

First Sunday of Christmas

Service Date:

26 December, 2010

Matthew 2:13-23

Well, it doesn't take us very long to snap back from the Prince of Peace, God's universal answer to human hopes, to the world of violence and fear that shockingly seems more normal, on the news, at any rate. But even in the gory annals of the Bible, this story of toddlers put to the sword seems more than usually bloodthirsty.

The Magi have been and gone, leaving their treasures behind them. But someone in Herod's secret service was evidently following them closely, and has reported back to his paranoid master that a new king, the Messiah, has indeed been born. Bad news for Mary and Joseph; potentially, even worse news for Jesus. So, warned by an angel, they leave behind not only their roots in Nazareth but even their temporary refuge in Bethlehem, forced to flee the country in order to save the child's life.

And they are not alone. Through history, men, women and children have had to flee their own country: because they supported the wrong political party, because they believed in the wrong ideas, because they saw no future for their children in their own land or simply because, as in this case, their unhinged ruler has no trust in his people. They have spent all their resources in getting to safety; often they have found little or no welcome on their arrival, treated with suspicion by those native to their new host country, who fear what they do not know.

So far, so good. Jesus is finding out at a very young age how difficult human life can be; far from living it up in palaces, he's at the rough end of the human experience. But here comes a really difficult part of the story; for just as, in his later life, Jesus accepted his innocent death in order to show just how much God loves us, so here, other innocents die so that he can live to adulthood. This is self-evidently unfair. And Matthew seems to recognise this as he quotes from the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

And paradoxically, I am glad that this story was not edited out of the New Testament, out of one of the books that we call Gospels, good news. For if we only had in our Scriptures the story of the child born to be king, and not the stories of the children who did not grow up to be anything, they would not tell us the whole truth about the way the world is.

Why the angel who warned Joseph could not also have warned the mothers of Bethlehem, or have hastened Herod's death, we do not know. We may never know the reason for many human tragedies, both then and now. But what we do know is that into such a world as this, God has chosen to come, to share with us not just the highlights, not just the good things in life, but everything about it, its tragedies as well as its triumphs. And for that we can be glad.

Hymns:

R&S 163 comes from the Sheffield hymnodist James Montgomery, first printed in the Sheffield Iris of 24th December 1816. In keeping with the fine tradition of Sheffield radicals, the hymnbook of 1819 in which it was first published was suppressed later that year after Cotterill got into trouble, trying to introduce new hymns to his congregation. The tune Iris is a French carol tune, but named after Montgomery's paper.

R&S 169 is a Latin/German medieval carol translated into English by Anglican vicars G.R. Woodward (1901) and Percy Dearmer (1928). The version we are singing today has verses

from both. The oldest manuscripts of its tune, Puer Nobis ('A boy to us'), have been traced back to 1360 in the Augustinian College of St Castulus, Moosburg, Germany.

R&S 709, a paraphrase of Psalm 98, was written by Erik Routley, a Congregationalist minister and academic. The tune *Rendez a Dieu* ('Give to God') is one of the psalm tunes found in the early French Genevan psalters, probably composed by Louis Bourgeois.

R&S 188 was written, words and music, in 1959 for a Methodist youth club nativity play in Loughton by the minister there, Geoffrey Ainger. It was first published in a 1974 collection called *Songs from Notting Hill*.

R&S 170 was written by W.C. Dix, an 18th-century manager of a marine insurance company whose heart was in hymnody. The hymn is said to have been written for the tune *Greensleeves*.

Sermon:

Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Matthew 2:13-23; Hebrews 2:10-18

We're back to Matthew's Gospel again - don't three years pass quickly? And you'll notice this time, as you may have noticed before, just how much value the author of Matthew places on Scripture. Three times in our first reading this morning - three times in just ten verses - he describes something happening 'as had been spoken through the prophets' - as a fulfilment of prophetic words written in the Hebrew Bible. To be a bit more precise, he points to words spoken by Hosea, Jeremiah as well as, intriguingly, an unknown prophet with a saying not to be found in the Hebrew Bible. It's as if he's trying to map the story of Jesus onto the Scriptures, sometimes more successfully than others.

Why's the Gospeller want to do this? Well, he wants to explain to his hearers about Jesus in terms they will know and understand. You may have noticed on your order of service a little Nativity set from France, made of clay of the style called *santons* or little holy ones. If you've been in the south of France, you may have seen public scenes of *santons* there - dozens or even hundreds of the little figures, dressed in traditional costume, placed within the streets of a little country village, with all the trades and varieties of farm workers represented. Somewhere in the crowded scene, you'll find the Nativity proper, as the picture I've printed on the service sheet shows; but it's right in the middle of ordinary village life, the way everyone celebrating Christmas would know and love it.

And the Gospeller's doing a similar thing. He knows his Jewish hearers will be familiar with the words of the prophets, and prepared to look for God's will coming through the fulfilment of ancient Hebrew prophecy. So in order to persuade listeners that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, God's coming leader, Matthew scours the Hebrew Bible for resonances and echoes of Jesus' own story. It's possible, indeed, that in some cases it was the other way around: that it was prophecy, rather than firsthand knowledge of Jesus' life, that forms the framework of the Nativity story as Matthew portrays it.

As you'll know, Mark's Gospel, the first one written, doesn't bother with birth stories at all: he plunges straight in with John the Baptist. John's Gospel, as we saw yesterday, goes right back to the beginning of the Universe. And the writers of Matthew and Luke choose very different approaches to begin their retelling of Jesus' life: where Luke's Gospel focuses on Mary and the shepherds, Matthew's goes for Joseph and the wise men. It's easy to see why a Jewish patriarch might want to know the story from Joseph's point of view, but why all this interest in the Magi, foreigners to a man, and of the wrong religion, at that?

The Gospel writers aren't very worried about biography, as such. But one question inevitably arises: why did Mary and Joseph take Jesus from Bethlehem, where he was born, to Nazareth, where he was brought up? Starting with the three prophecies mentioned in

our reading today: God calling his son out of Egypt; poor Rachel weeping for her children; and that mysterious prediction, 'he shall be called a Nazarene' - and you can see how the answer might fall into place in the Gospeller's mind, with apparently fairytale elements, a wicked king and a deadly threat averted, traceable to his respect for Scripture. For a traditional Jewish way of interpreting scripture, midrash, allowed for imaginative narrative, so long as the fixed points already set down in Scripture were maintained.

That's the case for the episode of the Bethlehem bloodbath having been biblical reflection rather than historical reportage. Taking the other point of view, of course, Herod the Great is known to have been so paranoid that he killed his favourite wife and son for plotting against him, so there's no difficulty whatsoever in seeing him as the author of a bloodthirsty baby-culling plot, intended to nip the Messiah in the bud. But either way, so what? Just as some of us when we visit the library will go for historical books, and others will prefer thrillers, some of us will be more comfortable than others with the possibility that Matthew's Gospel may use creative imagination as well as historical information to paint its picture of Jesus. But whether particular aspects of the Nativity story are fact or fiction, what difference does it make to us, trying to live as Christians in twenty-first century Sheffield? What can it tell us about God and ourselves?

Maybe our other readings this morning can help. I've already touched on our all-powerful God's chosen vulnerability, shown in Jesus' having to flee Herod's anger and become a refugee in a foreign land. Our God is no distant observer, but knows from experience how hard it is to be weak. Our reading from Hebrews comments: Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Isaiah's prophecy looks back in hope to a time when God was evidently with people: It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. For now, strangely, the roles are reversed: it is the infant Jesus who must be saved, who must be lifted up and carried. Yet it is that very vulnerability, ultimately expressed through his acceptance of crucifixion, that will save us, his sisters and brothers. For, as Hebrews reminds us, Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.

And that brings me back - for the last time for a while, I promise you! - to the question of whether our basic attitude in life should be of hope or of fear. Christmas Day may seem like a brief ceasefire in our world's violence. Here we are, just one day later, already considering atrocities, and biblical atrocities at that; our own reality can produce sufficient parallels. Yet our looking back at this well-loved story, like Isaiah's, can give us hope for life here and now. Mary's child knows just as well as we do the painful realities of this world's suffering and injustice; and it is through his grappling with and his victory over all these things that we can realistically hold on to our hope in God's coming reign.

Christmas Day

Service Date:

25 December, 2010

Hebrew Bible reading: Isaiah 52:7-10

Comment 1

It seems a long time ago that we started to get ready for Christmas, using the Advent wreath to help us count. But today, finally, the Advent countdown has been completed, so

I'm going to need five people to help me light all our candles, while those of you who's not been with us all the way through can catch up with the rest of us. [get 5 candle lighters]
The first week in Advent, we heard Isaiah the prophet's hopes for the world. Everyone would come to God's house, to learn wisdom, and all the nations would make swords into ploughs and spears into pruning hooks.

So in the first week of Advent, our hopes were for the world to be at peace, but our fears were of global disaster. [light candle 1]

In the second week of Advent Isaiah's hopes was for a new world where wolves and lambs, snakes and babies could live together in peace. And we thought about our own church here, about the different sorts of people we are. Our hopes were for reconciliation where we had hurt each other; but we feared rejection if we tried to make friends again. [light candle 2]

In the third week of Advent, Isaiah dreamed of God transforming the wilderness into a blossoming garden, and we hoped for transformation in our own lives. But as we remembered with sorrow the untimely and violent death of Jim Cathels we remembered too our fear of loss if we dare to have high hopes. [candle 3]

And last week, as we remembered Isaiah's promise to King Ahaz that a new baby would show us God with us, we thought about how, two thousand years ago, the hopes and fears of centuries gathered in the little town of Bethlehem, and how that still says something about us today. [light candle 4]

Week by week in Advent we have been gathering our hopes and fears to display in the form of prayers as decorations on our Christmas tree, with doves for peace, paper chains for making friends, raindrops for God's transforming life and angels announcing God's good news. So I can fairly say that this Advent, children and adults, we've all been working hard, getting ready for Christmas Day. All our hopes, all our fears, we've given them to God, through our Sunday services and all the days between.

Now finally it's Christmas Day [light candle 5], and we're back with Isaiah to thinking about the world, crying out for peace. And to all our hopes and all our fears, God has given us the same response. A baby. [Show knitted Jesus] Hmm. I don't know about you, but there are times when you get given a present, and you have no idea what to do with it. You're polite, so you say thank you very much, I don't know how you guessed just what I wanted. You know the person who gave you the present loves you, and wanted to please you. But just for the moment, you have no idea what to make of their gift. So you put it down carefully and decide to come back to it when you have time to think.

That's what we're going to do right now in this service. [take baby Jesus and put him in knitted nativity manger]. But in the meantime, I believe there may be some people here this morning who'd like to show the rest of us a good present they've received.

Hymns:

R&S 160 was once thought to have begun life as an 18th-century hymn in Latin: 'Adeste, fideles'. However, it now seems likely that the man who 'discovered' the earliest manuscripts, John Wade, a Roman Catholic teacher and manuscript copyist working at Douay Abbey, may in fact have written both words and tune. The tune Adeste Fideles is also known as Portuguese, from its use in the Portuguese Embassy where Samuel Webbe, its first publisher, was organist.

R&S 166 was written, both words and tune, by Valerie Collison, for a Southern Television competition, 'Carols for Children', in 1972 (the year of the URC's birth!). Whether they won is not recorded, but it has become a catchy 20th-century carol.

R&S 167 comes from the pen of Cecil Alexander, in her Hymns for Little Children, explaining

the different phrases of the Apostles' Creed (here, the line: 'Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary'). 'All things bright and beautiful' came in the same publication, to explain the idea of creation to children. The tune Irby has always been associated with this carol.

R&S 180 from John Bell of the Iona Community, reflects on our Gospel reading this morning. The tune Incarnation, written for this hymn, expresses its central theme: God becoming human for us.

R&S 161 was written by J.M. Neale, a 19th-century Anglican priest and hymnodist, though it comes from a Latin/German carol 'In dulci jubilo', which Neale first discovered in a Swedish translation.

Sermon:

New Testament reading: Hebrews 1:1-4

Comment 2

What has God given us in response to all our hopes, all our fears? A baby. [take knitted Jesus I don't want to be impolite or blasphemous, but as a solution to the world's woes, a baby immediately sounds about as useful as a chocolate teapot. I mean, what can a baby do about our huge hopes, our deep fears, let alone those of the whole world?

There's another problem. According to our second reading, this isn't just any baby we're talking about. Listen to the way the letter to the Hebrews describes him:

God's Son, whom God appointed heir of all things, through whom God also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

Isn't there a bit of a mismatch here?. [show off knitted Jesus] Even if this Jesus were a real baby, alive and kicking, not a tiny knitted replica, that reading talks about a hugely powerful figure, responsible for creating everything in the beginning, sustaining it now, mirroring God's glory.

Isn't that too much for any human being to bear, let alone a newborn child?

And yet, that is the claim on which we Christians stake our lives. That somehow the glory and the power of God, as described in that reading, can be found in the weakness and insignificance of a baby.

How can this be?

Some of you, like me, may have watched the sequence of four half-hour programmes on BBC 1 this week dramatising the events of the Nativity. They have made the story as natural as possible - no sudden shafts of light as Mary receives Gabriel's news, no technicolor choir of angels with wings telling the shepherds; even the Magi following the star see it as three stars coming together and shining as one.

And the hopes and fears of these characters in the drama are very this-worldly. Mary is going to have a baby without a husband, and everyone else is ashamed of her. The shepherd's wife is sick, and he can't pay all the taxes he owes to the Romans. The wise men know Herod, king of Judea, is not going to like hearing about a new king, because he thinks that must be a threat to his own power.

Here are our own hopes and fears; but not only ours, those of the whole world. For who, in the whole wide world, in time past, present or to come, is not affected by personal relationships, by questions of work and money, by politics on a larger scale?

That's why you'll see repeating on the screen behind me depictions of the Nativity from many centuries and from all over the world. On every continent, for over two thousand

years, people have heard this story and have taken it as their own; have taken God's gift of a baby, and found it was just what they needed to answer their hopes and their fears. But how?

I'll leave you to think about that while we sing our next carol, R&S 167, taking us back to the very start of the story in first-century Bethlehem.

Gospel reading: John 1:1-14

Comment 3

Though the story we're celebrating this morning happened two thousand years ago to people in Bethlehem, if it's to be of any use to the whole of humanity, it has to be universal, to work for everyone everywhere. To be universal, the story's got to go back even further; to before the beginning of time itself. And that's exactly where John takes us in the prologue to his Gospel we've just heard. He's trying to do something nearly impossible, something we've been wrestling with in the course of this service. He's trying to bring together in one person the glory and majesty of our creator and the new life of a tiny baby. How does he do it? Through pictures. He talks about Jesus as God's word, deliberately spoken in our human baby language because we can't speak or understand the language God speaks. If he is to address our hopes and fears, he has to be as human, as vulnerable as us. And Jesus is God's light, shining in darkness. When we see a bright light, either we can turn away because it dazzles us, or if we look, by that light everything else becomes visible. Let's have a quick demonstration by switching on the lights of our Christmas tree. [Jackie switches on lights - switch at wall below war memorial.]

As you see, before the lights came on, you could hardly see the bulbs among the general decorations, the expressions of all our hopes and fears that we've built up over the past four weeks. But once the lights are on, you can't avoid seeing them. What's more, they don't just shine themselves; their light shines on the colour and the glitter of our decorations, showing what they really are. On the face of it, like the unlit bulbs on our tree, God's life in Jesus doesn't look very impressive: one child among hundreds born that year in a small town in an unimportant backwater of the Roman Empire. Yet those who came into contact with him, who saw the light switched on, found he was more. His need for love could be answered or ignored. His weakness challenged people to use their power for or against him. How people reacted to him became a judgment on them, for good or for evil.

And more than that; God's presence in Jesus, cut right down to the bare bones of love, shows us what sort of God we worship. The words of our reading from John's Gospel in its traditional form are beautiful: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. But one of the more colloquial translations, the Message, has it even better: The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. You may think you know a person well, but it's not till you live beside them that you really understand what makes them tick. And God in Jesus pitched a tent alongside ours, moved into our neighbourhood, with all the inconvenience and vulnerability that being human involves, up to and including death. So if we dare to believe it, the promise that this child really is Emmanuel, God with us, can power our hopes and cast out our fears. For what can stand against us when God tells us so clearly: 'I am for you?'

Fourth Sunday in Advent: Nativity Service

Service Date:

19 December, 2010

Isaiah 7:10-16

Comment 1:

Narrator: All through Advent we've been attending to hope and to fear. The first week of Advent, we were giving our hopes for the world to God, yet the way the world is made us fearful of disaster. The second week, we considered our hopes for a reconciled church, where we have mended our disagreements with others and can show God's love to everyone, but feared rejection if we dismantle the barriers between us. Last week, we hoped for transformation of our own lives, yet the death of Jim Cathels reminded us painfully of the loss we also fear if those high hopes are dashed. And this morning, at our Nativity service, all our hopes and fears will gather in one place: the little town of Bethlehem.

As we've already seen, hopes and fears often go together in our minds, and that is also true for the story we're going to retell this morning, the old story which ends up with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. But as we've just heard, that story begins much earlier, with the hopes and fears of King Ahaz of Judah. Ahaz was surrounded by enemies, the kings of Israel and of Aram, who wanted to attack and destroy his people.

God's prophet Isaiah encouraged him to look with hope to God, but because Ahaz didn't want his hopes to be dashed, he feared to ask anything. Yet just as God wants to help us, God wanted to help Ahaz, so he gave him a promise: by the time there was a new baby - in other words, in nine months' time - all his problems would have gone. Isaiah doesn't tell us who this mysterious baby was, nothing apart from his name - Immanuel. And in Hebrew, as we've already heard, that means -

[Fear and Hope get up during this last paragraph and start to come towards the lecturn, in time for Fear to interrupt:]

Fear: Excuse me, could I interrupt for a moment?

Narrator: Why, who are you, and what do you want?

Fear: Isn't it obvious? I'm Fear, of course, and as you've just explained, this is my story you're telling. So I think I should be able to get a word in edgeways, don't you?

Narrator: Fear? But you're not frightening!

Fear: Of course not - I'm afraid. Think of all the horrible things that are going to happen in this story. You've got Ahaz already, afraid of these two kings who would do terrible things to his land and his people. That's me you're talking about.

Narrator: Well, you certainly have a big role in the story. But I'm not sure it's all yours to tell.

Hope: I should think not! Take no notice of him. This is my story.

Narrator: And you are...

Hope: Isn't it obvious? I'm Hope, of course! Fear's doing what he always does, jumping into the middle of the story, not thinking carefully, and not waiting for the end. I think if you look at it properly, you'll find this is my story, not his.

Fear: Oh no it isn't!

Hope: Oh yes it is!

Narrator: All right, all right, calm down. This isn't a pantomime!

As we've already established, hope and fear are tied up together in the Christmas story. We don't know how Ahaz reacted to what Isaiah said, and to be honest, between hope and fear it's so finely balanced, I don't think I can decide whose story it is before the end. So I think the best thing for us to do is to listen to the rest of the story as it unfolds, for you to make your cases as to whose story it is, and for all of us to make up our minds depending on what

you say. Are you happy with that?

Hope: Yes, of course.

Fear: Well, I suppose so...

Narrator: Good! Well, in the meantime, let's light our fourth Advent candle, to remember all the hopes and the fears gathering in the little town of Bethlehem, both then and now.

Lighting of the Advent Candles

Hymns:

R&S 151: See him lying on a bed of straw

R&S 139: The Angel Gabriel

R&S 145: O little town of Bethlehem

Choir carol: I saw a fair maiden

R&S 159: Hark! the herald angels sing

Sermon:

Gospel reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Comment 2:

Narrator: You see - that name Emmanuel cropping up again. As I was about to say last time, that means -

Fear: Excuse me! You said I could explain how this is my story! And it's completely obvious that this is about fear. Here's a teenager in a very strict culture, who's suddenly found she's pregnant without being married. If her fiancé decides to break the engagement, the law says she can be put to death. And even if he doesn't, every gossip in Nazareth will be pointing the finger at her. Her mum and dad will never hear the last of it. Will they accept her?

Hope: Can I put a word in? Thank you so much. This is so obviously a story about hope; about me! Joseph really loves Mary. He wants to have her as his wife. And he's prepared to take on someone else's baby in his new family, just because an angel tells him it'll be OK. I think that's very hopeful indeed!

Narrator: Well, members of the congregation, this is the first time you're being called on to decide, though by no means the last. You should each have a pink card and a blue card with you. If you feel warmly to Hope's argument, I'd like you to wave your pink cards now. And if you feel Fear has a worrying point, please wave your blue cards. Don't vote the way you think you should, but the way you feel. And I'd like us all to do it now.

[reaction]

Now the choir will lead us into the next part of the story, with verse 1 of O little Town of Bethlehem.

Gospel reading: Luke 2:1-7

Comment 3:

Narrator: This time, I think Hope should have the first word.

Hope: Thank you very much. Well, ladies and gentlemen of the congregation, my case is pretty clear before I open my mouth. Most of you will know the joy, the excitement and the hope of bringing a new child into the world. Among relations in Bethlehem, in a cosy outhouse with animals to keep them warm - I could think of a much worse way for any child to be born.

Fear: Rampant sentimentalism! Why were they in Bethlehem? Because the occupying government had made everyone leave their homes and register for taxation, even though this was a poor young couple. We have no idea if Joseph still had any family in Bethlehem, or if there was a local midwife prepared to help strangers. Do you know how many babies

died at birth in first-century Palestine? And their mothers with them? It was fear, I tell you, fear that Mary felt; fear of a hard birth, and fear of what might become of her child, growing up under the tyranny of the Roman Empire.

Narrator: Thank you, Fear. I think you've made your point. That certainly gives us a less comfortably romantic view of the little town of Bethlehem 2000 years ago. Much more like today, in fact, given the 30-foot high Israeli security wall built around Bethlehem which cuts it off from Jerusalem, and doesn't allow anyone from Palestine easy access into Israel, even for medical emergencies. However, we're getting ahead of ourselves. Given the story so far, whoever thinks Hope is more convincing, raise your pink cards. And if you think Fear has the right of it, wave your blue cards.

[reaction]

There's more to come, but first the choir will help us reflect on the story so far, with the second verse of O little town.

Choir: R&S 145 (UCB 60): O little town of Bethlehem (v2)

Gospel reading: Luke 2:8-20

Comment 4:

Hope: This reading is so obviously hopeful, I won't say a word.

Fear: Well, I only need to go to the second sentence to point out the justice of my case. An angel of the Lord stood before them -

Hope: Yes! It must have been wonderful!

Fear: The glory of the Lord shone around them.

Hope: If only I'd been there!

Fear: And they were terrified!

Hope: What? Did you sneak that bit in?

Narrator: I can confirm that these are the original readings, with nothing added or removed.

Fear: You see! Not only do these poor souls have religious opinion against them, not to mention the government and the military - even God's angels are terrifying. Wouldn't you be scared rigid if an angel appeared and started talking to you?

Hope: But the angels bring them such good news! God's leader, who's going to rescue them from their fears, has just been born!

Fear: Who thought she wouldn't say a word? I rest my case.

[both sit]

[poll]

The choir will now sing the next verse of O little town, reflecting on how people may respond to this news.

Choir: R&S 145 (UCB 60): O little town of Bethlehem (v3)

Sermon

Well, we've heard the story, and the argument between Hope and Fear as to whose story it is. But of course, the story doesn't stop there. Two thousand years ago, the hopes and fears of all the years came into Bethlehem and focussed on the birth of Jesus. But when he was born, not all hopes were immediately fulfilled; not all fears were immediately assuaged. We still carry both fear and hope within us: for ourselves, for our church, for our world. And we still need to decide, today more than ever, whose story this is; whose voice we will listen to. We may think we've already made that decision.

We're Christians.

Of course we think hope rather than fear rules our lives, if not yet our world.

But if we're honest, is that always true?

I'm not suggesting that we should start feeling guilty because sometimes we are afraid. I hope you've not met too many idiots these last few weeks driving around as if there was no ice or snow, endangering themselves and others on the road. Sometimes fear is there to help us focus on making the right decision.

But at other times fear can hamper us from moving forward. These weeks I've sometimes found myself frozen on the pavement - metaphorically frozen, though literally also felt true - when snow and ice was all around, not sure which way to go to make sure I didn't slip and fall. But unless I chose the best way to step, even though I wasn't sure which way to try, I'd be in danger of staying there till the snow melted, and dying of hypothermia!

At this time we are remembering Jim Cathels, Ann's son. He could have left South Africa, could have decided it wasn't safe enough for someone who was white to live there. But it was the life he loved; shortly before he died, he sent Ann an email saying how happy he was, how much he was looking forward to the Christmas holidays. Jim helped street children in South Africa; he made trees grow into beautiful and healthy shapes; he supported Zimbabwean workers whose lives and families depended on his employment. Hope, rather than fear, characterised Jim's faith and his life.

Even on Christmas Day the story will not be over, for the baby will grow up. Both hope and fear are still part of his story, as of ours. But because he is God with us, loving us enough to share the hopes and fears which come with being human, his perfect love can cast out the fear whispering to us that it's not worth hoping, that we are not worth loving, that it will all end badly, that those unlike us are our enemies. As we sing the last verse of O little town of Bethlehem, let us dare, in spite of our fears, to welcome this child, Emmanuel, into our lives.

Third Sunday in Advent

Service Date:

12 December, 2010

I have in my hand two common objects, which may not immediately seem linked to each other or to our first reading this morning. What are they? [a dirty dishcloth and a hyacinth bulb] Though it may not be immediately obvious, they are connected; and to our first reading, so as you listen to the reading, I'd like you to work out what they may all have in common.

Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10

What do these objects have in common? Or rather, what lack do they have in common, which our first reading promises will be supplied? [water]

There are two ways an object can be transformed by water. The first is to wash its surface. I have strong hopes that once I've washed my dishcloth, it will no longer have these distressing yellow stains. Vegetable soup, just in case anyone's wondering. But of course my dishcloth will get dirty again, and need washing all over again.

The second way, however, is longer lasting. It is to take water in, to use it to grow and change. Unless this bulb takes in water, its roots will never get any longer, and its shoot will never grow. But if it does, it will stop looking like a bulb, stop functioning like a bulb. It will be transformed into leaves and flowers and scent.

What has this to do with either our reading from Isaiah or our hopes and fears in this Advent season? The first week of Advent, we looked at our hopes of peace in the world, and our fears of disaster. The second week, we were closer to home with our hopes of reconciliation in the church, and our fears of judgment. But this week it's personal. This

week we're looking at our hopes of transformation for ourselves, and our fears of loss. And as we come before God this week, both are live issues, with the death of Jim Cathels, Ann's son, fresh in our hearts and minds.

What did Isaiah have to say to God's people thousands of years ago, with all their hopes and fears? And can it still be relevant to us today? His prophecy raises so many hopes: that God will give us courage in place of fear; that our bodies will work as they should, that land which is now barren will flower, and dry landscapes be brought to life; that God will give us direction in life which none of us can mistake, and that our final destination will be a joyful one.

Do we dare entertain such hopes, in a world where so often disappointment and loss make the headlines and shape our own experience? Do we dare hope that our lives will be transformed? And, if we're honest, do we really want transformation? It's one thing being washed clean and keeping our shape as a dishcloth. It's quite another changing our whole lives in order to flower. Is our true hope, in reality, to keep our heads down, not to attract God's attention by looking for too much, to get through life with as little damage as possible: to survive?

That is not Isaiah's vision. Nor is it that of Jesus, God's coming King. His hopes for the transformation of us and our world were so high, he staked his life on them. And it is his coming we await: in hope, and maybe in fear. For if our hopes are high, our loss may be be correspondingly painful.

Hymns:

R&S 137 is an Advent hymn written by Philip Doddridge, the youngest of twenty children who became a Nonconformist minister in Northampton, was awarded a Doctorate of Divinity by Aberdeen University and died at the age of 49 from tuberculosis. The tune Bristol is from the 17th century; the name appears arbitrary.

R&S 141, words and music, is from the pen of Graham Kendrick, a prolific 20th-century writer of hymns and choruses, written in 1986. It calls us to prepare for Christ's coming in the expectation that our lives will be transformed by his coming.

R&S 136 was written in the 19th century by Dora Greenwell, a poet who also wrote essays on women's education and suffrage, and attacked the slave trade. This hymn began as a 30-verse poem. The tune Gonfalon Royal by Percy Buck is from the same century, written for use at Harrow School.

R&S 127 is a paraphrase of Psalm 72 made by the 19th-century Sheffield author and newspaper editor James Montgomery. The tune Crüger is named after its 16th-century composer, the German Lutheran Johann Crüger.

Sermon:

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146; Matthew 11:2-11; James 5:7-10

if our readings this morning are anything to go by, as Christians, we have very high hopes. Apart from the Isaiah reading we've looked at already, think of our psalm this morning. 'Happy the ones whose hopes rely on Israel's God.' And if our God is as described: pouring eyesight on the blind, supporting the fainting mind, sending the labouring conscience peace; helping strangers, widows, orphans in their distress, giving prisoners their release, then such hopes are indeed justified. But is this the case?

I'll leave you to consider that for a while, thinking back over your own lives, as we pick up from last week the story of John the Baptist, that preacher inclined towards plain speaking and judgment. In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus both praises him to the skies - a prophet, and more than a prophet, one of God's greatest messengers - but also cuts him

down to size: for John is less than the least in God's kingdom.

What's Jesus getting at here? And why did the author of Matthew think it was important enough to put down? As you might expect, lots of reasons have been put forward. Some people think that when the Gospels were being written, there were still people who followed the teachings of John, and hadn't heard of Jesus as God's leader to whom John was pointing. We know that's true, because we meet some of them in the Acts of the Apostles. So some reckon this was a bit of propaganda, put into the Gospel to persuade any remaining Johannites that they should really be switching their loyalty to Jesus. Is that right? Well, it's possible: since the first Christians, power politics have been part of the reality of church life. But somehow it seems a mean-spirited explanation.

Other people reckon it's a bigger story than that. They think Matthew's Gospel is telling Jewish people reading it: get wise! Forget about John - he's part of the old order. He was good enough for our ancestors, but Jesus is the real thing, bigger and better. Don't worry about being Jews any more - just focus on being Christians.

Is that likely? Again, you'll hear enough people explaining how wonderful Christianity is by trying to prove how mistaken Judaism is, so the Gospel writer could have been another of them. But I don't see someone who takes Jewish traditions and scriptures seriously enough to structure his Gospel round them is going to downgrade his whole religion like that. For Matthew, Jews are the natural Christians.

So what do I think is happening here? Let's go back to my visual aids, the dirty dishcloth and the bulb, both in need of water. If you remember, I drew a distinction between the external cleansing power of water, which will always need to be repeated, and its internal power to transform: once a flower grows from the bulb, it won't be the same again.

Like many a prophet, ancient and modern, John the Baptist is very good at telling us where we go wrong. He can call the religious experts to account because they pride themselves on knowing God better than everyone else. He can tell tax collectors not to cream a bit more off the top for their own benefit. He can tell soldiers not to grumble about their wages. But where John, with all the other prophets, is less helpful, is in showing us how to change. Of course we would like to be the sort of people John can't point the finger at. But as anyone who wants to change a bad habit knows, it's not as simple as hey presto! and we're the new revised Christians God wants us to be. The prophet points out our failings, we take note, we change - and then, ten to one, we relapse: because, underneath, we're still the same people, driven by the same needs and fears. In other words, as we might have guessed, John the Baptist is great at external cleansing. But he's not so good on transformation.

Jesus, on the other hand, is all about transformation. He's God coming into human life from within, transforming our motivations, our values, our lives. Jesus is able to make us flower like hyacinth bulbs - or, even better, like ourselves: the people God created us to be. And that transformation isn't a one-off, but a life-time's change in who we are.

Sounds great, but what do I mean in practice? Well, let's translate that great long list of God's transformative actions in our psalm into our own context. Have you ever come to worship with your mind in a whirl, maybe because you had a big decision to make, or life was really stressful? When you left worship, however, things felt different. Your problems were still there, true, but you felt calmer, more at peace, more ready to deal with them; more hopeful that together, you and God could find a way through. Maybe it was the music, with its power to speak to our hearts. Maybe it was one of the readings which gave wisdom for your situation. Or it may have been the silence in our prayers, bringing you God's love. God's transformation can be immediate, but that's not necessarily the case - just like bulb-

fanciers in winter, our reading from the letter of James is right, though infuriating, to counsel patience. Over the years, God has been transforming me from somebody who worries about everything and needs to be in control into somebody more ready to let go and let God. Of course, we can't always put our finger on direct divine action. People do change and mature through life. What's more, we can help transform each other, by pointing out each other's gifts, sharing a word of encouragement. But to the extent my life has been transformed - work in progress - I believe it's down to Jesus, the living water, making my desert bloom. I wonder how God has been changing you through life? I'd love to hear.

But what happens when loss hits? When we hear news like the death of Jim Cathels? Don't our hopes in God's transformation just make it hit harder than if we had feared it all along? Our reading knows about suffering, too; as do saints of past times and today, Christians whose lives have been full of sorrow, but who still trust God. If our hope was in a magician, waving a wand to protect us from all harm, we would be disappointed. But even though our transformation may be watered by tears, the God we worship and serve is Immanuel, God with us. With us from the uncertainty of birth to the sorrow of death; taking us beyond death, into life that will not die.

Second Sunday in Advent; Holy Communion

Service Date:

5 December, 2010

Hebrew Bible reading: Isaiah 11:1-10

Comment

Chair: Can this meeting of the health and safety subcommittee come to order, please? The topic of our meeting this morning is Isaiah's vision of God's peaceable kingdom, and how we can foresee and avoid any associated risks. Point one: livestock.

Member: I've done some initial research on this. I can't find any formal trials of wolves lying down with lambs, but my general reading indicates that it may well result in a lot more wolves and a lot fewer lambs.

Chair: And your solution?

Member: There's an obvious solution, of course. Keep the two in separate enclosures, preferably fenced off, with sheepdogs patrolling the perimeter. It will have cost implications, but that's the best way to avoid trouble.

Chair: What else?

Member: I'm not sure Isaiah looked very hard into the practicalities of bears grazing like cows. Apparently bears are omnivores, and a purely vegetable diet will play havoc with their digestive systems. Similarly, I suspect the RSPCL would have something to say about lion owners who fed their charges on hay. However, vegetarian dogs have been known, so with the proper dietary supplements, I imagine it might be possible to implement Isaiah's strategy, preferably with a pilot study monitored by vets to highlight any unintended consequences.

Chair: Now, child protection issues.

Member: I really don't think Isaiah can have studied best practice in this field. The statutory regulations say nothing about the ideal proximity of small children, whether or not breast-fed, to adders, but I suspect there would be strong feeling against it from the parents' point of view, if nothing else.

Chair: I don't want problems; I want solutions!

Member: Maybe defanged adders? If that remained within the spirit of the original vision?

Chair: Well, that doesn't sound completely impossible. Now, to the crux of the matter. Isaiah's mission statement: 'They shall not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain.'

Member: Now there, I'm afraid, we have a real problem. Can you imagine any situation, even under divine providence, where there is no hurt, no destruction? Why, my own family couldn't claim as much, let alone my synagogue! And as for our glorious religious heritage... well, it would be downright embarrassing if we were to suggest anything of the sort.

Chair: I do take your point. Well, we've done our best to envisage Isaiah's dream, but your analysis clearly points to its impracticality. These dreamers never consider the human realities of the situation! All we need do now, I think, is produce a report to that effect and suggest the whole idea go back to the prophet for reworking. And this time, he should make better use of his focus groups! Meeting adjourned!

We're good at being pragmatic in this church. We know the effort it will take to keep the paths snow-free, and the times when it's better to stay at home rather than becoming stranded halfway up a hill. Pragmatic is good. It means we can fulfil our programmes, not raise false hopes. But if we only operate on the basis of life as it is, we have no chance of discovering life as it could be. While I was inside today, leaving my boots by the door in case, out of my window I saw one of my neighbours shovelling snow out of our side road. He was remembering back to the time when we were all connected, acting on his dream of a snow-free road even while low temperatures and a grey sky prevailed, even though the next snowfall might cover his hard work, to make that dream a reality.

It's too easy for us pragmatic people, even in church circles, to work with the present realities of the relationships between us. She's never liked me since I made that unfortunate remark, even though I apologised.

But we don't call each other names; we just don't say hello in the street, or sit near each other at coffee. We're just happier when the other isn't there. And the same can be true when we encounter members of other churches who think or do things differently from us. Reconciliation is a big word to use in church circles. It sounds too big for us - more the sort of thing they need in Israel and Palestine. Yet the first Christians were known by their love for each other - though reading Paul's letters, I suspect they could be just as awkward as us. So what's stopping us, when, as inevitably happens, there is conflict in the church, from becoming friends again? I suspect it may be our fear of being judged. I suspect many of us store up the negative labels others have given us, and bruise a little every time we think of them. Why would we make ourselves vulnerable, deliberately put ourselves in the way of more hurt? And yet, Isaiah's vision promises reconciliation between some very different characters! Dare we take that dream seriously? Alongside our hope for peace in the nations, dare we light a candle for reconciliation, reconnection, in the churches, and in our church?

Hymns:

R&S 626 was originally written by Canon H. Scott Holland, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford. The tune Rhuddlan comes from a town near Rhyl in North Wales.

CG 25 was written by Geonyong Lee, a South Korean composer who began composing at the age of twelve. It has been paraphrased in English by Marion Pope, a United Church of Canada worker with the Presbyterian Church in Korea.

CG 28 was originally written by Johannes Olearius, a 17th-century German academic, translated by Catherine Winkworth. The tune Genevan 42 comes from Louis Bourgeois, one of the three main composers of hymn tunes in the Genevan Psalter used by Calvin.

R&S 445 is a twentieth-century hymn by G.W. Briggs, an Anglican clergyman and Anne

Atkins' grandfather. The tune Woodlands was composed in 1916 for Gresham's School in Norfolk, and named after one of the school houses.

R&S 650 is our most recent hymn, written in 1986 by David Fox, a URC minister who sadly disappeared two years ago on a walking holiday in Slovenia. The tune Gonfalon Royal was composed for use at Harrow School for the hymn 'The royal banners forward go'.

Sermon:

Sermon: Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist wasn't really someone who worried too much about focus groups, or what anyone thought of him. I can imagine the disciplinary action which would arise, maybe even court proceedings, if today he were to call a bunch of religious people vipers - it's slander at the very least, if not a hate crime! So why are we thinking about him this morning, when our hope is of reconciliation and our fear is of judgment?

Isn't John on the wrong side of the argument here, if we're trying to hold in our hearts Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom, where God rules?

But if we think of Isaiah's dream as an Ahh! moment, sugar-coated and Disneyfied, then we're barking up the wrong tree. For here's how the previous chapter ends: Look, the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low. He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.

John the Baptist carries on with the same analogy when he warns his hearers: Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. There's a brief glimpse of that hellfire which I understand used to be such a feature - along with brimstone - of stern preachers, feeling it their duty to warn their hearers to repent of their sins or to face an eternity in the furnaces of hell. And while those images are metaphorical rather than literal the fear of judgment, human or divine, is still active in many Christian lives; maybe even in some of us here this morning. So what sort of people, or what sort of characteristics, are Isaiah and John, those extreme tree surgeons, warning us about this morning? Well, to start with, unless particularly tall people are in more danger of God's judgment - and for obvious reasons, I do hope not - it looks as if those of us with high religious status should be listening out carefully.

Isaiah's tall trees were the people of Judah and Jerusalem, God's holy city.

They reckoned they were in God's good graces, not like those horrible people in the northern kingdom of Israel, whom God had punished with Assyrian invasion. Anti-northern prejudice is nothing new!

John the Baptist's vipers were the religious establishment: the Pharisees, who were experts on how to live a holy life, and the Sadducees, who knew all about the proper way to worship. People who came to hear John just to make sure he wasn't leading people astray were not his favourite audience. They seemed to assume that because they knew about God, God liked them best. And that's actually a common failing in us religious people. If we ever catch ourselves thinking we have the right answers, and everyone else - Muslims, atheists, young people, the Yorkshire Synod, whoever - has the universe totally wrong, we know we need to think again. For, as John the Baptist knew, God can make friends out of anyone, and doesn't need our permission to do it, either.

Yet I've learned through our Muslim-Christian dialogues that we shouldn't soft-pedal what we believe just because someone else thinks differently. While Muslims respect Jesus greatly as a prophet, and hold his mother Mary in very high regard too, they do not see him, as we do, as God in human form. From a Muslim point of view, it is impossible to imagine

anyone human who could possibly match up to God's stature, and it would be pride beyond anything Isaiah or John denounces for anyone to claim such a relationship. When we see, however, the reality to which we Christians believe both Isaiah's prophecy and John's tirade are pointing, excessive pride or hubris is the last thing we find in God's chosen leader. His wisdom, his spiritual insight, are evident, but he does not use them as weapons. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, says Isaiah, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. So for those on the underside of life, who feel condemned before they even open their mouth, his coming is good news: of reconciliation with God and reconnection with others. Someone with physical or mental health problems; or who struggles to make ends meet; or whom people would pass by quickly on the other side - they can look forward with hope to Jesus' coming.

