

Background Notes for Leaders:

Matthew 11: 18-19 / 'Friend of Sinners'

Jesus was described as a 'friend of sinners.' The society in which he lived marked out some as living righteous lives, usually those who kept the Law of Moses and observed the teaching of the Rabbis, and those who did not. Behaviour was under scrutiny and those who transgressed were considered by the religious ruling elite, as 'outcasts' or 'sinners'. The righteous, (those right before God) would keep themselves separate from them to keep their own purity. There is precedence for thinking this from the wisdom literature in the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 1: 10-19 provides a warning against the enticement of 'evil companions'. By staying away from wrongdoers the individual can 'walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the just.' (Proverbs 2: 20 NRSV)

In Matthew 11: 18-19 Jesus challenges the judgments made by society regarding who is or who is not acceptable in God's eyes, especially by looking only at outward behaviour and not at the heart. He reminds the crowds that John the Baptist neither feasted nor drank and they accused him of having a demon, and yet Jesus both eats and drinks and they say 'Look a glutton and a drunkard.' Jesus challenged convention about how a rabbi should behave. Socialising with people, and in particular eating with them, was a sign of friendship and acceptance. Jesus being a 'friend of sinners' called into account his credibility as a rabbi in some people's eyes. When challenged by the Pharisees in Matthew 9: 11-13 about his friendships with 'sinners' he said

'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, *'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'* For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

He quotes directly from Hosea 6: 6, and from an understanding of Micah 6: 6-8. Mercy was more important than judgment. Those who the culture called 'sinners' knew their need for God and yet many who judged them were blind to their own failings and felt they did not have the same need.

Jesus looked at the heart and challenged the common understanding of who was acceptable in God's eyes. He was prepared to seek out those who knew their need for God even if it might taint his reputation in others' eyes. In this way he was very different from many other religious leaders of the day.

This scene is also an echo about the nature of God in the mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus is 'God with us'. Jesus became human in order to be alongside His beloved Creation and to show them the way of life and love by His example. The barmaid makes the comment that Jesus was 'opening himself up to all sorts of accusations just by being here – with us'. God is therefore not a far off deity unconcerned with the joys and challenges of human life; He enters into it and shares it with us.

Mark 2: 14-15/'The Call'

Levi was a tax collector. The Romans used Jewish agents for this purpose and those involved in this trade became particularly despised. As they were collecting money on behalf of a pagan occupying power, they were seen as traitors to their own people. Another bone of contention was that they had a reputation for being dishonest. Tax collectors could not serve as witnesses or as judges and were expelled from the synagogue. In the eyes of the Jewish community their disgrace extended to their families.

Levi worked under Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee. The booth where Jesus found Levi was probably a toll booth on the major internal road that went from Damascus through Capernaum to the Mediterranean coast and to Egypt. (NIV Study Bible).

In the scene, Levi talks about meeting up with his fellow tax-collectors at the Three Beggars Inn and mentions Zacchaeus, whose own story is told in Luke 19: 1-10. In both of their stories, Zacchaeus and Levi felt the urge to change their lives after they had met Jesus. Zacchaeus made amends for those whom he had cheated, with interest, and gave away half of his possessions to the poor. Levi left his profession to become a disciple. We know him more commonly by his Apostolic name 'Matthew', one of the twelve disciples (Matthew 9 : 9-10/ Matthew 10 : 3) illustrating that the call that he experienced took root in his life in a deep and transformative way.

Jesus saw Levi's intrinsic worth and his potential. Levi knew he was loathed in his community and so the acceptance and honour shown him by Jesus would have made a big impact. The belief Jesus had in him helped Levi to realise that life could be different for him. The encounter left him with the irresistible urge to follow.

Jesus was willing to choose Levi, even though it would have been an unpopular move with some of the other disciples and provoked criticism.

It would also have damaged his reputation as a rabbi in others' eyes. Jesus' choice of such a man as a disciple would cause others to question his judgment and his own status before God. A truly holy man would not choose a 'sinner' like Levi. It would also be an affront to national pride if someone who is working for 'the enemy' is honoured in this way.

