarded as the morals and ethics of the Bible. What, unfortunately he did not go on to say, was not only have we abandoned the guidelines, we have also abandoned the Guide. So as we make this journey over the next few weeks, the first thing we need to make sure of is that we have the right Guide. And, it’s to God’s Word that we turn to get the information about our Guide. I’ll have relied heavily on Luke 9:51 to the end of the Gospel but have brought in information from the other Gospels not given in Luke.

Guide me oh thou great Jehovah. Who is our guide? An important question for we need to have confidence in our Guide’s credentials and qualifications if we are to make the most of our journey and arrive safely at our destination. As far as credentials are concerned, reverently I say that we are treading on holy ground here for just as the Trinity is difficult to explain, so too is the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was both fully human and fully divine – a God-Man. Again, this is something beyond human comprehension, but in spite of our inability to explain it, it is something that is absolutely essential to Christianity. It is part of truly profound theology and when I had to teach this at college, I had to be very blunt and say that even if we could not understand it, if the students didn’t believe it then they had no business being at a theological college. It’s a staggering thought to realise that the character we are looking at is the second Person of the trinity – God the Son - God, Himself, in human form, experiencing the ease or hardships of our journey through life. And it is only the Holy Spirit who can bring the assurance of the truth of that statement to us.

The writers of the New Testament do not try to explain the how of Jesus being divine and human at the same time, but they do give us two titles for Jesus which convey this truth to us.

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The first is the title Son of God – from which systematic theologians get the term ‘the second Person of the Trinity’.

With only two exceptions - James and Jude - the writers of the NT assert that Jesus is the Son of God. However, even in these books, God is mentioned as Father and associated with Jesus. Peter does not use the term, but in his letters, God is explicitly said to be the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John takes what is implicit in other New Testament writings to a deeper and more explicit theological significance, especially the passages which imply that God and Jesus are One. Yet when you read through the first three Gospels you find that people did not recognize or treat Jesus as the Son of God. It is completely ironic that it was demons who recognized Him as such. Recognition by demons was both immediate and direct. It was not based on any observation of what He said or did. The demons recognized in Jesus the presence of a supernatural person.

Also, if you read through the Gospels the one thing that stands out about Jesus is that He had a special relationship with God. To use a modern expression, had a ‘direct line’ to God. All other Jews had access to God only through the High Priest. So, if we do not believe that the NT teaches that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God – God in human form - then we will get everything else Jesus’ journey wrong. Why, because, it is only by first recognizing Jesus’ true identity, that we can begin to understand the colossal change of lifestyle – for the want of a better term – that God undertook for us. I said at the end of last week that Jesus had made the journey from Paradise to earth. That statement leads to a truly amazing conclusion that Jesus is the Son of God but lived on this earth, in every way, as the Son of Man. Divinity and humanity or as Oswald Chambers puts it “Dust and deity.” In other words, Jesus has the key qualification for being a Guide. He has an in-depth knowledge of where we are and where we are going to and, more importantly, how to get there by the best route.

When you think of it too, a guide’s job is to promote the people, places and events that you have signed up to see and experience – not themselves. And when we look at Jesus we can see this in action. Jesus never referred to Himself as the Son of God as He was guiding people into the Kingdom of God. This admission was only made at the trial before the Sanhedrin and Jesus pointed out that the high priest had said it, not Him. Over and over again Jesus could have proved He was the Son of God, yet chose not to.

Instead Jesus, preferred title for Himself was the Son of Man and when you look at the Son of Man references in the Gospels, you see why Paul extols Jesus for His humility – such a contrast to the self-promoting celebrity cult that pervades our society today. Jesus never wrote a book, appeared on a radio or reality TV programme, created a new ideology or even travelled outside His own country – yet He has made the greatest impact on the history of the world. How did He do it? By being perfect in another of the tour guide qualifications – a range of effective communication skills. By word and thought and deed, Jesus communicated the right way to make life’s journey – so much so that the first generation of Christians were said to be following “The Way.” Acts 24:22. But Felix, who was rather well informed about the Way, adjourned the hearing with the comment, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.”

How did Jesus show “The Way” to his followers? The Evangelists do not tell us what preparations needed to be made when Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem. If His instructions to the Twelve and the Seventy during His journey to Jerusalem are an indication of how He Himself did things – as His own statement that “The Son of Man had nowhere to

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lay His head” suggests – He would be travelling with a minimum of baggage, little protection and the threat of rejection wherever He went. Jesus invites his followers to share his homeless situation and doesn’t keep back from them the possibility, indeed, the probability of them being persecuted for his sake. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke the Son of Man is an object of derision for associating with sinners. Yes, as Son of Man, He did have the divine prerogative of forgiving sins but, on His journey, He also speaks three times of himself as the Son of Man in references to his impending betrayal and arrest. Jesus, as a human being, made this journey, knowing full well the fate that lay ahead – so not only is the Son of Man title an indication of His humanity – the Son of Man title in relation to His fate also points to Him as the Messiah.

An in-depth study of these two titles alone add up to an amazing portrayal of a God-Man. As I said earlier, this is something our finite minds cannot fully understand. But the one thing we can grasp is that in being both God and Man, we have a unique Guide – One who knows the past from the present and the present from the future. One who has experienced life as we have to live it. That’s true, we might say, but how can we ordinary human beings be expected to live up to that standard? How can we follow Someone with these credentials? So many people say they wouldn’t become Christians because they “couldn’t keep it up.” And they are right to a certain extent. I’ll talk about this point next week, but for now let’s look at the stories about Jesus’ journey from the region of Galilee and ask – Does this Person really understand what I have to go through as I walk the road of life. The answer is that Jesus, in one way or another has experienced everything that makes us human.

Let’s take His physical journey. Depending on the starting point the distance of the journey from towns in Galilee to Jerusalem, via Samaria and Jericho is between 106 – 120 miles – which would have taken 5-6 days – but in this particular case it did take longer because the Bible accounts tell us that Jesus stayed in places for various lengths of time. Some scholars have estimated that it took around six months because the Gospel of John mentions Him previously travelling to one feast in Jerusalem in winter and we know, the crucifixion took place in the Spring. This was a journey He had probably made many times before. We know as a Twelve year old He had travelled to Jerusalem with His parents and every devout Jewish family would have made that annual pilgrimage for the Feast of the Passover. Taken together with His journeys during His three-year ministry, it has been estimated that Jesus walked around 15,000 miles in His lifetime – that’s around two-thirds of the way around the world. Bear in mind that these journeys were made in the blazing heat of summer, the rainy seasons and the bitter cold of winter. He would have had to ford the River Jordan and we know He risked the storms of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus travelled through fertile valleys, but more often we read of Him along dusty earthen tracks or up mountains. The final lap from Jericho to Jerusalem was all uphill – from 850 feet above sea level to 2500 feet above sea level. It was also the most dangerous road. Pacifists conveniently ignore the Bible references to the disciples carrying swords. One was used in Gethsemane which showed they were prepared to use them. This, and the story of the Good Samaritan tells us that Jesus did face danger from bandits along the way and needed some physical form of protection. We know that along those journeys He got hungry, thirsty and tired and weary. Is it any wonder when crowds of people were constantly demanding something from him. This took its toll – remember the woman who touched the hem of His garment – He felt strength go out of Him. We know there were times He just had to find somewhere to be alone. So He was subject to the same things that get many people down – the weather, the obstacles on the routes we take, the demands people make on our energy and time, and the physical weariness that makes it harder to get through life.

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You might say that it's okay for people who are physically capable and who can get over these physical discomforts, but what about those who have to make the journey through life who are not physically able or who are getting on in years? The Bible does not tell us if Jesus ever suffered a physical disability, but as a human being Jesus would have been subject to the same kind of ailments that His outdoor and pressurised life would bring. Bear in mind too, that Jesus was 33 when He undertook this journey and it has been estimated that average life expectancy at that time, was 40 years of age – so in those times, Jesus was not making this journey in the full bloom of youth or the prime of life. And we do know that He knows exactly what excruciating pain is like given His crucifixion.