But we can't get away with being dewy-eyed about God's Messiah. For Isaiah also promises: he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. This is where I am really tempted to list some of the things that are wrong in other churches,

and to look forward to Jesus' zapping my misguided opponents. But if I did that, I'd fall into the very same trap as any bigoted religious leader in Jesus' day. Furthermore, if I think of Christians I know personally who hold such views, even though we are bound to disagree, I can't feel that way about them. For the truth is that we are connected as members of Christ's body, and every break in that chain hurts me as much as them.

I suspect most of us here, unlike John the Baptist, aren't tempted to wage war on misguided belief. We just don't talk about either religion or politics. Yet if, fearing controversy or judgment, we stay resolutely unconnected from those who are different from us, snowed up in our own righteousness, we are not bearing the good fruit of reconciliation to be found in Isaiah's vision. For it does not describe wolves being put down, adders defanged, or even strict heavenly segregation to avoid unheavenly rows: but harmony across differences. Just as we are, through the reconciliation with God Jesus offers to each of us, all that we are can enter God's kingdom, transformed; along with the whole of them, whoever 'they' are. Soon we will be calling to mind the consequences of human destructiveness which Jesus carried to death and through death. Each of us bears some responsibility for the world's sorrow; none of us is totally innocent. Yet Jesus makes Isaiah's vision a human possibility, because it is a divine possibility and Jesus' life and death have made humanity divine. And our participation in this ongoing drama of reconciliation gives us the courage to forgive, to be forgiven, and thus to re-member the human chain of love broken by fear.

Advent Sunday; Caledonian Service

Service Date:

28 November, 2010

Isaiah 2:1-5

Advent again, the start of our yearly countdown to Christmas. Sometimes we may wonder: why bother waiting four weeks now December is here? The shops are playing carols; Christmas cards have been on sale for weeks now; the Christmas lights were switched on last weekend in Sheffield, and every TV ad tells us about yet more presents we can't live without. Yet I don't know about you, but I've not nearly made all my preparations for Christmas. You can see, for example, that our Christmas tree is still waiting to be decorated. And though in one way the world already seems ready to mark Christmas, in another way,

we seem to be nowhere near that hope of peace that Isaiah offers us: the time when we will no longer be spending our money on international missile shields or on aircraft carriers, but on ploughs and on tractors, when God will judge between nations.

Let's do a quick international roll-call. North Korea seems to be doing its best to provoke South Korea into war. Ships off the coast of Somalia are in ongoing danger of hijacking by pirates as government has broken down there. In Gaza Palestinians are living in a huge prison camp. In Haiti people are attacking the United Nations forces sent to help them, because they blame outbreaks of cholera on the foreigners. Sudan may be about to dissolve into civil war. In Congo there are still outbreaks of violence, as in Afghanistan. And that's by no means all.

Faced with all these fears of disaster, what can we do,? We have two possibilities. One: we can close our eyes, shut our ears, turn the telly up louder and go on making our shopping lists. Or two: we can face up to the horror and destruction that are part of our world, and ask God for hope rather than fear to rule and, this Christmas, for Isaiah's vision of peace to come closer in our fearful, war-torn world.

Which option do you think I'm going to suggest we follow? Right: the second one. And all through Advent we're going to be following that pattern: facing our fears, and giving to God our hopes.

This week, as we light our first Advent candle, we will be looking at the whole world and praying for its peace. When they go out, our children will be decorating doves of peace, which will become the first decorations on our Christmas tree - they'll come back in at the end of the service to start putting them up, with a bit of help from other people. And when we come to our prayers of intercession, praying for others, I'm going to invite you to think about a country in the world in need of Isaiah's dream of peace, and to write the name of that country on the dove you were given as you came in, to add to our tree decorations. For this year, our Christmas tree won't just be helping us with our countdown to Christmas. It will also become a prayer tree, offering to God our hopes for the whole world.

You may wish to write on your dove a hope for the country you have chosen - it may be Scotland or England, it may be a country in Europe, Asia, Africa or the Americas - or just its name. Next week, we will be thinking of hopes and fears again, as we consider our church getting ready for Christmas. The week after that, we'll be offering God hopes and fears in our own lives. And the week before Christmas will be our Nativity service, when Hope and Fear fight it out for possession of the Christmas story. But I'm getting ahead of myself. This week it's time to light our first candle on the Advent wreath. Who would like to help me?

Hymns:

R&S 128: The Lord will come and not be slow

R&S 130: Behold, the mountain of the Lord

Psalm 122 (tune: Belmont, R&S 441) I joy'd when to the house of God

R&S 656: Lo! He comes with clouds descending

R&S 601: Christ is the world's true light

Sermon:

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Matthew 24:36-44; Romans 13:11-14

Isn't it really easy for us *not* to hope for peace? Isn't it easy to conclude, from the pages of the newspapers and the latest TV headlines, that the world is going to hell in a hand-basket, and the best thing for us to do is to switch off, literally and metaphorically, and cultivate our own gardens? - when the snow lets us! Isn't it tempting to let ourselves think: in so many parts of the world where we're fortunate enough not to live, disaster is bound to come, so

all we can do is to forget about the many terrible things we have no power to change? Or, when I say that, does it make you think: You're talking rubbish, Sarah! Remembering the St Andrew's Night Ball, which some here attended last night, in the hope of having a good time in spite of the disastrous weather, maybe you're thinking: 'Not so: Scots can hope with the best of them!' I reckon the Scottish character is not one which will give up lightly, so last night I Googled Scotland and hope, looking up the most frequently visited pages on the Internet with both words in. What do you think I found?

Well, in my results there were three categories of hopes for Scotland. The first, and most frequent, was sporting: snooker, golf, rugby - and of course, given Richard Souter's address last night lauding the Tartan Army, football! The second was environmental: stories of seabirds able to breed because of the Scottish Marine Bill; hopes of harnessing offshore wave power. And the third was politics - though I have to say that there was very little unanimity about what was hoped, or from which party! Anyway, that confirms what you already knew, that we all do have hopes, based on what we care about, and on what we think is possible. But I'd still like to challenge you all, wherever you're from: are your hopes big enough?

Think of Paul, writing to the Christians at Rome, a flourishing church, urging them not to get complacent in their faith. Wake up! he tells them. Time's getting on: it's nearer to the end of all things than when you were first believers. Don't get sidetracked into satisfying lesser desires, but keep your eyes on God, your main priority. Now I hope I don't need to warn Caledonians - or anyone else, come to that - about the temptations of revelling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness; though as some of you will know, I always leave the St Andrew's Ball before the dancing, so after that anything is possible! More seriously, I would like to remind us that when life is stressful, though reaching for just one more glass may appear to silence our fears, it can just end up compounding them. I hope, too, that both in the Caledonian Society and in St Andrew's, quarrelling and jealousy are temptations we can overcome; again, when we're under stress, it's all too easy to assume that others are having an easier time than we are, and to react accordingly. If you are tempted that way, ask for God's help to change!

But the question of salvation: wholeness, rescue from all that is wrong? Like world peace, that's such a huge hope that maybe we prefer not to entertain it, in case we are disappointed. And that, too, may be one facet of the Scottish character: to expect the worst and be pleasantly surprised, not to hope for the best only for those hopes to be dashed. Yet for Christians, hopes should be high. For we believe that our God is not satisfied with the way things are, with injustice and disaster. We believe that God has already intervened in our world, bringing wholeness to those who would accept it. And, in theory, we believe that God has promised that our hopes for the world's transformation will not be disappointed. Yet, two thousand years after Paul's writing to the Romans, can we still honestly be looking for the fulfilment of God's promise: and if so, how? Some years ago a series of books called 'Left Behind' hit the American bestseller lists, taking very literally our passage this morning describing the rapture (the technical term for that moment when God's chosen ones are taken up into heaven and the rest are left behind). Such smugness - assuming of course that we are among those who are taken by God, not those who are left - may once have been a temptation for Presbyterians here too, as expressed in the following ditty: 'We are the chosen few; let all the rest be damned; there's only room for one or two; we can't have heaven crammed!' Now we can easily mock the devilish self-satisfaction, memorably expressed in James Hogg's Confessions of a Justified Sinner, that assumes its own

righteousness and the absolute wrongness of others. But going to the other extreme, it's easy for us to be distracted from the Christian hope of transformation, to assume we can forget about Jesus making anything new, at any time.

Yet unless we dare to hope for change for the better, and to keep a sharp eye out for such change happening, we are in danger of getting left behind, of not being caught up in God's transformative action within our ordinary world.

After the Second World War, a Swiss theology student called Roger Schütz hoped for peace between the nations of Europe. Instead of abandoning that hope, he founded the Taizé community in France, a huge force for reconciliation between young people in Eastern and Western Europe. Years ago, when I was in London, the Taizé community wanted to hold one of its big European meetings there. While planning for this enormous event, as well as the question of accommodating and feeding thousands of young people from every part of Europe, the organisers wanted to arrange visits to local signs of hope. For though these were small - a soup run here, a youth club there - they believed that the hope of world peace begins to be realised at grassroots level, person by person.

Going along the lines of Richard Souter's praise of Scotland as an outgoing nation, I'd argue that our hopes for peace need to be outgoing, reaching beyond us and ours to people everywhere. And lest you see this as a fine ideal, but one that's impossible to carry out, I'd like to offer three signs of hope where this is already happening. A few weeks ago, thousands of shoeboxes filled with new gifts - 27 boxes from this congregation - were sent off to Africa and Eastern Europe so that poor children in many countries will know someone cares about them. After this service, at least some of those who baked cakes will have managed to struggle through the snow bearing their cake tins. That way we will be able to raise money, not only for our church funds but also for Children in Need; and to take home something good for lunch, as sadly we can't share it here today. And at your seats you will find envelopes labelled Commitment for Life into which you can, if you wish, put a cheque, payable to St Andrew's, supporting our Christian Aid appeal for the work of Silveira House, an aid agency in Zimbabwe, that country at war with itself. You will know of many other ways, however small, in which, as we prepare for Christmas, we can look out for the coming of God's love, and place our hope in God's promise of peace. And that way, the fear of disaster will not overwhelm us.

Last Sunday before Advent: Christ the King and Commitment for Life

Service Date:

21 November, 2010

Jeremiah 23:1-6

We all know, I think, something of the difficulties of Zimbabwe. But what is maybe less obvious from all the bad news reports we get from there is the resilience of the Zimbabwean people, how they are always ready to make something out of nothing. Here are two sculptures from Zimbabwe, one of wood and the other of stone: making beauty and meaning out of raw materials. And we're going to look at a snapshot of the work of Silveira House, which we support through Commitment for Life, the URC arm of Christian Aid - apologies for the poor quality of some of the images in this Powerpoint presentation. We begin with one of the huge stone sculptures for which Zimbabwean artists are famous - this one brought to Britain through the work of Johnston Simpson, a member of St Andrew's URC in Walton on Thames. It's called Freedom - a powerful word in Zimbabwe - and it reminds me, especially on this Sunday when we celebrate Christ as our King, of Jesus' head,

crowned with thorns.

1. Let's look at a Zimbabwean sculptor making something out of nothing. This man is all the more impressive, for he cannot see, and is working on his wood sculpture by touch.

Blindness in Zimbabwe can make someone totally dependent on others, but Silveira House has helped this man to express his artistic gifts and earn his living by them.

2. Nyamapanda is a small town on the border between Zimbabwe and Mozambique. It's a favourite stop for the long distance lorry drivers as they travel through to Harare and beyond, so single women here with no training or support often become sex workers. Kesia Tafura in this picture is part of a fourteen strong Sewing Group trained by Silveira House. After three weeks initial training on the basics of needlework they were given fabric, thread and hand sewing machines to start producing school uniforms and trousers, though apparently they still have difficulty with the zips in men's trousers! Parents are delighted with the uniforms, sold in the local market. Their profits are going back into the kitty so they can expand to sell in Mozambique. Through Silveira House the women have also received training on HIV prevention. When asked how the course had changed her life one of the ladies said, "I told my husband to practice safe sex and get tested. This has made my life better now."

3. But small businesses in Zimbabwe still have a hard time surviving, especially after Operation Clean Up in which the Zimbabwean police swept through informal settlements and townships in Zimbabwe, bulldozing homes, businesses and people. Silveira House has offered businesses like this one emergency aid, but also supports them through HIV and AIDS education and testing: in 2008, one in seven Zimbabwean adults was living with HIV.

4. Chipso Chaparata in this picture is the chairperson of a drinks group in Nyamapanda. Following training from Silveira House, she and the group are now able to sell around 300 bottles a month of a fruit flavoured juice. Learning to mix the right amount of concentrate and clean water and store the product correctly has meant they can now sell the juice in local shops, bringing in much needed income for women in the community, many of whom, widows from HIV related illnesses, have been affected by the violence of the last few years. Chipso says, "This project has had real benefits as I can survive on my own. My husband died and I need to look after my family. With this I can do it. Life was very harsh and I felt like killing myself but it has made life much better now. Projects like this one have really changed our community. The bottle means so much more than a drink."

Other group members remembered how they used to get a few pence for carrying bags for visitors passing through. Now with income generating schemes and HIV training they have realised that both men and women need to be involved in earning. Learning a skill or setting up a small business helps if one of them dies. The person that is left will then be able to support their children and give them a future.

5. It was Father John Dove who founded Silveira House forty one years ago. He is now in his late 80s. Here he is addressing guests attending the celebration of Silveira House's 40th Anniversary. The current director is Father David Barry. He says of Silveira House: It was born in the crisis of the early 1960s when there were clashes in the townships, and we seem to have been in some sort of crisis ever since. We work in awareness building, advocacy, conflict resolution, research into the situation, HIV&AIDS awareness, technical skills and small business creation and other things.' What a list!

6. Thokozami Mugwetsi is a highly qualified nurse and social worker working with Silveira House. Her expertise and passion are nutrition and HIV education. She is particularly keen to promote healthy lifestyles through growing, processing and using medicinal herbs.

Life for Thoko can be as difficult as for those she supports. Living in a high density area around Harare she often finds she has no electricity or water for days at a time. Her standard of living has dropped in the last year with the use of the American dollar in the supermarkets. She has noticed that although the shops are now full of food it is much more expensive. Her adopted son wants to be a doctor but may have to leave the country to train.

She speaks of desperate times when there was no food and people she was working with ate the seeds they were given to sow. Today she says life is a little easier but people worry about the next elections and must be prepared by being self sufficient. When a mother and baby group spoke of their desire to have cervical cancer tests as well as HIV testing Thoko knew that much of her hard work had been worthwhile. In a land where life expectancy for a woman is thirty four years, understanding the importance of taking care of themselves and their children will bring a healthier and longer future.

7. Making something out of nothing: this is what Zimbabweans are used to doing; and making something beautiful at that, as this stone sculptor shows. But places like Silveira House would find it impossible to keep going under Mugabe's murderous regime without help from people like us supporting Commitment for Life. We are supporting good leadership in Zimbabwe, good shepherds who, under God, can bring the people into a better future. But remembering that crown of thorns, Zimbabweans are still awaiting the freedom of living under the kingship of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Hymns:

CG 62 takes its tune from an English folksong, the Lincolnshire Poacher, but the words, based on Matthew 18:19, come from Zimbabwe. Sadly, though Zimbabwe is now independent, freedom for God's people there is a prayer that still needs praying.

R&S 269 paraphrases Psalm 72 but looks forward from its Jewish roots to see Jesus as the fulfilment of Messianic hopes for a righteous king. The tune Truro was written in the 18th century; its name is unexplained.

CG 63 is a modern hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community, which again anticipates the Christian fulfilment of God's promise made through Jeremiah of a righteous king. The tune Salley Gardens is an Irish folksong, named from Yeats' poem.

R&S 522 expands on the nature of Jesus' kingship, expressed through vulnerability. Both words and music were written by Graham Kendrick for the 1983 Spring Harvest convention.

CG 65 is written in Shona, one of the languages of Zimbabwe.

R&S 265 was probably written for a Baptist hymnbook in 1930, to the tune Londonderry Air, another Irish traditional melody.

Sermon:

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Luke 23:33-43; Colossians 1:11-20

I wish I'd been with John Marsh on his visit to Zimbabwe! He takes us with him: from the three-star hotel Zimbabwean style in Harare, to the hospitable white Zimbabwean church Elders, with whom he stayed in comfort, to the hospitable black Zimbabwean ministerial family, who had to get up early in the morning to gather wood and heat water for him to wash; to the amazingly luxurious five-star hotel where on the way back they had to stay because of BA strikes. And with the monarchy in the news, because of the Queen's visit to Sheffield last week and the recent announcement of the engagement of Prince William and Kate Middleton, I couldn't help wondering: in which of these settings might John Marsh come across the heir to the throne and his bride, if they decided to honeymoon in Zimbabwe? The answer's obvious: the five-star Rainbow Towers hotel - formerly the

Sheraton, Harare - with anything anyone could ever need laid on; right next to the governmental offices, where top Zanu-PF officials lead a life of luxury behind high fences. Just as, the joke runs, her Majesty the Queen thinks all toilets smell of fresh paint, because the facilities are always redecorated just before her visit, so we expect our monarchs to live with the absolute best of everything. Whether we approve or disapprove, it's part of the job spec of being royal. A king staying in a Zimbabwean hovel? It's about as likely as Anne Widdecombe winning Strictly come Dancing.

And the letter to the Colossians seems to bear this out, talking about Jesus, our heavenly king. Listen: He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. First place in everything - that's the Rainbow Towers Hotel all right, isn't it? Or is it? What do we hear in our Gospel reading this morning about our king, and where do we find him?

He is dying. He is dying nailed onto a cross, between two convicts. The Roman governor has posted 'King of the Jews' above his head, but only in an ironic way, and the soldiers on execution duty mock him with it. The leaders of his religion sneer: if you're really God's chosen leader, come down from the cross! Only one person, a criminal dying with him, treats him as a king. Yet Jesus is the one to whom we Christians owe our highest allegiance. I suspect we might prefer a more obviously glorious king; the sort of king who'll carry us through life without too many worries - not the sort who ends up getting himself crucified, for heaven's sake! But life's not like that. Given his mother's sad story, Prince William knows that. So do the people of Zimbabwe, struggling against HIV/AIDS, poverty and corrupt leadership. Yet demonstrably the Zimbabweans we have seen this morning have learned from their Creator the art of making something beautiful out of nothing. And our King is to be found with them, black and white, just as much as speaking truth to power in the Rainbow Towers. It is only rulers like Mugabe, clinging desperately to privilege, who pretend that their reign is the true reality - and that pretence cannot hold forever.

We in St Andrew's cannot understand fully the times people in Zimbabwe, and Zimbabweans who have been forced to become refugees, are going through. As John Marsh hinted, we have more resources than we realise; maybe more resources than we can use; certainly enough resources to support Silveira House through Commitment for Life, as fourteen in this church already do on a regular basis. Yet we too have our own stories of pain, of loss, of hoping against hope for God's help. And the letter to the Colossians prays on our behalf, as well as for our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe, and even for Robert Mugabe - for on the cross Jesus prayed for those who killed him to be forgiven. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Rejoice, for it is this Lord who is our King!

Second Sunday before Advent: Remembrance Sunday

Service Date:

14 November, 2010

In our act of remembrance, the names of those inscribed on our War Memorial were read in the form known to their families and friends. The Tryst was read, the Last Post played by a trumpeter in the balcony, two minutes' silence was observed in thanksgiving for and remembrance of both them and all the others, civilians, peacemakers and soldiers, who have lost their lives in later conflicts, and Reveille was sounded. We ended by singing both verses of the National Anthem, as a prayer on our national day of remembrance.

Hymns:

R&S 344: God of grace and God of glory

R&S 762: The National Anthem

CG 141: What shall we pray for those who died?

Hymn (tune: Farley Castle, R&S 211) God of the nations, God of all who live

R&S 632 (tune 'St Thomas'): O day of God, draw near

Sermon:

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

Remembrance Sunday again; and whom are we remembering? What are we remembering, and to what purpose?

Today we remember those who have given life or limb in every war since the two world wars, right up to those wars still being fought today. Our Gospel reading speaks almost in passing of 'wars and insurrections'; nations and kingdoms rising up against one another; almost in passing because, from its point of view, 'the end will not follow immediately' - and that is the focus of its interest. In each Christian century, soldiers have fallen in battle, and it has seemed to their contemporaries that the end of all things must be near; yet the world goes on turning, the trampled grass grows green again and every spring the poppies blow. We could almost imagine that, because the end of all things is not yet, our Gospel takes the fact of war for granted. Certainly in the Hebrew Bible, spring is known without comment as 'the time when kings go out to war'. And though today we are remembering soldiers who have fallen in battle, we must look elsewhere than the Bible for words to mourn them; for example to our choir's anthem this morning, words taken from the funeral oration of the ancient Greek Pericles, reported in Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War.

For while the Hebrew Bible gives us the lament of David for Saul and Jonathan - ironically, both warleaders fighting against him - those who were not famous generals are not mourned. Either, as Israelites, they are presented as dying because they or their commanders had displeased God; or, as fighters against Israel, their deaths are foreseen and seen to be justified. Either way, there is no direct biblical tradition of commemorating ordinary individuals. Yet each Jew and each Gentile killed in biblical wars will have had families who mourned them and sought to keep their memory alive, as we do today for those whose names are inscribed on our own war memorial, and as many of you will be doing individually for others, connected in different ways with your own life.

How should we understand our actions? Are we celebrating dead heroes? Current soldiers' views on this question are mixed, as you may have gathered from the way this year the early wearing of red poppies by TV presenters, from halfway through October, has been queried.

Those of us born since the world wars who have not seen active service - including our leaders - may be tempted to glorify war and those who die in it. But a persistent voice of

military experience, from Wilfred Owen onwards, can query just how sweet and fitting it is to fight and die for one's country. Apart from the danger of death or physical mutilation, minds and later lives are also at risk. Research has shown, for example, that people who have been in the Armed Forces are disproportionately at risk of homelessness. And from the US Army we hear that 'for active duty troops, more have killed themselves this year than have been killed in Iraq or Afghanistan'.

A letter to the Guardian signed by six veterans of recent conflicts, from the Falklands to Afghanistan, and reflecting on the realities of modern warfare, is emphatic on the subject: *Armistice Day, a day that should be about peace and remembrance is turned into a month-long drum roll of support for current wars. This year's campaign has been launched with showbiz hype. The true horror and futility of war is forgotten and ignored. The public are being urged to wear a poppy in support of "our Heroes". There is nothing heroic about being blown up in a vehicle. There is nothing heroic about being shot in an ambush and there is nothing heroic about fighting in an unnecessary conflict. Remembrance should be marked with the sentiment "Never Again".*

No one, apart from arms manufacturers or politicians trying to make a name for themselves from the safety of the rear lines, could think war to be a good thing. Yet I suspect that the horror of war is not the only thing people are remembering this morning. Civilians in Sheffield and elsewhere discovered that the blitz brought out a neighbourliness which, ironically, they may feel lacking today. The comradeship of forces personnel in action, depending on one another to stay alive, is a real force for good. For some, the danger of living on the edge has charm. And it is a deep human instinct to let our worst experiences, including those of war, slip into oblivion; to remember only the good. This year some here this morning visited Pegasus Bridge and heard the story of piper Bill Millen, personal piper to Simon Fraser, 15th Lord Lovat, commander of 1 Special Service Brigade at D-Day. Millin, who died this year, is best remembered for playing the pipes whilst under fire during the D-Day landing in Normandy. By the time of the Second World War the use of bagpipes was restricted to rear areas by the British Army. Lovat, however, ignored these orders and ordered Millin, aged 21, to play. When Private Millin demurred, citing the regulations, he recalled later, Lord Lovat replied: 'Ah, but that's the English War Office. You and I are both Scottish, and that doesn't apply.'

Yet if we do not also remember the excesses of war, to which civilians as well as soldiers can fall prey, we are doomed to repeat them. After the massacres of the twentieth century, it is hard to have faith in any war ending all wars. And if, as in the case of George W. Bush recently attempting to defend techniques of torture, we turn into the enemy whose tactics we abhor, that enemy has won. This, too, we should remember today.

But our remembering should not stop there, either. For we should remember, finally, the ideals with which some go out to fight. And here we come at last to our second reading, from the prophecy of Isaiah. Children living safely to adulthood; people living to a ripe old age; a house of one's own to live in; work of one's own on which one can live: such are the hopes of everyone which, if denied, can lead to war. It may seem an impossible vision to realise before the end of all things. Yet just as much of our national wealth is currently expended on war, such peaceful hopes - seen, for example, in the United Nations Millennium Goals - can become practical aims to which we commit ourselves, individually and as a nation. That way, when we come to remember all who have died in war - peacemakers, warriors on all sides and civilians, the red poppy and the white - we shall keep faith with their desire for a better world, one in which God has the final victory.

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Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

7 November, 2010

Luke 6:20-31

Who wants to be poor? Certainly not the young woman I heard on Radio 4 this week, who'd just finished college with a load of debt but couldn't find a job. She was living in a crowded flat with others in the same situation, existing on benefits while she filled in more and more job application forms, and feeling terrible about her life. All the effort she'd put into her education seemed to be going to waste; she felt she was letting down her parents, who were living in much more comfort elsewhere - but most of all, she seemed to be angry that the good life with a house of her own and a well-paying job, the life society had promised her if only she worked hard, was quite out of her reach. I wonder how that young woman might react if she heard Jesus saying: Blessed are you who are poor, for God's kingdom is yours? I suspect it might not be very polite. Rubbish, she'd be saying. Of course I want to have money.

I'm not in a good position to talk about the blessings of being poor, for I've always had as many resources as I needed to live my life. I suspect I'm not the only one here this morning in that position. But maybe we can get somewhere by looking first at the second Beatitude: Blessed are those who are hungry, for they will be filled. The hungrier I am, the more I look forward to my next meal and the more I appreciate it when it arrives. If, on the other hand, I've just had a meal and have eaten my fill, I can smell the most delicious food, and not want any at all. Unless I need food, I'm not interested in it. And maybe that idea is one way in to understanding the rest of what Jesus is telling us.

If we know what it's like being poor, we know we don't want to go on with things as they are. If we are hungry, we want to eat. If we're crying, we want to laugh. So when we are in need, we turn to God. But what happens if we are well off, well fed, content? Why would we want things to change? For us, life is good right now, and any alteration would give others more at our expense - so we may be tempted to think not just that we don't need God but even that we don't want God interfering in our lives. Unless, of course, it's not just our lives and those of the people we love that are important to us; unless our own prosperity and comfort are not the most important things for us.

The young woman I heard on the radio felt cheated of the prosperity that should have been hers by dint of her hard work. Her situation calls into question the values of hard work leading to material success by which she and many of us have been brought up. But if we are Jesus' friends, we have a different set of rules in a new regime: God's kingdom. We see it in Jesus' telling his friends that when they get a bad name because they are his people, they're on the right track. When someone attacks us or the values we stand for, he tells us, we are to love and pray for them. When we want to protest against an unjust society, we are to do it not by violence, but by showing it up for what it is. We are to treat others, especially people we are tempted to distrust or ignore, with the same consideration we want them to give us.

That's quite a different way of looking at things, and as Jesus warned, it may cost us dear. Do we really want to break out of the prison of working hard for what we are entitled to, and instead dare to look to God for what we need?

Hymns:

R&S 121: The God of Abraham praise

R&S 108: The love of God

CG 111 (t. R&S 74): Sing for God's glory

R&S 261: At the name of Jesus

Sermon:

Daniel 7:1-8, 15-18; Psalm 149; Luke 6:20-31; Ephesians 1:11-23

I've had real difficulty in preparing the service this week; and not just because there always seemed to be something else in the diary that stopped me thinking about it properly. No; I suspect I may be calling into question one of my own deep beliefs: that if I try as hard as possible to get things right, I won't need to ask for God's help. But before I explain a bit more about what I mean, I'd like you to stop sympathising with me for a moment and feel some compassion for the prophet Daniel, whose night's sleep was broken by an unexpected and unwelcome dream.

What did he see in this dream? The four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. The bit we've missed out in our reading this morning gives anatomical details for these beasts, which make them nightmarish creations: a lion with eagle's wings; a bear with three tusks; a leopard with four birds' wings on its back, and finally a monster with iron teeth and ten horns. But Daniel isn't just having a nightmare; he's giving a political commentary on different world empires which would rise and fall centuries after the setting of his story, when his prophecy was used to comment in a covert and safe way on the great powers of the writer's day. What is the outcome of this political bestiary? Daniel is reassured by one in the know: four kings shall arise out of the earth, but the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever--forever and ever." In other words, while kingdoms and earthly powers come and go, God's people will not be shaken, but will continue. And so far at least, the prophecy has been accurate. The Babylonian empire, the Persian empire, the rule of the Greeks and that of the Romans is all ancient history; other empires, including our own, have arisen and fallen in the centuries since, and today we may be witnessing the rise of a new empire in China, while the power of the United States may be on the wane. But trying to use Daniel as a political history misses the real point, which is that God's kingdom is of a different sort to any human regime, and that while all human organisations are temporary, God's rule is eternal.

Our psalm this morning takes up this theme. While most of it is concerned with God's praise, the last few verses don't augur well for the temporal powers, whose fate is to be bound and judged. Of course, this is complicated by the Bible having come out of a small country which, for most of its existence, was under the rule of foreign powers. Heathen rulers are as a matter of course assumed to be up to no good, and in need of God's chastisement - for aren't they persecutors and oppressors of God's holy ones?

That sort of attitude is not so foreign to our own church tradition. The Scottish Presbyterian Church from which we came defined itself by protest against King James VI of Scotland and I of England, who attempted unsuccessfully to impose on the Scottish church an English prayerbook. The Congregationalist church, partner with the Presbyterians in making up the United Reformed Church, has its roots in the English Reformation, which decided King Charles I was too ungodly to live and had him executed. In general, however, the Scots in England and specifically in Sheffield haven't been known for nonconformity. This church is largely made up of professional people who have built material success on hard work within the Establishment; not all of you may support England in sporting matters, but I've not noticed the question of devolution to be a burning issue for our Scottish members - though you're welcome to put me right afterwards!

There's good and bad in this approach. While there's always a question mark in my mind against people who see nothing but bad in 'them' - the people with the say, the people who rule us - and nothing but good in 'us', I sometimes wonder whether we've been coopted into the ranks of the rich people described by Jesus who are doing very nicely, thank you, and don't want to rock the boat in case they are affected. We have bought into the myth that if we will only work hard, society will reward us with prosperity. That myth is looking rather shabby, however, when it comes to subsequent generations. Some of your children and grandchildren are discovering, like the young woman I mentioned earlier, that the bargain of work in exchange for success isn't always being honoured.

And the financial cuts to come may further challenge the idea that may still lurk at the back of our minds: that through hard work we can make it in life without needing help from God or anyone else; that only those who deserve it are poor. But what should we make of the reading we heard just now from the letter to the church in Ephesus?

It speaks of power, of riches, of inheritance - and to start with, it sounds as though we're talking metaphor here; as though, so long as you have a good relationship with God, your physical circumstances are irrelevant. But then, towards the end, it begins to speak of God's raising Jesus from death; of his being seated far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. Not only in the age to come, in heaven, but also in this age, on earth, Jesus' authority is greater than that of prime ministers, of queens or of presidents. And that necessarily has an impact on our dealings with the powers of this world in our own local context, whether we're talking about Nick Clegg, David Blunkett or Paul Scriven.

It may not be accidental that this letter is written to Ephesus. There, you may remember, Paul clashed with local economic interests when, preaching Jesus, he caused a large drop in sales of silver images of the goddess Diana, whose temple in Ephesus was famous. What we do as Christians should affect the powers that be, political and economic, and they will not always be very happy with the results. For if we question the underlying myths of our society - for example, that those who are rich deserve it, and those who are poor should work harder to achieve riches - we may expose underlying unfairnesses that benefit some in society at the expense of others. We may even question the myth that prosperity is all we need to make us happy, and therefore that the more we own and buy, the happier we shall become. Instead, we may dare to live out the shocking truth: that as created human beings we will always be dependent upon God's help; not because we deserve it, but because God loves us and wants to supply our needs.

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

31 October, 2010

Luke 19:1-10 (read by Elizabeth)

Sarah: Did you hear what happened yesterday, Elizabeth? Disgraceful! Absolutely disgraceful, it was!

Elizabeth: No! What happened?

Sarah: Well, you know there was a huge traffic jam on the dual carriageway. I was stuck there for hours! Disgraceful!

Elizabeth: I agree with you - the City Council really should improve traffic flow at that junction. I blame the trams, myself.

Sarah: But do you know why there was a traffic jam?

Elizabeth: Why?

Sarah: There was some event, Off the Tongue or something like that, and they got some famous young man in to talk about his life so far. Not that he's done much to write home about that I've heard. Nothing but layabouts, him and his friends. No proper jobs.

Wandering round the country discussing life, the universe and everything with a bunch of no-goods. I'd be ashamed to be his mother.

Elizabeth: But what's he got to do with that traffic jam?

Sarah: Well, you know how hard it is to park in town. People were flocking to West Street to hear his talk, and trying to find somewhere to park in those little side roads. And the traffic jam...

Well, you know what it's like. Shocking.

Elizabeth: Sarah, I'm not quite sure why you're so het up.

Sarah: Oh, that's not the *really* disgraceful thing. Turns out, there was someone famous in the audience. Or rather, infamous, I might add. Do you remember that banker, the one whose firm went bust for billions because he was greedy and made all the wrong decisions? What was his name? It's on the tip of my tongue. Anyway, you know the one.

Elizabeth [*cautiously*]: I may do. But how does he fit in?

Sarah: Well, he wanted to see this youngster. I can't think why - surely bankers are the gods of their own universe. But suddenly he went all shy and modest. And I know why, too. I can imagine just what people would have said if they saw him, now we know just how much the financial cuts are going to hurt! So he asked for a seat right at the back, and hoped everyone would be too busy with the speaker to notice him.

Elizabeth: Sounds like a good plan. What happened?

Sarah: What happened? What happened? Disgraceful, I call it! Anyone who did see this man was politely ignoring him, but what did this young whippersnapper do, once he'd given his speech and the questions were over, but call him up to the stage! Thingummy, he said - well, not Thingummy, but I can't for the life of me remember the man's name - Thingummy, he said, I'm staying with you tonight. Let's go for a coffee.

Elizabeth: Well! I didn't see that coming!

Sarah: Nor did anyone else, especially his welcoming committee, who looked pretty miffed, I have to say. But off they went together, just as if he were a person who deserved anyone's attention! I can't see this doing the young man's popularity ratings any good at all.

Elizabeth: I can see how people might be annoyed, but isn't 'disgraceful' putting it a bit strongly? The worst you could say of him is that he's a bit naïve, wants to see the best in everybody.

Sarah: But that's not the really disgraceful thing! They held a joint press conference this morning - it'll be in the Star tonight, I should think - and apparently now they've talked, Mr Fat Cat Banker's had a change of heart. He's going to give away lots of his profits to finance debt counselling for people who got in a muddle with their loans.

Elizabeth: Well, isn't that good news?

Sarah: You are joking, Elizabeth, I suppose? Help all those ne'er-do-wells who got into debt through too much spending and not enough saving? It'll just encourage them! Disgraceful, that's the only word for it! And the headline in the Star!

Elizabeth: Which was?

Sarah: 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'. They were even trying to drag religion into it! I don't know what the world's coming to, I really don't!

[*Elizabeth sits down*]

'Disgraceful' is a word that can easily slip off the tongue, whatever it is we can see going wrong in the world or among our friends and family. What we maybe don't consider so often that disgrace is the opposite of grace. And grace is not only the word we use to describe something that is beautiful, elegant, the way it should be, but also the word for God's free forgiveness of each of us. Some of us here this morning may know we've got major things wrong in our past or our present, things we wish had not happened, things for which we need forgiveness. Others may know we've had hurtful things happen to us that are not our fault, things which we need to forgive. But in fact there aren't two sorts of people sitting here this morning. For just like the bankers or those in debt we may be good at condemning, we imperfect human beings are always in need of God's forgiveness, and particularly so if we are tempted to feel that it's always others, and never ourselves, who behave disgracefully.

But the good news is that God's forgiveness, whether for Zacchaeus or for ourselves, is always on offer. And if God can forgive us, God can also give us the power to forgive each other.

Hymns:

R&S 492 is part of a longer poem by John Greenleaf Whittier advocating calm, reflective worship and self-scrutiny. The tune Repton by Charles Parry was originally at home in his oratorio Judith, where it told of the Israelites' escape from Egypt.

R&S 84 was apparently inspired in its Methodist author, Rosamond Herklots, while she was gardening and reflecting on the persistence of deep-rooted weeds and of sin in the human heart, in 1966. The tune Walsall was first published in the early 1800s as a psalm tune, set to Psalm 103. Its name is unexplained.

R&S 654 comes from the hymnody of Fred Kaan in 1965 while he was minister at Pilgrim Congregational Church in Plymouth, and was originally connected with United Nations Day (24th October). The tune Intercessor is also a twentieth-century creation, originally written for Ada Greenaway's hymn: 'O word of pity', whose last line, 'O Intercessor' gave the tune its name.

R&S 646 is another Fred Kaan hymn, dealing with mutual forgiveness. The tune Acceptance was written for this hymn.

Sermon:

Isaiah 1:10-18; Psalm 32:1-7; Luke 19:1-10; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Whenever I've heard that story about Zaccheus, it's been focussed on the man himself: how he was too short to see Jesus coming, so climbed a tree to get a good view, gained an unexpected houseguest, and changed his wicked ways. But you know how a Bible story you've heard dozens of times can suddenly hit you in a new and unexpected way? This time it was one little sentence that did it for me: 'All who saw it began to grumble.' And I thought: how discouraging that must have been, both for Zaccheus and for Jesus. A new friendship is being offered, a possibility of change - as Jesus later says, 'Salvation - wholeness, healing - has come to this house'; but all they can hear is the rhubarb-rhubarb from crowds of Disapproving People.

And that in its turn made me think of an experience a few of us had this week. Thanks to the Caledonian theatre group, we went to see Enron, a musical play about the rise and fall of a huge Texan company that started off in oil and gas, turned into a stock exchange for trading energy, and ended in fraud, bankruptcy, and the loss of billions of pounds and thousands of jobs and pensions. The way the play put it, three people seemed particularly implicated in its downfall: the Chief Executive Officer, Jeffrey Skilling, whose financial instruments,

brilliant for making money, had little basis in reality; his Chief Financial Officer, Andrew Faslow, who hid the resulting losses by creating unreal companies to take on Enron debt; and the chairman, Kenneth Lay, who carefully asked no awkward questions so long as the stock price went on rising.

Enron was a fascinating play - and that's something I wouldn't normally say about financial analysis - but what caught my attention was the different ways in which these three men dealt with the disclosure of their wrongdoing. When the crash came, while Faslow admitted his wrongdoing - and received a much reduced prison sentence as a result - Skilling proclaimed his innocence to the last, blaming the crash on a loss of confidence in the markets, rather than on any fault on his part, while Lay - the son of a Baptist minister, whose watchword was family values - died of a heart attack before he could be imprisoned. By the time it had all come out, I'm sure the whole of America was nodding sagely and saying how disgraceful these revelations were. That, of course, was before the further bank and corporate failures in the US and elsewhere, of which we're all well aware, and which carry some of the responsibility for our current economic plight. But before then, while the stock price went on rising higher and higher, I wonder how many of us, if we'd had a stake in Enron, would have been saying anything other than Hallelujah.

And while the case of Enron is unusual for its size and complexity, our reaction to wrongdoing - one aspect of what Christians call sin - is pretty similar in smaller cases, whether we're talking about a library fine or a car crash. Some admit their fault, maybe because they are genuinely repentant, maybe because they hope it'll decrease their punishment. Some - thank God, not many - genuinely cannot understand why the rules should apply to them. More turn a blind eye to the consequences of their actions. And many do not recognise their own involvement in a system which benefits from wrongdoing.

In case that last one doesn't make sense, let's use Isaiah's accusations against his people as an example. You'd think, from the way he begins, that they're on trial for some heinous offence, as bad as the cities of the plain which assaulted strangers and were consumed by fire. But to start with, it's not easy to tell what Isaiah has to complain about. You lot spend all your money on sacrificial animals! he seems to be saying. You worship God at all the right times! You pray a lot! It feels as though Isaiah's picked up the wrong script: a testimonial to their virtues, not an indictment against them.

But then we come to the heart of the matter, and it's a serious charge. Their hands are full of blood; they are evildoers. On what basis does Isaiah make this claim? Not on their pattern of worship; but on their absence of social or political action. Seek justice, he urges: rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. And this implies, of course, that as he speaks, oppressed people are being left to sink or swim; that widows and orphans are struggling to survive without the support of God's people.

