

HEARERS OF THE WORD



1 Sam 26:2, 7-9, 11-13, 22-23; Ps 103 (102); 1 Cor 15:45-49; Luke 6:27-38

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return

Luke 6:27 Jesus said: “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Luke 6:32 “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Luke 6:37 “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our Gospel takes us to some of the best-remembered teachings of Jesus, the heart and soul of Christian behaviour and ethics.

KIND OF WRITING

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).

Our reading is a complete unit in Luke, with an intelligible structure thus:

- A. vv. 27b-31 Imperatives (practical)
- B*. vv. 32-34 Rhetorical questions
- A. vv. 35-36 Imperatives (rational)
- vv. 37-38 *A link to the next section*

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD. (Lev 19:18)

And what you hate, do not do to anyone. Do not drink wine to excess or let drunkenness go with you on your way. (Tob 4:15)

I say, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you. (Ps 82:6)

Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. (Lev 19:2)

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:17-19)

Within the Jewish tradition, we read:

See then, my children, what is the goal of the good man. Be imitators of him in his goodness because of his compassion, in order that you may wear crowns of glory. For a good man does not have a blind eye, but he is merciful to all, even though they may be sinners. And even if persons plot against him for evil ends, by doing good this man conquers evil, being watched over by God. He loves those who wrong him as he loves his own life. (*Testament of Benjamin* 4:1-3)

Any crass contrast between Judaism and Christianity is thus excluded.

Thought for the day

In the most generous perspective, the desire for retaliation represents a longing for justice and equity. For example, “an eye for an eye.” Such justice is easily distorted into vengeance, hence the limiting of vengeance to precisely equal retaliation in the Old Testament. That tempering of vengeance does not really go far enough. The problem is responding in kind—the ultimate logic of which would be one person left with one eye!! Jesus goes to the heart of the matter: do not respond to violence with violence, do not engage at the level offered. Instead, turn the dynamic on its head: love your enemies and break the cycle of hatred and violence.

Prayer

Help us, compassionate God, to take to heart the teaching of Jesus that love without limit may be our rule of life.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

There is a considerable background in Luke-Acts to the teaching here.

And the crowds asked John, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” (Luke 3:10-14)

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32–35)

ST PAUL

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13:8–10)

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Gal 5:13–14)

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. (Gal 5:22–26)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 27 The opening phrase is strong, even abrupt in Greek, lit. "but to you I say who are listening." The first imperative is simple: love your enemies. This is really new. There is no command in the Jewish Scriptures to *love* (or indeed to hate) the enemy. However, in the later Jewish tradition we find the same high ideal (see the *Testament of Benjamin*, above). Neighbour in Leviticus means one of your own people, not an outsider. This is part of the Q tradition and therefore older than the Gospels.

Verse 28 This is also part of the Q tradition. Commentators note the progres-

sion from thought (*hate*) and word (*curse*) to deed (*abuse*). Cf. the progression in Psalm 1:1. Blessing those who curse you turns up again in Rom 12:14.

Verses 29-30 The verbs are now in the singular, suggesting concrete action by an individual. Non-retaliation is the key: not to respond in kind but rather to change the dynamic by other means. The slap in the cheek is meant to be insulting: *she would sit at the king's right hand and take the crown from the king's head and put it on her own, and slap the king with her left hand.* (1 Esd 4:29–30) By contrast, the Christian remains vulnerable. The contrast with Mt 5:40 is significant: the outer garment first and then the inner. Cf. *The Didache*: Abstain from fleshly and bodily cravings. If someone gives you a blow on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well and you will be perfect. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles; if someone takes your cloak, give him your tunic also; if someone takes from you what belongs to you, do not demand it back, for you cannot do so. (Did 1:4) V. 30 has been labeled the most outrageous of the instructions. It is good to remember that these are not rules to be followed in a mechanistic way but illustrations of principle. Again, *The Didache* 1:5-6 moderates the interpretation.

