

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Jeremiah 17:5-8; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12,16-20; Luke 6:17,20-26

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God

Luke 6:17 Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. 18 *They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.* 19 *And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.*

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Luke 6:22 Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

24 But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 25 Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Luke 6:26 Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Beatitudes are probably more familiar in the Matthew version, where he offers a rather longer list. Both Matthew and Luke drew on a *Sayings Source* (Q) of some 252 verses. They use the material differently—Matthew gathers some of the material into the Sermon on the Mount, using his eight or nine beatitudes as an introduction. Luke, however, leaves the material dispersed throughout the ministry and offers the beatitudes during the Sermon on the Plain (6:17). Nevertheless, the beatitudes function also here as an introduction to the Great Sermon, 6:17-49. The reader will notice that

Luke has corresponding woes as well as beatitudes. Vv. 18 and 19, omitted in the lectionary, have been added, as they provide the Lucan setting more fully.

KIND OF WRITING

In *form*, we have here beatitudes and woes, reflecting a Wisdom outlook. In *content*, we have the reversal of present conditions, reflecting an Apocalyptic outlook. It is probable that Luke has preserved the more original content of the beatitudes and Matthew the more original third-person format. It is possible that Luke’s third beatitude should be second. Extending that to include the woes, the Q version of the earliest form of the text may have read something like this:

Blessed are the poor,
for of them is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are the hungry,
for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the mourners,
for they shall be consoled.

Woe to the rich,
for they have received consolation.
Woe to the satisfied,
for they will be hungry
Woe to the consoled,
for they will mourn.

Luke has shaped the *Sermon on the Plain* (6:17-49) into three sections, actually followed by the lectionary: Luke 6:20-26 (6C), vv. 27-38 (7C) and vv. 39-49 (8C; the excerpt is vv. 39-45). Each section is indicated by Luke (vv. 20a, 27a and 39a). Finally, in this Gospel, the beatitudes can be read *Christologically*: Jesus himself is poor (8:1-3, 9:58), he hungers (4:2; 24:41[!]), he weeps (19:41), he is despised and rejected (22:54, 63-64; 23:35-38, 39).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

There are many beatitudes in the Hebrew Bible. Today’s psalm, in its original (exclusive) language reads: *Blessed is*

Thought for the day

We all know from experience that happiness can be confused with all sorts of things — enjoyment, getting my own way, pleasure etc. We also all know— in our heart of hearts—that true happiness is not something that *I have for myself* but something that *I am with others*. Rather than something I possess, it is something that I am, with my values and vision. The paradox of human life is that we attain happiness not by aiming at it for ourselves but only making other people the focus of our lives and loves. In the words of St Paul: *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.* (Rom 13:8)

Prayer

God of our happiness, give us the wisdom that you alone can give so that we also may be wise and come to life in abundance, according to your will.

the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. (Ps 1:1-2).

Beatitudes in general belong to the Wisdom strands of the Old Testament, reflecting popular experience of what “works” to make a person happy (Ps 1:1, 41:1; Prov 14:21; Sir 31:8). As such, OT beatitudes offer praise of a secular happiness, referring to earthly goods (e.g. 4 Macc 18:9). These seldom point beyond the present situation and only rarely does one find a reference to a future, messianic event (so perhaps in the messianic interpretation of Is 31:9). Often, these passages have a *moralising* function (e.g. Prov 3:13; Sir 14:1; 25:8; 26:1) and they can be quite platitudinous.

In the world of Jewish apocalyptic, however, beatitudes express a hope for end-time reversal and eternal bliss (Dan 12:12; Tob 13:14). For example: *Blessed be they that shall be in those days, in that they shall see the good fortune of Israel which God shall bring to pass in the gathering together of*

the tribes (Psalms of Solomon 17.50) and *Blessed are you righteous and elect ones; for glorious will be your lot* (1 Enoch 58:2).

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

This Gospel contains five further beatitudes, peculiar to Luke.