I very much doubt that the Israelites to whom Isaiah addresses his message were rubbing their hands, gleefully watching the undeserving poor getting their comeuppance. But the same system which rewarded the efforts of prudent landowners made it very hard for those with no land of their own to make a living, while widows or orphans, with no family to support them, no social services to pay for their keep and no possibility of work, would have found life almost impossible. Today too, while financial cuts are necessary, if it turns out to be the most vulnerable who bear the brunt, we must protest. For many of us in the good times benefitted from the financiers' games, in the upward movement of share and house prices; and our interest payments on savings, however meagre, still come out of the pockets of people in debt.

So when in a few moments' time we have a little silence to bring what is wrong in our lives to God, let's consider not just what we think and do, but also how we are implicated in the bigger systems - economic, political, ecological - of our society. For recognising our part in these structural sins, rather than hiding it from ourselves and others, as they tried unsuccessfully to do in Enron, acknowledges the truth that we, along with the rest of the human race, belong to an imperfect and sinful world. And, as our psalm suggests, confession is good for the soul. I don't mean that we should constantly apologise for everything, whether it's our fault or not. But if we try to pretend that we are never in the wrong, we can only sustain that attitude by a constant refrain of 'Disgraceful!', which fools no one. If, however, we dare to admit to God, and to others, the things that we have got wrong, God's grace has elbow-room to operate in our lives, transforming us into forgiven people who in our turn can forgive others, instead of grumbling about them. And as that dynamic transforms our Babel of conflict to a Pentecost of harmony, by the help of God's grace we are becoming people like those described in Paul's second letter to the church at Thessalonica. Through no fault of their own they are persecuted, yet they are becoming more faithful, more loving; and others who see their lives can give glory to the God whom they serve. May that be said of us, too.

Bible Sunday

Service Date:

24 October, 2010

Two members of the church gave short reflections on Bible passages that meant a lot to them: Luke 6:46-49 by John Carter described Jesus' picture of a house built on rock as the principle of mutual love on which he had founded his life and his marriage; James Dickson spoke of Micah 6:6-8, God's call to justice, mercy and humility by which he tried to live his life.

Sarah Hall then spoke of a passage that meant a lot to her personally: Psalm 139.

Most of the time when I talk about the Bible, I'm using facts and ideas that other people have given me. But just as John and James have already shared today Bible passages that mean a lot to them personally, passages they've lived with a long time, that still help them in their daily living, I'd like to share with you one of my own favourite parts of the Bible: Psalm 139. All the psalms have been used for centuries for believers to share their feelings with God. Sometimes the writers seem to go overboard in confessing to God that they're the most horrible person in existence, bar none. Other writers seem a bit smug and self-satisfied - all their problems are the fault of someone else, someone wicked. And I can feel like either of those. Sometimes I think I'm doing really well in life, sometimes it feels as if I can't get a thing right. But that's why I love this psalm.

For Psalm 139 gives us a glimpse of how intimately God knows us, and has known us, ever since before we were born. Imagine a pregnant woman going for her first ultrasound, seeing the fuzzy little image on the screen and thinking: That's a real person, someone I'm always going to love. God doesn't need that technology, for from the beginning of the world, God has already had us in mind. And when I'm feeling wobbly about being me, that can be very reassuring - for God already knows the worst, and isn't put off by it!

The Psalm reminds me, too, that God's never going to go off and abandon me. Separation anxiety is a normal part of development in babies and young children - think of floods of tears at the kindergarten gate - but for adults too, the forming of good relationships means the possibility of losing them again, whether through disagreement, geography or time. So I

find Psalm 139 reassuring, not because it promises me a totally wonderful life, but because however far my life may take me, into no matter what dark or scary places, God is already there ahead of me.

The Psalm's not all about me, me, me, though - and that's good too! For I love finding out more about God's thoughts, God's ways. And given that God is so much greater than we are, great enough to conceive and create a whole universe or universes, there's always going to be more to find out about God, about God's world and God's creatures in it. One of the really amazing things the psalmist didn't know about God was how God chose to relate to us by becoming one of us, a human baby - but I'm getting ahead of myself: it's not quite time for Christmas yet!

And one more thing I like about Psalm 139 is that it's a reality check, though the paraphrase we've just sung misses out the nasty bit, so you'll have to check it for yourselves. After all that wonderful language about how well God knows us, how near God is to us, the writer relapses into feelings of hatred. And that, too, is part of me being human. I want people to see things my way. And if they don't, I'm tempted to assume that I'm right and they're wrong, that my enemies must be God's enemies too. Of course, that doesn't work - for my enemies are also reading Psalm 139, hearing how God loves them. That's why the Psalm's closing prayer is mine: test me, God, let me see my imperfections. But don't leave me in despair: lead me on your way.

Hymns:

R&S 38, though written by John Marriott in 1813, wasn't published till after the author's death in 1825 when, six weeks after he died, it was quoted at the Annual Meeting of the London Missionary Society. The tune Moscow was originally written for the hymn 'Come, thou almighty King' and published in a collection sold for the benefit of the Lock Hospital, an orphanage. Its name is that of the city where the composer, Felice Giardini, died.

R&S 317, another nineteenth-century hymn, was given by its author, H.W. Baker, the heading of Psalm 119:105 - 'They word is a lantern unto my feet, and a light unto my paths'. The tune Ravenshaw was adapted by W.H. Monk from a sixteenth-century pre-Reformation hymn in honour of Jesus' high-priesthood; the name seems to have been an arbitrary choice.

R&S 321 was first published in the 1920 supplement to the hymnbook of the Adult School and Brotherhood Movement, for which its author, G. Currie Martin, was a lecturer for many years. He was also, in his early years, Professor of New Testament Language at Yorkshire United College in Bradford. The tune Capel is an English traditional carol melody (originally to the words 'King Pharim sat a-musing), arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams.

R&S 319, our most recent hymn this morning, was written in 1954 by R.T. Brooks, for the 150th anniversary of the British and Foreign Bible Society. The tune Regent Square, by Henry Smart, is named for Regent Square, now Lumen, Church, by URC Church House.

Sermon:

Scripture

We've heard this morning of some of the reasons why we Christians find the Bible central to our faith. John has shared with us how building one's house on rock is not only a sound engineering principle, but also a model for building a marriage and a life on mutual Christian love, a model that has weathered well over many years. James has also spoken of a part of the Bible committed to memory, which has helped him, over a lifetime of Christian service, to meet others who do not share his point of view with humility rather than aggression - if this principle held good, how many family quarrels would be averted, not to mention church

committee meetings improved! We've found Anita inspired by the language of 1 Corinthians 13 to help us praise God and confront our own failure. In a few moments, Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan will be Derek's inspiration, guiding us at the end of One World Week into prayer both for ourselves and for others who are different from us.

But that's not all. In our discussion last week at the church meeting on Bible passages we have known and loved, many other uses of Scripture have come to light. We use Scripture to reflect on our lives and the things we value most. Ruth's promise to Naomi to stay with her always, even when her own family are far away, comforts someone whose family lives a long way off. Simeon's song to Mary, reflecting both his trust in God and his acceptance of all that was to come, helps someone else accept the harder aspects of their life. Jesus' story of two brothers and their generous father underlines how crucially important family relationships can be. And Jesus' challenge to his friends that trust in God will help them accomplish enormous things has challenged someone else to trust God, and always to ask for God's help in prayer.

The Beatitudes, another choice, are loved not only for their call for us to live up to the all-encompassing love of God, but for their familiar words and rhythm. And I suspect the Bible's powerful use of language is no small aspect of the way we use it. Many of us may have learned verses by heart at an early age; maybe in a traditional version, unlike today's ordinary language, but that very difference can help us treasure the Bible's words, and to bring them to mind at moments of confusion or crisis. And though we sometimes, uneasily, may think knowing the theological long words should be the important thing in our Christian knowledge, even if we don't quite understand them, for someone it emerged that it was the words of a hymn which mediated the Bible. 'When I survey the wondrous cross' was loved for its memories of family members long gone, as well as for its doctrinal truths, expressed through the Gospels. Art can also mediate the Bible to us: Isaiah's promise that God has 'carved us on the palm of God's hand' - expressed in a Ghanaian sculpture of a hand, palm up, holding a newborn baby - confirmed someone's vocation to work with children. And of course words of the Bible may also be memorably associated with the great events of our lives: weddings, baptisms, funerals.

All these riches are ours! But they depend on our continuing to open and to be open to Scripture. So may its words become even more part of our lives, as we continue to follow Jesus, God's living word: forever the same, forever new.

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

17 October, 2010

Luke 18:1-8

It's One World Week this week, and the theme is 'Piece by piece towards peace'. That reminded me not only of our reading just now, but also of a piece of patchwork I did years ago, which I brought in to show you today. I'm sure others in the congregation will have done much more elaborate patchworks than this, but I've kept it all these years because it took a lot of work, but I felt the result - even with its ragged edges - was worth all my pricked fingers.

It's an appropriate theme for One World Week, too, I think. We have such high hopes for peace in our households, in our nation, in our world, but it seems to come in such little pieces, coming from conversations that may take place over years, from tiny shifts in politics, from slow, slow change. We sometimes speak or pray as though peace is something

we expect to achieve immediately, as if God were to wave a magic wand through our prayers and change people out of all recognition. But if we think of ourselves, we know that important changes sometimes take us years to achieve - if you've ever given up smoking, say, or taken up exercise, you know it takes time and effort to change a lifetime habit! It's all very well talking about things we can achieve ourselves, even at a lot of effort and cost. But sometimes change seems to be out of our control, something others must decide to do. I heard a story recently of someone who bought a two thousand pound living room suite from one of the big furniture companies, only to discover, when she got it home, that the cushions of the sofa sagged after about an hour's sitting on them. It may sound a trivial problem, but I suspect others here could match her story: months and months of waiting and worrying and writing letters and making phone calls, just to get her case heard. And all over the world people's lives are being affected by those in power - politicians, judges, multinational companies - with apparently little they can do about it. That's how it was for the widow in our Gospel story, too. She knew she had a good case in law; it was up to the judge to hear her story and pass judgment on it, but she couldn't make him do it. But remembering that widow and her story, Jesus tells us never to give up hope. For though earthly powers that stand against peace may seem impossible to shift, even they can be made to see reason, if we persist. My friend got her new sofa cushions - even though it took her eighteen months and the threat of a court case! Peace is growing slowly, painfully, in Ireland and in South Africa, as a result of ordinary people and ordinary churches taking small steps towards peace with their neighbours. We too can make peace with our neighbours, can give time and effort to many just causes in our city and our country. Yet how can we keep on making the effort, day by day? How could the widow keep on pestering the unjust judge for justice? Through prayer: for it is our ongoing relationship with our just God, renewed daily through prayer, that refreshes us, strengthens us and helps us persevere in piecing together peace, piece by little piece.

Hymns:

R&S 47 is based on both Psalm 90 and Psalm 104, reflecting on divine creativity and human frailty. It was originally written by Robert Grant in the 18th century, but has been revised to allow for subsequent changes in the English language; for example, it no longer makes sense in the last verse to have us 'lisping' God's praise, but the idea of struggle is retained. The tune Hanover was written as a psalm tune by William Croft in the 17th century, possibly as a reference to the royal house of that name.

R&S 528 began life as a medieval Latin hymn, but its adaptation by Percy Dearmer in the twentieth century takes an earlier translation by J.M. Neale in the nineteenth century into account. While it started as a Christmas hymn, it now reflects more generally on Jesus' incarnation, God becoming human. The tune Quem Pastores Laudavere (Shepherds came, their praises bringing), arranged by Vaughan Williams from a medieval German manuscript, harks back to its Christmas origins.

Eternal God, you cry for justice comes from the pen of Michael Forster, who has written a hymn for every Sunday of the church year. The tune St Clement is better known accompanying the evening hymn 'The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended'.

R&S 620 was written by Fred Kaan, a URC minister and prolific hymnodist who died last year, and first used to mark Human Rights Day in Pilgrim Congregational Church, Plymouth. The tune Oriel is a nineteenth century German hymn tune, reharmonised by W.H. Monk, who named it after the Oxford college.

Sermon:

Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; Luke 18:1-8; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

It's all very well for me to say, 'We must persevere in prayer so we are strong to act.' That's easier said than done, as you'll know from personal experience. Our psalm today makes beautiful promises of safety from evil; yet from what I know of your lives, let alone the more painful stories you have not felt able to share with me, if I were to assume that your experience was all sweetness and light, you could laugh ruefully in my face. The psalm tells us that our God never sleeps, that God will shade us from sunburn or moonshine; yet you know and I know that God's people are no more protected from pain and sorrow than anyone else.

So I suspect there may have been times in your life, as there are times in mine, when it is very hard to persevere in prayer; when we may want to shout at God because of injustice, or to brush prayer aside as irrelevant to an apparently hopeless situation. Strangely, there may also be times in life when everything is going fine, when we see no need to ask for God's help, and therefore may have little motivation to persist in prayer on our own account - though, of course, the world's conflict is still hard for us to ignore. Moreover, if we do see trouble ahead, and it's trouble of our own making, that too may stand as a barrier between ourselves and God - for we dread to hear words of divine condemnation.

For all these reasons, continuing faithfully in prayer may be something we find hard; almost as hard as Jacob in our Hebrew Bible reading, wrestling in the dark with an apparently murderous stranger. Jacob certainly had things on his mind, as he waited by the Jabbok river for light to come so he could cross and face his elder brother Esau, met for the first time in years. Jacob had cheated his brother in a big way. He had stolen the birthright that should have meant Esau's inheritance of a double portion of his father's wealth, and Isaac's dying blessing, that should by rights have gone to his firstborn son. He had run away from home in fear of his brother's reprisals. And years later, successful as he now was, he still feared Esau's anger.

So Jacob sent on all his wives and children, all his flocks and herds, over the river, towards the meeting point with Esau. Now he was trying to prepare himself for the next day's encounter. And in the night, at his lowest ebb of confidence and strength, Jacob had to wrestle, without knowing whether it was God or the devil who was engaging him so powerfully.

It seems to me that the Chilean miners so recently rescued from their underground prison of over two months may have been through a similar spiritual ordeal. One of them commented on his rescue: 'I was with God and I was with the devil. But God won.' And that reminded me again of William Golding's powerful and horrific story 'Lord of the Flies', in which a group of boys, isolated as the Chilean miners were, yet with fewer resources, mental or spiritual, lost that fight and turned from cooperation to competition; from goodwill to mutual destruction.

Jacob could have chosen to follow the devil's insidious prompting, could have run away from his brother again, abandoned his family all over again, so as not to face up to the evil within him which had caused this conflict. Yet his struggle to take responsibility for his past actions, to see the truth in who he had been and what he had done, was with the God of truth. Our struggle too, when we are peace-making, is with God and the devil; for one aspect of peace-making is to recognise where our own claims or attitudes may be part of the problem. It can be hard for us to let go of the moral high ground and to see things from our opponent's point of view. It is much easier to point out the obvious areas where the other has failed. Yet if we endeavour to discover where we are standing in the way of

justice, we too may be challenged to change our thoughts and ways, whether it's a low-level conflict involving who should be doing what when in the church kitchen, or a high-level conflict, as we come to terms with the fact that ongoing fighting in the Congo is fuelled by the diamonds in our jewellery and the raw materials of our mobile phones. No wonder that prayer is not always our first reaction! For we cannot rely on God to tell us we are completely right.

Yet though Jacob left that encounter limping, he also gained from his night of wrestling a new name: Israel, 'he strives with God'; reflecting a new understanding of who he was, and of just how much God valued him. And such new knowledge of ourselves and of God's love for us can be ours too when we persevere in prayer, however difficult the situation.

As we look into this strange story, so long ago, so far away, it can give us insight into our own lives with God. And the same applies when we look at the second letter to Timothy, for the encouragement it gives to someone who has grown up in the faith.

The passage we have heard gives a reason for this: 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.' Another translation of those same Greek words, however, tells us that 'All scripture inspired by God is useful'. That may seem a small difference, but it throws back on us, together, the responsibility to discern what in Scripture is of God and will help us in our Christian journey, and what may not come into that category. It might be possible in reading the story of Jacob to conclude that God wants us to get as much as we can for ourselves by cheating our families - but if you did think that, I'd want a quiet word afterwards. It's not always as easy as that, though, to avoid misinterpreting the Bible; we cannot forget that it was our sister Reformed Church in South Africa that believed the injustice of apartheid to be a truth found in its pages. Just as in our peacemaking we must wrestle with God to discern where truth and justice lies, so we will only find God's words for us today in the pages of the Bible by persevering in reading, in wrestling with difficult texts together and in prayer for the Spirit's guidance.

And when we persevere? When we do go on wrestling with God in prayer and in reading the Bible, when we encourage each other that it is still worthwhile to try piecing together peace, not just this week but all year round, what happens? Then we discover the truth of our psalm: not that God's people never face trouble, but that the God who made heaven and earth keeps our life.

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

26 September, 2010

Luke 16:19-31 (read by Miriam)

Miriam: So, Sarah, what will you be doing for Christmas this year?

Sarah: What do you think I'll be doing? I'll be here at St Andrew's, of course. Once we've worked out whether we're celebrating on Christmas Day, on Boxing Day Sunday or on both.

Miriam: But apart from going to church, though? What will you be doing for Christmas as a human being, not a minister?

Sarah: Panicking about presents, I suspect. I tend to cop out and get everyone books from Amazon online - that way they do the wrapping too. But of course that makes it more expensive. And I've not even got that many people to buy for. I just don't know how people with big families manage!

Miriam: It's only September, but it sounds as if you're already getting stressed out about it.

Sarah: It's not just the presents. It's the cards too. When I first came to St Andrew's, I worked out that if I started sending everyone in the church Christmas cards, not to mention everyone in my next congregation, and my next, I'd bankrupt myself, if I didn't work myself into a nervous breakdown or an attack of writer's cramp first. Season of peace and goodwill! Don't I wish...

Miriam: I rather like Christmas. All the lights in town, and the Christmas parties, and going home to see my parents. And isn't it meant to be one of our most important festivals?

Sarah: It should be. But somehow every year the spiritual aspect almost gets lost in the huge list of things to buy and do. I don't even have to cook Christmas dinner, because I get invited every year - but for most people that's another thing to worry about. I tell you, Miriam, make the most of your family support. Once you have to do all these things for yourself, life gets much more complicated. And expensive!

Miriam: Well, I'm on a student budget, so I can't afford huge presents for people. They don't seem to mind too much. And anyway, does Christmas have to mean buying people big presents? After all, if I've got it right, it's all about Jesus, God's present to us, not us giving presents to each other.

Sarah: Interesting. I'll have to think about that one. But anyway, why were you asking about Christmas now? It's still several months off.

Miriam: Well, that reading I did just now. About the rich man and Lazarus sleeping rough at his front door.

Sarah: Yes?

Miriam: I know we're none of us rich. Not really rich. But you know I came to the Broomhall Breakfast this Friday?

Sarah: It was lovely to see you there.

Miriam: It was great to be there. They're so welcoming, the breakfasters! I'd never been before, but they made me feel at home. I really enjoyed listening to what people were saying. And it made me think: I take so much for granted that people round that table used to have, and miss. Being in touch with my family. Having a nice place to live, with friends who care about me and interesting work to do.

Sarah: I suppose, in a way, every Friday morning we all meet outside the rich man's house, to share whatever we have, whether it's food or welcome.

Miriam: Someone at the Breakfast was talking about Christmas. He said he dreads it every year, because all that togetherness everyone else has just makes him realise how lonely he is then.

Sarah: And I suppose all that money everyone else spends on Christmas just rubs it in. Now I come to think of it, I don't need to spend as much money on celebrating as I do. It's seeing family and friends, not what we give each other, that's important for me.

Miriam: Does the Breakfast carry on over Christmas?

Sarah: No, but HARC does.

Miriam: HARC the herald angels sing?

Sarah: No, HARC: Homeless and Rootless at Christmas. It'll be in the Broomhall Centre again this year: open house for anyone who's lonely or hungry over the Christmas season. I bet if the rich man and Lazarus had met there, they could have made friends before they died. That would have made a much better end to Jesus' story. *[Miriam sits]*

Why on earth am I talking about Christmas now? It's still 90 days to go. But of course it's now we start making decisions about what will happen this year. Will we go to them, or they come to us? Who's going to cook the dinner? Can we really afford all those electronic

gadgets the grandchildren want? Yet Miriam was right: Christmas is God's present to us, not our present to each other. All our present-giving is built on Epiphany, when the wise men brought presents to the infant Jesus. So how can we give presents to him? By sharing what we have with those who have less. How would it be if this year we gave half as much as what we spend on Christmas to good causes? That would lift high the humble - as in our next hymn Mary reckons God does. And Jesus' mother should know!

Hymns:

R&S 67 was published by W.Chalmers Smith in his Hymns of Christ and Christian life in 1876. The tune St Denio is a Welsh hymn melody; bafflingly, in Welsh hymnbooks it is called Joanna.

R&S 740 is a well-known modern setting of Mary's song of praise on learning that she was to have God's child, by Timothy Dudley-Smith; the first of his texts to have been written as a hymn rather than a poem. The tune Woodlands was composed by Walter Greatorex, director of music at Gresham's School; Woodlands was one of the school houses.

R&S 734 is a paraphrase of Psalm 146 by Isaac Watts. John Wesley is rumoured to have sung its first line on his deathbed. As the name suggests, the tune Lucerne/Dresden is from Protestant Switzerland.

CG1 comes from the Iona Community, and uses the traditional tune Dream Angus to set its haunting words.

R&S 496 was originally written by J.S.B. Monsell for the reading from 1 Timothy set for today. The tune Duke Street is borrowed from the early Methodists in the eighteenth century; its composer, John Hatton, lived in Duke Street, St Helens, Lancs.

Sermon:

Amos 6:1-7; Psalm 146; Luke 16:19-31; 1 Timothy 6:6-19

After the service today, and after our Sandwich Sunday lunch, which I hope you'll share, I'm going to drop in at the Pakistan Flood Appeal fundraiser being held at the Broomhall Centre from 2 to 6 this afternoon. I know that in this church we've already held a special collection to help the people of Pakistan, but at the beginning of September the United Nations said they would have to launch a fresh appeal for funds, because they've only received two-thirds of the money originally sought in August to house and feed flood refugees while the work of reconstruction begins. There's evidently more to be done to help.

Why do the UN need to ask again, I wonder? After so many international disasters may we in this country be suffering from compassion fatigue? May we feel that, with the huge ability of the media to highlight problems in Britain and around the world, a whole army of Lazaruses is camped at our gates, and all we can do is ignore the problem and hope it goes away? Not that this proved a very productive long-term strategy for the rich man in Jesus' story to adopt!

But am I right to be identifying us with the rich man at all? In this church we certainly have a fine building to call home and financial resources to draw on, thanks to the congregation's giving both in former generations and today. Yet are we rich in time, in energy, in the hope that God still has work to do among us, that our story in this place is not over? Or is our spiritual bank account at St Andrew's starting to run low?

Maybe rather than having to choose whether to see ourselves as rich or as poor, we prefer the approach of our reading from the first letter to Timothy, which offers us the great gain of godliness combined with contentment. Its warning that the love of money - not money itself - is the root of all evil should ring bells with anyone stung by the banking disasters of the past few years, and his conclusion, 'If we have food and clothing, we will be content

with these' is not hard for us to agree with.

Yet the whole question of contentment isn't as simple as it may at first appear. Many of you will know that last week I was at a conference in Germany. Protestant theologians from across Europe were trying to work out how to strengthen and deepen the Leuenberg Fellowship, which since 1973 has allowed Lutheran and Reformed and Methodist Christians all over Europe to preach in each other's pulpits and receive Communion from each other, our own local example being fellowship between the Methodists and the United Reformed Church. As well as stories from Protestant churches all over Europe, we also heard what was happening in Brazil, and the United States, and South Africa. And it was the South African representative who made me wonder about contentment.

You'll probably know that it was Reformed churches in South Africa who developed the theology of Apartheid, which underpinned the injustice of white people towards everyone else. Our speaker was a white Professor of theology who had opted during the Apartheid years to work with a black church instead. That cannot have been easy for him, so what he said was worth our respectful attention. And what he said to us was this: You churches in Europe are far too content with what you have. Are you content to say that different churches are working together locally, that you're no longer interested in unity? What about Jesus' prayer that all Christians should be one as he is one with God? How does your fellowship match up to that? I went away from that conference in two minds. On the one hand, our local ecumenical situation does work well. On the other hand, are we giving up too easily on the bigger lack of unity that is still a stumbling block to those outside the church? Are our dreams of being one fellowship of Christians, expressing God's love differently in our various situations, all dead in the water?

If we here are tempted to be complacent about how we relate to people who have less than we do, maybe we too should not be so easily contented.

We run a breakfast drop-in where hunger and isolation are kept at bay?

Great - but not many of us actually come to share food and fellowship on a Friday morning, though you'd find a warm welcome and food for thought as well as for the stomach. We give money to various charities? That's good - but though giving money changes the level of our bank account, it has less chance of changing us into people who live with the loving generosity of the one in whose image we are made.

Just look at our psalm this morning. Israel's God and ours is the one who saves the oppressed, feeds the poor, supports the disheartened, helps the stranger, the widow, the orphan and the prisoner. Isn't that a huge contrast with those of whom Amos complains, who spend time and money on their own comfort, civilisation and luxury, but are not grieved at the plight of their fellow Israelites? There's an enormous gulf between the two: as big as the gulf fixed after death between the rich man and Lazarus. While both were still alive, I suspect that gulf was already in existence: made up of fear and the reluctance to be stirred out of contentment. Yet the money we pay out to good causes, the comforts, the Christmas presents given and received with which we may surround ourselves as a vain buffer against disaster, can have a side-effect: isolating us from the fellowship we could receive from others, different from us yet made in God's image.

During his lifetime, Lazarus cried out in vain for a kind touch, and received it only from the dogs licking his sores. After his death, the rich man cried out in vain for a cooling touch in the midst of flames. Yet ironically this same rich man had always been isolated from life at his own door; and after death this same poor man found his fellowship with Abraham to be real. So of course - you knew it anyway - we at St Andrew's are both rich and poor. Some of

us have more money than others. Some of us have wider friendship groups than others. But, given due permission and mutual respect, we all have the need to reach out and touch the lives of others different from us, as we all need a touch of fellowship from them. For that touching place gives God, who is never content, an opportunity for healing and for transformation.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Racial Justice Sunday

Service Date:

12 September, 2010

Luke 15:1-10

This morning I'm bringing you a tale of two flocks. Flock number one lives and grazes in the Palestine of Jesus' time. Loads of sheep, a hundred of them, all the same flock. One sheep wanders off, gets in trouble. What's one sheep in a hundred? But the shepherd notices. The shepherd cares. The shepherd takes the trouble to bring it back to the fold, and all the other sheep welcome it home. Happy ending!

Flock number two lives and grazes in Switzerland, the same place where Heidi comes from, full of beautiful mountains for sheep to graze safely. But this flock is made up of human beings, and unlike the flock in Jesus' story, not all these sheep want to be together.

When I lived in Switzerland a year, while I was studying there, I had to report to the police as a legal alien as soon as when I arrived, which felt weird. I met many lovely people there. But I had a communication problem.

I could speak good German, but not good Swiss German, which is very different. So though people started off a conversation talking German to me, by the middle of it they had slipped into Swiss German and suddenly I couldn't understand a word. That was hurtful to me, but it didn't bother them. After all, why should they put themselves out for me? Why come to a country if you can't speak the language?

Now you'd think the Swiss would be good at living with foreigners. There are four official Swiss languages: French, German, Italian and Romansch. There are even more versions of Swiss German, with more differences than Sheffield English from Glasgow English, depending on which canton you live in. But three years ago, in the Swiss elections, a far rightwing party put out a [poster](#) to stir Swiss people up about foreigners living among them. These posters showed very clearly that some sheep, some people were different from others. They showed lots of white sheep, and one black sheep. And the black sheep was no longer welcome in the flock. In fact, the white sheep were kicking it out. Just to make it clear why black sheep weren't welcome in Switzerland, one of the white sheep was portrayed lying on its back with its hooves in the air and a knife in its stomach. Clearly, black sheep were mad, bad and dangerous to know, and not wanted in nice white well-behaved Switzerland.

There was a row over the poster. The people who put it out said they were only protesting about criminals from ethnic minorities. But the picture spoke for itself. It said clearly that foreigners aren't just different. They're not to be trusted. In fact, it isn't just people who weren't white the Swiss weren't too keen on. White refugees from Eastern Europe aren't that popular with the Swiss either, or that's what I found. Foreigners having a holiday were fine. Foreigners coming over and wanting to make their lives there were not.

I don't think Swiss people are more racist than others. I think we are all tempted to believe people should start behaving and being like us if we are to welcome them into our lives. But

where we sometimes shut people out of society, Jesus brings people back into the flock. Whoever they are.

Hymns:

R&S 339: Great God, your love has called us here

Hymn (tune: Woodlands, R&S 740) There is a love that reaches out to all

RS 647: In Christ there is no East or West

R&S 474: Brother, sister, let me serve you

Sermon:

Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51; Luke 15:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

When we were talking about Racial Justice Sunday in the Worship Group, I wanted the group's opinion on what sort of materials we should be looking at. Would it be more useful to hear stories from refugees and asylum seekers looking for a welcome all over England, or to think about how in the longer term we relate to people who are different from us here in Sheffield? Overwhelmingly, we decided that focussing on our relationships with people in Broomhall would be more interesting - if more complicated - than thinking about stories from people we've never met and are never likely to. And as we started to think about some of the factors involved, it reminded me of our attempt last year to look at the issues surrounding global warming in worship. After that service, people who know a lot about environmental matters reminded me that the subject was much more complex than my presentation indicated, and that's likely to be the case now too. Yet though I can't pretend to sort out the whole vexed issue of racial justice - and, in our area, that often means interfaith relations too - as Christians we have the rich resources of our faith tradition to draw on as we wrestle with these complex issues. So let's have a go.

And to start with, let's admit that these issues often seem framed to make us feel guilty failures. Though we start off with the best of intentions in trying to build bridges to not barriers against our neighbours, often the results don't seem to match up to our intentions. We may feel that people drawing our attention to issues of racial justice want us to respond like our psalmist this morning: Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. The writer is traditionally supposed to be David, after he realised his big mistake in acting on his attraction to Bathsheba by having her husband Uriah killed. He came to understand he had sinned against God by abusing his power against both Bathsheba and her husband. Incidentally, Uriah was a Hittite, so David was being unjust not only to one of his subjects but also to someone from a racial minority, with no clan to support his cause.

While David didn't really have a leg to stand on, we may feel that though we try our hardest to be welcoming to our Somali Muslim neighbours, our efforts are apt to be interpreted as hostile. Yet such misinterpretation is not totally surprising, given not only their national background in tribal conflict and civil war but also the general public suspicion about Islam. Think of the international news over these last few days. A publicity-mad Florida pastor states his unchristian intention to mark the ninth anniversary of the Twin Towers terrorist attacks by burning copies of the Qur'an. Americans have been protesting against an Islamic community centre called Cordoba House relocating over the road from its current home, blocks away from Ground Zero, where it's been serving its local community for years; even though American Muslims were killed by terrorists too. When only stories of ill-will are highlighted, we should not be surprised, though we hold ourselves to be trustworthy, that trust is hard to build.

And the relationship between us and our Somali neighbours in Broomhall is complicated by the fact that for both communities, faith comes into the equation. In our reading from Exodus this morning Moses is discussing with God what should be done about the faithlessness of the people, who have given up their worship of God to follow the religious customs of the land where they are immigrants. He uses God's faithful covenantal relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Israel to argue that God should not just abandon the people and start again with a different group.

As Christians, we take this reading from the Hebrew Bible as part of our own story. Yet Muslims also - and with greater reason, genetically speaking - consider Abraham, though not Isaac or Israel, as their ancestor. Moses, too, is a prophet in the Qur'an. And this reading urges those who worship God not to abandon their religious ways just because they have entered a new land. Our own foundation as a church to serve Scots in Sheffield tells the same story. Religion, like culture, is not lightly forsaken by immigrants; imagine our outcry if Burns Suppers were to be banned by the English!

Our contact with our neighbours has centred on work with young people; an obvious area of cooperation, one might think. Yet Somalis in Sheffield, like our congregation at St Andrew's, face the problem of transmission of values to the next generation. Their teenagers are in no-man's land between Islam, as interpreted by traditional tribal society, and Western cultural values both good and bad, from individual freedom to the alcohol and substance abuse and the rise in STDs we too deplore. Our young people have largely decided that a regular commitment to formal Christianity, at least in our flavour, is not something they wish to prioritise. Vulnerable as both our groups are to this problem, it's easy for each of us to draw up cultural drawbridges, to insist for us and our families, so far as we can control them, on the values of life as we hazily remember it from former times; to consider new ways of doing things as threat, not as promise.

Looking back to the good old days and trying to revive them is far easier, for the Somalis and for us, than looking forward to an uncertain future, characterised only by God's faithfulness. Yet it is to just such a future that we Christians are directed in the letter written under Paul's name to Timothy. Paul too had once been rigid in the way he practised his faith, condemning anyone who dared to see God in a human being. Yet God revealed to him in Jesus a new way to think and to live, based on what had gone before, but immeasurably greater. So though Paul knew himself once to have been a bigot, a violent persecutor of those with whom he had disagreed, he also knew he could trust in God's mercy. Well-intentioned as we are, we too are tempted to be over-defensive about our faith and cultural position, expecting others to see things from our point of view rather than walking in their shoes. But the good news is that when we go wrong, our shepherd always takes the first step to bring us back. So though dealing justly and living lovingly with our neighbours can be hard, Jesus always calls us to forgive, as we have been forgiven: to start our bridge-building, our barrier-dismantling, all over again.

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

5 September, 2010

Philemon: Well, I never expected to see *you* again, Onesimus!

Onesimus: To be honest, Master, I never expected to be back...

Philemon: Sneaked off, didn't you, while my back was turned! You know what happens to runaway slaves, don't you?

Onesimus: Yes, Master.

Philemon: I can have you branded, you know.

Onesimus: Yes, Master.

Philemon: Or break all your bones, for daring to run away.

Onesimus: Yes, Master.

Philemon: If I were to have you crucified, no one would bat an eyelid or raise a finger to save you.

Onesimus: No, Master. *[pause]* Master, would you like me to read you this letter?

Philemon: I never knew *you* could read!

Onesimus: Paul taught me reading and writing, while I was in prison with him.

Philemon: Paul the great apostle? I didn't know he could do that sort of clerkish thing.

Onesimus: He says my writing is better than his, now.

Philemon: Well, well, well. Let's hear what Paul has to say.

Onesimus: *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Philemon: Decent of him to put my name first. Of course, the church does meet in my house. Still, to have a letter from Paul, addressed to me! Go on!

Onesimus: *When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.*

Philemon: 'Brother', do you hear that? Paul calls me his brother!

Onesimus: Yes, Master. Shall I go on?

Philemon: Yes, do - I'm sure this is doing you good to hear too.

Onesimus: *For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love-and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.*

Philemon: I wonder what he wants me to do now? He's a persuasive fellow, Paul. Once he gets an idea in his head, it's hard to resist him.

Onesimus: *I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus -*

Philemon: What?

Onesimus: *My child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.*

Philemon: You must be joking. Why's Paul writing about *you*? You were a useless slave when I had you. That's why we called you Onesimus. And you're even less use now you've dared to run away. Are you making this up?

Onesimus: I tell you, Master, as I love the Lord Jesus, this is exactly what Paul has written. Shall I carry on another time?

Philemon: No, if he can write it, I can hear it. Go on!

Onesimus: *Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.*

Philemon: 'My own heart'? You? He's gone mad in prison!

Onesimus: *I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.*

Philemon: Well, at least he understands you're my property, so he won't do anything with

you without my permission. But you, Onesimus? Useful? Wonders will never cease! Is there more?

Onesimus: *Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother-especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

Philemon: [*ominously*] Hold on a moment. Let me get this right. Paul is asking me to take you back?

Onesimus: Yes, Master.

Philemon: But no longer as a slave, but a 'beloved brother'.

Onesimus: Yes, Master.

Philemon: You run off, so he wants me to free you? Though you cost me a pretty denarius to start with?

Onesimus: That's what he says, Master. Listen: *If you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.*

Philemon: This has got to be a forgery. Let me see. [*stares at letter*] But this is his handwriting. I remember seeing it on the letter he wrote to my friends in Rome. 'I, Paul...' [*struggles*] oh, go on, you've got so far, you can read the rest of it.

Onesimus: *I, Paul am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*

Philemon: I have to admit it, that does sound like Paul. Typical of the man. He shows you Christ's way to healing, wholeness and eternal life, and then he expects you to turn your life upside down as a result, the way his was. All right, Onesimus. We are brothers in Christ, after all. I suppose it doesn't really make sense for you to be calling me Master.

Onesimus: There's one more sentence at the bottom of the letter.

Philemon: More? Now he's really pushing his luck.

Onesimus: *One thing more-prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow-workers.*

Philemon: That's Paul! Hospitality at a moment's notice! Oh well, tell the majordomo to get a room ready for him. Wait a moment, though... does Paul want me to free *all* my slaves? Oh, I'll have a bone to pick with him when he does turn up!

Onesimus: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

Philemon: [*resigned*] And with yours, brother Onesimus. And with yours.

Onesimus: That's the end of Paul's letter, actually. But I mean it too. If I'm truly your brother in Christ, if you believe God's good news enough to take notice of Paul, forgive me and set me free, that's the very least I can say.

Philemon: Thank you. I think. This is going to take a little getting used to.

Hymns:

R&S 543 was written by James Edmeston, an architect and surveyor by profession, for the children of the London Orphan Asylum, arguably in great need of a fatherly view of God. It is said that he wrote 2,000 hymns, of which this has probably lasted the best. The tune Mannheim was first written for a nineteenth century German chorale by Friedrich Filitz on an Advent theme: 'Wake, wake, because the day has come'.

R&S 549 written, words and music, by the twentieth-century folk composer Sydney Carter

was also composed with children in mind: the 11- and 12-year-olds of Southwark Cathedral School in London, about to move up to a higher school. The tune Southcote was named after the Cathedral Provost.

God eternal, cosmic wisdom comes from the contemporary pen of Michael Forster, a URC mental health chaplain, carpenter and satirist for Radio 4. The tune Rhuddlan, written in the eighteenth century, has a martial Welsh title, 'Dowch I'r Frwydr' (Come to battle!) which fits with the urgency if not the liberative theme of the song's words.

R&S 422 has been written by George Kitchin and M.R. Newbolt (chorus) and the *Rejoice and Sing* compilers joined by Stephen Orchard (verses), though the verses evidently have a biblical background. The tune Crucifer by Sydney Nicholson is named for the technical term for whoever carries the cross in a church procession - and, by extension, every Christian.

Sermon:

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Luke 14:25-33; Philemon

Imagine an army sergeant in the bad old days, trying to get recruits to join up. You can imagine the sort of speech he'd make to impressionable teenage lads: victory, military glory, impressing all the girls and being rewarded by a grateful nation with loads of money. It'd probably go down all the better with them because he'd be standing every candidate as much beer as he could drink. Later, as the hangover set in and the King's shilling didn't look quite so attractive, words like blood, sweat and tears might enter the mind, and young soldiers might wonder what on earth they'd let themselves in for. But by then, of course, it would be far too late for them to do anything about it.

In our Gospel reading this morning, though, Jesus seems intent on putting forward the worst possible scenario for the benefit of those considering the idea of following him. Fond of your family? Don't bother coming with me. Concerned about the possibility of crucifixion? Forget it. Oh, and by the way, you've got to give up everything you own. I can imagine people starting to edge away as soon as they heard all that. Yet people did decide to join him; and they can't all have been the sort who'd have wanted to join the French Foreign Legion, if only it had existed. So how can we make sense of Jesus' words, and what may his challenge to his followers then say about our own lives as Christians in twenty-first century Sheffield?

To help our thinking, I'd like to go back a few thousand years, to our reading from Deuteronomy. It's framed as a speech given by Moses to the Israelites, who are just about to enter the Promised Land, though in fact most scholars think it was written centuries later, by people whose political situation was looking shaky, and who were asking themselves: where did it all go wrong?