Verse 31 The Golden Rule is found in the Old Testament and widely in the culture (cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 5.188–89; Seneca, *On benefits*. 2.1.1). The motive is not reciprocal benefit but is entirely altruistic. Christian *agapē* has been defined as: seeking the well-being of the other without expectation of benefit to one's self. This contrasts with the culture of mutual benefaction of the time.

Verses 32-34 The argument here is an explicit rejection of reciprocity ("credit", "doing good"). The argument is a syllogism with a step implied: "but more is expected of you" (technically an enthymeme). If those without the faith manage to that much, how much more...etc.

Verses 35-36 This is a resumption of the earlier principle, missing from the same material in Matthew, but serving to underline Luke's purpose here, making the rejection of reciprocity super clear. It adds a motivation: this is how God acts, being kind to all without discrimination. Again, this is quite Jewish: *Be a father to orphans, and be like a husband to their mother; you will then be like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than does your mother.* (Sir 4:10)

Verses 37-38 Notice the progression from *judgement* to *condemnation*, resembling the progression from *forgiving* to *giving*. In antiquity, sellers of wheat were notorious cheats; by contrast, God will give "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over." Jesus calls us to unlimited generosity, after the example of God, not for the sake of the reward but so that we might be in the image and likeness of God, who is kind to all.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Our natural tendency when attacked is to self-protection and when we are attacked we attack back. We respond to an angry word with another, or to a blow by hitting back. Here Jesus suggests that at times there may be another way to act. What has been your experience of retaliation? Has it been life-giving? Have you experience of another way of acting?

2. When we do good to another, it can sometimes be in return for what we have received. At other times it can be done in the hope of getting something back. Or we may do it simply for the sake of doing good without any strings attached. Jesus suggests that this is when we are at our best. Recall your experience of these different ways of giving and celebrate the occasions when you gave without expectation of return.

3. Jesus proposes the generosity of God as a model for our generosity, and says that the generous will be rewarded. Perhaps you have experienced rewards, even in this life, from generous behaviour.

PRAYER

Compassionate God and Father, you are kind to the ungrateful, merciful even to the wicked.

Pour out your love upon us, that with good and generous hearts we may keep from judging others and learn your way of compassion.

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.

And just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, let us also bear the image of the man of heaven

1 Cor 15:42 *It is the same with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.* 43 *It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;* 44 *it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.* 45 So also it is written, “*The first man, Adam, became a living person*”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 However, the spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and then the spiritual. 47 The first man is from the earth, made of dust; the second man is from heaven. 48 Like the one made of dust, so too are those made of dust, and like the one from heaven, so too those who are heavenly. 49 And just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, let us also bear the image of the man of heaven.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

That the beginning (*protology*) and the end (*eschatology*) should resemble each other is a common idea in apocalyptic. The pattern is taken to be an indication of (divine) purpose, with the end completing the beginning. Thus, the matching affirmations in this reading constitute an argument “from congruency.”

KIND OF WRITING

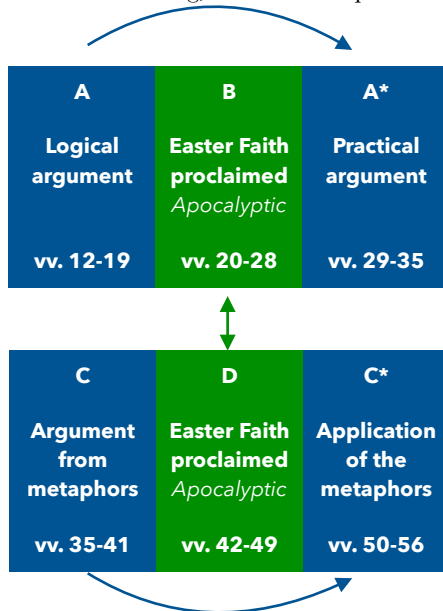
- Introduction* vv. 1-2 The tradition
- Statement of Facts* vv. 3-11 Witnesses
- Thesis I* v. 12 No resurrection?
- Proof I* v. 13-24 Logical follow-through
- Thesis II* v. 35 What kind of body?
- Proof II* vv. 36-56 Using imagination
- Conclusion* v. 57 Final exhortation

The overall argument in 1 Corinthians 15 can be “mapped” using the diagramme on this page. It means that the text can be read in two ways: “vertically”, that is, as a linear argument and “horizontally”, that is, reading the pairs of argument side-by-side. Thus, A and A*, C and C* go together. B and D also inhabit the same symbolic world.