We also know that He was concerned about those who did have physical problems - the blind, the lame, the diseased, the mentally impaired. Jesus' response was to heal wherever He went. Not everyone in the land of Palestine was healed by Jesus although He could have said the word and it would have been so – even today we do not know why some people receive healing and others don't. But the one thing that we can be sure of is that Jesus does understand we need help and support to deal with the physical burdens of life. Look at His feeding the hungry, promising living water to those who thirst and would He have issued the invitation to “Come unto me all ye who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest”, if He didn't understand that we do get worn down by pain or infirmity and tired and stressed out?

And we have so many indications too of Jesus' feelings about what he met on the journey. Jesus experienced the sorrow of bereavement and the sorrow and helplessness of seeing something headed for disaster and not being to stop it. The shortest verse in the Bible – Jesus wept. He wept over Lazarus and He wept when He reached Jerusalem. He was – as Isaiah put it – a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief.

So, in spite of His supernatural credentials, the Son of God and Son of Man understands the physical and emotional toll life's journey takes on us. And, Jesus will not demand more from us than He knows we can take. We are told “a bruised reed he will not break, nor put out a smoking flax.” He knows our limitations and all He asks of us is to do the best we can to follow Him with what faculties we've got. Prayer, a kind word, making a cup of tea for someone who could use one – in fact He says that just giving a cup of water in His Name is valuable service. No matter what physical condition we are in or our ages we can all carry out the primary work that God wants us to do - Believe on the one He sent and try to be more like Him as each day passes. All our life experiences are aimed at making us Christlike but Jesus knows we are a work in progress not the completed unit.

These letters describe us. PBPWMGHFWMY. It's not some secret code – It stands for “Please be patient with me, God hasn't finished with me yet.” We are not perfect – we are still sinners - but thank God, we are sinners saved by grace. We will never be perfect in this world – physically or otherwise - but we do have the example of One who was.

Guide me oh thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land. In January Stephen ended the service with this hymn after exhorting us to be strong and of good courage as we face 2012 and beyond, because God had promised to be with us through all we faced. Because of Jesus' journey, humbling Himself, even to the extent of washing the dust from the road off the disciples' feet, to walk along the road of human life, God has not only “talked the talk” but has “walked the walk.” In Christ, He has shown us that we have a Guide who

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understands our journey through life and will only ask from us what He knows we are able to give. The exhortation to be strong and of good courage therefore is not just a mantra to psych us up for the road ahead or as an aid to the power of positive thinking. It is a text to help us reflect also on our own journeys. Perhaps what we have shared tonight about our Guide, will strengthen and give us courage for the road ahead, because the promise to Joshua to be with him is the same one that we can claim today - I will never leave you nor forsake you. In the light of that, can we offer Jesus a little more of our lives and pray

Just a closer walk with thee
Precious Jesus hear my plea
Daily walking close to thee
Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.

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WEEK 3 TRAVEL IN 3D

3D is the new buzz technology in the cinema and now even 3D TVs. I've got to confess that when I see 3D I think of 3 old pennies – a thuppenny bit. Well my slides won't be in 3D but I am going to talk about 3dimensions.

Consciously or unconsciously, all the journeys we make start with the **DECISION** to make them. Some are so routine that we don't have to think about why we are taking them. With others, we have a reason for making them in our heads. They can range from a desire to hear opera in Milan, to the 10-30 group going to Ibiza for the 4 'Ss' – sun, sand, sangria – and I'll leave the 4th one to your imagination. Others are not quite so definite. The macho reason for why men climb mountains – because they are there; or 'Why at your age have you decided to see the source of the Amazon river?' – well, it seemed like a good idea at the time!

The one journey that doesn't involve our decision is life's journey. But that did start by a decision of God to put us on this road. Having said that, God has left all the decisions about the why, when, where and how we travel this road to the individual. And Jesus is one Individual who can show us how to make the right decisions about our journey.

Why, did Jesus decide to go to Jerusalem? First and foremost, in spite of what He knew lay ahead, Jesus made His decision because it was the right thing to do. It was God's will for His life. In one sense, Jesus is to be envied because He was in absolutely no doubt as to what God's will for His life was. I don't know about you, but it's not always as clear cut as to what God's will for our lives are – I just have to think of how convinced Peter and I were that it was God's will for us to return to Nigeria in 2010 – everything was in place, accommodation, transport, folk we knew, jobs in two colleges – then no visas. All I know now is that it was not God's will for us to go – but I often wonder will I ever be sure I know God's will in the future. What I would really need is a signpost with 10 foot letters pointing me in the right direction to be sure.

And, then there are times when we really do know what God's will is. A decision has to be made to obey or not to obey it. Make no mistake – Jesus had a choice. Jesus could have chosen not to go to Jerusalem at that particular time or He could have chosen not to go at all. Jesus tells the story of two brothers given a task – one says he will do it and then doesn't; the other says no and then does it. (Matthew 21:28). It's a good illustration of human nature. But the one Jesus commends is the one that in the end does the right thing in spite of reservations or a distaste for what he has to do. We need to realise that Jesus did not look forward to what was going to happen to Him – He did not have a 'death wish'. When Jesus decided to set His face to go to Jerusalem, it was in acceptance of the fact that the world could not be saved if He didn't go and finish His task. But unlike the distasteful tasks that we have to complete out of necessity or duty, Jesus faced the worst scenario out of love. Yes, it was necessary for the salvation of the world, yes, as Son of God, it might be regarded as filial duty – but we must never forget that God's love for sinful humanity was the driving force behind Jesus' voluntary decision to go to Jerusalem.

Perhaps our Lenten reflection might be about our decisions about following Jesus – to obey or disobey His command to take up our crosses to follow Him. And whether or not that decision is to follow Him as closely as possible or at a distance.

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And if our decision is to follow Him as closely as possible, we face the second step in the process –**DETERMINATION**. Luke 9:51 says Jesus **RESOLUTELY** decided – the dictionary defines that as unwavering determination. I love this photo – you can just imagine the determined look on this little girl’s face. So, to make a journey requires effort and it will not be trouble free. Probably the most important thing that will determine how determined we are to the journey is the purpose for which it is being made.

The journey to Jerusalem was the last stage needed to fulfil the purpose for which Jesus had left heaven to come to this earth. Underlying everything that Jesus said and did was a two-fold purpose. The chief one was, in Jesus’ own words, was to ‘seek and save the lost’ – David mentioned this in a sermon at the beginning of February. (Luke 19:10) This determination governed all that Jesus said and did in His life and the testimony of the Evangelists is that while He walked in this world, ‘He went about doing good.’ In fact, John tells us that if everything were recorded about what Jesus said and did, there would not be enough books to contain it all. (John 21:25)

2012 will be a year when we will be constantly reminded of how much determination it takes to become an Olympic standard athlete. The human body will be pushed to ultimate limits, there will not be time for anything else and every effort to raise and meet the financial obligations will be made. Can you imagine having to maintain this level of determination to your purpose for your whole life? Maybe for one or two Olympic Games and even, exceptionally, for three – but for the whole of your life?

Jesus’ determination meant pro-actively seeking out and saving sinners. He didn’t sit back and wait for them to come to Him. He made all the effort. And when He found those who were willing to become fellow-travellers, Jesus promised eternal life, but He didn’t promise a bed of roses on the way to it. He didn’t behave like politicians who make promises in election manifestoes that they either don’t intend to keep or find it impossible to keep when in office. And it took determination to be brutally honest about the cost of following Him.