How did we get into this mess? Looking back to Moses standing on the brink of entering Canaan, the land we now know as Palestine, they saw God, through Moses, giving their ancestors a clear choice: life and prosperity, or death and adversity? And they reckoned that boiled down to a fundamental decision: would people decide to serve God, or the gods? Now in the ancient Near East there were certainly a lot of gods and goddesses to choose from, controlling the harvest, the sea, the winds, the rain, good health - a lot of the things we now believe we understand through scientific theories about the forces of nature. But before we start to feel too smug about how much more we know than the ancient Israelites, I suspect there may still be 'gods' around to whom we are tempted to give lip service, or more. What about the god of choice, sometimes known as market forces? What about the god of security? What about the god of health? Or the god of family? All good things, don't get me wrong - but what happens if we make them, rather than God, our

highest priority? Have you ever had so much choice in the supermarket that you couldn't make up your mind to choose anything? Have you seen people living behind reinforced doors within alarmed houses and gated communities, afraid to venture past their own threshold because they're convinced that strangers will be out to get them? Have you come across people so fanatical about dieting and nutrition that they can't enjoy their food any more? Or whose focus on their families is such that they can't draw an independent breath? All these are caricatures, of course - yet the question raised in Deuteronomy still has some merit in our present-day world. What will you choose to worship? God? or something else? And maybe this helps us see why Jesus raised this question in such a stark way. He wanted those who were thinking of following him to realise that it wasn't a hobby for Sabbath mornings, but a lifetime commitment, one that spills over into all the parts of our lives that once seemed ours to command.

I have some sympathy for poor Philemon. He's trying hard to be a Christian. He's putting his whole house at the disposal of the church, which means he's a man of some wealth or they wouldn't all fit into it for worship. That must have meant he felt some responsibility for the poorer members of his community too. All this, he has taken on board. But now Paul is asking the impossible of him. He is asking Philemon to undermine the basis on which his whole life is built.

For in that period, slavery was a fact of life. You might be born a slave, or just be on the losing side in war. Some slaves were highly educated, and acted as tutors or administrators for the highest in Roman society. But they had no possessions, no family rights; and if things went wrong enough for them to run away, they could expect beating at the least, and crucifixion at the worst. According to Leviticus, while Jews could not own other Jews, they could buy and sell Gentiles. And poverty-stricken Jews could be the slaves of Gentiles too. So when Jesus was telling people about the consequences of following him, some of his audience might be thinking: is he treating us like slaves? while any slaves who had somehow managed to hear him might be wondering: how does this man know what life's like for us? Jesus' command to carry the cross is deliberately provocative - just imagine if he'd asked us to sit on the electric chair! - but he doesn't want us to say yes to following him without thinking it through, like incompetent builders who run out of cash halfway through a project because they didn't do their sums. When Christianity started, it was a very unofficial religion: following Jesus might be seriously bad for your health. But even now, it's no soft option. For when we are feeling strong and powerful he warns us that we must step outside the comfort zone of our status and resources, and share them with others who have none. And when we feel as useless as runaway Onesimus, he challenges us to admit that, however many times we need to ask for God's forgiveness and start again, he is still calling us, just as much as the greatest theologian or the most faithful Christian we know, to keep on following him, through the whole of our lives, bad and good. For most of us here this morning it's a bit late to count the cost before we answer the call - some will know all too well the difficulties we can meet when we put God first. Yet today, as we face all over again the challenge to follow Jesus, individually and as a church, I want to encourage us. For, as our psalm this morning reminds us, it's mysterious but true: each time we opt for life not death, God not the gods, our life is renewed, like a tree planted by a river whose roots, even in time of drought, reach deep into watered soil.

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

15 August, 2010

Luke 12:49-56

For more than a month now, I've been dreaming about my going on holiday. Not literally - I don't generally remember what I dream - but looking forward to rest, and relaxation, and reading, and watching plays and hearing concerts and eating out and meeting friends - everything I don't have time for during work, everything I look forward to on holiday. In real life, my dream may not turn out exactly as I'd expected, but looking forward to holidays is almost as great a pleasure as actually being on holiday itself.

This past week other people in the congregation have been looking forward to their dream becoming reality. Catherine Henstridge, Linda Callear's niece, will have been dreaming of marrying her fiancé Dave and becoming Catherine Hough, which she finally did with great aplomb yesterday at St Andrew's after months and months of planning and preparation. Of course, not all dreams are pleasant ones. This last week, Ann Langford has started to experience the sad reality of being without her husband Harry, a reality which many of you who have lost your partner know only too well. But even for Harry, death may have been something to dream of, compared with the long period of hospitalisation he has endured ever since his stroke.

Think for a moment of your own dreams. I won't ask what they are, painful or pleasant, but you will know just how much you look forward to them coming true. And in this passage, Jesus is sharing his dream with his closest friends. And if we'd not heard it already, I might ask you to guess Jesus' dream. Because what he comes out with isn't what we might expect of someone who himself was dreamed of before his birth as the Prince of Peace.

Jesus dreams of setting the earth on fire; but not just with enthusiasm for his message of God's forgiveness and the Kingdom's approach. Jesus' dream includes setting families against each other: father against son, daughter against mother. Even in-laws get drawn in to the fight. What sort of dream is that for Jesus to look forward to, or us, indeed? How can we make sense of it?

We know about having a dream; about how much we want it to come true. Martin Luther King famously had a dream about how he wanted Christians in America, black and white, to treat each other as human beings. Not long after the speech in which he shared his dream, some white people decided his dream was too dangerous - it threatened their power. So the dream had to go, and that meant Martin Luther King had to be killed.

The same happened, as we know, to Jesus. He knew that his dream of God's kingdom where all would be welcome was too dangerous for some of the good religious people of his time to accept. He knew it would cause people to fight it. It did then, and it has done ever since. But that dream of God's coming kingdom was so powerful, he couldn't give it up just because others were against him. All he could do was to warn his friends that it would be no easy ride.

How much do we care about Jesus' dream of God's kingdom? Do we believe in him enough to be prepared for conflict, when his dream challenges our own hopes and expectations, or those of our families? Or is dreaming just for when we're on holiday, and the workaday world the place where our dreams die?

Hymns:

R&S 492: Dear Lord and Father of mankind

R&S 493: Dear Master, in whose life I see

Psalms 82 (tune R&S 447, 'St Botolph') In gods' assembly God doth stand; he judgeth gods among.

Hymn (tune: R&S 583) I dream of a church that joins in with God's laughing

R&S 509: O Jesus, I have promised

Sermon:

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Psalm 82; Luke 12:49-56; Hebrews 11:29 -12:2

The hymn we've just sung describes my dream for the church - not just the United Reformed Church in general, but this church of St Andrew's in particular. I dream of us being able to share our joys and our sorrows as a church, of us as dancers, moving to the Spirit's music into God's future, of us caring not just for one another but looking outward to support, as the hymn says, 'the imprisoned and poor'; 'the unlovely and lost'.

But that's my dream; and the last time I counted, there were a lot more of you than there are of me. So though you get to hear me on a week by week basis, telling you all about my dreams, my hopes and fears for St Andrew's, it's actually your dreams that will transform this church or leave it stranded the way it is. And, as a minister, I solemnly warn you: don't take as Gospel everything you hear from this pulpit, but test it out. For otherwise, how do you know whether it's God's dream I'm sharing with you, or just a bee in my bonnet?

People in Jeremiah's time already had this problem. The reading we heard this morning has Jeremiah telling people what God thinks of the other prophets who claimed to speak on God's behalf. According to Jeremiah, God is not in the least impressed with the dreams they try to sell, dreams that sidetrack the people from remembering who God is. Those visions, says Jeremiah, are like straw compared with the wheat of God's voice spoken through his own prophesying: thin, un nourishing, useless.

Well, that clears it up for the Israelites of his time, except for one little problem: all his competitors in the prophesying business will have said just as unflattering things about Jeremiah's own words and the likelihood that he is speaking for God. And no one has a sure way of finding out who's a false prophet and who's the real McCoy. For the only guideline the Bible gives about telling true prophecy, true dreams from false is completely accurate but not at all helpful: wait, and see who turns out in the long run to have been right. Before we give up completely and go home, however, we do have a description of God's word in this passage from Jeremiah. Listen:

'Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?'

We're back with Jesus, dreaming of setting the world on fire, but deeply aware of the trouble that dream is going to cause. For, as we are reminded in Hebrews, God's word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

When we think about Hebrews, what about that amazing line-up of people of faith, continued from last week's reading? We've already had Abel and Abraham, Enoch and Noah, Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Moses. Now the cast list goes on: Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, judges who protected the young nation of Israel; David the great king, Samuel and all God's prophets - including, presumably, Jeremiah, though he doesn't get a headline mention. And their achievements!

The list sounds like the strapline of a Hollywood blockbuster, or the dreams you might get from a Boys Own story: conquering kingdoms, administering justice, shutting lions' mouths (no prizes for guessing that's Daniel), escaping death by a hairsbreadth, putting armies to flight. But then the descriptions start to get more painful: undergoing torture, mocking, flogging, imprisonment, stoning to death, being sawn in two or killed by the sword, being destitute, persecuted, tormented. Oops, we've suddenly moved genre into horror movies. Surely this can't be anyone's dream, unless that of a severe masochist? How could anyone

want this to happen, or approve it when it does?

Sometimes Christianity gets accused of being fixated on suffering and death, as if the worse it hurts, the more God must love you, so we should choose as painful a life as possible to make God love us more. I suppose Jeremiah's description of God's word as a hammer strong enough to shatter rock could be taken as a threat. But that would be no dream but a nightmare. We can see that by looking at everything Jesus said and did. His dream was of a world where people were whole, where everyone knew God and were each other's family. He died on the cross not in order to suffer, but as a result of following that dream, when it collided with the forces of religious rigidity and military control.

Similarly, the Hebrews role-call of great examples of faith didn't set out to be heroes. God already loved them, even more than they could dream of, and in response they decided to follow God's dream, enduring the painful results of that choice for the sake of its fulfilment. And at the end of that great line-up, we too have a place, as we lead our lives between yearning for God's dream to become reality and the beginning of its fulfilment.

It sounds marvellous, doesn't it? No wonder they call the Gospel Good News. Yet if we are honest, we know that some of our dreams are actually in conflict with those of Jesus. I'm not saying we deliberately set ourselves against him. I'm thinking more of my experiences this last week with my godson Raphael, whom some of you met last Sunday. He's named after an angel, but from time to time a shout of 'Yes, but I want it!' was heard in the Manse. Sometimes what he wanted, like playing with the Dicksons' lego, would be quite possible later, but not right now in the middle of breakfast. Sometimes it wasn't possible at all, like playing with the neighbours' children who had gone away. At nearly five, Raphael is convinced that if you want something hard enough and say so loudly enough, you'll get it. We who are older have more sophisticated ways of following our dreams, but underneath it's not so different: whatever the consequences, we want it. We want to travel anywhere without causing pollution or using up resources. We want cheap clothes and food without worrying about the wages or conditions of the people who produce them. We want the benefits of faith without the commitment to growth. Let's face it, some of our dreams will have to go: maybe yours, maybe mine. That is why, while we are in this in-between stage, when it's not always easy to tell just who is speaking with God's voice, Hebrews advises us to keep our eyes on Jesus. He is the one who goes ahead of us to mark out the path, our example of how to live well with God, our hope that life really is stronger than death. And as we follow him, we will find out for ourselves why, in spite of his clear view of the consequences, following God's dream is better by far than any of the dreams we may so anxiously clutch to ourselves.

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

8 August, 2010

Luke 12:32-40 (me to read from table)

Auditing Angel comes up out of congregation to lecturn with clipboard

AA: Very appropriate. You know not the day nor the hour, you say? Well, today's the day and now's the hour.

Sarah: The day and the hour for what? You're not going to tell me *you're* the Son of Man!

AA: No, I'm the auditing angel.

Sarah: The what?

AA: The auditing angel. I drop in on congregations from time to time, just to find out how

prepared they are for Jesus' coming. And today it's your turn here at St Andrew's.

Sarah: So what's the procedure? What do we have to do?

AA: There are just a few simple questions I'd like you to answer. *[Looks at clipboard]* Firstly, let's look at your worship.

Sarah: I'm afraid there aren't quite as many people in church as usual. Holidays, you know...

AA: It's quality rather than quantity I'm looking for. If your praying's as heartfelt as your organ is loud, you've nothing to worry about - after all, Jesus did call his friends a little flock, not a huge herd. So what do you think? What's the prayer like here?

Sarah: Well, it's not easy to measure... but later in the service you'll be able to hear what's on people's hearts just now.

AA: Great. I know God always looks forward to that. Next... *[looks down list]*

Sarah: *[nervously]* Are you going to ask me about the sermon?

AA: Well, I can read all your sermons back to 2007 on the church website, so that gives me some idea of the sort of things you like saying. Do you see your purpose in preaching here as comforting the disturbed, or disturbing the comfortable?

Sarah: *[hesitates]* Um, I think... both?

AA: Hmm. OK, that'll do for now on worship. What's your treasure situation?

Sarah: Treasure? You'd need to ask them at the cathedral. We don't have anything like that here.

AA: Put it another way, how do you at St Andrew's spend your money?

Sarah: Well, I can't give you a detailed answer...

AA: It's the big picture I'm wanting. Not the regular incomings and outgoings. What projects have you got on the go right now?

Sarah: Well, we're getting the kitchen refurbished next week. That's a major undertaking. Is that the sort of thing you mean?

AA: And before that? Over the last few years since you came to St Andrew's?

Sarah: We've put in a new boiler... we had an accessible toilet fitted out. And... let's see... oh yes, a few years ago we changed all the chairs in church. They're much more comfortable now, or so I'm told. I'm still sitting on the same seat.

AA: So all this work done - and it must have been quite expensive, mustn't it?

Sarah: Our treasurer's still wincing at the memory.

AA: Who was it done for?

Sarah: Well, a lot of people use the building: two other churches and many other groups as well as us. So they'll appreciate the chairs, and the toilet, and the kitchen. But to be honest, I suppose mostly we did it for us. The congregation.

AA: Aha. And what sort of things do you the congregation do in this well-cared-for, well-equipped building?

Sarah: Worship, of course. You've seen us at it this morning.

AA: Yes, yes. But worship isn't all God's interested in.

Sarah: Really? Well, we've got two groups that meet regularly to socialise and learn together. One of them includes people from outside the church. And some of us eat breakfast together with local people once every week. Is God interested in those things, too?

AA: God's interested in everything you do. Didn't you listen to your reading? Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is, what really matters to you. And your treasure isn't just money: it's time and effort too. So what you choose to spend it on says a lot about you. If you spend all your time and effort and money just making yourselves comfortable, I can

tell you for nothing, God's not going to be impressed just because you come to church. On the other hand...

Sarah: I see what you mean! Whenever we give our money or time or care to others, Christians or not, it's Jesus we're looking after. So looks like we always need to be ready - not for the auditing angel, but to recognise and serve Jesus whenever he comes into our lives.

Hymns:

R&S 712: All people that on earth do dwell

R&S 522: The Servant King

Hymn (tune: Noel Nouvelet, R&S 243) God the great Creator calls us to protest

R&S 530: Living God

Sermon:

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-15; Luke 12:32-40; Hebrews 11:1-16

You may have thought the auditing angel had a bit of a disrespectful attitude to our worship, considering the time and effort we at St Andrew's put into doing it as well as we can. The choir and organist have rehearsed, the audio operator has checked the system, the readers and I have prepared our scripts and we've all made sure to turn up on time, but I'm still not sure she was impressed! Well, judging by the words of our second reading this morning, she probably picked up that attitude from Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah is a religious insider - his wonderful vision of God's greatness and his own call to be God's messenger comes while he serves as a priest in God's temple. Yet, talking to God's people, in God's promised land - for as yet, the people have not yet gone into exile - he addresses some very harsh words to them. Remember two weeks ago, Abraham bargaining with God to save the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, condemned by God for their lack of hospitality? Well, here Isaiah calls his own nation 'rulers of Sodom and people of Gomorrah'. What's more, as he's a prophet, it's God's own words Isaiah is relaying to the people. What on earth can they be doing for God to be reproofing them like this?

Well, strangely enough, it looks as though they are following to the letter the regulations laid down in the Hebrew Bible itself about how to worship God. The first few books of the Hebrew Bible are full of rules about what sort of sacrifice should be offered when and by whom; when people should worship and how. If we had a book like that, we'd find in it, for example, our five morning communion services a year: on the first Sundays of February, July, October and December plus Easter Sunday. And while there are churches more spontaneous than ours, it seems unlikely that regulation in itself is what God hates - after all, those rules were formulated to give structure and order supporting people's relationship with God.

Yet something is badly wrong: for God is threatening to boycott the Israelites' worship, even to reject their prayers unheard. And halfway through the reading we come to God's complaint: Wash yourselves, says God, make yourselves clean; remove the evil from your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

So it's not, apparently, that what the people of Israel are doing is wrong; it's what they aren't currently doing that's the problem.

Sadly, this is not only a problem of three thousand years ago. It may affect us too. As well as the decisions we make about our church finances, to which the Auditing Angel drew our attention, there are parallels for us as individuals, dealing with our own resources. 'Ethical investing' used to mean not putting your money into industries that did harm. So people

may have avoided, for example, investing in tobacco companies or arms manufacturers. For years now, the URC, among other groups, has boycotted Nestle because of the way it marketed baby milks in the developing world. But now we are encouraged, more positively, to buy shares in companies - or to put our money in a bank investing in companies which protect the environment, enhance society or otherwise improve the world.

This is not only good news. In the short term proactive ethical investing may seem risky, bringing us less certain return than unrestricted funds; and I'd be surprised if any of us didn't want financial security. Moreover, I suspect none of us is free of supporting organisations or causes we wouldn't approve of if we knew. Naomi Campbell's blood diamonds are a good example. Though most of us won't have dodgy dictators offering us uncut gemstones in the middle of the night, I wonder how guilty the stones in our treasured rings may be of funding conflict around the world.

So for us too, Isaiah hits the nail on the head: our sins are scarlet, or to put it another way, we none of us have a clean balance sheet before God. Yet we can take this uncomfortable fact two ways. If we choose to take notice of the prophetic voices in our own time, warning us of how our actions may be harming defenceless people whom we will probably never meet, God promise that such turning round from past wrong will be for our benefit too; for a world in which vulnerable people and our fragile environment are protected is the sort of world we want to leave to the next generation. If, on the other hand, we choose to ignore the consequences of our choices, saying to ourselves: I'm not important enough for what I do to make any difference, our descendants may rightly reproach us for a world where warfare and destruction are commonplace.

I'm deliberately putting these decisions in terms of our own self-interest, because we are making them for our benefit, not God's. With one of the most sarcastic passages in the whole Bible, our psalm this morning makes that clear. 'I will not accept a bull from your house,' God tells the Israelites, 'or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If

I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?' God, creator of all, stands in no need of our feeble resources, or even of our worship.

Yet, astoundingly, God still wants to work together with us, wants us to make good decisions, even knowing our track record of getting things wrong. And in return, we can trust God to steer us through the choices we must make in life showing where we've put our treasure: our time and our money and our efforts. Our decisions may still not be easy. Yet the heroes of our faith, some listed in that long reading from Hebrews we heard this morning, went through this same hard process. Had you asked Abel or Abraham, Sarah or Isaac or Jacob, in the middle of their story how much they trusted God, as they decided what to do with their flocks or their money or their families, they might not have been utterly certain. Yet at the end of their stories, and in sharp contrast with the people of Isaiah's time, God is 'not ashamed to be called their God'.

In all this focus on our lives beyond this building, I don't want to downplay the crucial role that worship and prayer do properly play for us as Christians. We could, like Isaiah's hearers, stick to the letter of our own rules by singing a few jolly hymns, hearing a sermon and then going home to business as usual. But we also have the chance to reflect on the choices in life we have already made and those that are to come, to give thanks to God for the times we have heard and obeyed God's call to justice, to offer to God all the current possibilities

and dilemmas of our lives. Our prayers of thanksgiving and intercession this morning will come from you, and while it won't be the place to go into detail out loud, let's use that time to ask our God to show us how, by all the choices of our lives, we can build up our treasure in heaven.

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

1 August, 2010

Luke 12:13-21 (Jackie to read)

Sarah: Thank you for seeing me at such short notice, Dr Callear.

Jackie: That's all right. What can I do for you this morning?

Sarah: Well, my uncle died last week.

Jackie: I'm sorry to hear that.

Sarah: It was a great shock. We none of us expected it. One moment he was making a killing on the Stock Exchange; the next he was killed himself. All of a sudden. Dropped down dead just as he was making a bid for all the coffee in the world.

Jackie: All the coffee in the world?

Sarah: Well, he'd read that someone had done it with all the cocoa beans in the world. And my uncle thinks big. Sorry, he thought big. So he said to himself, why not coffee? After all, everyone drinks coffee.

Jackie: [*incredulously*] And he had enough money to buy up all the coffee in the world?

Sarah: Not everyone lost out with that mortgage crisis, you know. He was one of the clever ones; he backed the banks to lose. But I don't want you to think life was easy for him. He worked round the clock to make his millions.

Jackie: It does sound very hard work. But if we could just get back to your own situation. Why have you come to see me this morning?

Sarah: Well, he was my uncle.

Jackie: Yes?

Sarah: So we're related.

Jackie: Obviously.

Sarah: So I'm worried the same thing might happen to me. And you're a doctor, so I thought you'd be able to tell me how to make it not happen.

Jackie: Well, it sounds as if he was under a great deal of stress. Is your lifestyle as a minister very stressful? Maybe you should consider relaxing? exercising more?

Sarah: It's not that. I don't want to die like my uncle did. And I've inherited quite a lot from him, so if I need to go private for whatever the treatments are, I can afford it.

Jackie: I don't think you need any treatment. You look healthy enough to me. You're unlikely to die the way he did.

Sarah: But you don't understand. I don't want to die at all.

Jackie: Well, nobody does, but...

Sarah: No, seriously. I don't want to die.

Jackie: I'm afraid I can't help you there.

Sarah: Maybe I need to ask your mother, or your grandmother. After all, they've had more experience of doctoring than you have. In another few years you'll know the answer too.

Jackie: No, seriously, even modern medicine can't do anything about death. We can advise people how to live healthy lives. We can operate to make their bodies work better. But in the end, even the healthiest body's going to wear out. Everyone dies.

Sarah: Well, I'm very disappointed in you, Dr Callear. Very disappointed indeed. Can't you give me *any* helpful advice?

Jackie: Yes. Live as well as you can, while you can. That's my advice to you.

Sarah: That's all very well for you to say - you're much younger than my uncle - or me! Recently Sheila Cooke's lent me a book called *Black Diamonds* about the real-life history of a local coal-owning family of earls who within a century go from being among the richest in the land to dying out altogether. It's a great read, involving among other things national politics, bitter family fallings out and an affair with one of the Kennedys. Most of us will never have quite that level of finance, but it made me realise all over again how having money can't guarantee you safety or happiness.

If we believe the Mastercard ads we can get fooled sometimes into thinking something that isn't true: that with enough money we can buy our way out of every difficulty, even death. Really we know life's not like that, but it's easy to go with the flow, to think to ourselves: if only we had more in the bank, our problems would go away and everyone would respect us as successful people. But it ain't necessarily so!

Jesus' story contrasts someone who is rich but miserly with someone who's rich in other ways that count with God. So my question to you us: how are *you* rich? And how are you using what resources you have now?

Hymns:

R&S 489: Be thou my vision

He that is down needs fear no fall

R&S 239: Jesus lives!

R&S 586: All my hope on God is founded

Sermon:

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Psalm 49:1-12; Luke 12:13-21; Colossians 3:1-11

What have the following in common: Genghis Khan, Adolf Hitler, St Andrew, Robert the Bruce, Malcolm X and Mother Teresa of Calcutta? That's right: they're all part of the great dead majority. And, in due course, they're going to be joined by you and me. Of course, not all of them have equally good reputations among those of us currently breathing. I shall leave it to you to decide which the heroes are and which the villains. But, on the other hand, they are all dead. So, demands the book of Ecclesiastes, what's so great about being alive, when you know what's coming up? It's all just vanity... not vanity as in looking into every mirror as you pass, but as in uselessness; as bad as chasing after the wind, when you know you can never catch it up.

Ecclesiastes is not really holiday reading. On the other hand, the very fact that it's in the Bible indicates that, if you do ever wake up in the morning wondering whether it's worth getting out of bed, and if so, why, other people have felt the same, and God hasn't rejected them. We don't know for certain who 'the Preacher' was who wrote Ecclesiastes - the book itself says it was Solomon, who had more than enough riches for anyone (and, indeed, more than enough wives) - but whoever it was seems to have had a good try at everything and anything that might be considered worthwhile in life. We've only heard the edited highlights in our reading this morning, but if you read the whole book - it's not very long - you'll discover that the Preacher tried in turn concentrating on getting wisdom, pleasure, riches, power and success through hard work; and concluded that none of them was worth the effort, because however well you did, however much stress you went through to achieve your goals, you'd still end up just as dead as if you'd never bothered. What's more, whatever you'd achieved in life, after you died, someone else would take it all, and there'd

be no guarantee they'd do anything sensible with it.

You could call the Preacher the grumpy old man of his time. Ecclesiastes is the sort of book Victor Meldrew might have written, if he'd ever stopped moaning at his poor wife long enough.

But our psalm this morning seems to have a very similar theme. Listen: When we look at the wise, they die; fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others. Their graves are their homes for ever, their dwelling-places to all generations, though they named lands their own. And according to the psalmist there's one more twist to this sad saga: Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish.

That's a surprisingly modern thought, that we human beings shouldn't flatter ourselves, because even if we give ourselves airs, basically, we're like animals. It's something you'd expect to hear from Richard Dawkins, not the Bible. Yet it reminds us of the other side of the argument that money won't make us happy. Though I stand by what I said, it's also true that lack of the basic necessities of life - warmth, food, shelter - which money can provide can make us unhappy, and, if severe enough, will kill us. If we don't look after our bodies, we will painfully discover the dangers of ignoring them.

From the Hebrew Bible point of view, as we find in Ecclesiastes and the Psalms, one more thing we share with animals is the lack of afterlife. We live, we die, that's it. And that focuses the mind wonderfully on living well while we're alive. The poet Walter de la Mare advises us, Look thy last on all things lovely every hour, and it's good advice; why miss out on beauty and goodness just because there's going to be more around the corner? Hospices have the same philosophy: it's not the length of life that's ultimately important, it's the quality. Compared with a bank statement our riches towards God, built up over a lifetime, may look very unimpressive: a photo of a child? an old letter of thanks? a ring? a pressed flower? but we know their message: that we have been creative; that we have been transformed by living into something beautiful for God; that we have loved and been loved. That takes us right back to the beginning of the Bible, when God made the whole of life, including human beings, and in spite of everything that was to come, called it all 'very good'. But from the Christian point of view, this life is not all there is, so our reading from Colossians distinguishes between things on earth and things above.

This is a distinction I'm not always happy to make. Christian belief has sometimes been caricatured as 'pie in the sky when you die' - forget about what things are like here on earth, you'll be in heaven soon. There are hymns to reinforce that point of view: Brief life is here our portion; brief sorrow, short lived care; the life that knows no ending, the tearless life, is there. That sort of attitude can tempt Christians to ignore present injustice in a 'that's none of our business' sort of way; until, that is, we go back to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, reminding us that God wants justice done for widows and orphans: those in society who cannot speak up for themselves. But Paul isn't making that sort of distinction. He's giving his friends in the Colossian church very practical advice on how to start living now as if they were already in heaven. I can imagine them sitting together in someone's house listening to Paul's latest epistle. 'Put to death therefore,' he says, 'whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)... get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language'. And I can imagine them glancing at each other, as what he said hit home. We know what weaknesses we struggle with; our nearest and dearest may know too, as they are often the ones pushing our buttons, or who get clobbered. And we may know the temptation to say to ourselves: 'What's the point in trying to change? This is just how I am, and it's never going to be any different till the day I die. If

what cheers me up is putting something else I don't need on the credit card, or passing on the latest about someone's problems, or yelling at the cat, so what?' But Paul begs to differ. Why? Because as Christians, we're all part of the greatest makeover programme never shown on reality TV. From the moment we met Jesus - whether that was in our cradle or just a few years ago - to the moment of our death, we are each, whoever we are, being made over into his image: the one true human being, who most perfectly shows us what God is like. As far as my own makeover is concerned, it's a tough job for God, and for me as God's apprentice. It's going to take a lifetime. But for me and for you, the rich results will be worth all the effort. And that's not vanity, in either sense of the word.

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

25 July, 2010

Luke 11:1-13

We've heard what praying felt like for Jesus' disciples. Because Jesus chose them, because they went around with him all the time, we might think they'd be champion pray-ers, who knew exactly what to say and how to say it. But going by this story, they weren't very confident about praying. You pray, they ask Jesus. Show us how to do it properly! So he does.

I hope it gives us confidence to think that the people closest to Jesus needed some help in praying, because I think it's often something we find hard too. So I'd like you to move into little groups of 3 or 4 people, as we've sometimes done before, and I'd like you to think about the following questions, and then to discuss them with each other. Remember, there aren't any right or wrong answers: what we're looking for is how things are for you. And the questions I'd like you to think about, and if you wish, to share with your neighbours in the group, are these:

- Are there prayers you say by heart, as Jesus taught his friends the Lord's Prayer? what do you say?
 - Has there been a time in your life when it was really easy to pray? What happened?
 - Has there been a time in your life when it was really hard to pray? What happened?
- [discussion]

The other thing we can take from this story about Jesus and his friends is that Jesus thinks it's very important not to give up when we ask for God's help in prayer. He talks about someone who runs out of food to give his guests late at night, and because in those days there were no 24-hour supermarkets, all he can think of to do is to go to one of his neighbours who's a friend, and get him up out of bed to borrow some food. You can imagine he's not too popular with his friend, but eventually the friend gets tired of hearing the knocking on his door, and goes down to help him out, yawning and annoyed.

But God's not like that, Jesus says. God's not asleep or unwilling to help us when we ask. God's like a good parent who won't give their child junk food or poison when they're hungry. What we really need when we ask for help, says Jesus, is God's presence with us, God's Holy Spirit, giving us love, peace, patience, self-control - all the resources we need to get through whatever is bothering us, to go on working for the coming of God's kingdom in the whole of our lives.

Usually we pray the Lord's Prayer near the end of our worship. But this morning we're going to sing it, in a Caribbean version where the chorus is 'Hallowed be thy name' - may God's

name be loved and respected everywhere in God's world. Let's sing, and let's pray too, never giving up.

Hymns:

R&S 67: Immortal, invisible

Caribbean Lord's Prayer

Psalm 138 (tune: 'Strength and Stay') I'll praise you, Lord, with heart content and joyful

R&S 413: What a friend we have in Jesus

R&S 398: O Lord, hear my prayer

R&S 646: Help us accept each other

Sermon:

Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138; Luke 11:1-13; Colossians 2:8-19

You may have shared with your neighbours a time when turning to prayer was easy. I suspect at least some of those times may have been when life suddenly became very difficult for you, or someone you loved. Your immediate reaction may have been a mixture of: 'God, why did this have to happen? What have we done to deserve this?' and 'God, I'll be good if you make it go away!'

Some of you will know Colin Anderson's wife Jacqui. More of you may not, and that will probably be because for a few years now Jacqui's health has not been good, and she has not been able to come to church very often. I asked her once when I was visiting what her experience of prayer was. Her story - which I have permission from Jacqui to use - is very honest about the way she used to pray, and how, as a result of what has happened to her, that has changed. Let's hear it in her own words.

'I have come to realise that I used to be a bargain pray-er. When things happened in my life which were not nice; if the children was late home, or in family illness, I would pray to God to help me. "Please, God: let everything be ok, let the badness go away - I will read the Bible, go to church, anything - but let the problem be solved." The problems were solved; the children got home safe: the prayer and the promises I made were forgotten. I did thank God but till the next emergency happened, or unless I went to church, if I am being honest, I didn't pray; not at all.'

I suspect this is not only Jacqui's experience. We often think of prayer, maybe unconsciously, as a means of getting our own way: of bargaining with God. We will be decent people living good lives; in return God will make sure things go well for us. But of course, it doesn't always work out that way, as Abraham discovers in our second reading. Just to fill in a bit of background, you may be wondering what on earth the people of Sodom and Gomorrah can have done for their cities to be under threat of destruction. At this point of the story, they had a terrible reputation, both for sleaze and for inhospitality, but God isn't going by hearsay and wants to pay an unexpected inspection visit via angels to see whether things really are that bad. If they are, Sodom and Gomorrah are for the chop. But first God checks things out with Abraham. And Abraham, feeling protective about the city where his nephew Lot and Lot's family have settled, starts bargaining. There may well be good people among Lot's neighbours; so he starts high. If there are fifty good people, will God spare the city? After all, otherwise the good and the bad would die together, and that would do nothing for God's reputation as a just judge. God agrees. And once God has agreed in principle, Abraham can whittle the number of good people in the whole city right down to ten. Surely, counting Lot's family and servants, there will be ten good people in the city. Surely, God will spare it.

But Jacqui's story, like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, and maybe like some of our own, indicates that prayer is something different from such bargaining.

'I was rushed into the Hallamshire Hospital,' she says, 'with a suspected Brain Tumour. Once again my Bargain Prayer went into action. "No, God, you cannot do this to me! Please help me!" As I lay in bed waiting for the scan I started to bargain with God again: "Let it be a big mistake; let it be something else: anything but not a Tumour.'" And indeed, a CAT scan showed that Jacqui had no tumour. Her bargaining seemed to have worked. Until the test results came back. 'I visited the consultant at the Hallamshire,' Jacqui says. 'I was quite calm, looking forward to going on holiday in a few days, no worries. When the consultant told me it was MS I just stared into my husband Colin's face. I didn't want to believe it. I felt that my future had been taken away. I was so angry with myself, and everybody. I felt let down by God: how could he do this to me?'

I was not a bad person; I did everything in the right way; I wanted to be the perfect daughter, wife, mother, friend; I didn't hurt people; I gave to charities - so why had God given me this? Why was my so-called perfect life now ruined?'

Lot may have asked himself a similar question, as with his wife and daughters he fled the city of Sodom where all their neighbours and property had gone up in smoke. After all, he was one of God's people, not those wicked Sodomites.

When God's angels had been in danger of rape, had he not pushed his own daughters out of doors, imploring the mob to have their way with them, but to spare his guests? Was he not the pattern of virtue?

We will have our own ideas about just how deserving Lot was. Indeed, when bad things happen, we may be able to dredge up out of our past reasons why God may want to punish us. That perpetuates the idea that prayer is a bargain between us and God, a bargain broken if we are bad, withdrawing God's protection from us. Yet Jacqui's experience goes against that. 'I started to write all my feelings down,' she says, 'and it was quite an angry essay. I always asked God, "Why me?" It came as a bolt out of nowhere, when it came to me: "Why Not You?" The fear left me about my illness quite soon after I began to realise that I was not being punished for not returning my side of the bargain when I used to pray to God.' So how does Jacqui pray now?

'I thank him for each day for me feeling peace and being calm. I pray to him about the different situations in the world. No more bargaining prayer: I am not afraid of God, which I think I had been.' I think Jacqui's right about fear being behind much of our prayer and our worship: fear that unless we do everything right, we will be part of the burning city, not, like Lot, saved from destruction. And we're not alone. People in the church at Colossai were afraid that unless they did all the right Jewish things - circumcision, obeying the food laws, observing all the festivals - they could not make that bargain with God that would ensure their acceptance. Paul had to remind them that it was their trust in the risen Jesus, not anything they had done or failed to do, that proved God's forgiveness, God's acceptance was real, and was for them.

We are all at different points on life's journey, with our own prayers to offer, our own burdens to share with Jesus. But if we change our picture of God from a judge ready to condemn to a father ready to forgive, if we persist in building that relationship through prayer, we can offer the Psalmist's thanks: 'On the day I called, you answered me: you increased my strength of soul.' For this, not bargaining in vain for a trouble-free life, is true prayer.

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost; Baptism of Lily McMaster

Service Date:

18 July, 2010

Isaiah 43:1-3a

When they were thinking about what Lily's baptism means to them, Kirsty and Ross chose this particular passage from Isaiah, one of God's spokesmen. And it's not hard to see why. Bringing a child into the world, bringing a child up, is not easy. The news that surrounds us 24-7 reminds us of many of life's dangers for children. The risk assessments many of us have to do for work or voluntary groups also remind us of things that could go wrong in a child's life. So it only makes sense for Ross and Kirsty to bring Lily for baptism, to ask for God's help to protect her from everything bad that could happen to her. Right? Wrong! Anyone who looked to Isaiah for risk management would be horrified. Let's hear again the message he brings from God to the people of Israel, thousands of years ago, a message for us too: But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

So far, so good. We can cope with a God who made millions of years of evolution happen, just so God could call Lily's name and bring her into being. Creation over such a long time is hard to get our minds around - but here she is; isn't it fantastic?

Being redeemed sounds a bit weird - has God given us free coupons? What for?

I'll come back to that in a moment. But first comes the scary stuff. Listen to Isaiah passing on God's promise to Israel and to us: When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.

Hang on a moment! Wasn't God meant to keep Lily safe? It's great that the floods won't drown her, but what is God doing, letting her wade in deep waters to start with? And it gets worse: When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. Well, thanks a lot, God, but I'd rather she stayed out of the fire than walk through it unscathed. A fine protection you're turning out to be! A wonderful parent! Well, actually: yes. For as Kirsty and Ross are discovering, with Lily on the move: one of the major skills of parenting is in knowing when to be protective and when to give your child freedom to learn and grow. I hear she's discovered stairs now. If they didn't let her try to climb, she'd never work out how to do it. And I reckon God, who is a pretty good parent, must have had that problem with Jesus. Should Jesus watch his words in case he offended people, or speak the truth about God and others? Should he obey the religious leaders who could help his career, or love everyone, even embarrassing people no one else wanted to know? Should he stay alive at all costs, or be killed by people threatened by his message and live again, so we can find out how God's love is stronger than hatred or fear or even death, strong enough to get us through everything that hurts us? Because that's how God redeems us. Jesus' death, Jesus' resurrection is our voucher showing how, no matter how bad things get for Lily, God's love and forgiveness for her will never run out. In a few moments, we're going to be welcoming Lily as God's new child through the water of baptism. Don't worry, I don't plan to drown her. Her baptism doesn't mean nothing bad will ever happen to her; bad stuff happened to Jesus and happens to his followers too. But she'll wade through the floods, she'll walk through the fire. For like every Christian, every child of God, she has God's promise: I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your saviour: the one who rescues you; the light of all our lives.

Hymns:

R&S 104: Praise, my soul, the King of heaven

The Aaronic blessing (R&S 420)

R&S 572: Colours of day

R&S 531: Lord of all hopefulness

R&S 42: For the fruits of all creation

Sermon:

Isaiah 43:1-3a; Psalm 15; Luke 10:38-42

We've got a classic choice for Christians here, especially for Christian women: Martha or Mary? Can I have a quick show of hands: which are you: Mary? or Martha? Which would you like to be? - you don't need to say! And which - if either - do we hope Lily will become, once she gets the chance to choose?

It looks as if the right answer should be 'Mary'. After all, that's what Jesus said. 'Mary has chosen the better part,' he tells Martha, begging her sister for a hand with the dishes, 'and no one will take it away from her.' But what is this better part he's talking about? Is he just flattered because Mary's hanging on his every word?

It would be easy for us to imagine Mary as a theology groupie, a yes-woman who looks adoringly at Jesus instead of taking responsibility for herself, but that's because we're used to the idea of women being students - even, these days, of there being more women in some university subjects than men.

In Jesus' day it was very different. It was men who studied God's word in the Bible. The experts in it were called rabbis. And each rabbi called disciples to follow him who - surprise, surprise - were men too. Having a woman as your disciple, sitting at your feet the way men disciples did, was weird. Being a woman who wanted to think about life, the universe and God was weirder. Mary was bucking the trend. And I believe when Lily grows a bit older, she'll discover that God has given her many gifts and abilities which she can exercise as well as any man. If God calls her, she can even become a bishop in the Church of England now, though I'm not sure I'd be glad of that calling myself!

But as well as being a Mary, if she takes after her granny Arlene, I suspect Lily's also going to have something of a Martha in her. After all, gourmet cooking must be in her genes. It'd be easy to make Martha look silly and fussy, missing out on the chance right under her nose to learn from Jesus. But as the head of a household in her own right, someone who could invite Jesus into her own house for a meal, in those days she was just as unusual as her sister. And of course we don't just know about Martha from this story, in Luke's Gospel, for in John's Gospel we hear about a later incident in the life of both sisters.

Their brother Lazarus is close to death; they've asked Jesus to come and heal him, but unaccountably he delays till after the funeral. Then Jesus and his friends turn up, and Martha goes out to meet them. She's upset. She demands of Jesus: 'Why couldn't you come in time? Then my brother wouldn't have died.' What does Jesus say? 'I'm sorry - there was just too much traffic; I couldn't find anywhere to park my donkey?' Or, more likely, 'I was afraid if I did come, my enemies would get me?' After all, he's already had death threats from people who don't like the way he talks about God's love, God's forgiveness. No. 'I'm God's new life,' he tells her. 'If they're my friends, even people who've died will live. Do you believe me?'

Martha rises to his challenge. She recognises him as God's leader, the Messiah. She sees how closely he's connected to God, close enough that it makes sense for him to call God Father, and for her to call him God's son. She's a theologian now!