This scene highlights the courage and clear-sighted, independent thinking of Jesus. He is unconcerned about what others may think of his choices. He looks not only at the person as they are but also what they can become and he refuses to have his thoughts and choices moulded by prejudice in this community, even when it is well-founded. Levi's experience reminds us how being accepted and encouraged can increase our self-esteem. Levi began to believe that things could be different for him; he didn't have to accept blindly the scorn and derision he was used to. Being chosen, rather than rejected, reversed the trend and produced the work of redemption in his life. He knew his need for a new life and this is what Jesus was offering him, so he grabbed it with both hands, believing that Jesus would enable it to happen.

John 4: 1-29 / 'The Well of Living Water'

It was unusual that Jesus went into Samaria. Jews often avoided that region by crossing the Jordan and travelling on the east side (Matthew 10: 5/ Luke 9 : 52 NIV Study Bible). Jesus himself also instructed his disciples to avoid the area when he sent the twelve out (Matthew 10 : 5). The NIV study note on this states that the Samaritans were 'a mixed-blood race resulting from the intermarriage of Israelites left behind when the people of the Northern Kingdom were exiled and Gentiles brought in to the land by the Assyrians (2 Kings 17 : 24). Bitter hostility existed between Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day. The fact that Jesus travelled in that region therefore must have been a necessity for his mission.

It was notable that most women drew water at the end of the day not at the 'sixth hour' which would be the hottest time of the day. There are some references to women drawing water at other times, but the fact this woman was on her own as well, perhaps suggests there was a reason for her coming at that time by herself i.e. that she was someone that others shunned.

Jewish religious teachers rarely spoke with women in public and this was clear by the disciples' surprise and confusion when they found Jesus

talking with this woman. The fact that she was a Samaritan would also have been an eye-opener for them and one they would not have approved of.

Jesus asking this woman to draw some water would have been most unusual as a Jew would become ceremonially unclean if he used a drinking vessel handled by a Samaritan. The Jews held that all Samaritans were 'unclean'. There were also religious differences between the two groups.

Although Samaritans worshipped God, they only accepted the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. They also were at odds with the Jews about the importance of the proper place for worship. They claimed that Mount Gerizim was especially sacred and their scripture said that Moses had commanded an altar to be built there. The Samaritans had built a temple on this mount c. 400 B.C. The Jews claimed that Mount Ebal was the correct mountain for the altar and destroyed the Samaritans' temple. Animosity increased between them over these events.

In the conversation with the woman Jesus had a word of knowledge from God that she had had five husbands and the man she was with now she wasn't married to. The Jews held that a woman might be divorced twice or at the most three times. If the Samaritans had the same standard, the woman's life had been exceedingly immoral. (NIV Study Bible). Jesus acknowledged her life-style but he took the time to enter into conversation about spiritual matters with her. Most notably he revealed to her his identity as Messiah; an astonishing fact bearing in mind the prejudice against her that existed in his culture.

Jesus broke a number of rules in this encounter on the basis of gender, race, religion, and life-style. He drew her into a conversation that developed her understanding and changed her life. In the DVD scene, the woman talks about the conversation she has with Jesus. Although she is aware of the unusual circumstances of their conversation, she still expects him to respond to her in the way that most men do. She is used to playing the role of a woman of 'questionable background'. She has the confidence to continue the conversation playfully and she seeks to avoid any personal information by changing the subject. She knows the usual script and she doesn't want any deviations from it. It is only when Jesus looks at her directly and she knows it is different from how she's used to being looked at, that her defences crumble. Someone showing unconditional love and respect for her whole person is a rare experience for her and she is suddenly vulnerable and unsettled.

She manages to steady herself by evasive action. The conversation about the coming Messiah however brings more revelation and invites her to be 'the bearer of good news for all the world.' She is a woman of ill-repute who meets the God who loves her and trusts her with world-changing news. She becomes the natural evangelist to her whole community and her life is transformed by just one conversation.

John 9: 1-41/'Miracle.TV Investigates'

Giving sight to the blind was predicted as a Messianic activity (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; 42:7) and Jesus claimed this himself in the Nazareth Manifesto outlined in Luke 4: 18. There was an understanding widespread within the culture that suffering and affliction was caused by 'sin'. The Rabbis had developed the principles that 'there is no death without sin and there is no suffering without iniquity. There was also the belief that terrible punishments came on certain people because of the sin of their parents. (NIV Study Bible). In the DVD scene, Mrs. Meier alludes to the fact that some people had felt that her boy's blindness was the result of their sin. Jesus contradicts this directly in the Bible passage (verse 3).