In fact, His almost brutal honesty of what His followers could expect, did deter all except the ones with real determination to the choice they were making. Look at the passages about the cost of being a disciple (Matthew 16-28); what was required of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31); Jesus’ words to would-be disciples (Luke 9:57-62). It was not that any of these things were bad in themselves – in those circumstances they would have been the right and good thing to do. But in Oswald Chambers words – the good here was the enemy of the best.

Given those terms, it is no wonder that many turned away. John’s Gospel tells us that other words of Jesus meant many of people who had followed Him up to that point also turned back. An event which obviously saddened Jesus who asked His disciples if they would also go – a question which He may have asked because He thought there was a possibility of it happening. Instead, the reply He received from Peter, was a measure of the determination of the disciples – Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life (John 6:67-69). And that’s where the rubber hits the road – the bottom line. Originally, Peter had tried to stop Jesus going to Jerusalem (Matthew 16:22-23), but by this stage he had realised that Jesus was the Messiah and that the real meaning of this life and the next was to be found in Him. In this world, when you’ve done everything that can be done, seen everything that can be seen and worn out the countless number of T shirts collected along the way – what else is there? Peter’s inspired words show us that ultimately nothing and no one in this world can satisfy the deepest longing in the core of our beings. Together with Thomas’ words (John 11:16)

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that they would go with Him to Jerusalem even if they died with Him there, this belief in the words of eternal life, are measure of the level of determination needed to follow Jesus.

How determined are we to following Jesus? Reflection on that question perhaps could go along these lines.

*You call me Master, and obey me not;
You call me Light, and see me not;
You call me the Way, and walk me not;
You call me the Life, and live me not;
You call me Wise, and follow me not;
You call me Fair, and love me not;
You call me Rich, and ask me not;
You call me Eternal and seek me not.
If I condemn thee, blame me not!*

Are we going to turn back or reject the demands of Jesus because these things are too hard for us. As you can see from the poem, to decide to journey with Christ makes seemingly impossible demands and I think these examples show us why some people today are honest enough to say they will not become Christians because they ‘couldn’t keep it up.’ I said last week, they were right – in their own strength they can’t. Why, then does Jesus set these standards and expect us to follow them? Because of the third step needed in the process of our life’s journey with Jesus -**DEPENDENCE**.

We humans seem to have a real horror of handing over control of our lives to someone or something. The song ‘My Way’ is now held up as encapsulating our desire to have complete control over our own lives. Empowerment or empowering are two ‘buzz’ words in political and other circles. Yet, if you look back in history, we seem to be the most dependent generation that has ever existed. We now talk of the ‘nanny state’ providing us with services not available even two or three generations ago. We are more widely dependent on drugs, alcohol, on supermarkets and restaurants stocking a wider variety of foods than even some of our parents had access to. The widening of community, national and international commuter limits has made us more dependent on mechanical means of transport unprecedented in history. An obsession with celebrity and providers of all kinds of entertainment – digital or otherwise - has made us more dependent on escapism than even the ancient Romans with their endless round of circuses and fights in the arenas.

With all kinds of dependencies apparent in our everyday lives, why is it that there is so much resistance on dependence on a higher Being?

When we look at Jesus and see the fate that awaited Him when He reached Jerusalem, the one thing that helps us to understand how He managed to go through this journey as He did, is knowing that He depended on a higher Being. And that in itself was humbling for Jesus. We saw last week that Jesus was the Son of God, equal in every way to God the Father, yet as a human being Jesus was prepared to put that equality to one side and acknowledge that it was God the Father’s will that determined the course of His life’s journey. You just have to read through John’s Gospel to see the close connection between God and Jesus, perhaps being summed up in John 10:30 – I and the Father are one.

Secondly, Jesus was dependent on the empowerment that came from God the Father in the Person of God the Holy Spirit. When you read through the Gospels, have you ever wondered

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how Jesus knew exactly the right thing to do and say in every situation that He met? We are not told in every instance that the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus to do or say certain things. They didn't have to because it was obvious to them that Jesus' power came from God and in His humanity that power could only be channelled through the Holy Spirit. One scholar has said that • Earl Richards states that the Spirit "is both the agency of God's action in Jesus and the dynamics of His ministry".

If we look at the Gospel of Luke for example we can see that Jesus was no ordinary itinerant preacher or prophet.

People called Jesus a prophet and in Jewish terms that meant one who was empowered by God's Spirit to speak for God.

Jesus had a reputation as a prophet in His lifetime (Matthew 21:11, Luke 24:19, John 9:17) and thought of Himself in terms of a prophet. In Luke 11:32 Jesus says that one greater than Jonah is here. At the beginning of His ministry – Luke 4:24 – when He was rejected by the people of Nazareth, He said that no prophet was accepted in His own country. On His way to Jerusalem – Luke 13: 33 He said "Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem."

There is also the element of 'foresight'. Jesus had knowledge about the availability of the colt and the upper room; about His betrayer and denier; and predicted His own fate, the fall of Jerusalem, the end times and His own return. This is also firmly within OT prophetic tradition.

Look to at the examples of Jesus knowing how to read people. Luke adds a touch of perhaps humorous irony portraying the Pharisee doubting Jesus is a prophet presuming He does not know the character of the woman with the ointment. Yet, soon after, in the middle of a pressing crowd He knows someone has deliberately touched just the hem of His robe - not His Person !! John 2:24-25 explicitly states Jesus' ability "But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man for he knew what was in man. My son – about 17-18 at the time, came home from the Air Training Corps wearing their latest T-shirt slogan – A pat on the back is a recce for a knife. I thought how sad that was that one so young had such a cynical view of people – but in today's society, can we deny that so often it is true. Jesus' example is living out the central verse in the Bible – Psalm 118:8-9 – It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

Above all, though, OT prophets, inspired by the Spirit of God are remembered for their message. Jesus too shows Himself under the same 'compulsion' (4.43) to preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the poor - the 'acceptable year of the Lord' of His Spirit anointed mission.

And it is in His words that the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit can be discerned. The disciples followed Him in obedience to His words. At the word of a seemingly itinerant preacher, a 'professional' fisherman let down his nets - against his better judgement - and caught not only fish, but found a new vocation. The healing of the centurion's servant at a distance, the authority of His preaching and teaching which was constantly being challenged by the religious authorities (Luke 20:2), often with the purpose of trying to entrap Him in saying something that would give them reason to arrest Him. His answer to them when they tried to entrap Him into a treasonous statement about paying taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22:17, Mark 12:14, Luke 20:22) left the people "marvelling" at His answer.

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Those words were not only indications that they came from God but are also a display of wisdom, which in the Old Testament was a gift from God. Jesus, Himself acknowledged this when He said that “one greater than Solomon was here.” Wisdom is defined as being able to discern the tests and react appropriately. In our own lives we often say that we are hearing one thing but we know that something different lies behind the words – we “read between the lines.” In the New Testament, wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit and in Luke 21:15, Jesus promises His disciples that when tests come for them that He would give them “words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.”

Perhaps one of the strongest evidences for the power of the Holy Spirit was Jesus’ encounters with demons. Demons recognized both His right and His ability to decide their fate and it is in this respect that the Spirit element is strongest. Only a stronger Spirit had the power to deal with such demons and the “strong man” who ruled them.

3D Travel. Decision, Determination and Dependence are the key elements of making a success of our life’s journey. All three are worth reflecting on, especially the last. I say that because once a clear decision to follow Jesus has been made and we have truly determined ourselves to His service, we have access to exactly the same empowerment that enabled Jesus to change the course of history. That is a staggering thought. In Colossians 2:12 Paul tells us “when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” The power that raised Christ from the dead is available to us 24/7. All the spiritual riches that God bestowed on Jesus are there for the asking – Ask, Seek, Knock – how much more is God willing to give us His Spirit Luke 11:13. how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

So when Jesus said His followers had to take up their crosses and follow Him, He was not asking them or us to do it in our own strength. Again, an example of how He understands we need all the help we can get on this pilgrimage through a barren land – barren because it cannot provide what a person made in God’s image really needs. But we can thank God that Jesus on His journey to Jerusalem has shown us exactly what dependence on God and the power of His Spirit can help us to achieve if we submit to His control.