So while she was making the bread and setting the table and washing the dishes Martha

must have taken in something of who Jesus was. And maybe her learning, done in little scraps between her other responsibilities, is a good model for us these days, caught between so many calls on our time, wondering whether or how there is meaning in our lives, whether or how God can make sense for us. When we reflect on our lives and the life of the world, when we ask ourselves: 'What does Jesus say to this? What's God playing at here?' we are following Martha. As Lily grows older, I hope she will ask these questions, and share her conclusions, within and beyond the church. For, as we sang in our last hymn, if the message of God, the message of Jesus makes sense to us, our challenge is to share it with others.

But how is Mary, Jesus' open disciple, reacting to the tragic death of her brother? Martha tells her that Jesus has come, and together they go to Lazarus' tomb. Mary, too, accuses Jesus: 'If you'd been here, my brother would still be alive!' But where Jesus challenged Martha, he weeps with Mary. She knows how deeply he is affected by what has happened; she knows how much he cares about all three of them; she knows she can trust him enough to share her feelings of grief and anger. And he knows he can trust her enough to weep in her presence - something that was no easier for a man to do then than now. And after they weep together, Jesus shows both sisters God's unstoppable love, and foreshadows his own rising from death, by bringing Lazarus back to life.

Mary and Martha: two strong women, who could challenge and be challenged by Jesus, who could trust him enough to share their thoughts and feelings with him. Two good role models for Lily, and for each of us, women and men. But of course they had the massive advantage of knowing Jesus face to face. We have to rely on passed-down stories about him. It's not the same as sitting at table with them: talking to Mary, absorbed in the conversation till Martha digs her in the ribs to pass the bread; looking at Lazarus, wondering how he feels. No, our church life is not the same as sitting down at table with Jesus; yet in a way, our psalm points us to how we can share our lives with God just as much as if we'd been there at Martha and Mary's table two thousand years ago, or listening four thousand years ago when Isaiah first gave God's people God's message. Let's hear that psalm through again: it's not long, but it has profound implications for us. GOD, the writer asks, who gets invited to dinner at your place? How do we get on your guest list? And God replies: "Walk straight, act right, tell the truth. Don't hurt your friend, don't blame your neighbour; despise the despicable. Keep your word even when it costs you, make an honest living, never take a bribe. You'll never get blacklisted if you live like this."

That's challenging in this economic climate where if we save ourselves from financial cuts, they will hurt others; where we're tempted to lay blame elsewhere for the mess we got into believing in endless cheap credit; where the weakest, or the most honest, may go to the wall. It's challenging for Ross and Kirsty, doing their paid work and bringing Lily up: what example are they giving her? But Kirsty and Ross, you're not on your own. You two and Lily are sitting around God's dinnertable, with all of us and many more, as like Martha we try to get our work done well, and like Mary we ponder on Jesus' words and how to follow them. That's why by baptism we're welcoming Lily not only into God's family but into this church community. Through all our days - even wading through waters, or walking through fire - we're in this together, with God, who'll get us through.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

11 July, 2010

Luke 10:25-37

Our Gospel reading this morning is a very familiar story, so I want us to use our imaginations to understand it freshly. Listen, and fill in the details for yourself.

I was hitchhiking, but no one turned up to give me a lift, so I had to use shanks' pony instead. It's a bad road, with a reputation for accidents and muggings, but I couldn't help it. So I kept a sharp lookout, and tried to listen out for noises that might mean somebody bad was coming, so I could get out of their way. Even so, I walked right into trouble. A big group of men who looked as if they meant no good to anyone. I tried to walk past confidently, the way they tell you to do in bad parts of town, but it didn't work. First the whistles, then the name-calling. I tried to ignore it, but when I didn't respond they got angry. Then they surrounded me, so I couldn't move on. And I don't want to think too much about the next bit. It hurt, that's all I need to remember. And when it was over, I was horizontal with my bag gone, and they were nowhere to be seen. I crawled over to the edge of the road, but that was all I had the strength to do. In the end, someone had to come along, didn't they? I must have fainted at that point, because when I came to again, it was several hours later, and I heard the sound of footsteps again. Oh no, not again, I thought - you've taken everything I had anyway. But it wasn't the muggers back. It was much better news than that, or so I thought. It was a cleric, dressed for some major festival. I could hear him muttering as he came closer; trying out his sermon, it sounded like. I'd have quite liked listening to him, but I had other things on my mind. So I cleared my throat, meaningfully. Then he came out of his dream, and noticed me lying there. But if I'd looked for any help, I was going to be disappointed. 'Terribly sorry to see you in trouble,' he exclaimed as he picked up his pace. 'But I'm late already, and as you see it's a pretty important occasion. I can't risk getting blood on my vestments. I'm sure someone will come along to help you soon.' And off he went, top speed.

I was a bit sorry to see him go. After all, no one knows what clergy do when they're not in services. I'd have liked to think they went round helping people. But evidently his congregation and getting to his service on time meant more to him than I did. So I went on lying there in the road, drifting in and out of consciousness, till another set of footsteps woke me up again. This time it was someone going to a meeting. She had all her notes with her, and was ready with all her arguments against so-and-so who was going to oppose his plan. She looked efficient and organised, so I had high hopes of her help - but it was as bad as with the cleric. It just took one look at me and the state I was in, and she veered off to the other side of the road. This one didn't even look at me. It was as if unless she decided to stop and notice me, I didn't even exist, so if she didn't look, she wouldn't have to change her priorities and do something about my problem.

I was getting worried now. It was growing late, and the air was getting colder. What would happen to me if I had to lie here all night? Would the next band of muggers think it was a real laugh to kill me? Or would pneumonia do it for them?

The next bit seems like a bit of a dream to me, even now when I look back at it. Because to be honest, the next person to stop was someone I'd have pretended to ignore if I'd seen him in the street. You would have ignored him too! It was embarrassing the way he dressed. His accent was really weird. And it was anyone's guess what he'd been doing beforehand and with whom. But to me, just then, he seemed like an angel.

He picked me up and helped me walk over to his transport. He got me to a hotel. He actually paid for me to stay the night - heaven knows where he got the money from. And I heard him telling reception, 'Don't worry about the money. I'll be good for the bill. Just contact me if

you need to spend anything else.' And I realised that out of all the people in the world, this impossible man had been my saviour. I'd never have believed it, not in a million years. We often tell the story of the Good Samaritan as though we are or should be the Samaritan, looking for ways to help people out when they are in trouble. The word 'Samaritan' has come to mean someone who's a good neighbour, and Jesus ends his story answering the question, Who is my neighbour? with the words: Go and do the same. But when Jesus' friends heard the story, they would not have been identifying with the Samaritan. Samaritans were weird. They got God wrong, they didn't live right, they were an affront to any right-thinking Jew. So to understand the story right, before we're the rescuing Samaritan, first we have to imagine what it was like to be in need of help, and to be rescued ourselves by one of these peculiar characters.

Hymns:

R&S 90, words and music, comes from the pen of Patrick Appleford, one of the co-founders of the Church Light Music Group, which published three collections of Twentieth Century Hymns, this one in 1965.

R&S 475 is also a contemporary hymn, written by Glen Baker of the United Church of Canada. It reminds us that while we as Christians are servants of others in need, we can also be helped by other people in our own healing.

R&S 318 is another twentieth-century hymn, but one based on no fewer than seventeen biblical quotations; if your mind wanders during the sermon, you are invited to track them down to their sources! The tune Cornwall is from the nineteenth-century composer S.S. Wesley.

R&S 95 comes from the Mirfield Community, a Yorkshire Anglican community of monks, and was written by Bishop Timothy Rees, at that point the Principal of its ordination training course. The tune Blaenwern comes from the Welsh revival of 1904-05.

Sermon:

Deuteronomy 30:11-20; Psalm 82; Luke 10:25-37;

Colossians 1:1-14

Our reading from Deuteronomy this morning sounds like a no-brainer. It's not even like Deal or No Deal, that you don't know exactly what's in the box you're being invited to open. Rather than a sum of money, small or large, the people of Israel are being invited to choose life rather than death. Well, it's obvious, isn't it?

But maybe not. Maybe when you get into a real-life situation, it's not so easy as having a choice of boxes, Noel Edmonds on hand and the banker on the phone to advise you. To start with, Deuteronomy, like our psalm, has the wisdom of hindsight. It was written during the Exile, when the people of Israel had decades to work out what could have gone wrong for them, that they had been defeated in battle and driven out of their land. The writer of Deuteronomy is pretty sure what it was: they'd not obeyed God, kept God's laws, and this was why they were in such a state now. So he urges the people: don't make the same mistake twice. Keeping God's laws means life, breaking them and turning away to other gods means death. It's like the choice between Compare the Meerkat.com and Compare the Market.com. As the meerkat on TV says: Simple! But to the Israelites who had crossed the desert and entered the Promised Land, what it meant in practice to keep God's laws, to serve God and not other gods, may not have been so simple. And I suspect that may be true for us, too.

Think about the villains on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho; not the muggers, but those who saw the person in need and turned away again. They had good reasons not to stop.

Both priest and Levite would have been contaminated by touching a dead body, and the victim had been left for dead. Both would have had important responsibilities to their own communities, which could not have been fulfilled had they turned aside to help this stranger. It might even have been a set-up with more robbers lurking in the background. So in their minds, their priorities were obvious. Yet from the victim's viewpoint the outcome was evidently wrong.

I wonder whether it was hard for us to enter into the mindset of the victim waiting to be helped, rather than the other travellers on the Jerusalem-Jericho road, those who passed by or the one who stopped to help. Our tradition approves of people who work hard, whether in their own affairs or on behalf of the church. St Andrew's has set up many organisations to do good works, helping others directly or raising funds for charitable causes. We are conditioned into being either Good Samaritans, or people who feel guilty when they pass by on the other side.

Last week I said, *If God's kingdom only comes as a result of our efforts, then we are back to earning salvation by the sweat of our brows, or more likely by endless committees, fundraising events and petitions we feel we have to organise so that God's work is done. And we're back to the prospect of powerlessness, guilt and failure, since we are not God but human. Is it possible, though, that God is quite capable of doing God's work? That our task is to look and notice when this is happening, and to say to others, as the psalmist does, 'Come and see what God has done'?*

This invitation for us to be people who are witnesses to what God does, not people who kill ourselves trying to fill in for God, drew a response from one person, But we do too much already. We can't do more. And for many of us, that is true. Torn between the demands of family and of church, we may hear the story of the Good Samaritan as a call to further action, and to despair; because we can do no more. But what if, instead, we are the ones in need of help, which may be offered to us from an unexpected and unwanted quarter?

The victim on the Jerusalem-Jericho road had to choose between death and life: death from exposure on the road, or life from the hands of a Samaritan. It was a no-brainer; yet I could imagine a different choice. 'Hands off me, you dirty Samaritan!' exclaims the victim, defiantly. 'If I die, I die, but you're not going to touch me! You know nothing about God or our culture! I refuse to be helped by you!'

Ridiculous, a response like that. Surely God had sent the Samaritan. How could such help be refused? Well, I'm sure you all know the story about the man hanging off a cliff, who refuses offers of help from a mountaineer, a boat and a helicopter because he wants God to save him, and hasn't recognised God's help in those who pass by.

Deuteronomy reminds us: God's word is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.'

What word is this? Deuteronomy sees it as God's law. According to the letter to the Colossians, it is also 'the gospel that has come to you.' But of course God's word is not only the law or the Gospel. For 'God's word' is also one of the many names given to Jesus. In our church meeting on Wednesday, we talked about some of the names we use for God; our prayers of adoration and of confession this morning have come directly from the words chosen by people at that meeting. Somebody asked me how we can give God any name, since God's reality is so far beyond our understanding. And that is quite true. Yet this all-

powerful God whom we praise and serve chose to become human, to be translated into a word our tongues could speak and our hearts could recognise. That is why God's human word is so near to our everyday lives. Yet God turns our everyday expectations upside down. Jesus is both friend and stranger, the victim lying helpless on the road and the despised Samaritan coming to his rescue. This is the shock of his story. It is good news for us, in need of help; but, like most of Jesus' stories, it has a sting in the tail. Would we agree to be helped by God, not just to be weary helpers? And would we recognise, say, a hijab-wearing refugee, or a tattooed biker or - well, you fill in the blanks - as someone sent by God to our aid? For after that, we could not stay the same.

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost; Holy Communion

Service Date:

4 July, 2010

Gospel reading: Luke 10:1-20

Narrator: After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them,

Jesus: 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way...

Disciple: Sorry, Jesus - can I just ask you something?

Jesus: All right. What is it?

Disciple: Can I just get this clear? You've called us all to follow you. Some of us have had to leave our families and jobs behind, and I can tell you it took a lot of organising to get away. And now you're sending us away again? I don't understand. Do you want us with you or not?

Jesus: Yes, or I wouldn't have called you to start with. But I've called you exactly in order to send you out.

Disciple: You've called us in to send us out? Sounds a bit like country dancing to me. But you're the boss. What do you want us to do? Is it going to be dangerous? Should I go home and get my dad's sword?

Jesus: See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. 4Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.

Disciple: Sorry to interrupt you again. But surely you can't really mean that? My mum always said, Don't leave the house without your purse. You never know when you're going to need a shekel or two. If we're not to take bags, how are we going to carry our sandwiches? I'll get blisters if I don't wear my sandals - you know how sensitive my feet are. And why shouldn't we say hello to people we meet on the way?

Jesus: To take one question at a time: you won't need a purse because when they hear what you have to say, people will offer you food and a bed for the night - it'll be a fair exchange, not charity. You don't need to pack a spare pair of sandals - the more you take, the more it'll weigh you down. And I don't mean you can't say hello to passers-by on the road. I just mean you shouldn't stand around all day kibitzing. You'll have work to do! Which reminds me, if it's quite all right with you, I'll get on with what I was telling you.

Disciple: You carry on. I'm all ears.

Jesus: Chance'd be a fine thing. However... Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house.

Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there...

Disciple: Whoa, whoa, whoa.

Jesus: What now?

Disciple: This business about curing the sick...

Jesus: Yes?

Disciple: That's what *you* do.

Jesus: True. But not just me. Didn't you hear what happened when I sent out Peter and James and John and the rest of the Twelve? They went off quaking just as much as you are, but they took me at my word, and God healed people through their prayer.

Disciple: But they're the holy ones. You've chosen them to be close to you. I'm just ordinary. I can't do things like that!

Jesus: On your own, maybe not. But you're not on your own. Where do you think God is? Where's God's kingdom?

Disciple: Well, in the temple. In the synagogue. Um, with you, when you teach and heal people. But not with me!

Jesus: On the contrary. Whenever you enter a town and someone welcomes you, I want you to tell them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." OK?

Disciple: OK, but... what if they don't welcome us? What if they laugh, or get nasty?

Jesus: Whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near."

Disciple: So according to you, God's kingdom is to be found all over the place? Even places where people don't welcome us or respect your name?

Jesus: I tell you, on that day -

Disciple: What day?

Jesus: The day of judgment! And stop interrupting me! On that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town. 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But at the judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. 'Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.'

Disciple: So you don't want us to go to far-away exotic places? I've got an aunt in Chorazin. She might be interested in what you're saying about God's kingdom. She keeps on asking me who you are and what I think I'm doing following you. And her little girl is always poorly. I wonder what God might do for her... Thanks for explaining, Jesus. What you want us to do doesn't sound quite as frightening as it did before.

Narrator: After some time, the seventy returned with joy.

Disciple: 'Lord, in your name even the demons submitted to us! It was fantastic! We did just what you said, and my feet didn't hurt at all, and you should have seen my aunt's face when her little girl got better after we prayed for her. Now all her neighbours want to know more about you. And God's kingdom is starting to feel really real, not just something you'd hear about in a synagogue sermon!

Jesus: 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. If ever you start to think you can't do anything for me, remember, I

have confidence in you, or I wouldn't have called you in the first place.

Disciple: When are you going to send us out again? I want to see God's kingdom in Bethsaida next time. It's so exciting seeing things change like this!

Jesus: It's great you're starting to see what God can do. But don't be fooled into thinking it's all going to be plain sailing from now on. Do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. And however bad things get, no one has the power to take that away from you.

Hymns:

CG 66 comes from John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community, with its words set to a Lewis folk melody. It celebrates our joining as a community called by Jesus around his table.

R&S 576 is a setting of words from our Gospel reading with others from Matthew's and John's Gospels, sending us, out to tell others about Jesus. Words and tune are by Hubert J. Richards.

R&S 447 is another contemporary hymn, this time by URC minister Brian Wren. The tune St Botolph was named for the parish church where its composer, Gordon Slater, was organist.

R&S 453 is also set to a folk tune, this time from Jamaica. Its words, celebrating God's invitation to the abundance found in communion, are by the URC hymnodist Fred Kaan.

Sermon:

Sermon: Psalm 66:1-9; Luke 10:1-20

In spite of our theme introduction, I wonder how far any of us can imagine being in the position of one of Jesus' 70 disciples, whom he instructs in our Gospel reading today to go off and prepare people for his coming. I suspect we'd be fine at the logistical bits of it: sorting out our travel arrangements, working out how best to cover the ground; but a lot more nervous about what we might be called on to say or do.

For what examples may come into our minds of telling others about God's kingdom and Jesus' love? I suspect we may be thinking of people knocking on strangers' doors to interrupt their daily lives with threats of hellfire and damnation; or of huge evangelistic rallies like those of Billy Graham; of people standing on soapboxes with a megaphone or walking around with sandwich-boards about the end of the world on their backs; or again of televangelists demanding that people should send them money in return for promises of coming prosperity. Compare that with our own experience: many of us may have been taken to church as babies before we had a word to say for ourselves; we may never have had to put into words to ourselves, let alone to anyone else, what our faith means to us. So as followers of Jesus today we have a problem. On the one hand, the models we have of people preparing others for his arrival may be ways we cannot imagine ourselves using. On the other hand, we may be uncomfortably vague about exactly what it is we would say or do if ever we were to go out, as Jesus sent his friends out, in order to prepare his way. Impasse.

It's not surprising that talking about mission, or evangelism, or any of the scary words which come up in this sort of conversation is often something which makes us cringe, or decide to take a vow of silence, or preferably run as fast as possible in the other direction, muttering something about an unavoidable prior engagement.

But does it have to be that way?

Do we have to choose between feeling guilt at not following Jesus and feeling powerless to obey his commands? Or may we be barking up the wrong tree? What is God actually wanting us to do?

Let's take another tack and look at the psalm set for today. Rather than what we should be doing or avoiding, it focuses on what God has done, and in particular God's power to rescue God's people from trouble. For God is the one who turns the sea into dry land; and that's not a question of marsh reclamation. It's a coded reference, for those who know, to the story of Exodus, when through a miracle the sea parted for the escaping Israelites, but rolled back onto the Egyptian slavers pursuing them. 'Come and see what God has done,' says the psalmist; 'God is awesome in his deeds among mortals.'

Now that is Israel's story, in which through our faith in Jesus we can share; but it is by no means the only thing God has done, or the only thing God is still doing, in our world. Let's go back further than the story of the seventy disciples sent out by Jesus, to the story of his sending out the 12, his closest followers. How does Luke describe his instructions to them? They are to proclaim God's kingdom, and to heal. But what does Jesus mean by the kingdom of God that they are to proclaim? How might we recognise it if we saw it? For that we need to go back further yet, to Jesus' manifesto, given in public in the synagogue at Nazareth. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,' Jesus says to his family and friends, 'because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' So if and when we see these things taking place, we can justifiably point to God's work, to God's kingdom in operation. I keep on harping on that it's God's work and God's kingdom for a reason; because I suspect that it's too easy for activists like me to try to shoulder God's work ourselves, and then to retire disillusioned when things don't work out the way we'd hoped.

If God's kingdom only comes as a result of our efforts, then we are back to earning salvation by the sweat of our brows, or more likely by endless committees, fundraising events and petitions we feel we have to organise so that God's work is done. And we're back to the prospect of powerlessness, guilt and failure, since we are not God but human.

Is it possible, though, that God is quite capable of doing God's work? That our task is to look and notice when this is happening, and to say to others, as the psalmist does, 'Come and see what God has done'? I don't mean to imply that we ourselves have nothing to do with God's work. Like Jesus' friends, whether the 12 or the 70, we are called to the work of healing, restoring, proclaiming God's good news. Yet when a church is working as it should, this arises naturally, not as a bolt-on extra.

Here are some pointers to the Kingdom I have come across this past week. At our Friday drop-in breakfast, I meet a man who has been looking after his friend's dog for months now, and as a result has been served an eviction notice from his Council flat. But our local Anglican vicar has taken notice of his plight, and has arranged for a private landlord to visit his current flat and find out whether the dog has damaged it; if not, a bond will be given guaranteeing his good tenancy, and a roof will again be over his head, when he was in danger of homelessness. Again at the Breakfast, someone who has come to church on Sunday brings a friend who suffers from depression. She is very nervous on first entering the building, but as we talk about gardening she relaxes. And as she leaves, she smiles, freed for a moment from the chains of her illness.

I think it's not coincidental that I'm talking about an event centring on food. While physical food is a necessity for us all, and therefore a leveller for all sorts of people, the sharing of lives that takes place during the Breakfast is just as important. And today we will be sharing together in the most important meal of our faith, where we believe Jesus is present with us: giving thanks for bread and wine, gifts of God's creation; sharing with us not only food and

drink, necessities for our bodies, but also God's love for us, strong enough to survive death; a necessity for our souls.

It's not easy getting a handle on the dynamic of the Christian life. Jesus calls us in to follow him alongside one another, for we are gifts to one another in the life of faith. Then he sends us out to see what God is doing in the world: to notice it, to point it out to others. He gathers us in around God's table, to be nourished by him in a particular way. Yet at the end of the service he sends us out again, to find him, serve him, point him out in the church and in the world.

It's tempting for us either to get so comfortable in our church lives that we are fearful about the idea of seeking God in the world; or to get so involved in our lives in the world that we resent the idea of giving more time to church. But if we only have eyes to see, God is at work in both. And if we only dare to give our attention and our permission, God is yearning to transform both the church and the world in ways that will be good news for us, and for others not yet among our number.

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

27 June, 2010

Luke 9:51-62

I wonder how many here were following Andy Murray's fortunes at Wimbledon yesterday? I can't say I was one of them, but it must be a bit exhausting being a follower of a sporting personality just now. One moment they're up, next moment they're down, and you go up and down with them.

Following a team can take a bit more effort and expense if you actually go and see them play, and the same is true if you follow a particular band. The Glastonbury festival was this weekend - I wonder if any of you used to follow a band so keenly you wanted to spend the weekend up to your knees in mud with very limited toilet facilities, just so you could see your favourite stars live? The new series of Doctor Who has just been launched in the States, and people were queueing round the block in New York to see the first episode screened with the stars. Or maybe if you follow principles of prudence and economy, you've queued for the first day of the sales in London, to get your hands on all the bargains.

So following something or someone can involve more effort than just being an armchair follower, switching the TV off and going to do something else. Jesus' friends are discovering that in our reading this week, as he leads them off to Samaria. It's not just that they're going abroad. Samaria was a very dodgy place for Jews to visit. They talk the same language, but the accent's wrong. They follow the same God, but the theology's wrong. Imagine finding yourself in the middle of a National Front gathering, when you really don't agree with the people surrounding you, but there are far more of them than there are of you. But Jesus needs to get to Jerusalem, so that's where he has taken them. And we, the readers of the Gospel, know that when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, it's not going to be all milk and honey there either.

But in the meantime, here you are in this foreign territory, and to crown it all, the people aren't being friendly. You went on ahead to ask them nicely, but because you're going to Jerusalem - dodgy territory to them - they're not interested. A bit of food? A room for the night? No way. And this confirms all you ever suspected about Samaritans. They don't know about God at all. They're just out for themselves. You know your leader must have the power to zap them - you've seen him using God's power to heal - so he should jolly well

teach them a lesson they won't forget, and bring down fire from heaven to raze their village to the ground.

But he won't. You try again at another village, but you still wonder.

Then he starts saying weird things. When someone wants to follow, he warns them that he's a homeless stranger. Surely not back in Israel? Someone else wants to sort out his father's funeral before following Jesus, but is told, 'No time for that - it's now or never.' Even saying goodbye to your family is out, apparently. This is hard. Can you really put all that effort into following someone who doesn't seem to follow your priorities, or care about your other relationships? And do you want to? Following Jesus may be harder than you thought.

Hymns:

R&S 117 was originally written by the Swedish writer Carl Boberg in 1885. An English translation was made in 1925 by Gustav Johnson; a German translation by Manfred von Glehn in 1907 and a Russian translation of the German by L.S. Prokhanoff in 1927. This was then reworked in English by Stuart K. Hine in 1939 to produce the version we sing today. The tune How Great Thou Art is a Swedish folk melody.

R&S 528 is another much-reworked hymn, starting off as a medieval Latin Advent carol attributed to Adam of St Victor and translated by J.M. Neale in 1863. Percy Dearmer borrowed two verses of it and added the rest to make the hymn we know today. The tune Quem Pastores Laudavere also has medieval origins.

R&S 558 on the contrary is a 20th-century hymn from John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community in which we hear the voice of Jesus calling us to follow and, in the last verse, are given the opportunity to respond. The tune Kelvingrove is a Scottish traditional melody to the words, 'O the shearin's no for you'.

R&S 345 brings in the Welsh tradition of the United Reformed Church. The words written by William Williams were first published in 1762 in Welsh and approximately translated in 1771 by Peter Williams (no relation). The tune Cwm Rhondda was composed for the annual Baptist singing festival at Pontypridd in 1905 and named after the valley of the Rhondda, a river in Pontypridd.

Sermon:

1 Kings 19:15-21; Psalm 16; Luke 9:51-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Preachers like me sometimes talk rather glibly about following Jesus, as if it's the easiest and most obvious thing in the world to do. He's the one who knows us better than anyone else, who loves us more than anyone else. Following him may seem a no-brainer, especially for those of us who have always been to church, who were first brought as infants in carry-cots and who have faithfully attended church and played their part in a congregation through many decades since. Yet for Jesus' first followers, if we are to take seriously our Gospel reading this morning, keeping on following him after their first calling was by no means a foregone conclusion. And before we write that off to their limited knowledge or their inadequate faith, we should take seriously the circumstances that made them wonder. Let's go back to Elijah and Elisha, in our Hebrew Bible reading. At the beginning of it, Elijah is just recovering from having heard God's voice - you remember? the voice that was not in wind, earthquake or fire but in the sound of silence? - and from the political programme that God has set out for him: choosing new kings for Aram and Israel. The bit missed out in the lectionary, which is a bit squeamish about such things, predicts the inevitable bloodbath that will ensue from these political actions. And his last task is to choose a new prophet to succeed him: Elisha.

Elijah duly carries out all God's commands, but when it comes to anointing Elisha as

prophet, he seems to hesitate. Maybe he thinks back over his own tumultuous life - slaughtering prophets of Baal, standing up to kings and queens, living through drought and famine; overtaking chariots at full speed - and wonders: is this really something to wish on someone else? He throws his mantle over Elisha to indicate his new prophetic status. But when Elisha runs up, all keen to follow him, Elijah has a momentary qualm, and tells him, 'Go back again; for what have I done to you?' Yet Elisha is willing to take on the prophetic burden along with Elijah's mantle. He sacrifices his oxen - burning his bridges, we might say, since cattle were then your bank account on the hoof - and follows Elijah. And we do not know whether or not he kissed his parents goodbye before taking the decision that would change his life forever.

Elisha's decision to follow Elijah, Jesus' friends' decision to carry on following him, may seem a long way from our own Christian discipleship, especially for those of us with no recollection of having made a deliberate choice to become Christians. Yet if we are seriously following Jesus there are always choices to be made in how we live.

Consider our reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he contrasts life lived according to the flesh and according to the Spirit. Of course, when Paul's talking about 'the flesh' he doesn't mean either meat in a butcher's shop or the extra inch round your waist that just won't disappear. By 'the flesh' Paul means the impulses we all face to do what is wrong. And it's an interesting list of temptations he sends to the Galatians.

Following through our sexual desires with the wrong person or in the wrong way is evidently out; well, no news there. Ditto sorcery, of the non-Harry-Potter variety - trying to manipulate reality to match our desires isn't on. Drunkenness and carousing aren't obvious problems in this congregation - though you'll know if ever taking a little drink becomes a necessity rather than a pleasure, and consider the implications.

Yet prioritising other things over God - idolatry, in other words - may be a tougher question for us to handle. If we are to take our other two readings seriously, even our love for and responsibility to our family might get in the way of our loving God, of our following Jesus. That's something to consider: could it possibly apply to your own circumstances? If so, how might things change in your life for the better?

And then comes a whole raft of words describing broken relationships between people: enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy. And these are sadly familiar to us, at least as possibilities. When I've been at Caledonian dos, I've occasionally picked up little undercurrents of 'So-and-so won't speak to thingummy, so we can't put them on a table together.' Friendship groups, even in churches, can sometimes harden into cliques which don't take people outwith the group into account. And at the extreme, there are people recently on this congregation's membership list who, because of some argument long ago, are no longer seen among us, though no one now can remember the original cause of controversy. So here's a challenge for me as much as one for you: when we fall out, as will sometimes happen, how can we counter the desire to win the argument by acting lovingly to each other, forgiving each other the wrongs which initially separated us?

Thank God, that is no mere rhetorical question, but is answered very firmly by Paul: it's God's spirit - the same spirit which inspired Elijah and Elisha, the same spirit which informed Jesus' words and actions, which can help us as we choose to follow Jesus by living a Christian life. And the fruits of that continual recourse to God, that continual prayer of: 'Help me, for on my own

I can't be loving,' are evident in Paul's second list.

They are evident too, from what I have seen, in at least one organisation that takes its life

from this church: St Andrew's tennis club. It is known across Sheffield, not for the excellence of its players - though for all I know, that may be the case too - but because of its welcome to newcomers. Whoever you are, a novice or an expert, you don't need to bring a four with you and stick to your little group; whoever is there on club days will play together and improve their game. The club even decided to opt out of the lawn tennis association, because there was too much emphasis on knock-out competition, as opposed to just enjoying the game.

And there's a true echo of the Christian life. Why do we follow Jesus, when it's sometimes difficult and painful? Because it is also our joy. Our psalm speaks of our hearts as glad and our spirits rejoicing, because in God's presence we can be joyful and at rest. In the end, we do not follow God because we must, but because God's love is better than anything else in the world.

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

13 June, 2010

Narrator: Welcome to *Come Dine With Me*, the first programme of this popular TV series to be set in first-century Palestine. Just to remind you, this evening a host is going to welcome others to his table and be scored on his hospitality. Your host tonight is... Simon the Pharisee! And because this is a pilot programme, he's invited just one guest: some young wannabe preacher, Jesus from Nazareth. It's going to be very interesting to see how Simon reacts to this newcomer on the religious scene. Let's find out how the evening begins...

Reader: One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

Narrator: Here's one for the books! Though maybe not one for the Bible, not the Sunday school bits, anyway. At first glance, it looks like Simon's gone out on a limb to please his guest - remember that episode when Lee Eley brought in gold-painted Bond girls to serve martinis? But Simon has the name for being a conservative, religious guy - the name Pharisee says it all, really. What's he doing letting a woman like that into his dinner party? How's he going to handle it? Let's see more...

Reader: Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him-that she is a sinner.'

Narrator: Simon's not pulling any punches tonight, is he? He may not be saying out loud what he thinks, but it's written all over his face. You're meant to pretend to be polite to your guests. But the way he's looking at young Jesus, it does make you wonder whether he wants him to be knocked dead by his hospitality, or just knocked dead. So how's Jesus going to react? Oh - he's starting to say something. Shh!

Reader: Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.'

'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.'

'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater

debt.'

And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.'

Narrator: Well, that's all Aramaic to me. I don't think we've ever had someone stop the whole meal just to tell stories. I don't see the point. But Jesus still seems to have something to get off his chest. Maybe he's got muddled - you're not meant to start doing the judging till after the meal's over, and here the food's hardly on the table. So what's he got to say to his host at this critical and embarrassing juncture?

Reader: Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.'

Narrator: That's a knockout blow! If I've got it right, he's implying that Simon's fallen down on his duties so badly, he's not been a proper host at all. That even before the meal's begun, he's scored nil out of ten. But that's not all. Jesus seems to be scoring this woman off the streets for her hospitality too - even though it's not her house! He's scored her highly for foot washing, for anointing - even for love! This is incredible! But I don't get it - what's love got to do with it, anyway? Surely the whole point of a programme like this is to make people feel worthless failures?

Reader: Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Narrator: This Jesus certainly has a new take on things. It's as if people who show love to others show they know they can trust God to love them. As if Jesus could forgive us for all the things about ourselves we regret, instead of having them scorned in public. This could be a whole new series: *Come Love with God!*

Hymns:

R&S 378 is one of a trio of hymns by Bishop Thomas Ken to be sung at different times of day; the others being 'Glory to thee, my God, this night' and 'Lord, now my sleep does me forsake'. They have in common the Doxology, praising God, which we sing each week as we bring our offering of thanksgiving and money to God. The tune for 378 is, rather obviously, Morning Hymn.

CG 29 reminds us that in worship we both give and receive God's hospitality. Seven Joys of Mary is an English traditional carol.

R&S 538 is a famous poem by George Herbert, published in 1633 in his posthumous volume *The Temple*, and set to another English traditional carol, Sandys (pronounced 'Sandz').

R&S 602 comes from a Roman Catholic priest, James Quinn, involved in ecumenical work, who died this year; it was written in 1969 for St Joseph's school in Edinburgh. The tune Lledrod, named after a village near Aberystwyth, is a Welsh hymn melody.

Sermon:

2 Samuel 12:1b-14; Psalm 5:1-8; Luke 7:36-8:3; Galatians 2:15-21

Well, of course, *we'd* never behave like the sneering hosts or guests on *Come Dine With Me*, let alone like Simon the Pharisee, ignoring the basic needs of his guest of honour. We've been brought up much better than that. We know how to do hospitality at St Andrew's, whether it's a cup of tea with our friends or a full-scale Burns Supper with the whole church and the Caledonian Society put together. But I suspect it's easier for us, as it is for most

people, to be hospitable when we're dealing with people we know, people like us. If, in a modern version of Simon's dilemma, a stripper in full costume, or lack thereof, were to gatecrash one of our Network meals and start giving the speaker a neck massage, would we offer her the chance to take the weight off her high heels, or might we be more inclined to reach for our mobiles and call 999? If that seems a bit unlikely, what if, as happens from time to time, someone from the Broomhall Breakfast turns up at church? How warm a welcome do they find among us? Alternatively, I wonder: when was the last time you came to the Breakfast yourself, to discover the Breakfasters setting up and clearing away, bringing cups of coffee and plates of food, chatting to one another - offering you a welcome, if you chose to accept it? For it's not always easy to tell who the host is and who the guest.

King David must have thought he was a pretty good host when Nathan the prophet came round to call. Maybe Nathan was a bit of a bore, as the minister sometimes is when making a visit, but David could put out the Hebrew Bible equivalent of tea and biscuits with the best of them. If Nathan wanted to tell one of his interminable stories, David would hear him out graciously. He knew his kingly duty. Yet Nathan didn't seem to know his duties as a guest. Instead of complimenting the king on his taste in biscuits, Nathan's chosen story hit the monarch where it hurt: right in his self esteem. For David prided himself on being a good king, one who saw justice done. When he heard of a poor man robbed by a rich man, he was furious -

until Nathan told him: You are the man. Then David let himself recognise, maybe for the first time, just how much he had wronged his general Uriah by sleeping with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, and giving orders for him to be killed in the thick of battle when Bathsheba became pregnant. Like Simon the Pharisee, he could no longer ignore the inconvenient truth that he was, in old-fashioned parlance, a sinner: someone who could not keep God's law for humanity, but had missed the mark.

It's not always easy for us to realise or admit that we're part of the problem, not part of the solution. I remember six years ago coming to Sheffield for the first time, before I ever knew of St Andrew's, for a summer school with Sheffield Industrial Mission, as it then was. We were taken to see aspects of industry in Sheffield - a steelworks, a call centre, a cinema - and invited to look more deeply into one of the places we studied, to ask ourselves what was going on there theologically as well as economically.

Our group decided to look at the call centre we had visited and question the operatives' self-understanding. They were working on behalf of a building society, chasing people whose mortgage payments had fallen behind. They evidently believed that they were the good guys, looking for people in trouble to help them out of it. But behind their pastoral concern, we found out that enforcers were doing a more sinister job - ringing up defaulting clients incessantly, badgering them at home and work, making their lives a misery. Behind that again, before ever we'd heard the term subprime mortgage, we saw the hand of an irresponsible mortgage lender, offering huge loans to people who would never be able to afford to pay them off, then milking defaulting borrowers by charging hefty interest rates ad infinitum. We concluded that the call centre operatives, though themselves well-meaning, were part of a much less well-meaning system. Yet behind it all, I received a shock. For the building society justified its actions by appeal to its savers, due their interest payments. And I myself was one of those savers. It's not always easy to tell who the saint is, and who the sinner.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul is grappling with a similar difficulty. As a Jew, he sees himself as a good guy, not a sinner - someone righteous, who has worked hard all his life to

keep God's law. We may identify with Paul, too. We have been brought up to pay our taxes, to obey the rules of the road, to be generous to worthy charities, to be good and upstanding citizens. But, says Paul, as Christians we believe it's not our keeping of the law that makes God accept us. Instead, it's the trust, the faith we have in Jesus. That's still the case, he argues, if Christians go wrong and break God's law - as happens spectacularly from time to time. That doesn't mean Jesus condones wrongdoing when it is Christians who sin. It is part of the barrier separating people from God, the barrier between us only his death could remove. But however good the lives we lead, we can be thankful that is irrelevant to the way God judges us - for no one living can be perfect, and God's standard is perfection. No one living is perfect; yet, Paul argues, for Christians, it is no longer we who live, but Christ, the perfection of God in human form, who lives in us. Christ is the perfect human being, never separated from God by sin; Christ is the gracious host who never ignores or mistreats his guests. As we follow in his footsteps, as we grow like him, we will gain confidence in offering his gracious hospitality to others, and in receiving it graciously too. We know that there will be times when we get it wrong; when, like Simon the Pharisee or like David the King, we rely too much on our own virtue, and try to ignore our own wrongdoing. Yet, when we realise our mistake, we have the choice of going on pretending to be in the right, or admitting to our fault with sorrow, along with the damage it has done in our and others' lives, and of finding God's forgiveness. So every day, as the psalmist invites us, whether at morning or evening, let us pause in prayer to share the events of our lives, good or bad, with God: asking for mercy when we have done what is wrong, asking for guidance to do what is right. For through such prayer we can find God in all the events of our lives, whether bad or good.

Second Sunday after Pentecost: St Columba

Service Date:

6 June, 2010

Galatians 1:11-24

Columba: I must say, Paul, that's a very impressive list of places you've visited. Weren't you born in Tarsus, in Asia, I believe? And then to travel to Arabia and Syria - and Jerusalem! I envy you seeing Jerusalem!

Paul: And Rome. But it wasn't precisely a sightseeing trip.

Columba: No, no, of course not. They had you up in front of the powers that be, I understand - trying to get you to back down and worship the Emperor rather than Jesus. I had a bit of that trouble myself, in a much more local way. Brude, King of the Picts, agreed to be baptised, but not all his people followed him.

Paul: I have to admit, Columba, I don't know nearly as much about your story as you do about mine. Some little Northern outpost of the Roman Empire you were working in, wasn't it? Ireland, or somewhere like that?

Columba: I can understand you making that mistake, because originally I came from Ireland but actually it was Scotland I did my work in. Not that I planned it that way.

Paul: I can't say much of my travelling was by plan, more by divine inspiration. Was it the same with you?

Columba: I'm embarrassed to say this, but it was because I fell out with someone over a book.

Paul: Enough people have written things about me, and they can never agree on what they think. That's how it is with scholars - no need to be embarrassed.

Columba: You misunderstand me. Finian and I, we fell out over a book of his I'd copied out, a book of the Psalms. You know how rare and precious books are - well, I thought it was mine, and he thought it was his, and before we knew it, things had got out of hand and men were lining up to kill one another in battle. I felt terrible about it! A follower of the Prince of Peace, to be the cause of hundreds of deaths!

Paul: Believe me, you're not the only one to feel bad over being the cause of destruction. Before I saw the light, remember, I started out my journey of faith trying to put Christians into prison. I've spent the rest of my life trying to put that right, by telling as many people as possible the good news about Jesus.

Columba: That's exactly what I did, too. But after that terrible battle, I felt I had to go away from my homeland, make a fresh start altogether. So with twelve companions, I sailed away from Ireland till I couldn't any more see the land of my birth, and eventually we landed on the island of Iona.

Paul: I've done some travel by ship myself. Horrible seasickness it gets you, even when you don't get wrecked. And then when you land, the work starts up all over again.