At the centre of each argument is a faith proclamation, in the typical language of Jewish apocalyptic. Logic takes you some of the way but to get to the heart of the matter, it was essential for Paul to switch to apocalyptic, because he himself was a Christ-believing apocalyptic Jew. We may wonder how much his Corinthian

readers managed to understand this. However, if some at least came from the group of “God-fearers”, they would have the background to make sense of it.

Our reading comes entirely from D, vv. 42-45, omitting the opening verses. With so short a reading, it could be expanded.



ORIGIN OF THE READING

Having expanded the imagination of the Corinthians in vv. 35-41, Paul goes on to apply the metaphors in the case of Jesus’ resurrection and our future resurrection.

RELATED PASSAGES

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also came through a man. For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ, the first fruits; then when Christ comes, those who belong to him. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he has brought to an end all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be eliminated is death. For he has put everything in subjection under his feet. But when it says “everything” has been put in subjection, it is clear that this does not include the one who put everything in subjection to him. And when all

things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Cor 15:20–28)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 42a Paul begins to draw conclusions from his metaphorical illustrations and argument in vv. 35-41. Body means more than one kind of reality.

Verses 42b-44 The series of contrasts is climactic leading to the shocking claim that there is a spiritual body — a stark oxymoron to Greeks. But Paul has already shown that body is *not univocal* but polyvalent.

Verse 45 The claim to a spiritual body is now supported by an argument from apocalyptic congruence. Just as we have resembled Adam, likewise we will resemble Christ, who is a life-giving spirit.

Verse 46 Paul notes a kind of chronological hierarchy or sequence, from the lower to the higher.

Verse 47 The fact that Paul names neither Adam nor Jesus obliges the hearers to figure out who is intended. As noted above, such an argument works from the apocalyptic belief in the resemblance between the beginning and the end.

Verse 48 Paul applies v. 47 to the present reality of the Christian believer. If this is true of all believers, it is also true of those who have died already.

Verse 49 This general teaching is then conversation in hope, the aspiration that we indeed become like the “man from from heaven.” Paul will further apply the argument in vv. 50-56, the substance of next Sunday’s excerpt.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Paul expands the minds and imagination of the Corinthians. Has my Christian hope been expanded and strengthened?
2. Paul’s argument is based not on nature (immortality of soul) but on Christ and his resurrection. Is this part of my faith as well?

PRAYER

Creator God, in Adam you created us in your image and likeness. Continue in us the work of your grace that we grow into the image and likeness of the Second Adam, your risen Son, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

I was not willing to extend my hand against the Lord's chosen one

1 Sam 26:2 So Saul arose and went down to the desert of Ziph, accompanied by three thousand select men of Israel, to look for David in the desert of Ziph.

1 Sam 26:7 So David and Abishai approached the army at night and found Saul lying asleep in the entrenchment with his spear stuck in the ground by his head. Abner and the army were lying all around him. 8 Abishai said to David, "Today God has delivered your enemy into your hands. Now let me drive the spear right through him into the ground with one swift jab! A second jab won't be necessary!"

1 Sam 26:9 But David said to Abishai, "Don't kill him! Who can extend his hand against the LORD's chosen one and remain guiltless?"

1 Sam 26:11 "But may the LORD prevent me from extending my hand against the LORD's chosen one! Now take the spear by Saul's head and the jug of water, and let's get out of here!" 12 So David took the spear and the jug of water by Saul's head, and they got out of there. No one saw them or was aware of their presence or woke up. All of them were asleep, for the LORD had caused a deep sleep to fall on them.

1 Sam 26:13 Then David crossed to the other side and stood on the top of the hill some distance away; there was a considerable distance between them.

