

LENT 2021

Just about any arrangement we make at the moment is, of necessity, provisional. On the basis of hoping for the best while preparing for the worst, Mark Binney and I have been considering a Lenten series which we can undertake from the security of home, or in groups, should it be safe to do so. We can even do a hybrid arrangement, so no-one feels obliged to go beyond what they feel safe.

Toward the Kingdom of Heaven is a booklet of daily readings through Lent based around the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. The course has been drawn together by Professor Amy-Jill Levine, one of the world's pre-eminent New Testament scholars.



Professor Levine is a member of the Jewish faith and has devoted her life to understanding the New Testament and sensitise students to how each writer would have been heard in the conventions and culture of first century Judea. She teaches as Vanderbilt University in Kentucky.

Her credentials may be found here:

<https://divinity.vanderbilt.edu/people/bio/amy-jill-levine>

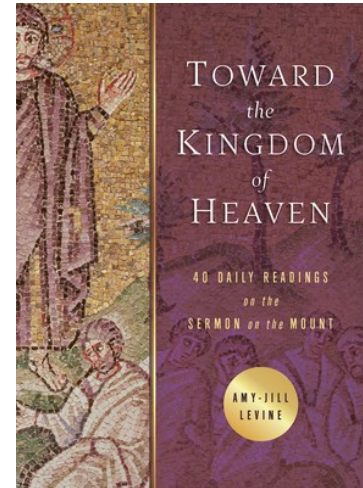
Over the past twenty years, I have routinely had one or other of her books within reach, when I have needed to understand an issue in a New Testament text from a Jewish point of view. I have never come away empty-handed.

To get a flavour of Professor Levine, there is a range of videos of interviews and teaching on YouTube. A good introduction is a 17 minute interview with her *Jewish Jesus: Amy-Jill Levine Extended Interview* which you may find at:

<https://youtu.be/IPDySI7TGc>

I have reproduced the introduction to the course overleaf, with each day's heading here on the right. Mark and I plan to meet every Tuesday evening in Lent on Zoom. If there is a need to have an additional Zoom meeting during the day, we will be pleased to arrange that.

You don't have to be Anglican to sign up. Anyone who wants to participate is welcome. Please register your interest in an email to vicar@evesham.church with Lent 2021 in the subject line, so it will go in the right folder.



FORTY DAYS IN LENT

1. The Teacher is Here
2. Fulfilling Scripture
3. Jesus, Torah, and Tradition
4. Jesus and the New Community
5. Blessed are the Christ-Pushers
6. The Righteousness of the Pharisees?
7. Love as Risk
8. Suing and Pursuing Your Neighbour
9. The Gift on the Altar
10. Rules for Confrontation
11. Your "Yes" is Enough
12. Public Displays and Private Holiness
13. Prayer: It's Personal
14. Raising Money Without Raising Eyebrows.
15. Jesus's Guide to eyecare
16. Righteousness, Righteousness You Shall Pursue
17. Light and Blindness
18. Our Father
19. The Politics of prayer
20. Who's Your Abba?
21. Making God's Name Holy
22. Your Will Be Done: What We Must Do
23. Pray Boldly
24. Bread from the Earth, Bread from Heaven
25. Forgive Us Our Debts
26. Rescue Us from Evil
27. Mammon
28. What We Wear
29. The Price of a Sparrow
30. The Days of Our Lives
31. To Seek and Save the Lost
32. Judge, but Do Not Be Judgemental
33. The Canaanite Woman
34. Do *for* Others?
35. The Road Less Travelled
36. False Prophets and Good Fruit
37. Fathers and Mothers
38. Blessed are the Doers
39. Circumcised Hearts
40. Teaching with Authority

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THE INTRODUCTION TO 'TOWARD THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN', BY AMY-JILL LEVINE

From its opening verse, “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him” (Matthew 5:1) to the beginning of the sermon, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3), to Jesus’s closing words about the houses on firm and weak foundations, to the crowd’s astonished reaction, the Sermon on the Mount beckons to us in multiple ways.

Its evocations of the Scriptures of Israel (what would be called the Old Testament) show us how Jesus both interprets and fulfils the Law (the Torah) and the Prophets, and so it cannot be understood fully unless we see that continuity with Abraham, Moses, and David.

Its comforting Beatitudes lead inexorably to its challenging ethics, all the while providing disciples the assurance that the/ really can be the light of the world and the salt of the earth- Its ability to get to the heart of the commandments—do not murder becomes do not be angry; do not commit adultery becomes do not lust—begins the discussion of how the body and the mind must work together. So, too, its teachings against hypocrisy help us to engage in needed introspection for getting the logs out of our own eyes.

Perhaps the best-known part of the Sermon on the Mount is the “Our Father” prayer. With attention to the meaning of the Greek, and suggestions concerning the underlying Hebrew or Aramaic, we can hear these ancient words anew. In so doing, we see both how they are connected to the rest of Jesus’s teaching and how they touch upon the world as it should be.

But the prayer is not the only familiar passage. Hearing with fresh ears the implications of “Love your enemies,” “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,” and “Consider the lilies of the field,” and so many more familiar phrases not only brings Jesus’s teaching to life, it shows them as a guide by which we might live into the kingdom of heaven.

Each verse, even each word, opens up to ever new interpretations, When the verses are put into dialogue with the rest of the Gospels, am the rest of the Bible, more insights emerge. We draw out connections between the Sermon in Matthew 5-7 and themes sounded elsewhere in Matthew, such as the concerns for righteousness, resisting temptation, and creating the beloved community

where both justice and mercy reside.

These daily readings put Jesus’s comments in the Sermon into conversation with the Scriptures of Israel, with the

other Gospels, with the epistles of Paul, and then they move from antiquity to today. To understand what a text means for us, it helps to understand what it meant to the people who first heard it. These readings, designed for daily reflection and personal study use the words of the Sermon to help us think about our own lives: parenting and children, economics and business, politics and democracy? Have versus need, the gap between the way things are and the way things should be, and what can do to mind that gap.

The best teachers—and Jesus was certainly one of the be teachers the world has known—‘do more than convey information, They find ways of using language to encourage their students to thinly and then to act. They teach not only by providing answers but by helping their students ask the right questions. They know that they will never have the last word, and they take a certain pride when their students bring what they’ve learned into conversation with other books, other experiences, and other times and cultures. The Sermon on the Mount is just such a teaching: it raises new questions and new interpretations. When studied with attention to history, language, culture, and ethics, it turns from a series of well-known phrases into a beginner’s guide to the kingdom of heaven.

These daily readings are here to accompany you on what Jesus calls the “hard road” through the “narrow gate,” both to keep you from getting offtrack and to point out the birds and the lilies - the inspiration and the challenge - along the way. Your first step is to open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 5. God willing, it won’t be your last step.



Amy-Jill Levine