As a variation of John F Kennedy’s presidential speech, the question for us to reflect on is not so much what can dependence on God do for me, but what, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can I do for Him – especially in fulfilling His prime desire that we become more like His Son with every passing day and this starts with Jesus’ own instructions in John 6:29.

Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

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WEEK 4 GUIDE BOOK

The tour brochure. Guidelines for a safe and hassle free journey. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had a step by step guide to how to handle every situation we meet in life? If only we could be prepared for the totally unexpected. But I wonder, even if we had, would we follow it to the letter. Let's be honest – how many times have you got a new gadget, a flat-pack build or even a child's train set – and decided to launch right in without reading all the instructions. Just to give you an example – When we moved to Wales I had to get a new washing machine and you've got to admit that after 12 or so years since buying the last one, the technology had changed a bit. So when after two or three weeks when I couldn't get the door opened after a wash cycle, I had to call a washing machine engineer. Well, if I had read the instructions I would have known to check if the child lock was on and that I had to hold it down for 5 seconds to release it to get the door opened. Did I learn from that? No. I got a new cleaner last May – just before Christmas the brushes stopped turning in the cleaning head so I had to go on to technical services. Can you imagine what a fool I turned out to be when the 'gentleman' – informed me that I had kept the button which changes the cleaning process from carpet to hard floors was still depressed. If I had read the instructions I should have known to check I had pressed the right button. . Ah well – at least I can make my age an excuse – and I'm Irish on top of that.

As human beings we all make mistakes and as Christians we will make them too, but there is so much trouble we could avoid, if we are prepared to follow directions Jesus has left for us. Some of Jesus' greatest teaching came as He made this journey and Luke 13:22 tells us that Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem." We focus on the miracles and the stories, but we often forget that Jesus' main activity was preaching and teaching about repentance and the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Why did Jesus put such an emphasis on teaching at this time and even after His resurrection? The answer lies in Matthew 28:19-20 – the verses we know as the Great Commission. And the verse from John shows that what Jesus taught, especially on the road to Jerusalem, was to be the foundation of Christianity. Then, the disciples had to rely on memory, albeit with the help of the Holy Spirit, to pass on what Jesus taught. The existence of the Church 2000 years later is a testimony to their success. And as we reflect on our journey, perhaps the one thing we need to concentrate on is how often does Jesus' teaching come into our minds. We don't have an excuse. We have access to His teaching 24/7 if we possess a New Testament. How often do we turn to it? A chorus I learnt as a child puts what our response should be in a nutshell.

The B I B L E, that's the book for me
I read and pray and then obey the B I B L E

I know there are lots of folk who either because of poor eyesight or simply that they don't like reading would find the first part difficult, but today we have plenty of audio versions of the Bible – and let's face it – the Holy Spirit cannot bring back to our remembrance things that have never been put into our minds in the first place. And tonight as we take a brief look at some of Jesus' teaching we can pray that the Holy Spirit will open our hearts and minds not just to take it in, but to value it and want to know more of it.

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Firstly, Jesus taught in parables. There are more parables recorded by Luke than in any of the other Gospels. We are all familiar with the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son and nowadays scholars are dissecting parables for all sorts of levels of meaning. But when Jesus told these parables to His audiences, He would have been giving them teaching in a way that was meaningful to them. The first principle of good teaching is to start where the students are at. Jesus spoke about things in people's everyday lives. Searching for things that were lost, wheat and tares, fishing nets the practice of hiring labour for the day, relationships between masters and servants. Every parable contains a truth and revelation about God, His kingdom, what we need to do to enter it, and our relationships with others we meet on the journey of life. Because the teachings in the parables touched people in their actual situations, Jesus gained a reputation for teaching things that were relevant to people's lives. As I mentioned last week, journeys start with decisions to make them. Then, as now, people had to make decisions about whether or not to listen to Jesus and whether or not to make His teaching relevant to their lives. By referring to all that was familiar to them He showed that He wanted them to know and understand His message. Are we willing to learn from Him through the teaching of the parables?

Secondly, Jesus taught about prayer. Probably one of the most significant things the disciples asked of Jesus on His way to Jerusalem was to teach them how to pray – this is significant because it showed they wanted to learn and to follow His example. They had noticed that this was His constant practice and if Jesus, as Son of God, felt the need to pray, how much more do we. And yet, prayer seems to be one of the hardest things in Christianity to come to grips with. We all know it is of primary importance, but I know that even though I have been a Christian since childhood, have read many books on prayer and have gone to talks on prayer, somehow I still don't feel that I've got it right, and especially over this past year or so, I've found it almost impossible to pray. Christians I've talked to have had similar thoughts about prayer and I may be completely wrong, but this is possibly the reason why so many people avoid prayer meetings and cannot pray in public. Having to look at what Jesus said and did about prayer has opened up some of the following thoughts. For Jesus, prayer was a demonstration of His dependence on God and it would seem that all that Jesus needed on His life's journey was channelled through prayer. And the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples seems to bear this out. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Acknowledging who God is, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the Person who as Father has our highest good at heart, has to come first. If we don't acknowledge who God is and that He is majestic in holiness and awesome in glory, then our relationship with God will be on a wrong footing. We need to realise what a mighty God we serve and that only He can be entrusted with the whole of our being. All that is involved in these ideas are a matter for endless thanksgiving that God exists and that He loves us enough to send His Son to die for us. We can also thank God for every instance of goodness, righteousness and justice that exists in this fallen world, for He is the source of all these things and that is what His kingdom is about. Can you imagine this world if we had no concept of what God wants it to be. Only Christians can truly pray for these things to prevail in our world from the individual to the global levels.

Relying on God for our daily bread – our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs is evidence of our dependence upon Him for our very existence, while praying for forgiveness for ourselves and for the ability to forgive others, is showing that we acknowledge we have not always pleased God and can harbour thoughts, words and behaviour that would contravene His command to love our neighbour as ourselves. God does not lead anyone into temptation, but He does permit trials and temptations in order to test our faith. We are

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vulnerable to the world, the flesh and the devil, but this final part of the prayer again demonstrates our dependence and reliance on God to see us through. This summary of the Lord's prayer in many ways brings prayer 'down to earth', down to our day to day experience of all that is going on in our world. Paul tells us in Thessalonians to 'pray without ceasing' – it seems impossible yet, if like Jesus, we see prayer as keeping in touch with God through acknowledging Him as in control of this world, thanking Him for His provision and when good, right and just things do happen to ourselves or others; for forgiveness and freedom from the guilt of letting Him down or wrong attitudes towards those for whom Christ died; and for the strength and courage to face our daily trials or temptations which can affect each of us in so many different ways, praying for deliverance from evil for ourselves and others – man's inhumanity to man and the suffering and trauma that comes from man-made and natural disaster, then not only is praying without ceasing possible, it wouldn't leave time for anything else.

We could have spent this whole six weeks and more on just exploring the teaching of the Lord's prayer and also what have been termed Jesus' 'high priestly' prayers in John's Gospel chapter 17. But perhaps the most important point that we can take from it is that we need to keep in touch with God through prayer and that can mean at any time during the day or night and regardless of whatever circumstances we are in.