1 Sam 26:22 David replied, "Here is the king's spear! Let one of your servants cross over and get it. 23 The LORD rewards each man for his integrity and loyalty. Even though today the LORD delivered you into my hand, I was not willing to extend my hand against the LORD's chosen one."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading is chosen to illustrate magnanimity and non-retaliation. It is one of the great narratives of the books of Samuel and Kings. The reading is perhaps quite long enough but to make sense of it, it might good to read the whole chapter to feel the full power of the narrative.

KIND OF WRITING

The books of Samuel and Kings further

the teaching that Saul proved unworthy and God's choice rightly fell on David as a result. Thus the worthiness of David underscores the justice of God's change of mind. As a whole, the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings faithfully reflect the ambivalence of kingship in Israel, whose king should have been God alone. Even the great David is no saint! Nevertheless, David in these stories, he passes the text of overcoming the seduction and ease of violence.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Our reading is part of a sustained contrast between Saul, God's first choice, and David, God's replacement candidate. The relationship between Saul and David had already proved dangerous and the hostility against David was recounted in chapters 18 and, especially, chapter 19. David prudently fled the royal household. Saul turned out to be madly jealous and quite paranoid.

In the overall narrative of 1 Samuel, chapters 24-26 bring to an end the story of Saul. There is also a significant pattern in the three chapters. In 1 Samuel 24, a very similar story is told: David has an opportunity to kill Saul but he chooses against violence. In chapter 25, David himself is saved by Abigail from violence against the house of Nabal. Finally, in our chapter 26, David again resists the golden opportunity to do away with his dangerous enemy. We are to understand that in each case, God's providence was at work, leading eventually to David becoming king of Israel. V. 10, not in the reading, anticipates the death of Saul, to be recounted so dramatically in 1 Samuel 31.

RELATED READINGS

The whole of chapter 24 should be read, noting the contrasting emphases in chapter 26:

- the role of Abishai as David's companion in the venture;
- the heightened sense of divine providence;
- the foreshadowing of Saul's death;
- the taking of Saul's spear and water jar;
- the taunting of Abner;
- David's suggestion of motivation for Saul's pursuit;
- Saul's final benediction to David.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 2 The Ziphites had told Saul of David's whereabouts.

Verses 7-8 Abishai, a member of David's elite, is glad to go with him and serves as a foil to the magnanimity of David. He urges David to take the opportunity given: *A second jab won't be necessary!*

Verses 9 David resists the chance, in a combination of compassion and respect for the Lord's anointed.

Verses 11-12 God helps David to be compassionate, but by way of evidence of his magnanimity, he takes two items of military significance: the spear and the water jug. V. 12 in the Jerusalem translation captures the excitement of the daring tale: *No one saw, no one knew, no one woke up; they were all asleep, for a deep sleep from the Lord had fallen on them.* The deep sleep for the Lord indicated the true agent behind all that happened.

Verse 13 David takes himself to a safe remove before waking Saul up. The suspense is sustained in the longer version because David shouts to Abner first and initially he is not sure it is David. Only then does the king wake up and he recognises the David's voice. The pathetic appeal of Saul in v. 21 (not in the reading) is, of course, not to be trusted, given the history: *"I have done wrong. Come back, David, my son! I will not harm you again, because you considered my life precious today even though I have been a fool and have made a serious mistake."* (1 Sam 26:21) Saul addresses David as "my son", but David does not call him "my father."

Verse 22 David could have used Saul's own spear to kill him! To be without your weapon is very unsoldierly.

Verse 23 Even though Saul wanted to kill David, David resists killing Saul because he is the Lord's anointed. Integrity (*righteousness*) and loyalty (*faithfulness*) are covenant qualities. Eventually, Saul blesses even David (v. 25).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. When have I been able to resist revenge when tempted?

PRAYER

O God, you call us to compassion, even towards our enemies. Give us your healing grace that we resist the temptation to vengeance and instead be magnanimous even to our enemies. Amen.