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (Luke 1:45)

But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” (Luke 11:28)

Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. (Luke 12:37)

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15)

For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ (Luke 23:29)

ST PAUL

Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil; consider what is good before all people. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people. Do not avenge yourselves, dear friends, but give place to God’s wrath, for it is written, “*Vengeance is mine, I will repay,*” says the Lord. Rather, *if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing this you will be heaping burning coals on his head.* Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:14–21)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 17 In the immediately preceding scene, Jesus calls the Twelve, having just spent a night praying on a mountain. Like Moses, Jesus comes down the mountain to address the people, represented in three groups, the apostles, the disciples and the multitude. In the contemporary idiom, Jesus meets people where “they are at.”

Verses 18-19 Jesus is shown as a prophet in word and deed. Healings and exorcisms are signs of the Kingdom.

Touch: Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, “I do choose. Be made clean.” (5:13) *Power:* One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. (5:17)

Verse 20 In the setting of Luke-Acts, this means the materially impoverished, the victims of social and economic oppression, even though a spiritual frame cannot be excluded. E.g. 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 21:2, 3. The promise of the kingdom is both a present and a future reality: 11:20; 16:16; 17:21.

Verse 21 The next two beatitudes spell out the experience of poverty. First of all, hunger, lack of food. And then, loss of significant people in your life leading to lack of support, isolation. *Hunger:* in this beatitude, Luke has bodily hunger in view: 11:20; 16:16; 17:21. The use of the passive voice indicates God as the one who will fill them. Cf. Isa. 49:9–10; 65:13; Ezek. 34:29; Ps. 17:14. *Weeping:* Luke has “weeping” instead of Matthew’s “mourning.” Weeping belongs to the typical language of Luke, occurring some 25 times. The turning of tears to joy is part of the vision of the end time: Isa. 49:9–10; 65:13; Ezek. 34:29; Ps. 17:14. Cf. Romans 12:14–21—perhaps Paul’s commentary on the Beatitudes.

Verse 22 This beatitude—an addition—reflects the later time of the church, when followers of Jesus were harassed. It also reflects the experience of exclusion from the synagogue. This is most likely not a formal exclusion but a practical one. Cf. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. (Acts 8:1)

Verse 23 Joy is a major theme of Luke (12-3-20-18). Leaping for joy is mentioned also in birth narrative: *When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb.* (Luke 1:41); *For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.* (Luke 1:44).

Verses 24-26 The woes—which may to back to Q and Jesus himself—express the mirror opposite of the beatitudes. As such, they make for uncomfortable reading. Apart from the severe warnings therein, the woes take us back to the Magnificat and the sermon in Nazareth in Luke’s version. Magnificat: He has

shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51–53) Nazareth: Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:17–19).

Heard deeply, the woes underline the Jubilee reversal of conditions, very much are the heart of the Lucan programme.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We are told that Jesus “fixed his eyes on the disciples” before speaking. It suggests that he was about to say something that he really wanted them to take in. Surprisingly he then tells them it is no bad thing for us to be poor or hungry. But perhaps you have recognised the truth in what St. Augustine said “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”
2. “Blessed are you who weep” is not an encouragement to be miserable. Rather it is an affirmation of the importance of loving relationships in life. We are blessed to have such people in our lives, but there may also be pain. Yet is it not true that the blessing of loving and being loved is worth the price you pay?
3. Jesus said that his followers would be open to opposition and ridicule because of him, and they are blessed when this happens. Unpleasant it may, but have you not been grateful on those occasions when you had the courage to stand by something that you believed in?

PRAYER

O God, who alone can satisfy our deepest hungers, protect us from the lure of wealth and power; move our hearts to seek first your kingdom, that ours may be the security and joy of those who place their trust in you.

We make our prayer through your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of all who sleep

1 Cor 15:12 Now if Christ is being preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 *But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.* 14 *And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is futile and your faith is empty.* 15 *Also, we are found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified against God that he raised Christ from the dead, when in reality he did not raise him, if indeed the dead are not raised.* 16 For if the dead are not raised, then not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is useless; you are still in your sins. 18 Furthermore, those who have fallen asleep in Christ have also perished. 19 For if only in this life we have hope in Christ, we should be pitied more than anyone.