Columba: Doesn't it just! Trying to set up a community of Christ so far from home, trying to deal with the local kings, always at war with each other, and to turn them and their people to Christ; trying to keep the love of learning and of hospitality burning bright in my brothers' hearts. And when they grew too fond of home, the Spirit would send them off again, all over the world, to spread God's news.

Paul: So it was the same with you as with me? I never stayed put in any of the churches I founded, though I loved the people I'd met in them. Somehow Jesus was always calling me onwards. Whether it was people begging for our help or others wanting to persecute the church by hurting me, one way or another I preached the Gospel all over the world.

Columba: My case wasn't precisely the same as yours. My monks travelled everywhere in their little coracles - as far as Russia, they tell me, but mostly I stayed put in Scotland - though once I went back home to found a monastery in Durrow. Writing hymns, and teaching boys their letters, and stopping the tribes from killing each other; there was quite enough to keep me busy on Iona.

Paul: And I hear you did a few miracles now and then.

Columba: There may have been one or two. God is good. I remember a boy who was very ill. They thought he was dead. I prayed for him, with tears streaming down my face, and he opened his eyes, and I gave him back to his parents. But who does miracles isn't important. Real signs are the ones that point people to God.

Paul: My point exactly. People make a great fuss about how I met Jesus, whether the Gospel I brought came from hearing other people or directly from God. As I told the Galatians, I didn't get my ideas from anyone else but God. But that's not the only important question to ask. Does what I say point to God? Does it bring life or death to those who hear? That's what people should be asking of anyone who preaches the Gospel.

Columba: And that asking takes a lifetime. Whether like me someone stays in one place, or like you, is always travelling on.

Hymns:

R&S 73 and **272** are two parts of the same hymn, attributed to

St Columba and translated by Rev. Duncan MacGregor for a commemoration service on Iona

in 1897. The tune Durrow is an Irish sea-shanty from Limerick, and Merville comes from Kerry.

R&S 549 by Sydney Carter, words and tune, was originally written in the 20th century for a class of children about to change school, but has wider themes of exodus, exile and pilgrimage.

R&S 489 is an Irish Gaelic hymn, translated by Mary Byrne and Eleanor Hull; the tune Slane is also an Irish traditional melody.

Sermon:

1 Kings 17:17-24; Psalm 30; Luke 7:11-17; Galatians 1:11-24

Last week we started to think about prayer, how it's a way of becoming part of the life of God, the dance of the Holy Trinity. But of course we don't pray as some sort of spiritual exercise routine. We pray because we feel something deeply, and we want to share that feeling with God, whether it's praise for beautiful weather, sorrow for our or the world's destructiveness, or our urgent need for relief. This last week, I can't have been the only one praying for Harry Langford, unconscious in hospital since his stroke, and for Ann and Cheyda, his family. We don't do that because we think we'll rack up faith points with God; we do it because we want an intolerable situation to change for the better. And that, too, is the case in two of our readings this morning, chosen to echo each other: the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, in Syria; and the story of Jesus and the widow of Nain, in Israel.

In both cases, a dearly loved son is dead. In the Hebrew Bible, life has not long left him, while in the Gospel, his funeral procession is in full swing. But in both cases, the bereaved mother is distraught. In the Hebrew Bible, the widow of Zarephath has just, with her son and Elijah, come through a long period of famine, so it must have seemed doubly cruel that God who had brought them through one danger would have taken her son away through another. In the Gospel, there seems to be no connection between Jesus and the widow of Nain, yet for him to be aware that the dead man was his mother's only son, her situation must have been common knowledge.

In both cases, Elijah and Jesus are troubled by this tragedy. Elijah protests to God: 'O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?' And when he prays, 'O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again, we hear that 'the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again.' Again Jesus, looking on the weeping woman in Nain, has compassion on her. For she is not only losing her son. With the death of her only male relative, she has lost her position in village life, her source of income and possibly too the roof over her head. She is in a truly terrible situation, and though she has not appealed to Jesus, he feels for her pain. So what is his reaction? 'Do not weep!' That could go down in history as one of the most tactless remarks of all time. If a mother can't weep at the funeral of her only child, when can she weep? But if Jesus hasn't just spectacularly failed Pastoral Counselling 101 - and this, remember, is the man who wept when his friend Lazarus died, so he's not just modelling a British stiff upper lip - what does he mean?

Earlier in the Gospel, you may remember John the Baptist, imprisoned by Herod, having a sudden qualm. Was Jesus really God's chosen leader, or had John got it horribly wrong? So he sends friends to ask Jesus: are you the one, or should we be waiting for someone else? Do you remember Jesus' reply?

'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news

brought to them.' And Jesus wasn't giving John's friends a random list of miracles: he was pointing out all the ways in which what he was doing echoed what people expected of the Messiah, God's chosen one. So now when Jesus tells a mourning mother, 'Do not weep!' he's pointing her to something God is doing; something new, heralding God's kingdom. And the next moment, he's given her son who was dead back into his mother's arms.

In the Hebrew Bible, Elijah's heartfelt prayer pulls no punches. 'What are you playing at, Lord?' he asks. 'This widow has been looking after me to her own cost; is this how you repay her?' And this is evidently what he is really feeling. Sometimes we may try to sanitise our prayer, to dress it up in fine words or a mild tone because we don't want God to be angry with us if it comes out wrong. But God's friends, like Elijah, know that God knows what we're really thinking and feeling, and is not put off by our honesty.

Sometimes we may not know what is best to ask - I remember when my mother was unconscious after her stroke, we didn't know whether to pray for recovery or release. But even when we have no words, God can understand the prayers of our hearts, for God's spirit can make sense of our deepest groans.

In this story, we don't hear Jesus praying out loud. Sometimes in the Gospels he does, but often to remind everyone that it's God who is the source of his actions. For like Elijah, what Jesus does draws attention not to himself, but to God. In Zarephath the widow exclaims to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth." And in Nain 'they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favourably on his people!"' Sometimes Christians may be tempted to pray out loud and ostentatiously so others will marvel at how good and holy they are - this is a temptation ministers face. I suspect people in this church are more likely to pretend they're not praying at all, just to stop anyone else thinking they're behaving like Holy Willie, the hypocritical Elder of the Kirk in Burns' poem, who speaks fair and does foul. But we need not be ashamed of saying our prayers openly, for they point to the God in whom we trust. Yet is it worth our praying? For we know that not all prayers, however honest and heartfelt, are answered yes. To see that, we have only to look to Jesus in Gethsemane, asking for a way out of crucifixion; or, indeed, to so much suffering in the world before and since his death. How can we make sense of such experience alongside the Bible stories we have read today, bearing witness to new life out of death? Maybe our psalm can help. It speaks openly of suffering and death, mourning and a cry for help. Yet like many of the psalms of lament, it also describes a turnaround from woundedness to healing, from sorrow to joy. If we have the courage to share our situation with God through prayer, that can be our experience too.

Columba was a soldier before he was a saint, and the second hymn of his we sing this morning uses the language of battle to describe Christ's death. Today we remember the 66th anniversary of D-Day, when Allied troops began the invasion of Europe which would lead to the defeat of Nazism, though then the outcome was not at all certain. 2000 years earlier, God's victory over death was inaugurated by Jesus' resurrection. And our Christian journey through life - whether we stay put or move on - is shaped by that battle, and by that victory.

Trinity Sunday

Service Date:

30 May, 2010

John 16:12-15

When I was doing my A levels, there was a Scottish dancing class at school. Now I'd only gone to that school for A levels, whereas all the others had learned all the way up the school. And I looked at the result, how they knew exactly which way they were going, and what their legs should be doing at which point, and I decided that never in a thousand years was I ever going to learn how to do that, even when they were calling the moves which should help, so what was the point of trying? Later, when I was studying in Edinburgh, there were a lot of foreign students like me around, and we none of us knew how to do Scottish dancing. But someone took my hand and drew me into the dance - and then what the caller was saying started to make sense. I'm still pretty bad at dancing, as those of you in the Caledonian Society will know. But now I know from the inside what it's like to dance, so it makes sense to try, even though I don't always get it right. It's the same sort of thing if you're trying to get to a place you've never been before, with someone else's directions: till you actually get there, you won't understand what the instructions mean. Or if you're trying to learn how to use a computer, know what I mean. The instructions will make sense, but only once you dare to try it out.

It's the same sort of thing listening to the reading we've heard just now, Jesus trying to explain to his friends about how the Trinity works. Just now, he tells them, you're not going to get it. But when the Spirit comes, you'll start to understand what I'm telling you, because the Spirit will remind you of all the things I've already said to you but you didn't understand. The Spirit knows everything about me, because it's God's spirit we're talking about, the connection between God and me, so it's through the Spirit you'll find out everything God wants you to know.

You can imagine them thinking, I thought I knew what you were talking about, Jesus, but now I'm completely lost! And of course events caught up with them, Jesus' trial and death and resurrection, and they had other things to think about. But then, after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, things started to make sense - because they were starting to understand what it feels like to be on the inside of God's dance of love, not looking on from the sidelines.

So how do we get off the sidelines into the dance of the Trinity? One way is through prayer. For it's God we're praying to, it's Jesus who helps us pray, and it's the Spirit who prays in us. Sometimes I wonder if people are as worried about praying properly as I used to be about dancing properly; if we're tempted to think we've got to have the right words to say or God will take no notice, just as I stayed on the sidelines because I thought I'd not get the steps right. Yet God doesn't worry about our grammar. I'll share with you three prayers I often use. When I'm about to meet someone, I ask God to be with us and to be the love between us. When I'm tempted to feel that nothing's working out right, or that I'm useless, I ask God to protect me. When I don't know what to say or do,

I just say, Help! And my experience is that those prayers are answered. Of course, another way to pray is using the words of our hymns. And we'll do that now, in a round, to remind ourselves of God's dance we're all invited to share.

Hymns:

R&S 34 is a hymn specifically for Trinity Sunday written by Bishop Reginald Heber, based on the vision in Revelation of God at the centre of creation's praise. The tune Nicaea, named after the famous council of the Church where 300 bishops affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity, was written by J.B. Dykes for these words.

R&S 29 is a simple hymn, yet sung thoughtfully its words can inspire to prayer. Both words

and tune are by Terrye Coelho and were first published in 1972.

R&S 36 is first known from a manuscript of the eleventh century CE, with a direction for singing it dating from 690CE, but there is a firm tradition of its having been written by St Patrick, in other words in the fourth century. Mrs Alexander, the hymnodist who penned 'There is a green hill far away' and 'All things bright and beautiful', made the translation we will sing this morning. It is unusual in that the hymn changes metre and tune in the middle verses, from

St Patrick to Clonmacnoise, both Irish traditional melodies.

R&S 586 is another translation coming originally from Joachim Neander, a seventeenth-century minister who died young at 30, and translated by Robert Bridges, a 20th-century poet and writer. The tune *Meine Hoffnung* means 'My hope'.

Sermon:

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Ps 8; John 16:12-15; Romans 5:1-5

Those verses from Proverbs I read just now are among my favourites in the Bible, because this reading grounds our experience of God; it makes connections between God's creative power and our experience of the world. You'll remember from the beginning of John's Gospel, that carol service reading that starts 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'? Well, in that reading, that way the Gospel writer reflects on the deep connection between God and the Word, between the Creator and Jesus of Nazareth, didn't come out of nowhere. It was founded on readings like this one, drawing the link between what we know of the natural world and the God whom we believe created it in love.

Many of you will have been to amazing parts of the world, and seen natural wonders which can help you to sing and to pray, too: My God, how great thou art. Yet, if we are truthful, we must admit that the world is not only a wonderful place. This weekend, Harry Langford is suffering the results of a serious stroke on Thursday evening. Gordon, one of the men who used to attend the Broomhall Breakfast every week, is dying of cancer. You will know of people suffering in various ways, sometimes through their own fault, sometimes not.

So we cannot unambiguously say, with Louis Armstrong, *What a wonderful world*.

Wonderful it is, but terrible too.

Our psalm this morning touches on that theme. Great and wonderful is God, the psalmist muses, and in comparison to God and to God's world, even with our 21st century technological might, we human beings are small and frail and vulnerable. Yet the contention of our reading from Proverbs is that even as the universe came into being - though it doesn't really work trying to think of a poetic passage in terms of physical time - God's wisdom, God's word, was already rejoicing in the world and in human beings. Our reading argues that at root, the world is a God-filled place and a friendly place; that when we reflect on our world and our lives, from the very beginning we can find the patterns of God's activity, whether we look at us human beings, or at all that lives.

How could we test out this claim? Can we check out my argument in the theme introduction that we are intimately invited into the dance of God, the shared love which we call Trinity? What sort of facts would count in an argument like that? Two sorts: the record of scripture; and our own life experience.

I've started building my case already by appealing to your experience of the natural world; yet here in Sheffield I can remind us not only of nature but of engineering as we look again at that passage from Proverbs. For God like an architect or a civil engineer is portrayed as establishing the heavens, separating sea from land, digging the earth's foundations; and

God's word, the master worker, is portrayed as putting God's plans into practice. If we add that passage from the beginning of Genesis about God's spirit brooding over the waters of chaos as the Word let there be light! is spoken, we can see constructive action as a Trinitarian as well as a human activity. And that in turn means that when we build - not only as engineers but as friends or partners deepening their relationship, as parents bringing up a child, as students constructing an essay, as musicians creating a performance, we are showing God's characteristics. And that in turn means that though since we are mortal our work will necessarily be imperfect, it matters; it is worth our doing it well.

Our psalm echoes that sentiment: God has given us frail humans the power to dominate the earth. It is up to us, then, to mirror God's care for creation rather than yielding to the temptation to damage or destroy what we have not the wisdom to understand. And that in turn can help us reflect very practically on how we should use the natural resources at our disposal, whether it's how often we should fly or what pesticides we should use in the garden.

As you see, this business of reflecting on the world and on God, and how we relate to both, isn't a sum that we can do once and lay aside with relief once it's come out right. It's more like a long-drawn out conversation, growing deeper and richer through the whole of our lives, as we allow our Creator's habit of construction to become our own creativity, God's Spirit to inspire our thoughts; God's master-worker to work with and through us.

But am I dodging the issue? As well as creativity, in which it is easy to see God at work, we are inevitably dealing in this world with death and destruction: how can I claim to see God there? We know that suffering, for example, is common to human experience; given what happened to Jesus, it seems unreasonable to expect otherwise. Yet can our suffering speak to us of God?

Remember the links of the argument Paul uses in our reading from Romans? Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and that hope is not deceptive, but points to God's love for us, generously poured into our hearts through the coming of God's Holy Spirit.

This is a dangerous argument; you may have come across people, as I have, for whom suffering has been corrosive. Yet Paul, who knows a thing or two about it, with his record of beatings, stonings and shipwrecks, deserves that we should consider his claim.

How, then, can suffering teach us of God's love? Here we return to our theme introduction: Jesus trying to explain to his friends how the Spirit would eventually make sense for them of the experiences they could not grasp at the time. While at the time his death seemed to be the end of everything, in retrospect the Spirit could interpret his resurrection to them as a sign of God's unstoppable love, a love which will never abandon us, however bad it gets. If we can glimpse that pattern of new life reflected in our lives and the life of the world, we can indeed have hope - not hope that nothing will ever go wrong, but that life is stronger than death. And with that hope, we can play our part in healing our damaged world. I'm not just speaking to the healthcare workers here today, for those of us with no medical background can also be healers: through giving attention to someone whom others reckon to be unimportant; through breaking down barriers between people; through forgiveness when we have been hurt.

In great matters of the universe, in tiny decisions no one but we will ever know, the dance of the Trinity never ceases. From the sidelines it can look impossibly complicated. But if we take up our invitation to join the dance, if we try out steps of creativity, hope and restoration, our partner will not let us fall.

CTBB Pentecost Service

Service Date:

23 May, 2010

Genesis 11:1-9

The people who built the Tower of Babel lost their way because they got so much into their building, they forgot to ask where God was in all their work. As a result, they stopped being able to understand each other - because it's God's Spirit who is the love between us, and unless we have enough love for each other to give each other the careful attention we deserve as people made by God, we will misunderstand each other too, and whatever we're doing will fall to pieces, however well we think we've built it.

I like doing jigsaw puzzles, so I've put a table out here so we can do one together this morning. The frame's still here, as you see. It looks as if some helpful soul has gone off with the pieces and hidden them. But they've left a few clues, and I'm hoping together we'll be able to puzzle them out and find out what the picture is. I'd like three helpers please, to take a look round this church and see if you can find them. But because I want to make sure we don't do a Tower of Babel and misunderstand each other, let's all agree where to look first, before you start. So here goes with the first clue.

1a. Ho logo parangeletai

Well, I'm not even sure if I've pronounced that right, and it's all Greek to me.

1b. Homiletics

Hm. That's English, at least. Can I have a show of hands as to what it's about? No? We're onto the last clue, then, and hoping this goes better.

1c. Six feet above contradiction. Where might that be, in this church?

[piece from pulpit] It's got a shape both sides. [get church logo understanding] Let's put it into the frame, and see what the picture may be. No? We need more pieces, evidently. Let's try the clues for piece 2.

2a. Hoc est enim corpus meus

Sounds vaguely familiar, but I never went above Latin O level. Second clue:

2b. Consubstantiation. I don't think we're going to get anywhere with this.

2c. The church's meal. Where in this congregation is there a meal set out?

[do second logo, put piece in]

OK, now we're getting somewhere. Let's see if the clue writer's done any better this time.

3a. gabh òran - [gaav ohræn] - oh no, that looks to me like the Gaelic, the language some people speak in Scotland. Now I'm really lost.

3b. Kist o'whistles - I've heard that before, but what do you think?

3c. Black and white played together - where in this church do you see that?

[third logo, put piece in]

Oh no - there's a piece missing! I hate that in a jigsaw. Without that piece, none of the rest of it will make sense. Oh, the last clue's tucked into my Bible. Always worth looking in there. Let's see.

4a. Ruach b ha-am. Still a problem - some people in churches just don't get it when nobody can understand what they're saying.

4b. The body of Christ. [jigsaw piece from back to front in cong].

Of course - as we remember today, God's Spirit of wind and fire made us the church, and it's God's spirit who holds us together now, who stops our work at CTBB falling apart.

Hymns:

R&S 294 is a translation from a 14th-century Italian hymn by a lay member of a monastic order. The tune Down Ampney, by Ralph Vaughan Williams, is named after the Gloucestershire village of his birth.

R&S 286 is a round of unknown musical origin, probably American, complementing the words of Philippians 4:4.

R&S 447 is by Brian Wren, a URC minister working in the US. The tune St Botolph was written by Gordon Slater and named after St Botolph's parish church in Boston, Lincolnshire where the composer was organist.

R&S 463 is another contemporary hymn written by Fred Kaan, a Congregationalist minister and hymnodist who died in 2009.

The 18th-century tune Warrington refers to Warrington Academy, Lancs, the school where the composer Ralph Harrison was educated.

Sermon:

Rev Dr Ian Wallis of St Mark's Church preached our sermon.

Ascensiontide and Education Sunday

Service Date:

16 May, 2010

Alison Vance gave our theme introduction on the theme: **Learning from Many Faiths**; the reading was from Luke 6:27-31.

Matthew's version of this teaching (Matt 5, 43ff) starts 'it was said .. love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say, 'Love your enemies...' This points to what, perhaps is the force of this passage. Not as we may sometimes have supposed 'Be nice to your enemy while hating everything he does and everything he is and wishing he would change' but 'Treat your 'enemy' as you would your friend'. So how is our 'enemy' defined? Luke 's passage defines it as someone who hurts you. Someone who wants what you have.

Someone who hates you. But more important than defining enemies is treating even these as friends and so defusing enmity. Are members of other faiths our 'enemies'? Do they hate us? Want what we have? Hurt us? Or are they just people whom we perceive as 'different'. Jesus challenges us to treat even truly hurtful people, and all the more these merely different people, the same way as we do our friends. Do we expect our friends to change their views to match ours? Or our partners, siblings, colleagues? I suggest we respect their views. The best way to show respect is by demonstrating our willingness to learn. It is that willingness to learn that the Faiths Forum of the University nurtures.

The Faiths Forum, established in 2008 is made up of members of all of the student faith societies, members of the University's multi-faith Chaplaincy team, and members of the Union of Students. This project encourages inter- faith dialogue and collaborative action within our University communities and aims to reach students with a Faith and those with none.

The forum meets regularly in term time with the following aims:

- to work together within the University and the Students' Union
- to organise multi-faith events
- to highlight important events and activities relating to faith
- to improve awareness of faith in the University
- to give a voice to all of the student faith societies
- to utilise the skills and experience of the various student faith groups and to appreciate the value of our diversity

The Forum aims to increase knowledge and understanding of Faith in all students, thereby educating the young people who will shape our future.

I have discovered that embedded within all faiths is an incarnation of the idea of doing to others as you would have them do to you. If mutual love is implicit within so many organised religions why one asks is there still so much religiously-related oppression, mass murder and genocide? A simple answer is a historical inability from people across a broad faith spectrum to convince followers that enacting the golden rule applies to all humans, not merely to fellow believers. The sheer welcome the multi faith group received on a recent visit to the Gurdwara (Sikh temple) is indicative that enacting the golden rule does not have to be difficult. Sikhs demonstrated Guru Arjan's teaching "No one is my enemy, none a stranger and everyone is my friend." (Guru Arjan Dev : AG 1299). One can remain true to one's faith without denouncing others. The faiths forum is an area for mutual learning and respect. The feedback which the forum gets from students is immensely positive. They really like events like the informal inter-faith cafes and visits to learn about other places of worship as they get people together and form new friendships. People express that it's a great way to learn about other cultures and faiths which is really important when our graduates are entering a global workplace. It's also really valuing faith and talking about it openly which should be done, as opposed to not talking about it because faith is often perceived in society as an awkward thing to talk about.

Different faiths often hold similar values. Our relationship with God can be strengthened by showing God's love by learning from others.

Hymns:

R&S 253: God is gone up on high

R&S 538: Teach me, my God and King

R&S 679: The Lord's my shepherd
Amid the clamour of the world

R&S 492: Dear Lord and Father

Sermon:

Isaiah 50:4-9; Ps 23; Luke 6:27-31; Acts 6-11

Thursday was Ascensiontide, and here's the Ascension story from Acts.

When Jesus' disciples had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Jesus' friends must have wished they could stop learning. Every time they thought they'd got him sussed, Jesus would say or do something new, something unexpected, and they'd have to start working it out all over again. Even now, after God has raised him from death, it's still going on. They think, they hope, they've got God's plan finally sorted out. This must be the time when Jesus brings God's kingdom in and the happy ending starts. But typical Jesus, when someone brings the question of a timetable up, he doesn't give a proper answer. Don't try to pin God down! he warns. It doesn't work! But when you need it, God's power will be yours, to tell the whole world what I mean to you. And just as someone's

about to say, What? he leaves the conversation, hanging in mid-air, a scene our Ascension window tries in vain to picture. He's not going to spoon-feed his friends the right answers. They'll learn only by working it out themselves. But the mysterious men in white give them a hint. Don't stay put looking up to heaven for the answers, they advise. Jesus will be back, but not how or when you expect, so get on with it! Faced with this, what do the disciples do? They meet together; they recruit new leadership; they pray.

They prepare, however uncertainly, to learn whatever it is God has to teach them. And maybe we in St Andrew's stand in a somewhat similar place today. Like all Christians, we have God's promise that if we ask for help, we will find it. But we don't know, any more than the disciples before Pentecost knew, exactly what form it will take. And for us too, there would be no point in God just telling us. It's this business of learning. Being given information doesn't always help us learn; it's finding it out for ourselves that counts.

Take the example of Broomhall Music, our recent concert. It's taught us what a complicated and fragile business it is working with our local communities.

We started out with the best of intentions, but we didn't get everyone on board who originally showed interest, and we didn't get everything right in our planning. Yet who could have guessed before the event that two of our lead singers in Captain Noah would turn out to be people with only a slight connection with our church? Who could have predicted the wonder of listening to instruments all the way from China? And next time we organise an event and invite our friends from Broomhall and beyond, we'll know what areas to focus on, and we'll do it even better.

Learning from others beyond our own group is a key aspect of education. Our church meeting on Saturday morning discussed the possibility of developing our work in the community, making St Andrew's a community centre as well as a church. That's a huge task. Yet others have done it before us, and we will need to ask for advice from local churches and the URC Synod, to find out what problems to avoid, what solutions may help us. Alison has been looking even more widely in her learning. She told us just now about the University of Sheffield Faiths Forum, where students from different faith communities find out about each other. And like us in the Muslim-Christian dialogues, she's discovering that we have a surprising amount in common. Would you believe it, our own dialogues have been running since November 2006? Our next meeting will focus on what we have learned since then, and it'll be good to have some of you there who've been in that dialogue from the beginning.

Education can be a painful business, especially when it challenges what we think we know, making us examine our preconceptions and rethink cherished ideas. So teaching must also be a pastoral, shepherding task. Marion has told us today about the pastoral work that formed such a large proportion of her workload when she was in teaching, and I know she's not the only teacher whose support and encouragement have helped their pupils to become better human beings as well as sharpening their intelligence. The pastoral task involves giving nourishment as well as guidance, loving care as well as discipline; the best teachers stay with us in memory long after we have left their classes, encouraging us through dark times as well as cheering us on when we achieve our dreams.

Here in this church, each of us can be teachers, if we dare. But do we dare share our own discoveries about faith, bad and good? The aspects of which our life-experience has convinced us? The areas where we doubt what we once held to be certain? Those of you with sixty, seventy, eighty years of being a Christian can be great resources to people like me with fewer years under our belt. Yet those of you whose faith is fresh and exciting can

teach the old-timers to look again at what we may take for granted, and to value it more highly. Each of us, from the oldest to the youngest, has something to teach, if we will learn from one another.

Teaching isn't always fun; Jesus knows that for sure. The only way he could teach us about God is through an object lesson: to show us that God's love never gives up, he has willingly gone through darkness for us, pain, death. We may never know who in Isaiah's time was the suffering servant described in our Hebrew Bible reading this morning, but as Christians we believe the reading also has something to say about Jesus: our teacher, who sustains us every new morning with his promise of power from on high. He himself has been taught by God. He knows from Gethsemane how painful obedience can be, when the way ahead is uncertain but looks bad. Yet our teacher trusts that God will not let him down. And so his disciples, including us, can do so too.

Fifth Sunday in Easter

Service Date:

2 May, 2010

Acts 11:1-18

I wonder what sort of food you like eating. When I was a child, I used to be a very picky eater. The only reason I ever got in trouble at junior school was when I refused to eat school lunch - it tasted so bad! And the first time I went to stay with my German pen-friend Ute in Bavaria, I was so worried about eating the foreign food that I lived on oranges and milk for several weeks!

But I suspect I'm not the only one to be picky. Let's face it, people in different cultures eat such strange food sometimes. Imagine taking the stomach of a sheep, frying up bits of the sheep's heart, liver and lungs with oatmeal, onion and spices, and stuffing the stomach with it, then boiling the whole thing for several hours before eating it with mashed-up turnips and potatoes. Oh, I forgot - many in this congregation don't need to imagine a thing like that. We eat it every Burns night, after we've said a poem in its honour, and we call it haggis.

Food can look or taste strange if we're not used to it, but Peter's dilemma was even worse. Imagine going to a French restaurant and being served horse, or to a Korean restaurant and having dog on the menu. It's that sort of feeling Peter had when in his dream he was given a choice of all the unclean sorts of animal God had told the Jewish people never ever to eat. But, because it was God who'd forbidden the food, it must have felt even worse. Imagine a teetotaler being faced with wine, or a strict vegan with meat, and we still don't get the horror of it. I'm quite impressed that Peter didn't wake up screaming. For it was God telling him to get stuck in to all these forbidden foods. All the things he'd thought God couldn't stand, apparently Peter had got it all wrong. God was a lot bigger than he'd ever realised. Well, that would have been enough to take in. But Peter was about to have an even bigger shock. One of the reasons orthodox Jews keep so strictly to their laws about food is to keep their identity. And I think Scots here in Sheffield can identify with that too. When I was living in Scotland, Burns Suppers happened all right, but they weren't nearly such a big deal as they are in England, America, Australia - far-flung places where Scots haven't wanted to let go of their Scottishness. When you're in the majority, you can afford to be relaxed about your culture. When there aren't so many of you, identity can sometimes feel threatened by the majority culture to the extent that eating haggis feels like a patriotic duty.

People of different races and nationalities can behave very differently depending on

whether they're in the majority or not, and how much power they are allowed. Men and women, gay people and straight people, people with different political views or different levels of education or degrees of ability can either accept each other, or decide the others are strange and maybe threatening, so ignore them. And that's us, here in this church. We have the power, each of us, to decide who is made welcome and who is ignored.

Peter is faced at the end of this reading with the choice: does he recognise that God is with people who aren't Jewish as much as with Jews, or does he go on behaving as though everyone else was unclean? I understand the Caledonian Society is about to welcome people who love Scotland but don't have Scottish blood. I hope we can take a lesson from them, look out for people in church who are different from us, in whatever way, and find out some of the reasons why God loves them.

Hymns:

R&S 41: For the beauty of the earth

R&S 647: In Christ there is no East or West

Psalm 148: Dance and sing, all the earth

R&S 497: Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart

R&S 601: Christ is the world's true light

Sermon:

Psalm 148; John 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6

It definitely looks from our readings this morning as though God is keen on variety. And we could have made a guess at that just from looking at the world around us. As the Tuesday afternoon group discovered recently in a presentation about Lynwood Gardens, in their 2006 wildflower survey there were over a hundred species logged in the course of a year - and I suspect that if they do a 2010 census, it'll be even greater in number.

Or take the varieties of political opinion that have been offered to us in the past few weeks. I wonder, though, how much we have discussed the different parties and what they stand for with those who differ from us. It's more comfortable to stay in groups of people who think the same way as you do than to brave differences of opinion, as I suspect the Conservative candidate for Central Ward may have discovered at the hustings at St Mark's last week. Yet, all credit to the man, he didn't turn tail and flee; though I was sad to see that he, and some of the others, did succumb to the temptation of explaining why the others' policies were wrong rather than why his own were right.

What seemed to throw both the Labour and the Conservative candidates into a spin - and this seems to be replicated more widely, from national commentary - is the possibility that there will be no clear overall majority, and therefore a 'hung' parliament (if you don't relish the prospect) or a 'balanced' parliament (if you do). Interestingly, both the Greens on Sheffield Council and the Scottish National Party, who have experience of such an outcome, seem to be saying that it's not the worst of all possible worlds - though it does require more time and effort than having a huge majority to do your party's will.

In a way, though, that situation is not so different from the way Jesus chose his closest followers. In a group of twelve men we have two pairs of fishing brothers, but with very different personalities - John and James get nicknamed the thunderbolts because they have a tendency to explode; Peter's called the rock because he's often so unstable; sadly, from this church's point of view, we know much less about Andrew. What about the others? We have a freedom fighter and a tax collector - who are bound to be at opposite ends of the political spectrum - and assorted others; not forgetting the Judas who brought Jesus to his death. If God doesn't like variety, in people as well as flowers, in politics as well as character,

Jesus has sadly slipped up on his recruitment policy.

But, as with a balanced Parliament, it's much harder work being a balanced church - what my friend Kyusak who runs the Sheffield Korean Church calls a rainbow church - than being of one opinion only. In a way, it's simple for Kyusak and his Korean friends, because their culture is a strong common bond, as Scottishness has been for us, so it's comparatively easier for them to be a political and theological mixture than in some other churches, where people have many other congregations they can try if they don't like what they find. But being a balanced church is a task that all of us must face if we are to follow Jesus' new commandment: that just as he has loved us, we are to love each other. He's not asking us to love him as much as he loves us; that would be relatively easy to get our heads around. He is asking the Conservatives to love the Labour supporters; the Brits to love the foreigners; the home owners to love the homeless; those attracted to the opposite sex to love those attracted to their own; and, of course, the other way around too. And he is asking this of his friends - those gathered at his last meal, and those gathered here this morning - not in an ideal situation of peace, calm and plenty but in the middle of an economic crisis, with power politics at work all around.

Does this seem too hard, too much to ask of us? Are we tempted, like the majority political parties, to gather with and love people like us, who will think and act the same way as we do? I suspect, if that is our dream, we will be sadly disappointed. For Peter has not been the only God-fearing individual in history to discover that God's love goes much wider than we ever thought or wanted it to extend. Slave owners in the nineteenth century discovered with shock that their slaves were valued by God just as much as they themselves; that in fact it was wrong to enslave human beings. Men in the twentieth century discovered with shock that women were as able to preach God's word and administer the sacraments as were they - not to mention fulfilling many other vocations previously held to be male preserves.

Yet to frame such advances in understanding in terms of human rights would be to miss the point. For as Christians we believe that slaves and women, like free people and men, are created by God in God's image for God's praise. Going back for a moment to our psalm this morning, the whole universe and everything in it is called to praise God. What reason is given? God commanded and all was created. Yet at the very end of the psalm, God's faithful too are called to praise him. What reason is given? Because we are close to him. As we come closer to God, we come closer to one another too, more able to see the good in one another, to appreciate those aspects of others which are very different from our own preferences; more ready, too, to admit to our own faults and weaknesses, safe in the knowledge that God will never abandon us. So the next time you catch yourself muttering, like Gordon Brown in the car, 'I can't stand that woman!' or 'How can he think like that?', I challenge you to reflect on the fact that this person, too, is made in God's image, made for God's praise. It might be a useful exercise to try out during the last few party political broadcasts before the election, during our next church meeting or even next time you see me ascending the pulpit steps...

But what's it going to be like if we ever do have a truly balanced church, a truly balanced government, a truly balanced world? It won't be like some people imagine political correctness - no one daring to say or do anything in case others are upset, but secretly thinking just as before. No: for that would be hell - and I'm thinking of heaven. I'm thinking of a new heaven and a new earth, one where there will be even more different sorts of people than species of flower in Lynwood Gardens, where we will all truly appreciate one

another. What will be so different? God will be living alongside us, and we will see each other in the light of God's love. All that is unlovable in us and in them will have gone, as will every sorrow, every pain; we will have come out of our graves to Easter newness. Are these words trustworthy and true? For if they are, even now we should be able to see little signs of heaven in waiting. I think I see them in my life, in the life of this church; but that involves using my discernment, and remembering when I see them to give thanks. That, too, is part of the Christian vocation I need to practise - and I don't think I'm the only one.

Fourth Sunday in Easter

Service Date:

25 April, 2010

Acts 9:36-43

When I hear this story, do you know who I think of? Lillian Binney. Lillian died a few years ago, but she was a regular and faithful member of St Andrew's. She sang in the choir - so long as it wasn't in Latin. She insisted on walking everywhere, rather than being given a lift. And a while ago, she used to run a group of women doing handicrafts for the sales of work St Andrew's used to hold, part of the Bath Street Mission before ever the dual carriageway cut Broomhall in two.

What makes me think of Lillian when I hear this story? It's the heroine of it, Tabitha or Dorcas. They sound quite old-fashioned names now, but actually they mean the same thing, in two different languages: gazelle, a graceful deer. Before she had trouble with her legs Lillian must have been a bit of a gazelle - she loved walking on the moors, and even though her family were worried about her falling down out there, she never did. But that's not the main similarity between her and Dorcas. It's the way she was always busy doing good things for people, being a good neighbour to the families living around her, helping people at church - and never wanting to be thanked or praised for what she did!

But there's a difference between Lillian's story and that of Dorcas. When Dorcas died, Peter was visiting her church in Lydda, and through his touch God brought her back to life. Maybe people hearing this story would remember the time Jesus healed a 12-year-old girl who everyone thought had died, using the same words: Get up!

When Lillian died, we had a service to mark her life, to say thank you to God that we had known her and to help us say goodbye to her. Now she's not with us any more, and all we can do is to remember her as our friend. And

I know people at St Andrew's do remember her. The last memory of Lillian

I have is when the choir went round to the nursing home where she was staying to sing Christmas carols, and her voice was still strong enough to sing us a verse on her own. Others of you will have many more memories, of course, because you knew her that much longer; memories both good and bad, of the sort of person she was.

Whether you knew Lillian or not, most of us will have memories of people we have known and loved who have died. How can those memories fit in with the season of Easter, when we believe God brought Jesus back to life after he had died? How do our losses fit in with Bible stories like the one we've just heard about Dorcas, who died but was brought back to life, making her friends glad?

It's a question I can't answer. But I am sure of three things. Dorcas, like Lazarus whom Jesus brought back to life, would still have had to die one day. We all do. But she would live on in the memory of her friends, as Lillian does in ours. And we can also be sure that Lillian and Dorcas and our loved ones are safe in God's hands. As the psalm Lillian loved says, I to the

hills will lift my eyes. From whence doth come mine aid? My safety cometh from the Lord who heaven and earth hath made.

Hymns:

R&S 246: The day of resurrection (tune: Ellacombe)

R&S 726: I to the hills will lift mine eyes

R&S 666: Sing we the song

R&S 345: Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

Sermon:

Psalm 23; John 10:22-30; Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17

It takes a bit of imagination, but thinking back to our Broomhall Music concert last night, I reckon it had a few things in common with that fantastic picture we've just heard in our reading from Revelation this morning. Think about it: people from different countries, with different languages, singing together with one voice. What we sang last night as a finale to the concert was a number from the musical *Oliver*: Consider yourself at home! And that was a very good choice of song, as we welcomed into St Andrew's people who may never have been inside a church before, as we shared our talents with one another, as for a little while, thanks to the power of music, we all became one body.

But in Revelation we've upped the stakes. For this is no jolly get-together. This is the grandest possible finale: the end of time. The people of Israel are already gathered. But now to join them come others from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, dressed for a solemn festival in white: and all their rejoicing is focussed on just one point: Jesus, both God's lamb and God's shepherd, the one who has rescued them from destruction. They have been through a lot: hunger and thirst, scorching heat and bitter sorrow; but now God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

If that's the triumphant ending, how did they get there? That's what the narrator of Revelation wants to know, and after he admits his ignorance, one of the elders can answer his question, as is usually the case when you ask an Elder something. These are the martyrs, those who have stood firm against opposition and refused to give up on their faith. While they lived, they weren't perfect - otherwise their clothes would not need cleansing - but, to translate the rather confusing picture-language of Revelation that talks about making their robes white in the blood of the Lamb: because of Jesus' death, all their mistakes have been forgiven. They have finally turned into the people God always wanted them to be. And Jesus, their shepherd, will lead them to the water of life, springing up for ever.

This heavenly scene may seem a long way away from us in St Andrew's this morning, all ready with our annual reports at hand to look back over the life of our church in this past year. We remember the times this year we've made mistakes, or we just haven't had the time or energy or commitment to follow Jesus. Our clothes are still in need of heavenly detergent. Yet that shouldn't worry us unduly; for as long as we're in this life, God still has work to do on us, as well as work for us to do.

At the beginning of our reading from John's Gospel this morning, there's a reference to the time the incident happened: the festival of the Dedication. As often happens when I'm preparing a sermon, that bit stuck out for me, and it struck me that a) I had no idea what this festival was about, but b) John's Gospel doesn't put in details unless it wants us to know something, so I'd better find out the answer. Having no Elders handy, I consulted a commentary, which directed me to the period between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament when the Maccabees, Jewish freedom fighters, were trying successfully to gain

independence for their country from the Syrian Seleucid empire. When they regained control over Israel, the Maccabees rededicated the Temple, which had been tainted by worship of the Greek god Zeus. This festival was still maintained in Jesus' time, even though a different set of foreign overlords, the Romans, had taken over. Evidently the Jews recognised the need on a regular basis to celebrate the Temple's recovery and to rededicate themselves to God's service. In fact, it still happens today, as the Jewish winter festival we know as Hanukkah. But why does John's Gospel think it important to tell us that it was the Festival of the Dedication? By putting the restoration of the Temple, where animal sacrifices brought God's forgiveness, alongside Jesus, God's chosen Messiah, we are given a forewarning both that Jesus' body will be destroyed and that in due time God will restore him.

Yet the promise of resurrection is not given only for Jesus. John's Gospel gives us too a strong reassurance: My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. We have thought a bit in our theme introduction about how this may work out for us on an individual level. But can this make sense for us as a congregation?

Evidently churches can be born, as when our forebears saw the need for Presbyterian worship and built a church here. Churches can also die, if they have too few people to continue meeting together. And, though it may be harder to notice, churches also die if they turn into social clubs, more interested in meeting their friends than in the worship of God. Yet how could a whole congregation rise to new life?