The pool of Siloam where the blind man washed his eyes was a rock-cut pool on the southern end of the main ridge on which Jerusalem was built. It served as part of the major water system developed by King Hezekiah. The use of saliva and mud to put on the man's eyes was a variation on other miracles of restoring sight (Mark 10: 46).

The healing caused great consternation among the Pharisees because it happened on a Sabbath Day which is God's day of rest when according to the Ten Commandments no work should be done (Exodus 20: 8). The Pharisees were a legalistic and exclusivist group who strictly kept the Law of Moses and the unwritten 'tradition of the Elders'. Although some were godly, many who came into conflict with Jesus were hypocritical, envious, rigid and formalistic. According to Pharisaism, God's grace extended only to those who kept his law (NIV Study Bible).

Some of the group criticised Jesus for healing on the Sabbath and others argued that he must be a prophet from God in order to heal at all. They could not agree and interrogated the man's parents. In the DVD scene Mr Meier warns his son to be careful when Zach spoke about Jesus possibly being the 'Christ'. The 'Christ' or 'Anointed One' would be the long awaited Messiah from God, the Saviour. The authorities had already

decided that those who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out, or excommunicated, from the synagogue. As the synagogue was the centre of Jewish community life, this was more than just a place of worship and the consequences would be felt in social relationships.

Hezekiah Beniah, the spokesman for the Pharisees in the DVD, outlines the ways that Jesus seems to have flouted the rules and encouraged others to do so. He cites a story of the healing of a paralysed man. Jesus had told him to pick up his mat and walk and when the man did this, he was instantly healed (John 5: 8-15). The man's critics accused him of breaking the Sabbath by carrying his mat but Jesus' response to this criticism was that 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath' (Mark 2: 27 NRSV).

Jez Simons, the 'award-winning young presenter' gives Zach Meier the last word which is directly from the Bible passage:

'Sinner or not, I don't know. All I know is I once was blind but now I see.' (verse 25)

This statement brings into focus the whole issue about what God's priorities are and this is echoed by Jesus' question to those in the synagogue just before another healing of a man with a shrivelled hand on the Sabbath,

'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' But they remained silent. (Mark 3: 4).

After Jesus went ahead with the healing we read in verse 6, 'the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.' The religious authorities saw the actions of Jesus healing on the Sabbath as a direct challenge to their understanding of the Law. It also would be a rebuttal of their teaching and to the power and control that they exerted in the community.

Luke 8: 41-48/'Tamar's Story - Just One Touch'

The woman at the centre of this story is not named in the Bible. Her situation was very difficult as she was suffering from a haemorrhage than meant she was ceremonially unclean. Some commentators have suggested that the medical issue was endometriosis. This would cause bloody discharge at times other than her regular menstruation. The

purity laws that ruled who was 'clean' and who was considered 'unclean' come from the book of Leviticus. The specific teaching states:

'When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge just as in the days of her period. Any bed she lies on while her discharge continues will be unclean, as is her bed during her monthly period, and anything she sits on will be unclean, as during her period. Whoever touches them will be unclean; he must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be unclean till evening.' (Leviticus 15: 25-27)

In the DVD Tamar speaks about the damaging effects on her well-being, not only from her long-standing condition and the lack of effective medical treatment, but from being considered 'unclean', the lack of physical intimacy, and the fear others had that she would contaminate them, or had brought the infliction upon herself through sin. It was a pitiful state to be in. She had heard about the miracles that Jesus had done and so she was desperate to try anything. In a similar passage in the gospel of Mark, she is reported to have thought:

'If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.' (Mark 5: 28)

Being touched by someone who the Law had deemed 'unclean' transferred the status to the other person. The woman was clearly taking a huge risk to touch a rabbi in these circumstances. This may be one of the reasons why she came up behind Jesus rather than in full view. The edge of his cloak may have been the tassels on his prayer shawl and would have allowed her to touch him without being discovered. This however wasn't the case as Jesus immediately noticed that power had gone out from him. Despite the crowd, pushing him and pressing against him, we read that the crowds 'almost crushed him' (verse 42), he could still discern a touch that was generated by intense faith and trust in his ability to heal. When Jesus refused to let it go, the woman came forward, 'trembling' as she was unsure of what the consequences would be of her action.

Jesus' reaction was one of tenderness and love calling her 'Daughter'. She could 'go in peace' because she was delivered from her unclean state by her healing and she could experience God's peace. The very public response of Jesus to this woman would have underlined the fact that she was now healed and she could be restored to her family and community.