1 Cor 15:20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The first letter to the Corinthians begins with an intense reflection on the paradox of the cross (1:18-25). It concludes with a profound reflection on the resurrection (15:1-57). In between many practical issues (ethics, sacraments, social issues) are addressed. In this way, Paul indicates that all of Christian life is to be viewed within the parameters of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, cross and resurrection. Of all the Jewish writings from the period on resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15 is the fullest and most consistent exploration of resurrection as such and on how to imagine the risen body.

KIND OF WRITING

It may help to repeat the structure from last week:

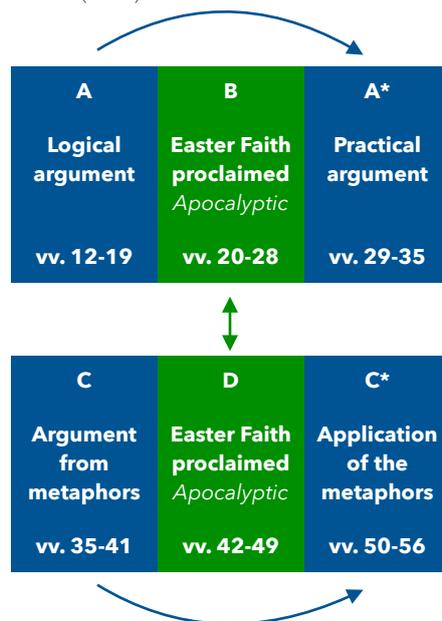
Introduction vv. 1-2 The tradition
Statement of Facts vv. 3-11 Witnesses
Thesis I v. 12 No resurrection?
Proof I v. 13-24 Logical follow-through
Thesis II v. 35 What kind of body?
Proof II vv. 36-56 Using imagination
Conclusion v. 57 Final exhortation

Hence our reading comes from the first proof, starting with the thesis and then skipping forward to v. 20. It might be a good idea to include the omitted verses.

The overall argument in 1 Corinthians

15 can be “mapped” as a matching pair of diptychs or panels. Arguments A and A* resemble each other, as do arguments C and C*. The internal B and D arguments — no longer logical but apocalyptic — also resemble each other.

Each argument is motored by a “thesis”. The first thesis is in the form of a question: Now if Christ is being preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? (v. 12)



The central arguments are really not arguments as such but proclamations of faith conviction, expressed in the appropriate language of Jewish apocalyptic. Thus, Paul abandons Greek logic, which takes you only so far. With such mapping in mind, it is clear that our reading has the substance of A (the logical argument) combined with just the very start of B (the apocalyptic proclamation).

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Some in the community really do believe that Jesus is risen but cannot see that the dead too are raised in Christ. Their slogan seems to have been “there is no resurrection of the dead.”

RELATED PASSAGES

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that since Christ has been raised from the dead, he is never going to die again; death no longer has mastery over him. For the death he died, he died to sin

once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you, too, consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:8–11)

Moreover if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also make your mortal bodies alive through his Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 Paul cites the slogan of those who do not think the dead are raised in Christ. The argument is: are you sure you want to say there is no resurrection *at all*? This would undermine the faith completely.

Verse 13-15 Paul draws out some of the unpalatable consequences of saying there is not resurrection *whatsoever*. The logic is relentless, even inexorable.

Verses 16 This is the kernel of the argument. In Jewish apocalyptic imagination, resurrection is a *communitarian* event, for *all*, at the end of time. The idea that there could be a resurrection for one person only would make no sense at all to an apocalyptic Jew like Paul.

Verse 17 That is, there has been no victory over sin and death.

Verse 18 Notice the language of falling asleep (temporary) — to be picked up immediately in B and later in A*.

Verse 19 Precisely because we have been fooling ourselves, living a delusion.

Verse 20 The image of first fruits suggests that Jesus is the beginning of the whole harvest. Asleep is important: just as I am the same person when awake and asleep (though in different modes), likewise there is continuity between who I am now and how I will be in the future.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. If I did not believe in the resurrection, what would be the consequences for how I live?
2. How much is hope for the dead part of my own faith in Christ? Imagine of that hope were taken away...?

PRAYER

God of the living: for you, all are alive. In the gift of Jesus raised from the dead, our hope of immortality dawns. Help us to live in the light of that hope.