Maybe in the same sort of way the Temple rose again at its rededication, when the Jews could return to the worship of God there after its misuse during the Seleucid empire. As Reformed Christians this dynamic should be something we recognise, for we believe we are always in need of reformation; when we are tempted to believe we've got everything right, we know we've got it all wrong. So in a way, our annual church meeting and service helps us as the festival of the Dedication helped the Jews: reminding us of how God has helped us in the past year. But as you know, our ACM is a pause on our way: a chance to thank so many people, an opportunity to fulfil our legal requirements as a charity, and an excuse to sit down to a good Network lunch and hear about the work of Janet Brown, our worker with older people. The real work will be done at our next church meeting on Saturday 15th May, when we take a good hard look at where our church is, and start to work out what in our life needs to die so that we may experience God's resurrection. I hope you'll be there. I reckon Lillian would have been, and many others we miss from among our numbers. So before we continue our worship, let's be silent for a minute to give thanks for those among us who have died in the course of this year, as well as for the other saints of St Andrew's who have gone before us. From 2009 we remember particularly Jean Burden, Gwen Dornan, Betty Megson and Patrick Knox.

Good Friday

Service Date:

2 April, 2010

Attachment	Size
Attachment	Size
 Good Friday handout.doc	544.5 KB

You can find this service attached as a file. The images we used for meditation can be found at the website of Victoria Hall Methodist Church, Sheffield, painted by a local artist who is a member of that congregation - take a look at <http://www.victoriahallmethodistchurch.org.uk/>

Maundy Thursday

Service Date:

1 April, 2010

Attachment

Attachment



[Maundy Thursday Footwashing 2010.doc](#)

You can find the service attached as a file; it included footwashing and Holy Communion.

Palm and Passion Sunday

Service Date:

28 March, 2010

Were we there?

Were you there when they crucified our Lord?

Well of course not. We're none of us that old. We didn't come along till two thousand years later. We rely on the story handed down through the centuries by those who have followed Jesus before us.

Year by year, with the help of a different Gospeller each year, we look at different parts of the tradition handed down to us, and retell the story of what Jesus said and did in the last week of his life. This year we have Luke's story, told for a group of Christians who weren't Jewish, told to reassure the Romans that Christians were nice people.

But just hearing the story doesn't necessarily help us enter into it. We know this story so well, we could probably tell it to one another instead of hearing it read from the Bible.

Maybe some future year we'll do just that. But that's not the same as actually being there, feeling the dust under our weary feet, smelling the blood from the Temple sacrifices, hearing the shout of the crowd and the hosannas of children, seeing palm branches and clothing littering the street as Jesus passes by. Because, let's face it, even those of us who have been to the Holy Land in modern Palestine weren't there when they crucified our Lord. This year the Oberammergau Passion Play will be put on again. In 1633, gripped by war, poverty and plague, the villagers of Oberammergau in Bavaria vowed to put on a 'passion play' every ten years. They survived, and performed the first Oberammergau Passion Play in 1634. Ever since, their descendants have carried out that pledge. Only villagers are allowed to take part as they devote a year of their lives to re-enacting Christ's life, death and resurrection.

All performers in Oberammergau are ordinary people with ordinary jobs. In real life, for instance, this year's Jesus is a psychologist and Mary Magdalene works as a flight attendant (not, fortunately for her, for BA). By taking on their roles in the Passion Play, they are fulfilling the promise to God made by their ancestors, celebrating their faith and sharing it with the world...

So this year, rather than my focussing on a few characters to tell the story for us from their point of view, I've decided to go back to old tradition, to read the Gospel story right through. You may be disappointed or relieved to hear that we're not going to stage this as a

drama. And though on Friday we'll be wondering how the drama of Jesus' death might play out on a Sheffield stage, this morning we will be sticking strictly to Luke's words.

Some of us will have a major role to play in the story. Others will only have the opportunity to stand up, say a line and sit down again. But this morning none of us are uninvolved spectators. For at certain points we all have words to say. Sometimes we will be disciples of Jesus, unsure what's going on. Sometimes soldiers: doing our job, guarding an enemy of Rome. Sometimes the crowds, asked whether they will set Jesus free or condemn him to death.

Were you there? As we retell this story, the key story of our faith, I think you may find that through our God-given imagination we were there, after all.

So let the story begin...

Hymns:

R&S 209: Ride on! ride on in majesty

Hymn (tune: R&S 227)

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? (new verses)

Were you there when the crowds came out to cheer?

Were you there when the crowds came out to cheer?

Oh - sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble;

Were you there when the crowds came out to cheer?

Palm Sunday reading Luke 19:29-40

Comment: Were we there?

Hymn Were you there when he shared the bread and wine?

Passion reading Luke 22:14-38 The Last Supper

Hymn Were you there when his friendships let him down?

Passion reading Luke 22:39-62 Betrayal

Hymn Were you there when they sentenced him to death?

Passion reading Luke 22:63-23:25 Condemnation

Hymn Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Passion reading Luke 23:26-56 Death

R&S 207: My song is love unknown

Sermon:

Where were we in the story?

I wonder how you experienced that story. I have to admit that just preparing the script for this service almost moved me to tears; the horrid inevitability of the death of someone I love. Yet Jesus' death wasn't inevitable. Had his friends not forsaken him, had the Jewish authorities not handed him over to Rome, had the crowds not changed their tune, had the soldiers refused to do their job... at every point, had things gone otherwise, he might not have died.

That conclusion reminds me of all too many recent enquiries into the deaths of children or vulnerable adults. Had social workers insisted on seeing and speaking to children rather than listening to the reassurances of those who should have cared for them; had there been a bed available in the specialist unit or a voice at the other end of the support phone-line; had different agencies better communicated with one another... that tragedy might not have occurred. In such circumstances, our next inevitable question is: so who's to blame? Whose head will roll so we can feel that at least this deadly pitfall will be avoided in future situations? Who will become the scapegoat, the example to make others in similar positions take note and amend their ways?

That question has been asked of Jesus' death, too. For centuries, the whole Jewish nation was blamed for his crucifixion. Yet accounts like that of Luke, wanting to present the Christianity of his time as a positive religion which in no way threatened the Roman Empire, actually spun the events of history; for in the time of Jesus only the Romans had the power to crucify their enemies. And such spinning led, however unintentionally, to horrifying persecution of Jews through subsequent centuries culminating in the Holocaust; and, even further, to persecution by the Israeli state of Palestinians today.

Blaming other people tends to land us in that sort of ethical mess. It might be more worthwhile for us to ask ourselves: if I had been in that situation, how much better or worse might I have fared? What decisions might I have taken?

* Am I prone, as one of Jesus' friends, to admitting to knowledge of him only when other Christians are around?

* Am I defensive about my own tradition, and likely to give short shrift to any brash youngster who sees things differently and says so?

* Am I just doing my job, keeping my head down, and not asking too many questions about whether what I'm told to do is right?

* If things go wrong for me, am I liable to turn around and blame others for the predicament I'm in?

* Am I one of the crowd: following the lead of whoever spoke last, happy to go along with whatever as long as I keep my friends?

Or am I someone who tells the truth, even if what I see goes against my expectations? * Am I someone who'll offer my resources with great generosity even if it puts me in danger? *

Am I someone who won't be put off supporting a friend however bad things get?

If you get a quiet moment during this holy week, I invite you to consider: where do I find myself in the Passion story? And I invite you, whether in thanksgiving or in confession, to share those thoughts with God.

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

21 March, 2010

John 12:1-8

Recently I gave up the unequal struggle and found someone willing to keep my house tidy. And now every Friday morning when I come back from the Broomhall Breakfast, I can tell she's been there, because of the piny smell of the cleaning products she uses; it goes all through the house.

This morning we have a new scent in church, too - just before the service, I sprayed the sanctuary with perfume. Don't worry if it's not your favourite scent - it'll wear off soon. But it helps us to think ourselves into that party we've just heard about when Jesus and Martha and Mary and Lazarus and all Jesus' close friends were eating together. There would be lovely smells of food, like you get at the Breakfast. But there would also be this new smell, this expensive, wonderful scent. Mary was giving Jesus' feet an aromatherapy massage, and drying them with her long hair. The smell of it must have gone right through the house.

It's the same sort of thing when you see two people who love each other, whether it's mother and baby, two best friends or a couple who've been together for years. Their love for each other is obvious. All their attention goes on each other. They'll give up what they wanted to do on their own to be with the other one. When they're apart, they talk about

each other to anyone who'll listen. And they'll spend their own money on whatever's going to make the other one happy. If we're looking in from outside, we may say they've gone over the top, that they aren't being reasonable, that we can't see what they see in the other person, that they're wasting money and time and effort. And from outside it may look that way. But if you love someone, you don't begrudge the time and effort and money you put into pleasing them, because their happiness is your happiness too.

We're Jesus' friends. That's why we came here today, so we could think about his life, sing about how we love him and ask him for help to become more like him. But when we go out of here, will other people be able to tell by the way we live how much we love Jesus; how much of ourselves we give to him?

Are we going to live like Mary? She showed Jesus she loved him by getting him the most expensive present she could buy. But it wasn't because it was expensive Jesus liked it. It was because she could see that he had trouble ahead, and wanted to help him through it.

Or are we going to live like Judas? He couldn't see the point of giving Jesus anything that expensive. Mary could have sold the perfume and done something sensible with it, like feeding lots of people. Or Judas could have used the money to do something he wanted with it.

We can't give Jesus a foot massage now. What we can do is to love other people. Not all of us have lots of money, but all of us have time and attention we can give to others. Are we going to keep the love we have to ourselves, or to people like us? Or are we going to give away our love and our time and our effort, even to people who don't love us, people who hurt us? Jesus did, and the scent of that love will never fade away.

Hymns:

R&S 277: How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear
Said Judas to Mary, 'Now what will you do...'

R&S 373: Lord Jesus Christ

R&S 474: Brother, sister, let me serve you

Sermon:

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; John 12:1-8; Philippians 3:4b-14

I find that reading from Philippians one of the hardest passages in the whole Bible. Not because I don't understand it. Like Mark Twain, it's not the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand. And this part of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi goes against everything I was brought up to believe. Everything Paul was brought up to believe, as well.

The thing is, with Jesus, the normal rules don't apply. If you'll forgive me boasting for a moment, I'll show you what I mean. I was born into a well-off and educated family coming from three great nations: Scotland, England and Germany. I've got three degrees from three of the best British universities. I've got my own house, a good credit rating, more than enough money to live on and no criminal convictions. I've even got a plum job as a minister, with everyone respecting my sterling qualities (well, I can dream...) I've done well in life, haven't I?

But Paul could more than match my level of qualifications. He was Jewish right from his cradle; his ancestors came from a respected tribe in Israel; he had studied under Gamaliel, one of the most famous rabbis of his time; he was a member of one of the most religious groups in Judaism, and he had taken great pains to keep the faith pure and get rid of any threats to his religion. He would have been a wonderful catch for any Jewish mother looking to find a husband for her daughter.

So what's my problem? I'll tell you: according to Paul, none of all the list of things he or I have achieved impresses God in the least. At best, my achievements are irrelevant - well, that's polite; Paul calls them rubbish; at worst, they can put me on the wrong track if I start thinking my primary aim in life is success. My German great-aunt would go along with him. Whenever she rings up, she asks if I'm well. 'If you've only got your health,' she says, 'you've got everything.' And I can see her point. If you're not well, what good can all your success do you?

But Paul isn't talking about health, either. So what does he think trumps any of the things people count as important? He says it's 'the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord'.

The surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. That friendship which made Mary splurge out with her precious perfume, which she would have set aside against her own wedding or funeral, for which she would have saved up for years, to soothe the tired feet of a man who in a week's time, though she did not know it, would be dead. Because in her life Jesus was the most important person there was.

Paul knows what Mary did not; that Jesus was going to give up his life, brutally, painfully, unjustly, to show people just how much God loves us;

and that God was going to raise him to new life. And Paul, who knows that whole story, passionately wants to share in the whole of Jesus' life, even his suffering, to be able too to share in the new life God gave Jesus through resurrection; not, and here is the point, because Paul deserves it as a successful religious man, but because God is generous.

This is not, I suspect, what we teach our children, or do ourselves. We are more likely to find ourselves on Judas' side of the argument than Mary's: let's not go wild with what we have, but husband our resources carefully; let's lay them out only on proven good causes, for we don't know where or when more will come in. It's only common sense.

But our reading from Isaiah shows us that our God does not deal in common sense. He is reminding his readers of the old, old story of exodus: a group of runaway slaves pitted against the might of Pharaoh's armies who, against all the odds, made their escape through the waters of the Reed Sea while their enemies, equipped with all the latest technology, were stymied. That's how our God works, Isaiah reminds them: freeing powerless slaves from forced labour; making water spring in desert places. The old rankings of success that counted in Egypt no longer apply to God's people. Here, the last has become first.

Fine words, but how many parsnips do they butter? The perfume from our theme introduction is still lingering around the sanctuary, but for how long? Soon the service will be over, and we will be back in the real world where rich and powerful people get rewarded with more riches and power, where God only helps those who help themselves and people earn success and recognition by talent and hard work. Are we looking forward to God doing something different? Longing to show extravagant love to God, or to others, even when we have no guarantees as to results? Hardly; we know how things work, and they're not going to change any time soon.

But that's a caricature of cynicism; and I don't believe it's a congregation of cynics I'm addressing this morning. We're a group of people like those addressed in our psalm today. They remember God's goodness to them in the past: the happiness they associate with being in God's presence, with keeping company with God's people, with living their lives in God's ways. But now there are tears as well as joy in their lives. Remember the desert? they tell God. Remember the time you gave us water in the wilderness? Well, we need that now. To go on sowing the seeds of God's kingdom that future generations will harvest, we need

to have enough hope in God's power and desire to rescue us to free us from all our insecurities about status and success and survival.

I should love to see this church full to the rafters. It would feed my own ongoing need for status; it would prove to me and to the world that I am a holy enough minister for God to give me success, measured in membership. Maybe from time to time you have similar thoughts. But our task is not to be successful. Our task is to be like Mary, extravagant in our love for Jesus; like Paul, willing to accept suffering and death as part of our life in Christ. But that's a tall order. In order this Holy Week to follow Jesus all the way, to the cross and beyond, we need hope that God can bring freedom from our slavery, water in our desert, new life out of our death. And I believe that hope is justified. Because that is the good news Jesus Christ came to share.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

14 March, 2010

Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

This is a very familiar story, a story of a family falling out and coming back together again. You get this sort of story in the soaps all the time, and in real families too; it happens to fathers and to mothers, to brothers and to sisters. I'd like you to think yourselves into this very familiar story, and to ask yourself three questions:

First question: if I imagine myself in this story, where do I find myself?

- Am I the father or mother who has seen their child leave home and get lost?

- Am I the son or daughter who has left the family and got into trouble?

- Am I the brother or sister who has been good all the time?

Second question: do I forgive either of the other two? What for? Or do I refuse to forgive them? Why?

Third question: do I need forgiveness from either of the other two? Why? Do I think I'll get it?

When you're thinking about these questions, I don't want you to look back at the Bible story and give the right answer. I'd like you to think about how you would feel in the situation, and what you would do.

I'd like you to split up into little groups of three or four people, and to discuss your answers with each other for 5 minutes.

In this story, the father forgave his younger son, who had caused him so much sadness, and was happy enough when he returned to throw a big party. The younger son ran the risk of being thrown out of the family when he returned, but to his delight discovered a huge welcome ready for him. But the older son, the one who'd always done everything right, wasn't so sure about this forgiveness business. We don't know how he reacted when his father begged him to come in to the party.

Jesus wasn't just thinking about family harmony when he told this story. He wanted his friends to know that however many mistakes they made, God would still be ready to welcome them back if they dared return. And that's true for us, too.

He had another message too, for good religious people, who never get anything wrong. People who come back to God are your brothers and sisters, he said. Don't refuse them a welcome, or look down your nose at them because they made different choices; just be glad with God that they've come back.

So this well-known story is a challenge for us.

Do we really believe that if we make a mistake and say sorry, God will forgive us, and so will everyone at church?

And how good are we at forgiving people who have done things to hurt us? Can we be glad with God when they say sorry and want to be friends again?

Hymns:

R&S 75: Sing praise to God who reigns above

CG 36: Forgiveness is your gift

How glad are those with peace of mind (Ps 32)

R&S 646: Help us accept each other

R&S 471: Bless and keep us, Lord

Sermon:

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Traditionally, I suspect the mother and father in a household used to be expected to split up judgment and mercy between them. The father was meant to be the one who punished - Just wait till your father comes home! - and the mother was meant to be the one who forgave and was merciful, protecting naughty children against their father's wrath.

Of course, in real life that doesn't always work out. In the news headlines in recent days we have been reminded that parents don't always protect their children as they should; just think of little Khyra Ishaq, starved to death by her mother. And I'm sure you could all think in your experience of family or friends of fathers who forgave and mothers who punished. But in general, popular wisdom expects a mother to forgive her child, no matter what they have done.

Maybe this is because, even now, in many families it is the mother who does most to bring children up. She feeds them, changes their nappies, oversees their first step and their first word, sings them to sleep. She sees how they play alone and with others, she knows their favourite foods and the expressions on their faces when they're trying to get away with something. Whether birth or adoptive mother, she starts off as the most important factor in her children's life. No wonder for Christians in the Middle Ages and for many Catholics now that Mary, Jesus' mother, has such an important role in their faith, as the one who intercedes for them with her son. But that very close initial relationship between mother and child may have less desirable consequences. We may need to forgive our mother for any destructive aspects of the values she has transmitted to us; and she may need to forgive us for ways in which we broke away from her in order to gain our independence.

As Christians, we believe that our God is a God both of justice and of mercy, so there can be no division in the Godhead between the one who punishes and the one who forgives.

This isn't easy for us to get our heads around, but we see the dynamic in operation in that rather odd snippet of reading we get from the Hebrew Bible in this morning's lectionary readings.

When God says to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt,' there is a story behind that comment. The Israelites are camped and resting in Gilgal for a reason: all their young men have been circumcised. The generation of male Israelites who came out of Egypt had already been circumcised in the desert; but that generation, though they came to the borders of Canaan, lost their nerve and would not enter the land, so Moses marched them back into the desert until that generation died out. Now the new generation have come into Canaan, and God is renewing with them the covenant, the agreement made with their fathers. After the punishment which saw their fathers die in the wilderness of their cowardice, God is forgiving the people, giving them a second chance, albeit a painful one, to

live the way God wants.

Psalm 32 goes into the dynamic of rebellion and forgiveness on an individual level. While we pretend that we have not gone wrong, there is no helping the situation, for we are not facing up to the truth; and all our energy can go into denial and concealment of our predicament; this in itself can be punishment. But when we admit our fault, God can forgive us and help us start again, guiding us away from temptation, advising us how best to live. This may sound like a pious platitude; but I suspect that in many families and indeed many churches the question of offence and forgiveness is one we tread warily around. We can be set so firmly into old patterns of action and reaction, developed through childhood or long relationship, that it may seem impossible to change our ways. And anyway, why should we change? After all, it's the other person who needs to change. If they would only get their act together, we wouldn't have any trouble with them. It's their immaturity, their domineering ways, their bad temper, their chronic indecision that really gets our goat. We don't have any problems like that.

Relationships within the Prodigal Son's family may well have proceeded along these lines before the younger son's decision to break away. In a way, his departure and return showed up a problem between his older brother and their father which might otherwise never have been revealed: that the older brother, unsure of their father's love, had been trying all this time to earn it by good behaviour. Now the father's love for both his children has been declared out loud, both sons have the choice of changing their ways, of living together in the love of their father; or of returning to the worn-out script of good son, bad son.

Putting aside the flowers and the chocolates and the lunches out, Mothering Sunday may be an opportunity, whether we are mothers or children or both, to take a good look at this very significant relationship in our lives; to consider ways in which we may need to forgive or be forgiven, and ways in which that forgiveness could be offered. And here our reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians may be of aid. Paul is writing to a church which has recently received from him a stinging letter pointing out all the faults they have developed in his absence. But now he reminds them that because both he and they are related through Christ, they can no longer see each other except as people for whom Christ has died, for the very purpose of reconciling them with God.

In telling his story about the Prodigal Son, Jesus reminds us that the relationship between us and God, and between us and others, however broken it may have become by past events, can always be renewed through honesty and through forgiveness. This is no easy road; even honesty and forgiveness can be used as weapons of one-up-man-ship by people who don't really want to be reconciled, and sometimes we need to allow time for healing. But when we truly want to forgive and to be forgiven, we are not alone, but have all the power of God behind us: God who is our forgiving Father, who is our loving Mother, who is the love within all our relationships, whether with family, friends or the stranger we have not yet met.

Third Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

7 March, 2010

Luke 13:1-9

Good morning. I am a fig tree. As you'll see, I'm speaking figuratively, so you're going to have to use your imaginations, but I'm sure you're all well capable of doing that. Ready? Good.

Good morning. I am a fig tree. You may still be having some difficulty imagining this, and if

so, I'll tell you why. I don't actually have any figs on me. This is a bit of a problem. I'm growing on a country estate in Israel. Quite a nice position, plenty of sunshine, a bit rocky but that doesn't bother me too much. I like it here. Every year I can stretch out my roots a bit more and grow a few more leaves and enjoy myself. I'm not doing any harm to anyone, just being beautiful.

But that's not good enough for the landowner. Oh no. He wants me to grow figs. How unreasonable is that? Aren't my leaves enough?

I've heard you can use them for clothing if you're out in the garden in the cool of the evening. But that's not good enough for this chap. He wants figs. He wants something to eat.

For the last three years he's been turning up at about this time of year, walking round me, dropping hints about how nice it would be to eat a ripe, juicy fig. He doesn't realise that growing figs is hard work. He doesn't know what it's like being a tree.

But my gardener, I reckon he almost does know what it's like being a tree. OK, he's got his bad points. He moves. He isn't green. But he understands trees, if you see what I mean. He's quite protective of us. He cares about us. And that's a good thing too. Because guess what happened to me this morning?

Yes, that's right. The landowner turned up again, and this time he was cross. Bad manners, I call it. He marched round and round my beautiful trunk, but he didn't listen to the rustling of my lovely large leaves. Figs! he yelled. I want figs! You're a fig tree, aren't you? Then why do you never produce any fruit? Three years this has been going on! I'm fed up with you - you're a waste of earth!

Just then, the gardener turned up. He could see at a glance what the problem was, especially as the landowner was in such a temper about it. So thank goodness he set about calming down his boss.

Yes, he said, I can see you're upset. Yes, it is disappointing. Yes, you had expected to be able to eat some figs this time. Yes, it's three years since you bought this lazy tree.

Lazy tree? I thought. Whose side are you on?

Give me one more year with it! he begged. Let me dig around its roots. Let me put manure on it.

Not on your life! I thought. Drafts round my roots? Nasty smells round my leaves?

But the landowner seemed to think it was a good idea. All right, he said. I'll give you one more year to make it do what a good fig tree should do. Otherwise it's for the chop.

Well, I'm still not keen. But I suppose having figs is what I was grown to do. And maybe a bit of air round my roots won't hurt too much.

Do you think the fig tree was right to complain? Should the landowner have left it alone? Or should it be producing figs?

Of course Jesus wasn't just talking about fig trees. He was talking about people too - his friends, like us. It looks as if Jesus expects us to be fruitful, to love people the way he loves them. Sometimes we can't be bothered. We're too busy looking after ourselves. Then Jesus stirs us up, makes us think again - makes us uncomfortable, like the poor old fig tree. But oddly enough, Jesus troubling us is the same as God's protecting us - because in the end, a fig tree that doesn't grow fruit isn't doing its job as a fig tree. And a Christian who doesn't love other people and show it by what they say and do isn't being a proper Christian.

Hymns:

R&S 484 was written by T.H. Gill, according to him: 'inspired by a lively delight in my Puritan and Presbyterian forefathers of East Worcestershire. Descended from a Moravian martyr

and an ejected minister, I rejoice not a little in the godly Protestant stock from which I spring.' The tune Luther's hymn was a 14th century secular song, set to a hymn of Luther's: 'Nun freut euch, lieben Christen, g'mein' (Now rejoice together, dear Christians).

CG 22 comes from Tom Colvin, a Church of Scotland missionary in Central Africa. He organised famine relief and initiated building, agriculture and health projects in Malawi, Ghana and Zimbabwe. Colvin encouraged the African church to use their own musical heritage in worship and to write hymns arising from their context; this hymn has a Malawi tune. He died in Edinburgh in 2000.

R&S 685 is an edited version of an 18th-century paraphrase by Tate and Brady of Psalm 34 - the original ran to another nine verses - in a development from metrical psalmody to hymns in England. The tune Wiltshire seems to be named arbitrarily but its connection with this hymn is almost universal.

R&S 589 comes from the pen of K__ - the soubriquet of its 18th-century writer. It originally ended with the emphatic couplet: 'That Soul, though all Hell should endeavour to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake'; the Rejoice and Sing version seems pale in comparison. The tune Montgomery, also called Magdalen, is usually sung with this hymn.

Sermon:

Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; Luke 13:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

We're three weeks into Lent now, three weeks into Jesus' wanderings in the wilderness and our own attempts to follow him on that hard road he treads from the desert to the cross. The choir has reminded us of our Lenten journey just now, when they sang our anthem: 40 days and 40 nights, thou wast fasting in the wild. And while Jesus was in that wilderness, the words of Psalm 63 may well have gone through his mind. Listen: O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

That's the song of a people who knew what thirst could be, who would never waste water because it was so precious to them. And it goes on to compare our relationship with God to the best of haute cuisine: My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips, for you have been my help.

Our reading from Isaiah also speaks of God's presence as food and drink: water and wine, milk and bread: things we will die without, things that not only satisfy hunger and thirst but make our living worthwhile. But here Isaiah seems to need to persuade people to take up his offer, and that's strange. It's as though someone were to burst into the Manse yelling Free fairly traded chocolate! and I didn't come running - and I can tell you, that is very unlikely indeed. Why do Isaiah's hearers seem so indifferent?

Well, by this part of the book, the people of Israel have returned from exile in Babylon - but all is not well. The temple and the city of Jerusalem remain to be rebuilt. There are enemies along the borders and nay-sayers among their own people. None of their new life back home is as they had hoped and dreamed it would be, and they must have been tempted to think to themselves: why bother rebuilding? why bother looking for God's help?

It's all useless anyway. But Isaiah refuses to let them slump into defeat. Seek the Lord while he may be found! he urges them. Call upon him while he is near! Don't give up! Don't stay comfortable and useless!

Indeed, he's more blunt even than that. Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts, he urges: let them return to the Lord!

At which point, I bet at least some of his audience would be nudging one another and muttering, Who are you calling wicked?

Telling people that someone else is wicked usually goes down a storm - that way, we can feel delightfully self-righteous. There's always some really good reason to look down on other people, whether they're not buying fairly traded produce or whether they gossip maliciously, and in any disaster there is always someone we can blame for it. Telling people that they are wicked, on the other hand, is never that popular. And Jesus ran a really serious risk of offending his hearers when he reminded them of two recent disasters: when Roman cruelty had led to Jewish deaths within the Temple, and when a tower had collapsed, killing many. Far from arguing the sinfulness of those who died, he points his finger directly at his hearers: don't blame them for what happened, he warns, look to your own spiritual health, or you may die unreconciled with God.

What sin is Jesus talking about? Well, the parable of the fig seems to indicate that God wants fruitfulness from us, behaviour to show those who observe our lives that we are Jesus' followers. And to make sure we get the point, straight after this Luke puts a story about Jesus healing a woman who has been unable to straighten her back and walk upright for eighteen painful years. He sees her plight, and immediately heals her tortured back, by touch alone. But there's a snag. He's healed her on the Sabbath, the day when, according to the Jewish law, no work should be done. So the synagogue secretary feels he just has to rush over and remind him: Aren't there six days when you can work legally? Why couldn't you have waited and healed her tomorrow?

Now you might call that officious, or tactless. Or you might decide that actually, he had a point, and look it up in Standing Orders to see if there was any way around the difficulty. But Jesus doesn't react that way at all.

He calls the synagogue secretary's bluff. You have animals? he demands. You untie them to feed and water them on the Sabbath, don't you? Unless you want to find a dead donkey on Sunday? Eighteen years this sister of yours in the faith has been waiting to have her back muscles unbound, and you really think she should wait yet another day?

We never hear what the synagogue secretary's reaction was. Did he justify himself, tell himself that the younger generation of preachers really weren't trained properly in Standing Orders? Or did he have pangs of conscience, as he reflected how someone in his own synagogue had been suffering for eighteen years, right under his nose, and it had taken a stranger to see her properly and to set her free? Whatever his conclusion, my guess is he didn't sleep too well that night. And that's what Jesus does to us: he disturbs us. But it's out of love he warns us: don't get complacent. For we never know what's around the corner. We may hope, like the Israelites in Isaiah's time, that it's all going to be plain sailing: yet suddenly we're faced with difficulties we'd never dreamed of, and we're greatly tempted to write God off. Or we may think, like the synagogue secretary in Jesus' time, that we've got the rules of our religion sorted out, and then a stranger comes along and points out our doublethink: it's all right for me, though not for her.

When I use these people as examples, I'm borrowing the idea from Paul, who in our reading from 1 Corinthians this morning looks right back to the Israelites, crossing the Reed Sea, getting to the promised land. You remember how God gave them food and drink in the desert? he asks his readers. That was Jesus. Yet in spite of God's nourishment, some of them went for their own comfort and pleasure instead; and paid dearly for it.

Don't follow that bad example! Paul begs them. Instead, remember that whatever happens to us, bad or good, God offers us just enough strength to get through it.

That's been as true in my life so far as it was for the Christians in Corinth. But everyone's experience is different. What do *you* think? Is Paul right?

Second Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

28 February, 2010

Luke 13:31-35

When something bad happens in our lives, one of the things people often wonder is: How can God let this happen? If God cares for us, how come I'm hurting so much?

Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we're calling God our Father, and fathers are meant to look after their children. In two weeks time we'll be celebrating Mothering Sunday, and thinking how God's like a good mother as well as a good father to us; one of the reasons we think God's like a mother is when Jesus says to the people of Jerusalem, in the reading we just heard, I'd have loved to cuddle you and keep you safe, the way a hen cuddles her chicks under her wings.

So doesn't God care enough for us to keep us safe? Or if God cares, maybe God's not strong enough to stop bad things happening? Either way, it's a bit scary to think about.

Jesus may have wondered the same thing. There were people who didn't like what he was doing, people who didn't want anyone to upset the way they saw the world. They believed you should love people who are nice to you and hate people who are nasty to you. But Jesus said we should love everyone, because God loves everyone.

That was why he cared for people with nasty diseases that everyone else wanted to forget about. He cared about children, though most of the grown-ups then thought children were only important when they started to grow up and do a grown-up's work. He cared about people whose minds were ill, people everyone else was a bit afraid of because they weren't ordinary. And because he cared about them, he made them better.

But Jesus knew he wouldn't be allowed to go on doing that forever. The powerful people who didn't like him caring for everyone would do their best to stop him. And he wasn't surprised, because a lot of the people God had sent before him to show how God wanted people to live had run into trouble too. So Jesus knew he was in for a bad time.

Now he knew King Herod was after him - that had to be serious, because the people who warned Jesus weren't too fond of him either. He could have decided, Enough is enough. I've been caring for everyone else long enough. Now it's time for me to look after my friends and forget about everyone else, so I don't get in trouble.

But because Jesus believed so strongly that God cares for everyone, he wouldn't be stopped caring for people too, however dangerous it got, however much people hated him for it. So when people wonder if God cares about us, when nasty things happen to us and we can get scared about what may happen to us, let's remember Jesus. He cared about everyone so much, he chose to go on caring for people who needed him, however bad things got. His bravery and his love shows us just how much God cares about us - not pretending that bad things don't happen but staying with us if things get bad. And because Jesus cares for us that much, because God cares for us that much, we can care for each other too.

Hymns:

R&S 575, based on Psalm 67, comes from the pen of H.F. Lyte, an Anglican vicar of the 19th century whose mother died and whose father left him at an early age. Lyte was never physically strong, and developed consumption and eventually had to live in the south of France where the weather was more clement. The tune Heathlands was first published in 1866 set to these words.

R&S 197 was written by Margaret Cropper, a Quaker and close friend of the mystic Evelyn Underhill, for the Sunday School at St James Church in Kendal which she led for most of her

adult life. The tune *Au clair de la lune* (By the light of the moon), a French nursery rhyme, comes from as early as 1576.

R&S 198 was written by the poet John Clare, who came from a farming family and gained popularity in the 19th century as 'the Northamptonshire Peasant'. However he suffered mentally for much of his life and was confined to a mental asylum for the last twenty years of his life, writing poetry when his health allowed. The tune *Surrey/Carey's* was written for a paraphrase of Psalm 23.

R&S 586 comes from an original German hymn by Joachim Neander, translated and paraphrased by the poet laureate and former medical doctor Robert Bridges. The tune *Michael* by Herbert Howells was composed for this hymn, written over breakfast by the composer while opening his post. It is named after his son, who died of meningitis.

Sermon:

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27:1-3, 14; Luke 13:31-35; Phil 3:17-4:1

That question I started with in our theme introduction is a deep, deep question, one I suspect at some point in our life we all ask of God: do you really want things go right for me? Can I really trust you to care for me, to know and to meet my deepest needs? And in our reading from Genesis this morning Abram is facing this problem head on. God has promised Abram, before he and Sarai ever set off from their homeland into the unknown, that Abram's family will become a great nation, indeed, that they will become a blessing to all humanity. And Abram has believed God.

But now, where is he? His wife Sarai has had no child. Abram has Ishmael, his son whose mother is Hagar, Sarai's slave - but no legal heir to all his wealth and achievement save a far-off cousin in Damascus. Has God tricked him? Is God truly trustworthy? Does God really understand his needs?

We in St Andrew's might have our own questions to ask of God. I'm not getting any younger; will my health hold out? What about my family, will they be all right? Will I find work that's right for me? Will this church, to which I've given time and money and love over the years, fade into nothingness as though it had never been? Does God really care about us and our needs?

God chooses an interesting way to respond to Abram's question - and if you ever do find yourself wondering along similar lines, I do recommend you follow Abraham's example and bring your complaints directly to God, who can evidently cope with us getting angry. God listens, then tells Abram to trust him even more, by asking him for a material commitment: just as now we may count our wealth in stock market certificates, all his animals were tangible signs of Abram's wealth.

The covenant made between the two that evening was the formal ratification of a sort of agreement often made in the Ancient Near East between two parties, often a king and his subject, in which in exchange for total loyalty the king agrees to protect the subject. But no king would allow himself to be questioned by his subject as God did by Abram; this relationship is much closer than that. And when Abram has signalled in this way that he is serious about his own commitment to God, God's promise is repeated, in more detail, though still with no detailed breakdown about how it would be achieved.

We don't know Abram's response, but at the time this may not have seemed too satisfactory to him, still wondering how he was ever to get a legal heir. When we have put our situation before God, we too may be left with mixed feelings: peace, that God has heard us, but also dissatisfaction: so when will God be meeting our needs? Abram's got further to go in his journey yet; so have we; as his example shows, it's not always easy to live trusting

that God will make things better for us, though we cannot at present see how. Of course, sometimes what needs to alter in a situation is us, and it's not always easy at the time for us to see how we need to change, maybe in unforeseen ways, so our needs are met. But the alternative - to assume that God, like the long-awaited bus, is never going to arrive, and that we need to look out for ourselves and our own because no one else will do it for us - may not be the ideal solution either, for what we really need isn't always totally clear to us. Part of the problem with obesity we hear so much about these days is that people are living much less energetic lives, with all our labour-saving gadgets, yet we are still eating the same amount of rich foods that were necessary for survival when we had to outrun sabre-toothed tigers. We don't always realise how much of our desire for food is need, and how much is habit. When it comes to our consumption of power, of raw materials, of finished products, it may be a similar story. Our economy is based on the expansion of consumer need ad infinitum - yet living on a finite planet, increasing our use of resources forever cannot work, even for us - let alone the developing world.

But even for those of us who are naturally frugal our perception of need is a question of mind-set as much as fact. When Paul in his letter to Philippi speaks of those whose god is the belly, he wasn't talking about those who had put on too much weight, or even Tiger Woods, but about people who felt that satisfying their own needs, rather than what God wanted, was their highest priority.

I suspect we are all tempted to make God's meeting of our spiritual needs our top priority. We want worship to be the way we enjoy it, with the music we like, at a time that is convenient for us, on dates when we are not already committed to something else. Once things are organised so our church needs are met, we want things to stay as they are. We want others to come and join us - so long as they agree to do things the way we like them. And we want God's care for us to mean we will enjoy success and avoid suffering.

If you were to show me a Christian with none of these desires, I should show you either a hypocrite or someone who really doesn't understand themselves. It is natural for us to want life to go well, as it was natural for Abram to want a son to inherit his wealth. Yet if Jesus had stuck with meeting his own needs, he would never have turned his face to Jerusalem and the cross. And as Paul tells his friends in Philippi, our natural wants - what he calls earthly things - cannot be a Christian's first priority; for our deepest need is rather for heavenly things, the love and acceptance that God alone can give us, which involves us in a greater and greater level of commitment to God throughout our lives. Just as Abram had to go through further struggle to see God's promise fulfilled in his son Isaac, Paul knew that everyone in the Philippian church would need the power of God's transformation to alter their priorities from their own needs to the acknowledgment of Jesus' authority in their lives. And the same is true for us. It's a process of transformation that the youngest among us can begin, and that the oldest among us still need to undergo.

What is the result of this process? To turn us into people of whom our psalmist writes, who can honestly say, God is my strong salvation; what foe have I to fear? In darkness and temptation my light, my help is near. Place on the Lord reliance, my soul with courage wait; his truth is your assurance when faint and desolate. This is Jesus' story too. God does not protect him or us from trouble. Yet he and we are given the assurance that no matter what happens, God's care will never fail us; and because God's care raised him from the death he endured as a result of caring for others, we can believe it's true.

First Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

21 February, 2010

Luke 4:1-13

Sarah: Welcome to a new series of Who Wants to be a Christian! I'm your host, Christine Tarrant. And here's our first contestant, Alison from the University of Sheffield! Nervous, Alison?

Alison: A little. But I do want to play.

Sarah: Why's that? What's at stake for you this morning?

Alison: Well, I want to follow Jesus. That's one of the reasons I'm in church this morning. But I don't always find it easy knowing exactly how to do it...

Sarah: Well, you've come to the right place to find out. You know the rules, but I'll explain them for the benefit of any first-time viewers. You have three questions to answer, and if you answer them all correctly, you'll not just be following Jesus, you'll be standing right next to him. Every question has three possible answers, A, B and C. You have to choose the right one. And you have three lifelines: ask the congregation, take away one wrong answer, and call a friend. Ready?

Alison: As ready as I'll ever be!

Sarah: Then let's play: Who Wants to be a Christian. Your starter question, for entrance to church membership.

You've decided to give up sweets for Lent, but a friend gives you a box of delicious fairly traded chocolates. Do you a: say, Well, I can always start my fast tomorrow, and scoff the lot? Do you b: say, I'll keep those till Easter Day and then scoff the lot? Or do you c: say, Won't it be wonderful when Easter comes and I can share these lovely chocolates with my minister. And the congregation, of course. A, b or c: What's your choice?

Alison: I'm not sure about this one. I don't think it's A. Jesus said let your yes be yes and your no be no, so if I've promised to do something I should do it. But I'm not sure whether I want to share my chocolates with anyone, even you.

Sarah: I'm going to have to hurry you here. A, b or c?

Alison: Jesus said, if you give generously you'll get generously as well. So I'm going to go for... C!

Sarah: Final answer?

Alison: Final answer.

Sarah: If you'd chosen answer B, and decided to eat all the chocolates yourself, on Easter Day you'd be enjoying... nothing at all! Because the right answer is indeed C! Well done! Feeling a little better now?

Alison: I think I'm starting to get the hang of this.

Sarah: Good, because it's going to get trickier. Listen carefully. Your second question, if you answer it correctly, will qualify you for membership of the Finance Committee.

Alison: Go for it.

Sarah: Your church has to watch its finances carefully, since offerings are down and costs are up. You want to refurbish the church kitchen, but you also want to use fairly traded products in church life: tea and coffee and biscuits. Do you a: decide the kitchen is most important, because that's how we'll get lettings income; b: decide that buying fair trade is most important, because it's helping people whom the recession is hitting much harder than us or c: say, This is ridiculous! We should be able to put some of our money into both. A, b or c: what do you choose?

Alison: You're right, this is harder. I don't know.

Sarah: Remember your lifelines!

Alison: Yes! I want to... ask the congregation.

Sarah: Well, congregation, this is your moment. I'd like you to think whether we want a) to spend our money on a refurbished kitchen; b) to spend our money on fairly traded products or c) to do some of both. a) Kitchen, b) biscuits or c) both. And I'd like you to raise your hands and vote now. Who's for a) the kitchen? [count] For b) the biscuits? [count] For c) both? [count] Well, Alison, that's what the congregation thinks. Will you go with their decision, or will you make a different choice?

Alison: I think I'll go with... choice c. Final answer.

Sarah: You chose option c: to spend the church's money on both a new kitchen and some fairly traded products. And the correct answer is... c! Well done!