Time is short because we need to look, again briefly at a third area of Jesus' teaching – PRINCIPLES. The sermon on the Mount is probably the best known teaching about principles, but on His way to Jerusalem Jesus addressed many other diverse topics. For example what could be more diverse than what Jesus taught about children and the state. In an age when we hear so much about child abuse, what a difference it would make if children could really be brought to Jesus and see how they should be cared for by an adult. One thing I admire about Greenfield, which I've never seen done anywhere else, is the practice of bringing children up to the front to say or read verses. Not only is this a part of instilling the importance of God's Word, it is also showing the children that adults regard this as very important too. Those children are the church's future. As those children say those verses we can all be praying that God will bring that to pass in their adult lives and that they too will eventually pass on what they have learned of God to their own or other people's children.

On our journey through life, are we prepared to follow Jesus' example in relation to children? And especially are we prepared to accept Jesus' teaching in the way He said it should be accepted - as a little child – Stephen said childlike, not childish. In other words, accepting it as the truth and trusting in it.

From a child to the state. In spite of all the defects in Roman or Jewish rule, Jesus said "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's." Our human journey makes us citizens of two kingdoms. As Christians we need to obey the laws of our country – with one exception – when they conflict with the laws of God. And how you deal with that kind of situation is beyond what we can discuss here. In this context, Jesus is saying that paying taxes is not in conflict with the law of God. Today, when there is so much in the media about tax evasion and rich being allowed to get away with it, there is justified anger about the amount of tax we have to pay. But, when you realise that this is something God expects of you, as He does about obeying other laws – driving safely, honesty in business, voting even etc. – you realise that this is what being salt and light in the world is.

The Independent newspaper, around 24th January published an article about the lack of integrity in British society – by treating all the laws, especially those which govern our everyday dealings with others, we are maintaining what integrity there is left.

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And the greatest principle of all. Luke 10:27 And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. These words sum up the Ten Commandments. And they come in the correct order. Unless we love God and have the supernatural love of God channelled through us by the Holy Spirit, we cannot love our neighbour as ourselves – because, if we are honest, we do find some people simply unloveable. But what does this kind of love mean? God’s love, for a start, is what we might call ‘tough love’. I read somewhere that God loves us as we are, but loves us too much to let us stay where we are. God’s love for us and for the world that is affected by us is governed by what in the end is best for His glory and our good. Many times that will take a path through suffering, disappointment, despair, the feeling that our prayers are never answered the way other people’s are, that God has forgotten or abandoned us. But every negative experience in our lives has the aim of making us the kind of people God wants us to be. That’s tough love and I know things that have happened in my life has, at times, made me question God’s love or even the very concept of love itself. But as we reflect on Jesus’ decision to go to Jerusalem and see what He faced there, I think it helps us to understand that everything God does in our lives – and especially not sparing His only Son from the suffering of this world – is love, not just as its toughest, but love at its best, for His glory and our greatest good, is the eternal life that comes from being moulded through our experiences into Christlikeness.

And when it comes to showing our love for God, the word ‘obey’ comes into the picture. Jesus and God are One - On that day you will realise that I am in my Father and you are in me and I am in you – John14:21. The link that forges that relationship is love and Jesus goes on in verse 22 to say “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me.” In verse 15 Jesus says “If you love me, you will obey what I command. And Jesus practiced what He preached. Verse 31 says “but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.”

As Christians, this brings home the importance of Jesus’ teaching. We cannot obey what we do not know or ignore and see as unimportant. And obedience to the light we have been given is the test of love for God.

It is easy to help and to love neighbours when they are acting in what we see as right ways, but what about the neighbour who is doing more harm than good? Our overriding approach should be that we will not wilfully or deliberately harm another person and that we will not ignore the needs of others if it is in our power to help them. Our human dilemma is that we are not infallible and we do not always know what to do to achieve the best outcome. Neville Chamberlain thought that appeasing Hitler was the best thing to do to avoid war. He was trying the Christian way of living at peace with everyone as far as it lay within him, but he ended up attributing goodness to something that was shown up to be evil. Sometimes I wonder if we are doing the same when we contribute to appeals and our aid ends up going to the wrong people.

It is the same with ordinary justice. Punishment or rehabilitation? God forgives us our sins, but, more often than not, He allows us to suffer the consequences of those sins in our lives. We should not shy away from allowing those who have offended against others in our society to escape the consequences of their actions. Unfortunately, our justice system gets it wrong in many cases and a ‘rehabilitation’ principle means that further offences are committed.

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Where do we draw the line between the two? My only objection to the death penalty is that innocent people have been put to death, because of human fallibility and other pressures – just look at the judicial murder of Jesus. But sometimes I think it should be an option.

These examples show us that it is not always easy to identify what is love for our neighbour on a national or global scale. God does not expect us to solve these problems, but He does expect us to respond to the obvious needs of people around us and to pray for guidance when we are in doubt about what we should do in difficult circumstances. That may mean helping when we know that a positive result may not materialise. But, if we have played our part in good conscience before God, the responsibility for the outcome is His. But in all these circumstances we can show our love for God and for our neighbour by praying that His peace, His providence and His standard of righteousness and justice will increasingly prevail in this world. In other words, pray what Jesus taught us to pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven; and obey Him by seeking what He commanded us to seek – Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

And the place to start seeking it is in the teaching of Jesus, for He knows more about it than anyone else.

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WEEK 5 NIGHTMARE

Nightmare journeys. We've probably all had some experience of journeys that have gone terribly wrong. We read of so many journeys having nasty or fatal consequences. Honeymooners shot and killed, the couple taken by Somali pirates, death caused by killer bees, others kidnapped, children drowning in pools meant to be a highlight of their holiday, muggings, freak accidents, travel accidents and this picture of the Costa Concordia brings home to us that journeys are not without risk. Getting to your destination is one thing – what happens there can be something else.

I'm sorry that I have to be so negative tonight. You probably will go home a bit depressed, but one of the hard facts of life that we face as adults is that bad things happen to good people. All of us, in one way or another, or to a greater or lesser degree, are vulnerable to the sin that comes as a result of us having to deal with the world, the flesh and the devil. As Christians we believe that sin, engineered by Satan, entered a perfect creation and is responsible for all that subsequently became wrong – the human, animal and natural environments. We also believe that Jesus had to die because of all the sin in the world. But have you ever stopped to consider what 'all the sin in the world' consists of?

David said in a sermon in January that our forefathers in the church tended to think of sin in terms of the wrongs committed by individuals and that, in one way they were right to do so. Sin consists of breaking God's rules that we find in the Ten Commandments and the greatest commandment taught by Jesus. We all fail God and that is why confession is a necessary part of our relationship with God. The Bible teaches that if we confess our sin, He is able and just to forgive us and will remember those sins no more. But if someone were to ask you how do you rate your sin on a scale of evil I think one of the hardest things to accept is that the ways I have sinned that have hurt other people are rated exactly the same as the worst I have mentioned **for as far as God is concerned no sinful word or act is more sinful than any other.** All sins have one thing in common – they all offend God equally and they have damaged our neighbour. According Matthew 5:19-19. Not one stroke of a letter – the dot on the 'I', the stroke on the 't'. If we break one part of the law then we have broken it all. With God, its all or nothing.

From the moment Adam and Eve acted independently of God's explicit commands we have all be born with the tendency to rebel against God's way of doing things. So, it is not the wrong things that are done that make us sinners. It is because we are sinners from the moment that we are born that we do wrong things. Theologians call that 'original sin' and that is something we cannot fix ourselves no matter how good we are.

Every wrong thing that is done on this earth throughout history and until Christ comes again can be traced back to the moment that two human beings thought they knew better than God and decided to do things "their way." It is very sobering, if not downright humiliating to be told "there is none righteous, no not one" and that all our righteousness is as filthy rags" in the eyes of God. It is excruciating to realise that, without Christ, I am no better or worse than President Assad of Syria or any brutal tyrant that has ever lived. For people without Christ, it is perhaps worse to be told that it is only reliance on the sacrificial death of an

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impoverished, itinerant Jewish preacher and teacher who lived over 2000 years ago, that can render us acceptable to God. Yes, God can forgive even the worst tyrant that ever lived – but what He cannot and will not forgive, is a refusal to accept His Son as an atonement for all the sins committed. The bottom line is that the blood of Christ has covered every sin that can be committed by any human being anywhere, anytime and in any way.