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD

Jer 17:5a Thus says the LORD:

5b *Cursed* are those who trust in mere mortals
 5c and make mere flesh their strength,
 5d whose hearts turn away from the *LORD*.
 6 *They shall be like* a shrub in the desert,
 and *shall not* see when relief comes.
 They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
 in an uninhabited salt land.

7 *Blessed* are those who trust in the *LORD*,
 whose trust is the *LORD*.
 8 *They shall be like* a tree planted by water,
 sending out its roots by the stream.
 It *shall not* fear when heat comes,
 and its leaves shall stay green;
 in the year of drought it is not anxious,
 and it does not cease to bear fruit.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This powerful reading from Jeremiah is a very good match for the beatitudes and woes in Luke, setting up the same contrast. The Jeremiah sequence (cursed / blessed) give the passage a positive, climactic ending.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The reading is found today in Jeremiah 17, but the origin of it is disputed. Some scholars date the oracle rather precisely to 609 BC, when king Josiah failed against Neco, pharaoh in Egypt. Another possibility is that vv. 5-8 could conceivably be Jeremiah's response to 15:19-21, when YHWH called the prophet himself to repent and to return to his original calling. Others think Psalm 1 based on this passage—but it could just as well be the other way around.

KIND OF WRITING

Verses 5-8 form part of a larger sequence, showing the following elements:

- 1-4: the indictment of Judah
- 5-8: curses and blessings
- 9-10: the heart is devious
- 11: wealth based on injustice
- 12-13: a fragmentary hymn
- 14-18 the lament of the prophet
- 19-27 a sermon on the Sabbath

Jeremiah 17 is, therefore, a collection of short, sometimes fragmentary pieces. There are, at the same time, unifying themes:

- 17:1 heart
- 17:5-8 heart / fruit
- 17:9-10 heart / heart / fruit

17:8 water/ stream
 17:13 fountain / water

17:5-8 is a wisdom psalm, with fairly precise pairing of themes. Each half shows the same pattern: cursed/blessed is the one / YHWH / He shall be like.../ it will not see good v. it will not fear.

RELATED READINGS

How blessed is the one who does not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand in the pathway with sinners, or sit in the assembly of scoffers! Instead he finds pleasure in obeying the LORD's commands; he meditates on his commands day and night. He is like a tree planted by flowing streams; it yields its fruit at the proper time, and its leaves never fall off. He succeeds in everything he attempts. Not so with the wicked! Instead they are like wind-driven chaff. For this reason the wicked cannot withstand judgment, nor can sinners join the assembly of the godly. Certainly the LORD guards the way of the godly, but the way of the wicked ends in destruction. (Ps 1:1-6)

You will be in the right, O LORD, when I lay charges against you; but let me put my case to you. Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive? You plant them, and they take root; they grow and bring forth fruit; you are near in their mouths yet far from their hearts. (Jer 12:1-2)

He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the

proud, to those who go astray after false gods. (Ps 40:3-4)

The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, showing that the LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him. (Ps 92:12-15)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 5 It could be cursed *is* or *be* the *man* or the *strong man*. The original reads: and make mere flesh “their arm” (= strength metaphorically). Notice the triple parallelism: 7b = the deed; 7c the outward error; 7d the interior mistake. Turning away from YHWH may point to Josiah, in this case. Psalm 1 has no corresponding curse.

Verse 6 There is a nice play on words in Hebrew: *kē'ar'ār bā'ārābā* (“like a juniper—*ar'ar*— in the Arabah”). We are meant to think of a treeless, barren wasteland, harsh and unyielding. The salt land recalls not only the area around the Dead Sea but also Sodom and Gomorrah.

Verse 7 The contrast is established succinctly in only two lines, contrasting with the relative verbosity of v.5.

Verse 8 See above for the same imagery in the related texts. As in Psalm 1, the word “planted” could also be “transplanted” i.e. given a new location. Here we are meant to think of an oasis, where the palms trees are constantly refreshed, leading to lack of fear and anxiety. Both types experience threatening times (“parched land”, “heat”) but the one who trust in YHWH survives not only unscathed but even bearing fruit unceasingly.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jeremiah puts before us two contrasting ways of living, which can help us to identify what happening in our own lives. Do I know elements of both?
2. The prophet portrays an oasis, a place of guaranteed, permanent refreshment, giving great stability even in difficult times. Where are my springs?
3. Freedom from fear and anxiety is always appealing—perhaps for itself but also because we are free in order to bear fruit, fruit that will last.