It was much more than just a physical healing, it was an emotional one too, and her status was fully restored.

John 8: 1-11 / 'Casting Stones'

The sin of adultery cannot be committed alone, so the question arises as to why only one offender was brought. The incident was staged to trap Jesus (verse 6) and provision had been made for the man to escape. The woman's accusers must have been especially eager to humiliate her, since they could have kept her in private custody while they spoke to Jesus. (NIV Study Bible.) It also raises issues of the sexism in such a Patriarchal society and whether women who had erred were treated more harshly than men in the circumstances. It is also noteworthy that the Law required the execution of both parties if found guilty, not just the woman (Leviticus 20: 10; Deuteronomy 22: 22). The penalty did not actually stipulate stoning as the means of execution but the teachers of the Law and Pharisees said:

'In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' (verse 5)

The question was provocative because the Romans did not allow the Jews to carry out death sentences, so if Jesus had said to stone her, he could have been in conflict with the Romans. If he had said not to stone her, he could have been accused of being unsupportive of the Law (NIV Study Bible.) Jesus' response was masterful, managing to uphold the Law, safeguard the woman's life, and challenge her accuser's hypocrisy all at the same time.

The DVD scene focuses on the double standards in the community. The women having tea together and the men who had caught the woman in adultery have the veneer of righteousness but not very far under the surface they had their own vices which they appear to be blind to, or wilfully cover up. Although they are quick to point the finger at others, their conversation with each other reveals the truth. Rahab, who is on one hand calling for punishment due to the sexual immorality and at the same time enjoying watching the whole thing through her binoculars 'for evidential purposes', is named after a prostitute in the Old Testament (Joshua 2) just to underline the point.

The Bible passage doesn't explain why Jesus was writing on the ground but in the DVD, Hannah the newcomer, sees his action as a sign of mercy

to the naked woman. It is a simple, yet profoundly loving action; it is a way of protecting the woman's vulnerability and to draw the men's lustful eyes away from her.

Although she had committed a sin, Jesus, unlike the others in the community, is not interested in condemning her. He is the only one 'without sin' who under the Law could have thrown a stone at her, but he refuses to. He doesn't condone what she has done but instead of calling for her punishment, he invites her to change her life. Such mercy in the circumstances is likely to have proved to be effective but this is misunderstood by Rahab and Sarah. They see Jesus' reaction as a sign of moral decay and law-breaking. He is not reinforcing what they consider are the high standards of their Society. Their blindness and hypocrisy are extraordinary as in the next breath, they go on to share another piece of juicy gossip, perpetuating the immorality they claim to stand against.

Luke 7: 11-17/'Reunion at Nain'

This story is one of Jesus raising a dead person to life. The others are Jairus' daughter (Luke 8: 40-56) and Lazarus (John 11: 38-44). There are also Old Testament stories of life being restored to the dead. One is of Elijah praying and restoring life to the widow of Zarephath's son (1 Kings 17: 17-24) and another is Elisha restoring the Shunammite's Son (2 Kings 4: 32-37).

In a Patriarchal Society a woman who did not have a man to protect her as husband or son was vulnerable. In Old Testament scripture there are commandments to take care of widows. They are often grouped with the poor, the orphaned, and aliens (foreigners), as those who are particularly defenceless (Exodus 22: 22; Deuteronomy 10: 18; Psalm 146: 9; Isaiah 1: 17). God is seen as their protector who has a special concern and providential care for them. The fact that there are a number of scriptures that warn against their oppression (Isaiah 1: 23; 10:2; Jeremiah 22: 3), suggests that this group were taken advantage of and society's duty of care was not always acted on.

The widow of Nain is not named in the Bible but in the DVD scene she is called Abigail. In this story there are two large crowds; one following Jesus approaching Nain and another large funeral procession going to the cemetery. According to Jewish tradition, if a group met a funeral procession then they were obliged to join it.

The widow of Nain had lost her husband and her son and was now in a vulnerable position, forced to rely on the charity of her community. The DVD scene however focuses more on the human story of grief and loss. Her bereavement is felt by the community who come out to support her for her son's funeral. Jesus' reaction shows his compassion:

'when the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said ,
'Don't cry.' (verse 13).