Tonight, what we need to reflect on is what did covering every sin entail? It's not an easy question to answer, but looking at what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem perhaps gives us some of the answer – because in Jerusalem, the manifestations of sin that Jesus did encounter truly add up to a nightmare experience.

On our journey through life we come into contact with political, military, legal, economic, social, religious and cultural organisations. Because such organisations are run by human beings who are not infallible, they are not without fault - all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. So if we look at the behaviour within some of these people in Jerusalem, we begin to get some idea of the sin that Jesus took on His own shoulders in our stead. And as we identify some of the manifestations of sin, perhaps we can reflect on whether or not they apply to us. We may not have sinned in a practical, literal sense i.e the letter of the law. But how often have we sinned against the spirit of it - Remember, Jesus said that anyone who hates another has already committed murder in his heart.

We have to start with the Sanhedrin and the High Priests Annas and Caiphas. This was both a political and a religious body for even the Romans recognised that the Jewish nation was a theocracy. But Jesus had really annoyed the Jewish political and religious authorities by His criticisms of them, by the parable of the tenants who killed the heir for they knew it was spoken against them (Luke 20:19) and especially by His cleansing of the temple, which robbed them of the profits from the corruption and greed of the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals. Jesus had previously criticised the Pharisees for their love of money and the Sanhedrin were motivated by the same avarice. The fact that it called it 'a den of thieves' indicates the extent to which the religious authorities condoned the corrupt commercial practices. Their subsequent actions resulted from what was innate in all human nature – anger at the loss of economic profit, murderous hatred (Luke 19:47); offended pride because Jesus was popular with the people who regarded His teaching as more authoritative than theirs; Pilate knew they had handed Jesus over "out of envy" (Matthew 27:18).

And the real tragedy in human behaviour here is that these things were found inside the Church. You expect these things of the world, but not among religious leaders. I have a friend to thank for the saying that 'it's the water inside that sinks a ship, not the water outside.' How often in history and even in our own day do we see the institution that should be upholding, defending and fighting for Christians and Christian values, remain mute and either distort the message or compromise with the world in the self-interest of individuals and the institution they are a part of. We know also that the Church has been a cover for many kinds of wrongdoing that are contrary to what God expects of those who claim His Name. We are no strangers to corruption, greed and abuse of others even within the Church.

All of this was compounded by injustice. The arrest and trial of Jesus was carried out at night which was against Jewish law. Even to this day it is a legal principle in democratic countries that trials must be held during the day in open court – that is, with the doors open. That is why for example, after the riots last year, the fact that magistrates' courts sat in the evenings made news headlines and when very exceptional cases that are heard 'in camera'

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i.e by a judge behind closed doors makes news. Look at the perjury committed – political subversion, claiming to be Christ the king when we know Jesus resisted the people’s attempt to make Him king after He fed the 5000 and refusing to pay taxes to Caesar – when we know He said render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s. There is no other way to describe this process other than a complete perversion of justice

Further actions of the Sanhedrin made this even more obvious because although they had no power to put Jesus to death but they did apply political pressure – John 19:12 to bring about His death. Pilate was threatened that Caesar would hear that he had refused to deal with someone who claimed to be a king for it was Pilate’s job to make sure no cause for rebellion or challenge to the emperor’s authority arose under his jurisdiction. Pilate tried to pass the buck by sending Jesus to Herod because Galilee was under Herod’s jurisdiction, but all Herod was interested in was seeing a miracle. (Luke 23:8). Jesus stayed silent because He knew what Herod was like – an old fox. Luke gives a very telling insight which is often overlooked. He tells us in 23:12 that that day “Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies.” In both cases we see the self-serving nature of politicians and rulers who want to maintain power at all costs – a selfishness that totally disregarded how another would be affected by their actions. And also a prime example of Jesus’ own warning. Matthew 10:39 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it The self-serving actions of Herod and Pilate were the complete opposite to the self-sacrifice that Jesus was about to endure.

The attitudes and actions of both Herod and Pilate were compounded by yet another manifestation of another aspect of human nature – cruelty and brutality, inflicting pain and suffering just because you have the power to do so. Last time I went into some detail about the military brutality to which Jesus was subjected. I don’t think I need to do that again because we just have to look at history and see the atrocities committed by military personnel – Syria and DR Congo are the most current examples.

Can you see the picture of human nature that is already being built up. Worse is to come. “Hosanna in the highest, Hosanna to the King” on Sunday became ‘Crucify Him’ five days later. This change of atmosphere brings us into the realm of everyday social interaction and relationships and it highlights the fickleness of human nature. Popularity is a much sought after commodity – politicians, entertainers, celebrities of various kinds depend on popularity for a living. But how often we see those that are praised and sought after at one time, become the target of gossip, the so-called ‘whisper campaigns’ and the rumour mill out of envy, jealousy, desire for financial gain, the desire to hit someone where it hurts, telling lies, if necessary to achieve your ends. Before you know it, the reputation of the ‘A-list’ golden boy or girl has been murdered and they have become the ‘untouchable.’ You see all the motivation behind the actions of the authorities who determined to kill Jesus exist in our ordinary situations and while they may not have such headline impact, they can destroy a person’s life.

Jesus knew that people would act through self-interest and throughout His life Jesus never sought popularity. Many of the things He said and did earned Him popularity, but Jesus never acted or spoke for the purpose of making Himself popular. Indeed, last week we saw that He never entrusted Himself to any man for He knew what was in man. It’s a true saying that ‘you can please some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can never please all of the people all of the time.’ Popularity may help you to win friends and influence people for a time, but the downside is that it often creates jealousy and

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resentment in others who will only be too glad to destroy the person. Popularity can only protect a person for so long. By the time Jesus reached Jerusalem, the hatred, jealousy and resentment of the Jewish religious authorities had reached such a pitch that they were determined to destroy Him.

We can bring all of this even nearer to home. There's a song that says "You always hurt the one you love, the one you shouldn't hurt at all." I think I am probably right in saying that we are all guilty of hurting someone we are close to or have experienced hurt from someone close to us. That happened to Jesus. The betrayal by Judas, who had been using Jesus for his own ambitions and was annoyed because they didn't materialise the way he had expected them to. The denial by Peter – the one who boasted he would stand by Jesus no matter what is like depending on someone to speak up for you but either they don't or put a negative slant to what they say. To be fair, at least Peter did not flee like the others, who feared to be arrested themselves. And we are told that Peter 'wept bitterly.' Unlike Judas who hanged himself because he couldn't live with his guilt, Peter was genuinely ashamed and realised the hurt he had caused. Peter's was a true repentance and that is why Jesus made a special effort to restore Peter to an intimate relationship with Him. (John 21:15-19)

Could Jesus have borne any more when His closest companions betrayed, denied or deserted Him in His hour of need. Well, He did, something that you and I will never have to experience. My God, my God, why have You forsaken me. The cry of dereliction when darkness fell and God turned His face away. Many say that happened because God is so holy that He cannot even look upon sin. Could it also be because He could not bear to look upon the inconceivable suffering of His only Son – a thought expressed in the words of a song – How deep the pain of searing loss, the Father turns His face away, while wounds that mar the Chosen One bring many sons to glory.

Not just in Jerusalem, but since time began and for all the time that will remain, every act of corruption, injustice, brutality, cruelty, selfishness, unhelpfulness in times of need, lies, denial, betrayal, desertion: everything motivated by avarice, envy, covetousness, malice, pride and deceit - committed by the whole of humanity fell of Christ's shoulders. That is our condition apart from God and the sad thing is that in most cases it is only lack of opportunity that prevents most people from acting on their natural instincts. They say DNA is unique to every individual, but if they could test DNA for sin, it would be exactly the same in every person. That is original sin, the defective gene we all inherit.