PRAYER

Wisdom God, give us your Holy Spirit to make choices that will be life-giving, not just for ourselves but for all we meet on the way. Through Christ our Lord.

THE LITURGY

Jeremiah 17:5-8; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12,16-20; Luke 6:17,20-26

READINGS 1 AND 3

The first and third reading going really well together. The sequence in Jeremiah from cursed to blessed is perhaps more appealing and positive.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 1 is very close to the first reading and articulated our response *Happy the one who has placed his trust in the Lord.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Jeremiah 17:5-8

Using the imagery of both wilderness and oasis, Jeremiah puts before us two contrasting ways, the way of death and the way of life. Lets choose life!

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20

At the time of writing, some people in Corinth believed fully in Jesus risen from the dead, but did not believe that the dead would experience resurrection (not unknown today!?) Paul puts them right by pointing out sharply the lack of logic in their thinking.

Gospel

Luke 6:17, 20-26

The *Sermon on the Plain* in Luke corresponds to the *Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew. Both being with “blessed” saying, beatitudes. Luke’s four beatitudes are matched by four trenchant woes.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 14 February

St Cyril, monk, and Methodius, bishop, patrons of Europe

Acts 13:46-49

Our reading is suitable for the feast because it shows us the motivation of two apostles, as they turn to the Gentiles. Cyril and Methodius were likewise apostles to the Slav peoples.

Luke 10:1-9

The sending of the seventy-two was an extension of ministry of Jesus which anticipated the wider sending to the

Gentiles in the Acts of the Apostles. It is, therefore, very suitable for the feast. We too today are called to take the Gospel beyond our own circles and, in the current phrase, beyond our comfort zones.



Tuesday 15 February

James 1:12-18

The gestation of sin is narrated—graphically and frighteningly. There is hope, however, in the next verse.

Mark 8:14-21

On its own, this passage is hard to read. The Gospel writer wants us to think again about the meanings (plural) of the two multiplications. Jesus is bread of life for both Jews and Gentiles — all are welcome!

Wednesday 16 February

James 1:19-27

In the wisdom books of the Bible, there is great interest in speech and the use of words. Rightly — because the capacity of speech is powerful, for good or for ill. Our reading today shows that the letter of James belongs firmly in this world of wisdom reflection.

Mark 8:22-26

Mark’s miracles can be read at two levels. At a surface level, a blind person has his sight restored — a sign of the good news. At another level, the story points to the journey of faith, often gradual and in stages. At this second level, the story is “true” of us all really.

Thursday 17 February

*The Seven Holy Founders of the Servite Order
St Fintan (Finan), abbot*

James 2:1-9

The letter of James is both immensely practical and remarkably faithful to the Jesus tradition. Our reading today reminds us of the parables and the practice of Jesus. He was no respecter of “places — or persons — of honour.” The opening sentence today could not be clearer.

Mark 8:27-33

Occasionally a reading “jumps off the page” and we feel ourselves directly addressed. Jesus asks each one of us today, “Who do *you* say I am?”

Friday 18 February

James 2:14-24, 26.

Today we hear the passage which led Martin Luther to question the authority and place of the Letter of James. It seemed to the great Reformer to go against the teaching of Paul, who placed faith first in order of importance. But St Paul and the Jewish tradition also knew that the living out of the faith was just as important as having faith. Bluntly, “faith without works is dead.”

Mark 8:34-9:1

Our Gospel today takes us to the heart of Mark’s word to his church: suffering is part of being a disciple. The Gospel was writing at a time of agonising upheaval — the terrible Jewish War (AD 67-70). Many were asking why such pain and where is God in all this. Mark underlines the link between Jesus’ own destiny and the destiny of his followers.

Saturday 19 February

James 3:1-10

James is the ultimate realist, so what he says about the tongue we would all recognise, alas!

Mark 9:2-13

The core message is clear: *Listen to him!* It makes a good pairing with the first reading, remembering that we have one mouth and two ears.