THE LITURGY

1 Sam 26:2, 7-9, 11-13, 22-23; Ps 103 (102); 1 Cor 15:45-49; Luke 6:27-38

READINGS 1 AND 3

The first reading serves as a drama, illustrating magnanimity—greatness of soul, literally—anticipating the teaching of Jesus about love of enemies.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 103 (102) is just perfect, as a mediation on both the first reading and the gospel. As often, the response says it all: *The Lord is compassion and love.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

1 Samuel 26:2, 7-9, 11-13, 22-23

A tiny bit of background may help: Saul, king of Israel, set out to kill David. David in turn has a chance to kill the king, but doesn't. If you listen carefully, you will hear why.

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 15:45-49

Christian faith in life after death is based not on nature or immortality of soul, but on the resurrection of Jesus himself. There is great energy in Paul's proclamation—an energy we need today as well.

Gospel

Luke 6:27-38

The teaching of Jesus has had great appeal, even beyond the Christian faith or the churches. Nevertheless, it can be disconcerting. In the midst of teaching that we know and love, there is also teaching which is disturbing and deeply challenging.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 24 February

This week, we begin reading Ecclesiasticus or Sirach or the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira. This is a late wisdom book, which survives in its entirety in Greek. Something of the complicated history of the text can be gleaned from the final chapter, where we read:

Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom. (Sir 50:27)

The book is a translation completed some time after 117 BC. The Hebrew original is usually dated to between 195-180 BC. The book as a whole is scholarly and belongs not to proverbial wisdom but to tractate wisdom as found in Job or Qoheleth. It contains a number of marvellous nature poems, praising God, the creator, present in all that exists.

Ecclesiasticus 1:1-10

Wisdom is a great gift and who would not like to wise? The writer is aware of that wisdom is both a mystery and a gift. Ecclesiasticus takes up the traditional feminine imagery of Lady Wisdom, the complement of every human being.

Mark 9:14-29

There is a great admission or confession at the heart of this Gospel story: *I do have faith. Help the little faith I have!* That could be our prayer today: we all have *some* faith — so there is room for growth!

Tuesday 25 February

Ecclesiasticus 2:1-11

Our reading is both an invitation and warning. A warning first: the spiritual journey will be demanding. Cf. *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.* (Hebrews 10:31) Then invitation: it is the only journey, full of reward. Ecclesiasticus is deeply reassuring.

Mark 9:30-37

In Mark, each of the three passion predictions is linked directly to a misunderstanding of discipleship following by a teaching on how to be a disciple.

Wednesday 26 February

Ecclesiasticus 4:12-22

The search for wisdom is common to all cultures and takes different forms. In the Bible, wisdom is portrayed as feminine—as mother, wife and companion. To become wise is to desire what God desires, to align ourselves with Lady Wisdom.

Mark 9:38-40

The tendency to exclusivism is common, but it can still surprise that the early Jesus disciples also suffered from. Perhaps that is consoling!! Jesus' reply is robust and as valid now as then.

Thursday 27 February

St Gregory of Narek, abbot and doctor

Ecclesiasticus 5:1-10

We are told these days to be gentle with ourselves — wholesome advice which could lead to complacency and even spiritual sloth. Ecclesiasticus puts us right in powerful cascade of negative imperatives, each staring with “do not.”

Mark 9:41-50

The warning in the Gospel is not unlike the warnings in the first reading: whatever gets in the way of discipleship should be resolutely set aside. The sharp humour of the teaching does not conceal its earnestness.

Friday 28 February

Ecclesiasticus 6:5-17

The wisdom book reflect widely on the human condition. Today, the important subject of friends (and enemies) comes up for comment. It would certainly make you think again today, even if it sounds a little worldly wise and would not be out of place in advice columns!

Mark 10:1-12

Jesus' teaching on divorce is both historical and clear. He calls us back to the great ideal of life-long fidelity from the book of Genesis. Jesus does not typically *legislate* and it is likely that here we have the restoration of an ideal, something to be striven for.

Saturday 1 March

St David, bishop

Ecclesiasticus 17:1-13

In one of the psalms, there is a great question: *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?* (Psalms 8:3-4) We do all ask who are we in the sight of God, in the grand scheme of things? A very considered answer is given in this reading.

Mark 10:13-16

The desire to protect the leadership can itself be an abuse of power. This was true in the time of Jesus and, of course, just as true today.