Jesus is moved by the woman's loss. He goes to the open coffin where the young man would have been wrapped up in his grave clothes and he touches it. Touching a corpse caused defilement in the Old Testament but Jesus did not appear to be worried about this. The word 'touch' in the Greek means to 'lay hold'. It might have meant that he grabbed the coffin firmly to stop the procession. He speaks directly to the body of the dead man:

'Young man, I say to you, get up!' (verse 14)

Even the dead hear Jesus and are raised to new life. The effect on the crowd is electric and wailing and mourning is turned to jubilation. He is hailed as a great prophet, in the vein of Elijah and Elisha. There are some differences however than those described in the Old Testament. Most notable is that he does not pray to God to bring life back like Elijah or Elisha did, nor does he use ritual in the way they did. Instead he speaks in words of command and life returns to the young man.

This account illustrates Jesus has power over death and has an authority that exceeds even the Old Testament prophets who had been involved in raising the dead. Abigail says in the DVD that she and her son Andrew are a family again. This corresponds to God's desire to restore and renew and how the family unit is a way of doing this, even to those who have no family.

'God sets the lonely in families,' (Psalm 68: 6)

Luke 4: 14-30/ 'The Return of the Small Town Boy'

Often when we think of Jesus' ministry we think of him outside, on hills, plains, on Lake Galilee, and in people's houses. Despite the relatively few references we have of this, the gospel records that Jesus went into the synagogue 'as was his custom'. He was a rabbi and part of his own practice would have been being part of the religious life of his community.

In the synagogue it was customary to read the scrolls while standing but sit whilst teaching. He is handed the passage of scripture to read. It is based on a passage from Isaiah 61: 1-2 and is the blueprint of what the Messiah, or to use the Greek word, 'Christ', would do. We don't know if Jesus chose to read that passage or it was the assigned reading for the day. After reading the portion of scripture he sits to begin his teaching and starts with the declaration that this specific scripture is fulfilled in his ministry. At first, we read that

'all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.' (verse 22)

Word had spread that he had performed an exorcism (Mark 1: 21-28), and healed a paralytic (Mark 2: 1-12) in Capernaum, and there was an expectation that he would do signs and wonders in his home town of Nazareth. Alongside these expectations however was the attitude of familiarity that breeds contempt as others exclaimed:

'Isn't this Joseph's son?' (verse 22)

Jesus is aware of this attitude and how it saps faith. His assertion that no prophet is accepted in his home town causes a stir. (verse 24; repeated in Matthew 13: 57; John 4: 44). He expects to be rejected and he further enrages the crowd by reminding them of times when Israel's rejection of God's messengers caused God to send his chosen ones to the Gentiles (non-Israelites) detailed in 1 Kings 17: 1-5 and 2 Kings 5: 1-14. To a fiercely nationalistic group this would have been inflammatory. It may also explain how the crowd quickly turns from approval to wanting to throw him down the cliff.

In the DVD scene 'Mum' and 'Dad' are settled in their life and views. 'Dad' is an armchair critic who doesn't listen or get his facts right and yet pontificates on every issue in a well-worn manner. He is not impressed with reports of Jesus, claiming that this local boy is 'too big for his boots' and even accounts of miracles are treated with scepticism unless they are done on home turf. 'Mum' is equally static in her views and doesn't hide her incredulity that 'little Jesus from two streets away' is making claims about his ministry. Neither of them move physically during the whole scene and that mirrors their lack of movement in response to the exciting and extraordinary news that their daughter brings home about Jesus.

'Mum' and 'Dad' consider themselves to be devout believers but they are dismissive of anything that might challenge their established views. The Messianic claims are ideal for the subject for a cross-stitch pattern

(omitting the reference to 'release of prisoners' which sounds far too liberal for 'Dad's' views) but they are not things to be hoped for as a reality in a Messianic ministry that changes lives. Susannah is naturally frustrated with her parents' reaction, or lack of it, but in the end she recognises that her different response to the news is rejected, (as is she essentially) as much as Jesus' revelation is.

This scene illustrates, not only how familiarity breeds contempt, but how those who believe themselves devout, weigh up the tenets of their own faith. Some will apply their theology to their life in a practical and whole hearted manner (like Susannah), and others will fit it into their existing constructs, dismissing those parts that don't match (like 'Mum' and 'Dad'.)