And that brings me to the ultimate source of all sin – the Devil. He is a being that most people don't believe in these days and is often caricatured. But he is alive and well and it came to light last year that Halloween, when there is so much graphic merchandise of the demonic, is second only to Christmas in national celebrations. A story I came across tells of two wolves. The Apostle Paul has told us the same thing – The 'Old Man' is opposed to the New Creation within us. The Flesh struggles against the Spirit. God and Satan are both fighting for our souls. What happened to Jesus in Jerusalem is a graphic illustration of what Satan can lead us into. Jesus said that Satan is the Father of lies and a murderer from the beginning. Feed the nature Satan has brought upon us and Jesus died to save us from and death is certain because the wages of sin are death, but the gift of God is eternal life. But at the end of the day, the devil can only go as far as God lets him and we allow him to govern our lives. Feed on Jesus' teaching and evil, although it can't be done away with completely, can be hindered from progressing forward.

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Taken together, what happened in Jerusalem does give us a compelling and graphic picture of the dedication and courage of Jesus and the unimaginable weight of the task He was called upon to achieve. It is difficult to find words to truly express, the terrifyingly awfulness of the innate sinful disposition. When it can lead to all the kinds of things that Jesus had to endure in Jerusalem, I think we can begin to understand why God is justified in saying it deserves eternal punishment. Someone has said that hell is having to live with your real self. If this is so, can you imagine having to live every moment of eternity facing the darkness within yourself and the regret that you didn't do something about it while you had the chance? And why, as I already mentioned that only sin that God cannot and will not forgive is the failure to accept Jesus' death as the atonement for your sin.

Looking at our journey through life, it is obvious that sin is rampant in our world at all levels of human existence. The potential to sin in any of the ways we have mentioned is in every single one of us. We cannot eradicate sin from the world, but we can reflect on how we can make sure sin is hindered on our watch. Feeding on Jesus' teaching, loving obedience through prayer, personal integrity, right motivation, service to others and standing against evil where we can. Considering the burden that Jesus bore, can we offer anything less? The bottom line is – when it comes to sin – it is truly a case of “There but for the grace of God through the blood of Christ, go I.”

Just a word about next week – I'll be concentrating on Luke chapter 24 and if you have time during the week see if you can identify 10 single journeys in these 53 verses.

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WEEK 6 WELCOME HOME

Especially after a nightmare journey all most people want to do is get home again. The word home ideally, because so many homes fall short of the ideal, is a place of safety, security, long-term stability, where we love and are loved, acceptance for who we are and where all our needs are provided for. Perhaps that's the origin of the expression "Home is where the heart is" because don't we all long for those things in our hearts? The good news is, that after the doom and gloom of last week, I can talk about going home, because the journey through Lent, doesn't end in a nightmare in Jerusalem. Lent is, for the want of a better term, a preparatory journey for the greater one that comes after it. We have reflected on the credentials of the Person who is guiding us on that journey. We have reflected on the need for the decision, determination and dependence required to make a success of the journey. We have seen that we do have a guide book that will keep us on the right road if we are prepared to follow its directions. We have reflected on the things which show that the journey will not be hassle free and could even have fatal consequences. But what we now need to reflect on is where we go from there.

When Jesus was comforting His disciples about His imminent death and departure from this world, He told them John 14:1-3, Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Thomas was honest enough to say that they didn't know where He was going and asked for directions. Jesus told them the words we are all familiar with - I am the Way and the Truth and the Life – no one comes to the Father except through me. But it was not until after the resurrection that these words and Jesus' final destination became clear to them. We are more fortunate than the disciples at that time for we now know that the whole intention of the journey to Jerusalem was to enable us to return home to the original place God had intended for humanity – heaven, the Paradise of the Garden of Eden.

For me the final stages of the Lenten journey is depicted for us in Luke 24. This is an amazing chapter for me because within those 53 verses are 10 journeys which take us closer to that home. Did anyone find all 10.

Well the first 5 are in the first 12 verses. The four single journeys made by the women and Peter – to and from the tomb. The fifth one is about Jesus being 'The Way'. When Jesus said He was the Way, I know that I didn't think of it in terms of a journey through death. The first journey in Luke 24 is Jesus' journey back from the dead. Think about this for a moment. It is more momentous than any real or imaginary journey that you have ever heard of. It is a journey only one man has ever taken and no-one will ever make it again. There are those because of bad experiences in life will tell you that they have been to hell and back. The Apostles' Creed tells us that Jesus Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead" I am not prepared to speculate about what went on during those three days in the tomb, but what Christians believe is that Jesus confronted all the powers of Satan – the author of death – and in winning this final battle over death won the war against Satan. Grave where is thy victory, death where is thy sting? Whatever else can be said about those three days, one thing we can be sure of is that Jesus made the journey from death back to life. Jesus pioneered the way back for us all. Christians no longer have to

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fear the journey into the afterlife as the ancients would have described it. Jesus has blazed the trail for us. For us Jesus is the only Way from death back to life and because of that, we can be sure if we are Christians, that we are already on the way home to eternal life. And while it may take a lifetime to get there, doesn't the hope and expectation of a guaranteed and permanent welcome home give us the encouragement to make the most of the rest of our journey.

The other 4 journeys in these verses focus on a RISEN Lord. Here we find three different responses which in many ways reflect how people today react to the Easter Day message. The two men who met the women at the empty tomb told them to REMEMBER what Jesus had told them when He was still with them in Galilee (v6) and verse 8 says "Then they REMEMBERED his words." They not only remembered, they believed. Peter wondered and there are many people who wonder whether or not there is something to the Christian gospel. Other disciples regarded the women's story as nonsense – in that age, the primary reason being it was women who were telling them – have men changed much in 2000 years? But nevertheless, they neither remembered they had been told it would happen, nor did they believe it had happened.

When it comes to accepting Jesus as the Way, everyone in the world falls into one or other of these three categories. If we are in the first, then how do we go forward? The answer is in the next four journeys which connected a ROAD with a ROOM. The journeys of the two men and Jesus on the Emmaus Road and back to a room in Jerusalem. When you think of it a road and a room again can represent wherever we are in life because we are either indoors or outdoors. Isn't it so reassuring to know that Jesus knows our exact location on life's journey and can show us the way forward from there – and 40 of the 53 verses in Luke chapter 24 tells us how to do it for this chapter is about people's encounters with Jesus and the consequences of those encounters.

The encounters start with despondent and disappointed people. The women who went to the tomb in sorrow (24:1-6) expecting to be able to perform the last service they could render to the One they had lost came back their sorrow turned to joy; the journeys of Peter to the tomb who still came back wondering what had happened – verse 12 – and the unbelieving disciples of verse 11 by verse 45 were enlightened by verse 45 – and they subsequently changed the world. Then we have the two men on the road to Emmaus. Here were two men extremely disappointed and saddened by what had happened to Jesus. They were two men whose hopes of a better future had been dashed by the crucifixion and they could see no better way ahead – ready to risk life and limb because of their experience with Jesus. In life, many of us find ourselves in the same situations, sorrowful, depressed, disappointed by thwarted hopes and plans for the future, wondering why certain things happen to us, and like the rest of the disciples who thought the women were talking nonsense, sceptical about and perhaps even afraid to be happy when we hear of something good happening. What had changed everyone in the course of the journeys and consequently brought a new and radical world view into being? In two words 'Jesus' teaching'. Yes, it may seem that I am on my soapbox again about the absolute importance of teaching what is contained in the Bible, but I'm taking my cue from Jesus, because if Luke 24 does not convince us that this route is the only safe and sound Way towards home then nothing else will.

The first thing that we need to notice about that teaching is that important point is that Jesus started not with His own teaching but with His Bible – the Old Testament. The word Scriptures is mentioned twice in verses 27 and 45. This is reinforced in verse 46 by Jesus

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saying “This is what is written.” and the specific written things He refers to are Moses, the Prophets and Psalms – verses 27 and 44. Although my own studies have been focused on the New Testament, time after time I’ve had to go back to the Old Testament for the origin of all that is contained in the New. It is to the Old Testament we must go if we want to show that Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfilment of the greatest promise given by God – to provide this sinful world with a Messiah – a Saviour who would cleanse humanity of sin and relieve it of the guilt and the punishment for that sin. In Luke 24, that is the teaching that Jesus passed on to the men on the Emmaus Road and His own disciples. They needed to be sure about who He was and to understand what He had come to do and why He had to do it in a way that led to crucifixion. When you think of it – that is the heart of the Gospel; this information is the cornerstone of Christianity. It is the what keeps the Church alive. Just as Jesus made use of the Scriptures He possessed so we must concentrate on all of the Scripture that we now have access to.

Today, in a secular, materialistic and atheistic world, and Christianity threatened by the resurgence of militant Islam, we need desperately to follow Our Guide’s example and get back the Guide Book provided for us. I can’t help but feel sad and frustrated that the in-depth study of God’s Word, in the context in which it was said and passed on to succeeding generations, just as Jesus is doing in Luke 24, now has no place in our schools and colleges. Islam indoctrinates its adherents with the Koran and have madrasahs specifically for this purpose. The word means a place where learning and studying are done. Yet, in our cities, towns and villages it is only Bible study groups like this one in Greenfield and in other evangelical churches that seems to be bringing the actual Word of God to people’s attention and keeping it alive – and I don’t think that’s an exaggeration.

In many ways I see what I am doing is like the washing machine and cleaner I mentioned a couple of weeks ago. I’ve shown you the product and given a quick-start guide, but if you want to get the fullest, the best and least hassle-free use of the product you’ve got to read the details of the manufacturer’s instructions. It’s the same with the Bible – it’s got to be read book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, word by word. Just one example. One day a Roman Catholic priest read three words and when he wrestled with their implications, the impact was the equivalent of a bombshell for Martin Luther – when he realised the impact of ‘Justified by faith’ that spark set off the Protestant Reformation. Power – in just three words.

And that brings us to the second point about Jesus’ teaching. His followers are to pass it on to others. Last time, I talked about how God thought it, Christ wrought it, the Holy Spirit brought it – but everyone of us sitting in this room tonight is here because somebody taught it. The women passed on what they had learned at the tomb even though they weren’t believed. And look at what it took for the two men on the Emmaus Road to pass on what they had learned. In daylight and in the heat of the day they had already walked the 7 or so miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were probably tired and obviously hungry for they shared a meal with Jesus. Yet, once their “eyes were opened” and their hearts burning within them verses 31-32 by what Jesus taught them, then literally, they risked life and limb to hurry back to Jerusalem at night, along an uphill, rough terrain road, which was also notoriously dangerous because of bandits. But they had Good News to tell and they wanted folk to know about it. We not only have to make the journey as Jesus did, we also have to pass on what He has taught us along the way to others just as He throughout His life and ministry, passed on what He had received from God. Luke 24:47 can be combined with Matthew 28:19 and John 21:15-17 which can all be summed up in the words “Pass the message on.” In Luke, the disciples are told that they are to be witnesses when they received

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the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to do it. Matthew gives what we know as the Great Commission to teach what Jesus commanded and both Matthew and Luke include the words 'to all nations.' Look at the maths - 1+11 = 3000 on the day of Pentecost. 1+11 two thousand years later = 2,000,000,000 (2 billion). 1+11 = ???????? from today on.

John has a different approach but the message is the same. If we look at John 21:15-17, we see Jesus restoring His relationship with Peter but linking Peter's love for Him with the words "Feed my sheep, feed my lambs." Have you noticed how much emphasis is put on food these days? Think about all the adverts for the supermarkets, numerous diet books and cookery programmes. I always think there's something strange that on the one hand we're told obesity is a problem and then they put all these cookery programmes on to encourage us to eat.

We need food to live. The thing to consider is what kind of food will help us to find our spiritual Way as we journey through that life and to help others to find that way too. The answer takes us back to the Bible. The first Christians prioritised the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42) and in many ways I see what I am doing is like the washing machine or cleaner I mentioned a couple of weeks back. I've shown you the product and given you a quick-start guide, but if you want to get the fullest and the best and the least hassle free use of the product, you must read and follow the maker's instructions. For Christians that means God's Word, book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, word by word. One example of what happened when a Roman Catholic priest read just three words – Justified by faith. Meditation on three words and the Holy Spirit's enlightenment as to their impact made Martin Luther the pioneer of the Protestant Reformation.

Today, do we need to reflect more on what we can do to feed ourselves and others with the truths of God's Word? Wales has a wonderful heritage of doing just that. This gives just some examples covering 4 centuries. Just as the lack of physical food results in famine eventually leading to death if not relieved, so the life, the health and strength of Christianity depends on amount of spiritual food it receives.

The Church from the time of Christ has been engaged in spiritual famine relief through its existence in towns and villages and through its support for missionary societies and other organisations like the Bible Society and Wycliffe Bible translators to take the Word of God where He provides the opportunities to do so. God doesn't expect us to be like the Muslims and know the Bible off by heart. I confess I can't always remember chapter and verse, but we can pass on what we believe not just in words, but in the way we live. Jesus said that "man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" and He Himself is the Bread of Life and the Living Water. We sing – Bread of Heaven, feed me now and ever more. Jesus is the Way to relieve spiritual famine – but He needs relief agents to distribute those resources – so the task starts with each individual. Jesus has shown us by His own example the Way to travel on life's journey. God's Word is to be lived out in our ordinary, everyday journey. Until we learn to read, pray and obey then we cannot pass it on to others, especially about the final journey we find in Luke 24. -the tremendous truth RETURNING home.

And here, is where the here and now meets with eternity. Christians are now on the return journey. We are still facing the ups and downs of life. Yes, the journey will at times be hard and will appear to be the most dangerous route we can take. Yes, we still need all the help we can get on this pilgrimage through this barren land. In many ways we are like the

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travellers on the Emmaus road. There are times when our hopes and dreams come to a dead end, when we feel the door to the future has been closed because God hasn't come through for us the way we thought He should. Their plans or ideas of how life would be with Jesus had been thwarted by the crucifixion and Jesus' death. It's at times like these that we have to remember God is controlling things for His glory and for our good. In times of grief and despair too, like these men, we fail to see Jesus walking beside us, and it's hard to experience the presence of the One who has promised never to leave us or forsake us. The two men were in a state of what we might call today, spiritual darkness or turmoil, or going through a wilderness period when God seems to be hiding Himself from us. In this particular instance the men were in this state because of one thing – they had failed to REMEMBER. David is fond of repeating the lines “The things of life will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.” It is when we look to Jesus and remember what He has taught us that our eyes too will be opened and I hope that these six weeks have opened our hearts and minds with a better idea of Who our travelling companion is, that our journeys will continue with more trust in His guidance and more knowledge of how to how he wants us to conduct ourselves en route. The icing on this cake, I think anyway, is to reach the point like the two men on the Emmaus road, who found their hearts “burning within them while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us.” – verse 32.

When we look at Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and beyond and all that it means, our hearts can burn, because whatever the hazards, the detours and diversions, we have Good News to share on way and that can also make the journey thrilling and exciting. The last three verses of Luke 24 give us the reason. They speak for themselves for Jesus has already made the journey into eternity and is already preparing what He has promised us - a guaranteed and a permanent welcome home.

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