Luke 7: 36-50/ 'The Politics of Power'

Hospitality was very important in Ancient Middle-Eastern culture and in Jesus' time it was customary to eat whilst reclining on low couches with feet facing outwards towards the corners of the room. A host would provide water in order for guests to wash their feet, or for a servant to do so for them. The fact that Jesus is not given even this minimal gesture of hospitality (verse 44), raises a question about Simon's motives for inviting Jesus to eat with him. In a culture that observes courtesy as important it seems very rude to have omitted this gesture. Simon is a Pharisee and may have been suspicious of Jesus but wants to find out first-hand what Jesus stands for and whether he is credible.

The woman who bursts in to anoint Jesus must have been desperate to show her devotion and this act of love costs her. She is prepared to take the risk of being thrown out, ridiculed or worse. She is a prostitute from the community, known for 'living a sinful life in that town' (verse 37). Even if she hadn't have been known, her profession would have been recognised by her clothes and the fact that she is wearing her hair down in the established custom. Gate-crashing the house of a man who is from a strict, religious sect is a huge gamble. She is also trusting that Jesus would not turn her away, be embarrassed for his host, or reject her very public display of intimacy.

The show of devotion also costs her in monetary terms. She comes with a long-necked, globular bottle full of perfumed ointment. It is usual to break the neck of the jar in order to use it and therefore it is an extravagant act. She stands behind Jesus at the edge of the room and

pours it on his outstretched feet. She kisses his feet, wets them with her tears and dries them with her hair. It is very intimate and it particularly galls Simon that this behaviour from a prostitute is shown publicly to a 'supposed' holy man. Jesus' refusal to stop her only proves to Simon that Jesus has no credibility as a prophet (verse 39). Jesus however sees the act for what it is: a sign of gratitude from a woman who has responded to his message and wants to live a new life.

The parable told to Simon about the debt that has been cancelled and its subsequent explanation causes Simon great offence. Pharisees believed that they were righteous before God due to their observance of the minutiae of the Law and the sayings of the Rabbis. Any negative comparison with a notorious sinner would be extremely insulting.

Although Simon is offended by what he would see as a personal slight against him, his anger boils over when he hears Jesus forgive the woman's sins. In the DVD scene Simon is apoplectic with anger at what he considers is blasphemy. In Simon's understanding Jesus is acting as someone who is usurping God's prerogative to forgive sins. He also takes issue with Jesus' pronouncement that

'your faith has saved you; go in peace' (verse 50)

Simon does not see this woman's behaviour as stemming from faith; to his mind they are the disgustingly intimate actions of a 'whore' who is 'steeped in sin.' She cannot 'go in peace' before God because of her lifestyle, which even if *she* claims that she has left, is still illustrated by her sensual behaviour towards Jesus.

In the DVD scene this incident is described as a turning point in the plot against Jesus. His assertion that he can forgive the sins of a prostitute after such an intimate display discredits his reputation as a man of God. He is dismissed as a blasphemer who now needs to be dealt with.

Simon sees the unfolding plan as righteous action. He and his brothers know what is required and with no right to execute anyone (John 18: 31) they will have to enlist the involvement of the occupying power to neutralise the threat. He recognises that the restoration of the balance of power still entails Roman supremacy but at least it will eliminate the challenge that Jesus presents; not least to his own group's political and religious influence.

It never occurs to Simon that God would see it any differently.

Matthew 21: 12-16/ 'Trouble at Temple Courts'

In the Synoptic Gospels the cleansing of the temple occurs during the last week of Jesus' ministry; in John's Gospel it takes place during the first few months. In the DVD scene the later timing is being used because this action is seen as an increasing challenge to the 'powers that be'; as Matthias the Prosecutor says 'sedition driven on by megalomania'.

Blood sacrifice was part of the spiritual life of the nation. It goes back to Genesis 4: 4 and the story of Cain and Abel. Sacrifice was seen as a provision for humanity's need. The book of Leviticus quotes its purpose as given by God. It states: -

'For the life of a creature is in the blood and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.' (17: 11)

The concept of Atonement is a way forward in penance, prayer or ritual by which 'sinful' humanity can be 'at-one' again with a Holy God. The blood involved in animal sacrifice was viewed as a price or ransom sufficient to pay off a debt of sin before God. Animals such as bulls, lambs, doves and pigeons were traditionally used in these religious rituals. The book of Leviticus outlines the laws and regulations for such offerings.

In Jesus' day, the buying and selling of livestock and birds for blood sacrifice took place within the large outer courts of the Gentiles which covered several acres. There was also another trade going on, that of money-changing. Pilgrims needed their money changed into the local currency because the annual temple tax had to be paid in that currency. This tax had to be paid near to the Passover time.

Although the money-changing was required, those who were involved in it charged for the exchange and if the coin in the exchange was of greater value than a half-shekel, they charged more for giving back the surplus change. Some of the charges went into the repair of the roads, some into the Temple Treasurer, and some into the money-changers' pockets. Although not all money-changers were dishonest, the process lent itself to abuse and the exploitation of the pilgrims who had come to worship.

Any animal offered in sacrifice must be without blemish. There were official inspectors of the animals and if someone bought their sacrifice outside the Temple, it could be rejected. The person would then be directed to the Temple stalls where prices were considerably higher. It

was a long-standing abuse, particularly with the selling of doves used when a woman came for purification after childbirth. This took advantage of those who were too poor to afford a lamb in these circumstances (Leviticus 12: 8).

The DVD scene is about dishonesty. Not only is Sam, the Temple Trader, attempting to pass off his sparrows as doves, but his fellow-traders are dishonest with one another. The truth about 'Blind Dave' illustrates this.

Liz, the customer, clearly spots the fake doves. The dishonesty however doesn't seem to shock her. She challenges Sam, but not unkindly and it isn't something to be passionate about. This may account for her surprise that Jesus should overturn the tables in the Courts. She says 'I thought he supported the things of God.' For Liz, as for many others, the Temple and its established practices, even if imperfectly managed by the Temple Traders, are the well-spring of the nation's religious life and above reproach.

Mark 14: 53-65/ 'Who Do You Say You Are?'

There are several stories being told in this DVD scene. There is what is going on in the hall as the Sanhedrin meets. There is also the story of Peter's denial as described by Joanna the kitchen maid, and there is the story of how the servant herself is making sense of who this Jesus is and the recollection of what effect he has on her household.

Caiaphas was the High Priest who was also the son-in-law of Annas, the former High Priest. He is the head of the Sanhedrin which is the high court of the Jews. It was made up of three kinds of members; chief priests, elders and teachers of the law. It's total membership number 71, including the High Priest who was presiding officer. Under Roman jurisdiction the Sanhedrin was given a great deal of authority but they could not impose capital punishment (NIV Study Bible).

In the Jewish judicial procedure, witnesses functioned as the prosecution but in this case, the witnesses could not agree. In the DVD the servant calls the whole thing a 'farce'. She knows that this is a rigged trial as usually there could be no conviction unless two or more witnesses agreed. Despite the fact that this wasn't happening her Master wanted to continue the hearing.

Jesus remains silent throughout the testimony of his accusers and gives no answer even when asked directly by the High Priest to comment on it. No doubt this would have infuriated the Sanhedrin. It also corresponds to the portion of scripture in Isaiah 53 known as 'The Suffering Servant' that foreshadows the experience of the Messiah: -

'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.' (verse 7)

He does however respond to the High Priest when Caiaphas asks him directly 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?' (verse 61)

Caiaphas uses the words 'Blessed One' as a way of referring to God without pronouncing his name, which was too holy to use. The title was equivalent to 'Son of God'. Jesus replies by saying 'I am – and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven'. (verse 62). This is an explosive statement.

Some commentators would argue that Jesus' form of words is deeply theologically significant. In Exodus 3: 14 when Moses meets God in the burning bush he asks what God's name is and God says to Moses:

'I AM WHO I AM'. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM' has sent me to you.'

This became the 'YHWH' then 'Yahweh' one of the names ancient Israel used for God. Therefore it is seen that Jesus is replying with the very name of God and putting himself on an equal footing with God. There are similar references to this like those in John 10: 30; John 14: 9. Luke's account is more ambiguous and Matthew's gospel does not record it. Even if one takes the theological significance of the words 'I AM' out of the understanding of Jesus' reply, it is still an inflammatory statement for the High Priest to hear.

Jesus is still claiming to be the Messiah and to have majesty and authority belonging only to God, which is in itself blasphemous to his hearers. The reference to the coming on the clouds of heaven is echoed in John's vision in the book of Revelation (Revelation 1: 7). It is not surprising therefore that Caiaphas tears the front of his clothes in response which was a symbolic way of expressing great grief or shock, especially at hearing blasphemy.

In the DVD scene, this act is the signal that the High Priest has made up his mind. Spitting and assaults follow and the two servants run back to the kitchen. The servant is in no doubt how the episode will end. Jesus is guilty of blasphemy and the Law requires his death (Leviticus 24: 16). He will be taken to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea from A.D. 26 to 36. It will be up to the Romans to pass the sentence that the Sanhedrin does not have the power to do themselves.

John 20: 10-18; John 20: 24-29/‘Called by Name’, ‘Sceptics Corner’

Jesus’ body had been put in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. He was a rich disciple (Matthew 27: 57) and a member of the Sanhedrin who had not agreed with Jesus’ condemnation (Luke 23: 51). It would have been hard for a member of the Sanhedrin to support Jesus’ cause openly so Joseph asked Pilate for permission to bury the body and he and Nicodemus, (see John 3) buried Jesus in Joseph’s own new cut tomb, after wrapping the corpse in clean linen strips and a large sheet or shroud over it as was the usual custom. Most of the disciples had run away and because it was sunset and the Sabbath was fast approaching, when no work could be done, the work of anointing the dead would have to be left. Mary visits the tomb as soon as possible to care for Jesus’ dead body. There are different accounts in the gospels about who was present and what they witnessed.

Mary Magdalene’s account of meeting Jesus is one of surprise and intimacy. At first she thinks he is a gardener from the tomb area and wants to know where they have put Jesus’ body. It is only when he uses her name and she recognises his voice that she knows that it is Jesus. Despite the fact that Jesus had told many that he would rise from the dead, even his most devoted followers didn’t appear to believe this. Mary shows her devotion and is given the task of telling the other disciples the news.

In the DVD Mary Magdalene shows the more emotional response towards the resurrection of Jesus and Thomas, the sceptic, shows the rational, cerebral response. Both disciples are at odds with each other, with Mary chastising Thomas for his lack of faith and love and Thomas dismissing Mary as an hysterical woman, with needless displays of emotion.

Thomas wants empirical evidence and says he will not believe unless he can see and touch Jesus for himself. Thomas explains his own journey of faith from scepticism to faith with the real pinnacle being his exclamation:

'My Lord and my God!' (verse 28)

When Thomas eventually has his doubts blown away he goes further than the other disciples and makes connections about Jesus' identity.

The juxtaposition of the story of Mary and Thomas in the DVD brings into focus the fact that faith in Jesus is not an 'either/or' thing when coming to emotions and reason; it is a 'both/and' response. Mary and Thomas are very different but their response to the person of Jesus is equally valid.

Epilogue - DVD

'So even when he dies he breaks the rules!'

Matthias the Prosecutor is left pondering over the evidence of Jesus' resurrection. He had always trusted in the process of Law and the fact that punishment was the end of the matter but now Jesus' resurrection has rendered the sentence of the court impotent and toothless. Jesus and the message of his life cannot be kept down. His resurrection challenges every presumption that the Law rests on. It is a deeply uncomfortable realisation for Matthias that what he has trusted in all his life is crumbling.

It is no coincidence that this last scene is shot in the ruins of an Abbey. What was once magnificent and looked like it would last for ever is now destroyed and only a shell is left. Matthias has to piece together what this new perception means for him, his values, and his world-view. His frustration at the unfairness of grace is clearly evident. He sees this new world-view as unrealistic and naïve but he still recognises its deep significance and that it may well be God's way. The crunch comes when he says to Gabriel:

'That's not how the world works Gabriel - or at least that's not how *my* world works.'

Although he is struggling to make sense of the new situation he is courageous enough to ask the serious question of 'What now?' If justice or the Law is not the ultimate guide, what takes its place? Gabriel tells him about the primacy of love and how that is expressed through God's amazing Grace. This whole section is about the miracle of Grace, and

how love overcomes judgment. It is a traditional theological discussion about Grace and Law, as described in Paul's letter to the Romans. It is God's saving action and love for all humankind that is the most powerful force. God is the instigator.

'We love because he first loved us.' (1 John 4: 19)

The final dialogue outlines the fact of God's Sovereignty. Gabriel says that 'we couldn't let you win the case totally' meaning that God brings the light out of the darkness and all things work together for good in the end. The ending involves a friendly, redemptive, drink together in the roughest pub in town in order to explore the miracle of Grace.

Background Notes written by Rev. Mandy Carr, Vicar of Lamberhurst and Matfield.

Questions for Churches and adapted for schools written by Ven. Simon Burton-Jones, Archdeacon of Rochester.