Alison: The right answer often is a bit of both, isn't it?

Sarah: That's not always true, as you'll find out in your final question this morning, for the highest prize: being a Christian, someone who follows Jesus all the way. Is that something you're interested in?

Alison: Of course it is. But if Jesus was perfect and always knew what to do, it's not very easy for us to follow him, is it? Life's not like that. Not for me, anyway.

Sarah: Well, listen hard to your final question this morning, for the prize of being a real Christian. You're putting a lot of effort into your work, but your degree will only go on for this year. So next year do you a) decide to do a doctorate, if you can find someone to pay you to do it, b) train as a history teacher or c) get a job that pays you more.

Alison: This is hard! It's bad enough to make choices when you know what the right thing to do is and you just don't want to do it. But if I don't know what the right thing is...

Sarah: You still have two lifelines, remember. You can take away one wrong answer, and you can call a friend.

Alison: All right, take away one wrong answer.

Sarah: And the answer that's gone is c: get a job that pays you more. There's nothing wrong with a well-paid job, but if that's the only reason you're taking it, you'll get no satisfaction out of your choice. That leaves you with two choices: a) get a doctorate or b) become a teacher. A or B? What will you choose?

Alison: I don't know! I really don't know. All I can think of to do is to call a friend.

Sarah: All right then, who are you going to call?

Alison: This is going to sound really cheesy, but I'm going to call God. Pray, I mean. I may not get an answer straight from heaven, but if I pray about it first at least I can hope for peace of mind to make the right choice.

Sarah: Alison Vance, you've won the prize! You are a genuine, certified, bona fide Christian!

Alison: But I've not even answered the question yet!

Sarah: Being a Christian doesn't mean knowing all the right answers. It means knowing who to ask, like Jesus did.

Hymns:

R&S 261: At the name of Jesus

Out in the desert Jesus was hungry

CG 35: For your generous providing

R&S 509: O Jesus, I have promised

Sermon:

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13; Romans 10:8b-13

Temptation is often seen in clear-cut terms. Eating too many sweets and having problems with your teeth. Being too friendly with too many people who aren't your partner, and hurting the one you're meant to be closest to. Taking something that isn't yours, whether it's hefty bonuses or someone's mobile phone. That's the newspaper view of temptation: giving in to a desire that's obviously wrong. But in fact Jesus' temptations in the desert don't seem to follow that pattern. Satisfying your hunger by eating is not wrong. Nor is wanting to be safe from harm. The real temptation to wrongdoing Jesus faced, in the newspaper understanding of the word, was to worship the devil rather than God; to choose destruction rather than creation. And that would have been no obvious temptation either, for a pitchfork and cloven hooves - or whatever the first-century equivalent may have been - would rather have given the game away. Jesus was truly being tempted by the possibility of using great powers for good, with the only proviso that his ultimate obedience would no longer be given to God.

And that sort of temptation, doing something wrong for a right reason, is much easier to fall into. Consider the situation in Palestine right now, several thousand years on from our reading in Deuteronomy, when first the people of Israel who had been enslaved in Egypt came into a new land and found God-given freedom. Now Israelis live in fear of rockets fired from Palestine. Now Palestinians live in fear of Israeli soldiers destroying their houses, uprooting their olive trees and building more walls so they can't travel to work or college or hospital. Because such terrible things have happened to Jews in the centuries since first they entered Palestine, the Israeli government feels justified in committing injustices against others who lay claim to the land. Because the Palestinian people suffer under this harsh treatment, terrorists feel justified in killing themselves and bystanders in order to attack Israel. Both sides are tempted by the power of victimhood to treat others as less than human - and that's always a trick of the devil.

Both sides appeal to God who upholds the innocent. Yet if they would only look at our Deuteronomy reading more carefully, both sides would find that aliens - in other words, people who are different from us, not the Dr Who variety - are also to join in the harvest feast God has provided, for there is enough for all to eat and be satisfied.

You may be wondering whether that can really be true. For in Palestine Jews and Muslims as well as Christians fight over God and God's promises. And our reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome seems clear-cut: if we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, God will save us, rescue us. That's a pretty clear definition of being Christian, so you might think Paul's argument excluded Jews and, presumably, Muslims, who didn't exist when the letter was written, from being people God rescues. But we could only understand our reading that way through falling into temptation: the temptation of being lazy and taking a few verses from the Bible on their own, rather than looking at the whole context in which they are written.

David Hill's Bible studies on the lectionary passages on Tuesday evenings during Lent will certainly not fall into that temptation, and I recommend them to you. But since they will not begin until this coming Tuesday, I can remind you without fear of repetition that Paul has written this whole passage to try to work out the position of Jews who do not become Christian - and by the end of the next chapter he has decided that, while he is sure people like us who are not Jewish can claim God's promises as true, what we cannot do is to decide that others, who have chosen a different path, are beyond God's salvation, God's rescue. But what exactly is this rescue about? Our psalm this morning might make us think those

who love God are guaranteed a pain-free existence, kept by hosts of angels from anything that might hurt us. But either none of us truly loves God, or that can't be the right answer; for we know life's not like that. People suffer. People die.

And that's not just true for us, either. Over these next few weeks of Lent we'll be retelling the story of Jesus' suffering and death, which angels did nothing to prevent. And even at this stage of the story, right at the beginning of his mission, Jesus realises it's useless his trying to manipulate God to his own advantage by living dangerously and then demanding God's protection; for God doesn't play that game.

It's all very well for Jesus, you may be thinking. He knows God's mind, so he'd win a game of Who Wants to Follow God hands down without even thinking about it. But can that be true? For if Jesus had that level of understanding, right from the beginning, could he be human as we understand humanity? I think not. We're told in the letter to the Hebrews that Jesus was tempted as we are, yet never gave in to temptation. Somehow we need to hold both sides of that equation in balance. If he'd never had to wrestle with the temptation of doing something that looked really promising but went against everything he believed in, he wouldn't have known what it's like to be human. Yet if, as we are told, Jesus always did resist temptation, then we may need to look again at how he did behave, when he was angry at injustice; when he was bewildered at people's lack of trust in him; when he felt as though God had forsaken him. Are the uncomfortable emotions of anger, uncertainty and despondency something we feel, as Christians, we should not experience? Maybe we should think again; for Jesus has been there before us.

If God's promise of rescue, that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, is to mean anything, it must mean God can provide us with enough resources for us to be able to resist the obvious temptations that will come our way about food or love or money, as well as that more subtle temptation to keep others away from what we have, because they are not as human as us. And Jesus, who for love of us and all gave up even his life, demonstrates that generous supply of God's love which can carry us through all temptation - if we admit we need help, and call our friend.

Transfiguration Sunday; Valentine's Day

Service Date:

14 February, 2010

Luke 9:28-36

For a few weeks now, it's felt as though I've been going on and on about God's love for us. And I don't feel apologetic, for God's love for us and for all is the good news Christians have to share with the world. But as well as God's love for us, it's worth looking at our love for God too.

Today is Valentine's Day, focussing on romantic love; but what's that sort of love got to do with the Christian story? After all, so far as we know, Jesus never fell for anyone. And though one picture for the church as a whole is the bride of Christ, that doesn't mean any of us individually is going out with him. Yet though Jesus isn't our heavenly boyfriend, we human beings can only love God through human forms of love. And while we're used to the idea of loving God the way a child loves father and mother, it's worth looking at how we come to love God through the lens of being in love too.

When we first come across the person we love, we want to be around them all the time, to listen, to watch. That's how Peter and the other disciples were with Jesus. They listened to the stories he told; they watched him as he healed damaged people and confronted

religious hypocrites. They found out what sort of person he was. How have we built up a picture of the Jesus we love? Through Bible stories? Hymns? Films? What others have said? After a while, if we're serious, it's time to make a commitment. And after a while, Jesus called his friends to travel with him all the time, not just when they had time or felt like it or needed a bit of cheering up. I wonder, what does our commitment to Jesus mean in practice?

If we do spend more time with the one we love, there may come a moment when our love for them seems a bigger thing than our whole lives; a moment when they seem almost to shine with love; a moment we can't properly describe, but will always remember. The mountain of transfiguration was like that for Peter.

But love can also make us act like idiots, when we want to hang onto that perfect moment, even though it's impossible. And Peter in our reading today is like that. He wants to hold onto his sudden understanding that in Jesus he has found all the law's tradition and all the prophets' wisdom rolled into one person. He wants to keep that memory intact and perfect and keep Jesus there with him. But Jesus won't be forced by our love for him into behaving the way we think he should. God's voice comes from the cloud, 'Listen to him!' If we love, we listen to our beloved and put them before our own interests and needs. How has that worked out in our story with Jesus?

Love, for Jesus' friends, is going to take them into some difficult times which we'll be following over the next few weeks. Their love for him will be tested; it will break; but it will also be mended. Is that true for us? Have there been times when our love for Jesus has not been strong enough to stop us letting him down? If so, we shouldn't despair. For though it's worth, as we go through Lent, reflecting on our love for God, we will always come back to God's everlasting love for us and for all.

Hymns:

R&S 67: Immortal, invisible, God only wise

R&S 274: God is love, his the care

CG 63: Inspired by love and anger

From glory to glory advancing

Sermon:

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; Luke 9:28-36; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Moses has evidently got a very bad attack of the love of God. When he comes back down Mount Sinai from talking with God, who has given him the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, his face shines with God's reflected light. Not surprisingly, everyone else is a bit wary of him. Might God's light be dangerous to them, if they get too close to it? Better to have Moses cover up his face when he's been too near God, just in case.

Maybe we can sympathise with the Israelites' caution. After all, if you get religion too badly, like love, it might make you do strange things. You could get the urge to become a missionary, or to preach on street corners, or to do something else enthusiastic and un-British. Much better to express our love for God as we do the rest of our emotions: cautiously and with reserve.

Of course, this is partly a matter of what is culturally acceptable, which will vary from society to society. The exuberant touchy-feely friendliness of Texans and the polite understated greeting of Edinburgh folk, though poles apart in expression, may be equally heartfelt and sincere. Yet we might wonder to what extent love that remains unstated is love at all; I would not envy a child brought up with all its material needs met but with no experience of hugs or pet names. At the other extreme, of course, a fiery love of God

combined with intolerance of other viewpoints can lead to the terrible conclusion of people killing in God's name, supposedly out of love for God.

Yet enthusiasts can draw us with them into their own enthusiasms, enriching and widening our own experience. Ardent gardeners or naturalists can show us beauty of which we would remain unaware without their passionate desire to communicate. People who love art or music, sport or science can share their passion with us; and such enthusiasm is often infectious. If you have been blessed with paid work which you loved as well as which paid your bills, I'd not be surprised to find that someone else's enthusiasm, whether teacher, friend or family member, sparked your own at a crucial moment in your life. And each of us is in a position to share our own enthusiasm for God in this way.

Of course, this is dangerous for us. We may find, like Moses, that others are wary of our faith commitment, fearing we will try to compel them to see things our way. Yet more often, I suspect, when we show our interest in God, families, neighbours or colleagues may rather be intrigued; interested in finding out more about our position, and in sharing their own thoughts.

There is, however, another danger which we run, once we pluck up the courage to express, however simply, our own faith position; and it is this: that we may become possessive in our love for God, tempted to disrespect someone else's view in comparison. As great a Christian as Paul falls into this trap in the reading from his second letter to Corinth which we've heard this morning. As you know, Paul comes from a Jewish background. Now he has seen in Jesus the Messiah for whom the Jewish people wait; yet not all his fellow Jews have taken that step. And because Paul has found in Jesus the hope of God's covenant of love with Israel finally being fulfilled, in comparison he understands the Jewish hope and the Jewish love of God as inferior to those of the Christian. Paul picks up the image of Moses with his face glowing but veiled when he has been with God, and interprets it the other way around. Because the Jewish people do not accept God in Jesus, he argues, God has veiled their minds so they can no longer see the glory of God shining in him.

From the Christian point of view this can sound convincing, and even make us feel rather smug. We have understood and accepted from the Jewish tradition what they have misunderstood and rejected. When, however, exactly the same argument is put by Muslims, who argue that in comparison with them, we Christians do not understand our own scriptures correctly, I can tell you it feels much less comfortable. While it is tempting to try to show how good our faith position is by downgrading those of others, it is not the way of truth or of love. We do not make Jesus' glory shine more brightly by trying to demolish those who see things differently; think again of Richard Dawkins' disservice done to atheism by the vehemence with which he attacks anyone and everyone who dares to admit that faith might make sense.

But if we were to talk about our faith, about praying or reading the Bible or working for others because we love God, isn't that just blowing our own trumpets, showing off, trying to persuade others how wonderful we are? Wouldn't we do better just to get on with doing the things our faith leads us to do, without all this embarrassing talking? Especially if we may not be too sure what the right words to use might be?

Certainly I'd agree that talking about faith without living it is worse than useless - and that's a temptation ministers are dangerously apt to fall into! I'd also agree that the way we live our lives can say a lot more about what we believe than the words we use. How we spend and invest our money, how we prioritise our time, how we treat people tells others much more about what we really believe than if we just spout the official right answers.

Yet words are important too for enthusiasm to be shared. If new Scots in Sheffield don't know which of their friends and colleagues hold their Scottish identity dear, they won't find out the Caledonian Society exists, and within a generation it will die out. If we let the veil of British reserve stop us from saying anything to others about the importance faith holds for us, we stop them finding out how true it could be for them too.

And our words don't have to be academic jargon to do the job properly. For Jesus wasn't an academic. He told stories: about plants growing, about food cooking, about families living together and falling out. He cared about people who were lost and left out and lonely. He looked at people's hearts, not their bank balances, to see what was worthwhile. And what's in people's hearts now concerns him just as much as it did then.

It's all there in the New Testament; but I bet it's there in your memories too. You'll have favourite Bible stories, that have meant a lot to you since childhood, or since you first came into a church, that remind you of what's important about your faith. And reflecting on your life in the light of those stories, sharing what you've thought, may be just the spark of enthusiasm needed for someone else to start to make sense of their lives by the light of God's love in Jesus.

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date:

7 February, 2010

Luke 5:1-11

I guess we start young learning what other people think of us. I know when I first had a godson, and I went to stay with his parents, I found myself saying, 'Good boy!' and 'Bad boy!' to this toddler who could hardly understand words at all. When he staggered over to me and handed me his toy to look at, his mother and I praised him for his generosity. When he started to play around with his food, and thought throwing it was much more fun than eating it, we told him gently but firmly where he was going wrong.

We start early. And all through our lives, other people tell us what they think of our bad behaviour. Just now, MPs must be regretting all over again fitting in with all the others and claiming too much money in expenses. But they're not the only ones. Papers sell when they tell us about people going wrong, whether it's a national footballer getting too close to his team-mate's girlfriend or a minister running off with the organist. As long as it's not us getting told off, we want to know all about it. It can give us a nice warm glow inside to hear about other people going wrong when we have not. And often people in churches are reported in the media as telling someone else off. Gay people who want to marry, single mothers, beggars, drug addicts - they can all find Christians queuing up to tell them how wrong they are.

But isn't that the point of being a Christian? To name and shame sinners, so they can see the error of their ways? Certainly through history, churches and ministers have taken this task on themselves. Maybe some of you have sat through hellfire and damnation sermons, intended to frighten people into being good and following God. But is this what Jesus does? Let's look at our Gospel reading this morning. Peter and his friends are in the middle of their work when Jesus strolls by, telling them, 'I know how to do your job better than you do! Just do what I say!' Peter is actually very restrained when he replies, 'Look, we've been at this all night and it's been no good. But I'll give it a go.' He calls Jesus Master, so they already know each other - but what can this carpenter, however wise he is, know about fishing? Well, we know the result: a huge catch of fish, almost sinking Peter's boat and another that comes to

help them. And what's Peter's reaction to this amazing abundance? Does he thank God? Does he thank Jesus? Does he ask him to sign on and come fishing with them every night? No: Peter reckons he doesn't deserve having something so special happening to him. And what does Peter call himself? A sinner: someone not worthy to be in touch with God, who has sent this miracle.

Does Jesus agree with Peter? After all, he has shown a bit of doubt in the man who shows us God. Isn't Peter a sinner? Shouldn't Jesus be telling him off, just for his own good? Strangely, no. Jesus doesn't tell Peter he's not a sinner, that he's perfect and will never go wrong. Anyone who knows Peter knows he's guaranteed to put his foot in his mouth. That's the sort of person Peter is. But Jesus doesn't condemn Peter, or even tell him off. What does he say?

'Cheer up: I'm going to show you how to catch people instead.'

If Jesus knows us that well and still wants us to come with him, I want to follow. How about you?

Hymns:

R&S 103 was written by the Victorian Anglican turned Catholic John Henry Newman, as part of his larger work *The Dream of Gerontius*, to be sung by angelic choirs, praising the work of God, as a counterpoint to the main drama of the work: the deathbed and eternal destiny of Gerontius. The tune *Chorus Angelorum* was written by Arthur Somervell to fit these words.

R&S 558 is a twentieth-century hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community in which most of the verses, until the last, put words of invitation and warning into God's mouth. The last verse, offering human response and commitment, is not to be sung lightly. The tune *Kelvingrove* is a Scottish traditional melody.

R&S 447 is also a twentieth-century hymn, this time by the URC minister Brian Wren, now retired. Unlike many devotional hymns for communion, it firmly links the believer's relationship with God to our relationship with the community of Christians. The tune *St Botolph* refers to St Botolph's Parish Church in Boston, Lincs, where the composer Gordon Slater was parish organist.

R&S 366 is one of Charles Wesley's best-known hymns, written within a day or two of his and John's experiences of conversion. According to the *Companion to Rejoice and Sing* it is 'packed with New Testament images of the Atonement, in which each one makes up for limitations of the others'. The tune *Sagina* is often associated with this hymn; the way phrases within the tune are repeated calls to mind the original tune for 'While Shepherds Watched', better known as the folksong *Ilkley Moor*.

Sermon:

Luke 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Sarah: Our reading from Paul's first letter to Corinth this morning gives us a lot to think about. To start with, what is the good news he proclaims?

Ann [*standing up and moving to front*]: You whited sepulchre!

Sarah: Excuse me? Who are you, please?

Ann: Who am I, indeed? I'm Richard Dawkins, of course, the famous evolutionary biologist and champion of atheism. A week ago I wrote an article in the *Times* about people like you, and I see you're at it again - 'befrocked and bleating in your pulpit', just as I wrote.

Sarah: I'm sorry you feel like that about me. I'd better come down so we're at least standing on the same level. [Sarah descends]

Ann: Don't talk to me about standing on the same level. You were preaching about Haiti recently, weren't you?

Sarah: Yes: when something that terrible happens in the world, I believe Christians need to ask themselves: where is God in this?

Ann: That's simple. There is no God. We know what caused the catastrophe in Haiti. It was a force of nature, sin-free and indifferent to sin, unpremeditated, unmotivated, supremely unconcerned with human affairs or human misery. But you teach that Haiti's tragedy must be payback for human sin.

Sarah: As I said in my sermon, I believe there was sin involved: the sin of those of us in powerful nations who chose to forget about Haiti's poverty, so they had no chance to protect themselves against the earthquake.

Ann: Don't give me that! Pat Robertson, the infamous American televangelist, says the Haitians are still paying for a pact with the Devil in 1791 to help to rid them of their French masters.

Sarah: I can assure you, that's not what most Christians believe.

Ann: Isn't it in your Bible? "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me".

Sarah: Yes, but that's more a description of heredity: people passing on the damage caused by their own bad choices to the generations to come. Freedom and nationhood weren't bad choices for the people of Haiti, though maybe for their slave masters who lost income when Haiti became independent.

Ann: What hypocrisy! Loathsome as Robertson's views undoubtedly are, he is the Christian who stands squarely in the Christian tradition. If you see suffering as an intractable mystery, if you see God in the help, money and goodwill that is now flooding into Haiti, or (most nauseating of all) if you claim to see God "suffering on the cross" in the ruins of Port-au-Prince, you're denying the centrepiece of your own theology.

Sarah: And according to you, what's that?

Ann: Sin and punishment, of course. Why, according to your Bible, did Noah's flood destroy people and animals over the whole world? Punishment for sin. Where was God in Sodom and Gomorrah? Barbecuing the citizenry, lock, stock and barrel, as punishment for "sin".

Sarah: It's true, we have some terrible stories in the Bible, and some of them have been misused to punish innocent people. But the story of the relationship between people and God has developed over millennia and is still developing.

Ann: I hope you're not going to say that the New Testament is all about love.

Sarah: Why, what will you say if I do?

Ann: Dear modern, enlightened, theologically sophisticated, gentle Christian, you cannot be serious. Your entire religion is founded on an obsession with "sin", with punishment and with atonement. Where do you find the effrontery to condemn Pat Robertson? You've signed up to the odious doctrine that the central purpose of Jesus's incarnation was to have himself tortured as a scapegoat for the "sins" of all mankind, past, present and future, beginning with the "sin" of Adam, who (as any modern theologian well knows) never existed.

Sarah: Quite apart from the question of Adam, and the evident difference between story and history in the Bible, I don't recognise what you're describing as Christianity.

Ann: Is it the word 'scapegoat' you object to? The only respect in which "scapegoat" falls short as a perfect epitome of Christian theology is that the Christian atonement is even more unpleasant. The goat of Jewish tradition was merely driven into the wilderness with its cargo of symbolic sin. Jesus was supposedly tortured and executed to atone for sins that, any rational person might protest, he had it in his power simply to forgive, without the

agony.

Sarah: Now I must protest. Do you know what the word 'atonement' means?

Ann: Your entire theology is one long celebration of suffering: suffering as payback for "sin" - or suffering as "atonement" for it.

Sarah: Atonement means 'at-one-ment' - how to restore the relationship of trust and love between God and people; the relationship which breaks down when someone treats God or other people as objects to be manipulated, not lives to be respected - in other words, when someone sins. And Christians believe that restoration of the relationship between God and us has come about through Jesus, as our New Testament reading describes.

Ann: The god-man who - as you tell your congregation, even if you don't believe it yourself - "cast out devils"? You may weep for Haiti where Pat Robertson does not, but isn't he being honest and true to your New Testament to use that language, even if you disown him? Robertson holds up an honest mirror to the ugliness of Christian theology; he may spout evil nonsense, but he is a mere amateur at that game, compared with educated apologists like you.

Sarah: There are powers of destruction at work in the world which it would not be too strong to call demonic. For instance, when you point out the hypocrisy and hatred you find in Christians, Mr Dawkins, you are naming devils, or to put it another way, you are describing our sins, and we should be grateful to you, however painful it is for us to hear. You're right to say that we believe Jesus died for our sins. But you're wrong to think that means God chose to torture and execute him, chose to punish him rather than forgive us. If that had been what it was about, you'd be correct in your comment that the Christian "atonement" would win a prize for pointless futility as well as moral depravity.

Ann: So what is atonement about, then, according to you? How did Jesus persuade God to forgive your sins?

Sarah: Jesus doesn't need to persuade God to forgive us. God loves everyone - not just Christians. God wants all the broken relationships between us to be mended. But we human beings have to be convinced this good news is true. We've often been brought up with our parents teaching us right from wrong by giving or withholding affection from us according to our behaviour - just think of the 'naughty step'. So rather than God's unconditional love for us, it's much easier for us to believe, like Peter in our Gospel reading this morning, that we are so sinful a good God won't want to have anything to do with us. Then it's just one more step to looking around for other people God must hate even more, calling them sinners, and punishing them accordingly. That's how we end up with people like you calling us Christians hypocrites. But if we understand Jesus' self-giving death, the death we will shortly be remembering in our communion service, as the only way he could convince us that God's love for us and for all cannot fail, whatever happens to us, then we can realise at-one-ment really is possible, even for us. And that is good news. Maybe for you too, Mr Dawkins. Oh, by the way, do you know where that phrase 'whited sepulchre' comes from, that you used to end your article?

Ann: From the New Testament, of course! I can recognise good ammunition when I see it.

Sarah: It's a phrase Jesus used to describe his opponents, people who were so sure about the sins of others that they didn't bother about behaving with integrity themselves. It's a vivid picture, of tombs well-painted without but rotting within; one all of us with strong opinions about the rights and wrongs of others' ways should bear in mind. So while I doubt I've yet convinced you of my case, I do hope I have given a fair account of your views this morning. Thank you for the challenge they pose to those of us faithheads who don't want to

leave our brains at the door when we enter church.

Ann: You're welcome! *[sits]*

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date:

31 January, 2010

Luke 9:10-17

It's a long way from this story of people thousands of years ago gathering in the Galilean countryside to hear what Jesus had to say to us in St Andrew's this morning. And it's a long way from us gathered here this morning to the people of Haiti, thousands of miles away on the other side of the world, still coming to terms with the terrible aftermath of the earthquake that hit them a fortnight ago. But this snippet of story told recently by an American missionary who used to live and work in Haiti brings us all together. Listen to what happens when he finally manages to get through by phone to people he knew in Haiti, and asks of news of those he knew there:

As the names flew by too fast over the iffy phone connection, I didn't recognize them all.

Most of the names he said were alive, some dead.

Then he said, "We don't have food or water." What do you mean? "No food or water."

Same answer.

I believe in the God who multiplied fish and loaves to feed the hungry. I believe in the God who says I'm always with you. And right now, it's achingly clear - heartbreakingly, angrily clear - isn't it, that we who believe also believe in the God who is hidden sometimes, sometimes when we are most in need, to whom the psalmist cried out, "How long, oh Lord, how long?"

The people in our Gospel reading were in need. Otherwise they'd not have bothered to leave their homes and villages, go hungry and thirsty, in order to hear what Jesus had to say to start with.

The people in Haiti are in need right now: hungry and thirsty, homeless and desperate. I'm sure some of us have already given money to buy supplies for them, and at the end of this service we will make a closing collection for the Disasters Emergency Committee Haiti appeal.

And in this country and this city right now, people are also in need of food and drink, of a home to live in, of money to pay off debts, of work that pays a fair rate for their efforts.

They too are asking, How long?

In the Gospel story, to start with it is Jesus who meets people's needs. First he speaks to them of God's kingdom, where there will be enough for all. Then he heals those in need of wholeness. When his friends see him meeting so many needs, maybe they are afraid of being overwhelmed; maybe that's why they want him to send the crowds away. They think they have no answers to all these problems. But Jesus points out they do have resources, even though the problem seems so much greater than they can solve. They have a few loaves and fishes. And when they give their own food to Jesus, it becomes enough to feed everyone.

In this week focussing on poverty and homelessness issues, it's easy for us to feel discouraged. The problems are so huge. Who can sort them out? Better to send people away than to raise false hopes. But Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows that a little love, a little generosity, can go a long way. Rather than saying, 'We can do

nothing,' we can offer money, buildings and time that is ours to God. For given with love, our shared wealth can do miracles, answering everyone's needs, even our own.

Hymns:

R&S 663: Love divine

R&S 745: A new commandment

CG 2: We cannot own the sunlit sky

R&S 42: For the fruits of all creation

Sermon:

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71; Luke 9:10-17; 1 Corinthians 13

I'm pretty sure you'll have come across that reading from Paul's first letter to Corinth. For it turns up on all sorts of special occasions: weddings, baptisms, even funerals. Maybe that's because it talks about very human ways we have of getting approval from others. Some people have a real gift of the gab. Some become absolute experts in their field. Some may give away everything to charity, and diet or exercise themselves into a size 0, to show how self-denying they are. But none of that will make them any more worthwhile: for our worth is measured by love.

In spite of the wedding connections we've given this passage, Paul's not talking romantic love here. This is something that anyone and everyone may display in their lives. Oddly, it's more easily recognised by what it's not: impatience, unkindness, envy, arrogance, rudeness, selfishness, irritableness, resentfulness, glee when someone else messes up. And however much success with others we can rack up by our eloquence or our knowledge or our ability to do without, whenever these unpleasant symptoms of lovelessness show up in our lives we can be sure we've got ourselves onto the wrong track.

Why is love so much more important than all these other gifts and abilities? Paul reckons it's because it's the one thing that lasts. Even the most eloquent person will run out of things to say. Our knowledge is always superseded by a better theory. Maybe it's more surprising in a congregation like ours that Paul doesn't even think living well and doing good things for others ranks above love. But he's looking not at results, but at motivation. If we think we can make God love us if we only show God how good we are, again, we've lost the plot. For God loves us before we ever do anything good; God loves us when we do nothing good; God will never stop loving us, however we decide to live. It's impossible to make God love us more than God already does, because God's very substance is love, and God's love for each of us is infinite.

When we truly realise that - not just in our heads, but in our hearts - we can relax, and pass on that love to others, nourishing as bread and fish shared on a picnic when there's enough to go around.

Doesn't that sound simple, obvious? So why does Paul go to the bother of describing all those ways of living that aren't in line with love? And why is Jeremiah warned, in our Hebrew Bible reading this morning, not to be afraid of the people to whom God will send him as a prophet? If he is giving them a message from God, why should he fear them? Sometimes people falsely think that while the God of the New Testament is loving and mild, the God seen in the Hebrew Bible is angry and vengeful. In this news report from Haiti we see a similar split of understanding:

Drumbeats called the faithful to a Sunday Mass praising God amid a scene resembling the Apocalypse - a collapsed cathedral in a city cloaked with the smell of death and rattled by gunfire.... Sunlight streamed through what little was left of blown-out stained-glass windows as the Rev. Eric Toussaint preached to a small crowd of survivors. A rotting body

lay in its main entrance.

"Why give thanks to God? Because we are here," Toussaint said. "We say 'Thank you God.' What happened is the will of God. We are in the hands of God now." Mondesir Raymone, a 27-year-old single mother of two, was grateful. "We have survived by the grace of God," she said. But others were angry.

"It's a catastrophe and it is God who has put this upon us," said Jean-Andre Noel, 39, a computer technician.

On the face of it, there seems to be nothing of a God who is love about the Haitian earthquake. Yet blaming its horrific results on the collision of tectonic plates in that region of creation would not tell the full story. Here is another eyewitness account:

We just passed the Presidential Palace. The TV photos have done this no justice. Collapsed. The dome sunk into the middle of the structure. The health, justice, and education departments collapsed as well. No government structure left. The Agriculture building survived. Now across the street from this palace is "tent city." A beautiful park has now been transformed into living quarters for displaced Haitians. As far as the naked eye could see - people. Clothes are hanging over the fence from apparent washing, tents, sheets pitched everywhere. Lord, if this is a way to remind a president, then he is certainly being reminded...Then it dawned on me - poverty and the earthquake have now collided. Part of this is simply the poverty they live in every day and the other part is the devastation of the earthquake. It is all one horrific problem now.

Though the first Black state of freed slaves, Haiti has always been a very poor country, where bad government at home has coincided with lack of help abroad. The earthquake, bad as it was, has highlighted poverty and injustice previously ignored by the international community; modern Jeremiahs have previously had very little success bringing this to international attention. Though much of its international debt was cancelled last September, Haiti still owes £552 million. And I suspect I am not the only one here to have known little about the country before this latest blow - I didn't even know that Haiti shares an island with the Dominican Republic (check it out on the world map in the hall).

God is love, and those who live in love know God. But expressing love beyond our own comfort zone of family and friends and neighbours can be hard work. It's not a matter of 'buying' our worthiness, of giving money to a good cause and then turning away; Paul reminds us of that. It is a matter of using mind and heart to build relationships over time, of trusting God's generosity to supply our needs as we share what we have with others, of risking opposition or disappointment when we try to be signs of God's generous love within a situation.

You'll remember that last autumn Ruth Grayson came to St Andrew's to talk about a night shelter for Sheffield that would run over January and February as a pilot project. We discussed this in church meeting, and decided we would support this new venture. The project has got off to a poor start because of all the snow earlier this month, and so far, there has been a limited take-up, even now the thaw has come; partly because it takes time for any new set-up to become known and trusted. So it has been suggested that the project be extended for another month; Elders will be discussing this at our next meeting.

Here we see love in action, addressing in a small way the big issue of poverty and homelessness in Sheffield: willing to be patient and generous with what we have, allowing others the freedom to take or leave what is on offer. As we prepare to show our love for the people of Haiti by increased prayer and interest in their situation as well as by financial generosity I'll end with a prayer by a Haitian-American journalist, Martha St. Jean. Let us

pray:

*We are a people well acquainted with grief,
but you O Lord are still merciful
Though the earth give way and mountains be removed,
you are still Lord of all
Words cannot express the depths of my people's sorrow
We weep and cannot be consoled
but today choose to believe that you are still faithful
We choose to believe that joy still comes in the morning
Imbue us with courage to face the day
Give us the strength to rise once more
Extend to us charity and justice, peace and truth
And allow us to always seek your face.
In the name of your son Jesus we pray. Amen.*

Third Sunday after Epiphany: Baptism of Connor Fall

Service Date:

24 January, 2010

Mark 10:13-16

There's nothing new about what I'm about to say. Margaret's reading says it all, really: I'm going to pass on to you now what I've heard and read from people who've been on our journey of faith before us. But though it's not new news, it's still good news. Let's hear what our church believes.

God loves us even before we come to love God ourselves. Though we can't understand such love, God invites us in baptism to accept it with the openness and trust of a child. Christ's journey from death to new life is the pattern of our lives, as we follow in his footsteps. Jesus himself was baptized by John in the Jordan. His baptism found fulfilment in the cross, where he gave his own life for the life of the world.

Like our reading says, that's a dark saying, one way beyond little Connor, way beyond any of us to understand. How could someone dying painfully become new life for everyone else? But this morning we've brought Connor for baptism because we believe it's true, and we don't want to keep that truth from him.

Isn't he a bit young for all this sort of thing, though? What does it say?

Whether we are children or adults, baptism marks the beginning of our lives as Christians and as members of the Church. In baptism we are called to take up the Cross and follow Christ in the company of all God's people from all times and places. Because we cannot do this on our own, at baptism we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, to enable us to live as God's people and to serve God's purposes in the world.

That sort of language may seem a long way from our Gospel reading, where people are bringing little children to Jesus so he can bless them. Actually, where it says 'people', I reckon it should really say 'mothers'. Maybe there were New Men back in Jesus' time, dads looking after their kids, wanting to bring them to Jesus. But it's much more likely to have been a mother asking for Jesus' blessing for her child. Think how brave she must have been! To disturb the holy man and all his male followers talking about holy things, for the sake of her baby! No wonder Jesus' disciples frowned them down - just like women, interrupting men talking about important things to show off their ankle biters to Jesus, for heaven's sake. Have they no sense of what's important?

But Jesus, not for the first or last time, shows more sense than his friends. God's kingdom, he tells them, belongs to the little people: the people others look down on, or despise for breaking the rules, or just ignore because they're not important enough even to notice. And unless like a little child we can learn to lay down the game of I'm better than you are, and see everyone as God's gift to us, we've no chance of finding Jesus' new life and God's kingdom.

Connor's not old enough yet to start that game. But we are, all of us. That's why we baptised people are always in need of a new start with God and each other. And thanks to Jesus' self-sacrificial death for us and for all, thanks to God's Holy Spirit living in our hearts, that's what's always on offer.

It's not new news, but it's good news for us all. Especially for Connor, who's about to become a new member of our Christian family here at St Andrew's. So let's get on with welcoming him in through his baptism. Let's light a central candle, to symbolise Christ present among us, the light of the world.

Hymns:

R&S 74 was originally written in German in the sixteenth century by Joachim Neander, and translated into English by Catherine Winkworth two centuries later. The tune *Lobe den Herren* was originally set to the words of a love-song beginning 'Dearest, have you quite concealed your face?'

R&S 549 comes from the twentieth century, written by Sydney Carter for boys in Southwark Cathedral School about to change school, but it is suitable for any of us when our lives change. The tune is called *Southcote*, a misspelling of the name of Ernest Southcott, Provost of Southwark Cathedral at the time.

R&S 425 is also a modern hymn, written by Fred Kaan, a URC minister who died quite recently. He wrote it for his congregation at Pilgrim Congregational Church in Plymouth. The tune *Herongate* is an English traditional folk tune collected by Ralph Vaughan Williams, eavesdropping on a maid working at Ingrave Rectory who was singing at her work. *Herongate* was a hamlet close to Ingrave.

R&S 319 was written for an anniversary of the British and Foreign Bible Society by R.T. Brooks. The tune *Regent Square*, written by Henry Smart, comes from the church in London where the editor of the book which first published it was the minister.

Sermon:

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 78:1-6; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 4:14-21

At first glance, our reading from Nehemiah this morning sounds just the sort of thing to give the Bible a bad name for inducing terminal boredom in its hearers. What's newsworthy, or inspiring, in a story that's basically about someone standing up and reading the Bible out loud to lots of people? Big deal - don't we do that every Sunday morning in church?

Granted, this reading goes on from early morning till noon, which is a bit longer than we normally get in church, but wouldn't that just be even more boring?

What's a bit more unusual is the reaction the reader, who happens to be Ezra the scribe, gets to his reading: when they hear it, everyone begins to weep. Why? That sort of reaction usually means that something important's been said, something that cuts to the heart, whether out of sorrow or joy. A little earlier on, when Ishbel, Connor's godmother, read out Margaret and Martha's prayer for him, I'd not be surprised if a few tears appeared at the corner of a few eyes, out of joy and thankfulness at his health and strength, after all the trouble he's lived through in his short life so far. So what was it about this reading of the Bible that made the people who heard it start to cry?

To begin with, what exactly was it that was read out to them? It was the book of the law of Moses: the Torah or first five books of the Bible, which for the Jewish people are the most important and holiest parts of all: telling where their people came from, telling of their people's story with God - telling them who they were. For years, during their exile abroad, the people had not gathered to hear their story told. Now they were back in their own land, among their own people. God's Temple had been rebuilt. Yet so much could never be replaced. When the aid agencies finally pull out of Haiti, their work done, maybe there will be a similar feeling among the people there: so much damage done, so many lives lost; how will we ever pluck up the courage to start living again? Yet even in the midst of sorrow, as Ezra reminded his hearers, the stories of the Torah spoke to them of God: present in their ancestors' joys and sorrows; present in their own. Even in discouragement and fatigue, the joy of the Lord was their strength.

Calling to mind the past through reading the Bible in the present crops up again in the Gospel reading set for this morning. Jesus, fresh from his own baptism and from his desert temptations, is dropping in on his home synagogue, at Nazareth. Like a visiting preacher, he's asked to read the set passage from the Bible and to reflect on it for his hearers' benefit. So he finds the right place in the scroll of Isaiah the prophet, reads it out - without benefit of sound system - and sits down again. And as everyone starts to look at him, he gives the shortest sermon on record: 'Today is the day this prophecy has come true in your hearing.' Sensation! What does he mean?

Again, let's look at the story. God's Spirit has chosen someone, said Isaiah, centuries before, to give good news to the poor, release to prisoners, sight to those who can't see, freedom to slaves and the return of land to those who've lost it through debt. And Jesus is saying: D'you know who God has chosen, here and now, to do all those things? It's me.

Now, this may sound a stupid question, but is this good news or bad news? On the face of it, to me it sounds like good news, but were the people then glad or sorry to hear him speak that way?

From what we've already heard in Nehemiah we might expect a mixed reaction; and we'd be right. To start with, his hearers can't praise Jesus highly enough. But then he starts talking about God helping foreigners, not Israelite widows; God healing an enemy general, not Israelite lepers - and suddenly the whole mood changes. Now the headline in the Nazareth Times is no longer 'local prophet makes good', but 'enemy-lover run out of town'. Why this sudden violent change of mind? Maybe because the good news he brings is just too good; it's not only good for those who are sitting there listening to him, but for everyone else too: for all the people who don't go to our synagogue, who don't follow our rules. And if some people are going to get back what they've lost - freedom, job satisfaction, land to live on - then others are suddenly going to find they have less than they'd counted on.

But what's all this got to do with Connor? He's rich in the support of family and friends; he's currently imprisoned by a buggy, but look out once he starts walking; his mum's his slave; and till he goes to college, at least, he isn't in debt.

So how does what Jesus says here relate to him, newly welcomed into our church family? To start with, both Jesus and Ezra the scribe show Connor something important: he needs to know his family history. Not just from his family by blood, but his family by love too, his church family: the stories passed down from Jews and Christians, our relations by blood or by love, that ended up in the Bible. For stories of our ancestors help us to find out who we are and who we want to become. When we're in trouble, we can look back and see how

God has helped those who went before us; that gives us hope that God will help us. When we're feeling successful and important, we can look back and remember how Jesus is interested in the little people, so we should be on their side.

Even now, Connor is no blank book to be written on. He is an individual with his own likes and dislikes, his own personality. But the stories we pass on to him, and just as importantly, the stories we tell him by how we behave when we don't think he's looking, will influence him, for good or for ill, as he grows up in our midst. Do we really mean what we believe and say about God? Does it show up in the way we live? A child's among us taking notes; let's make sure what he hears and sees speaks to him of the God who heals us when we are hurting; the God who challenges us to grow and change and become more loving when we become too comfortable as we are.

It's a big and eventful family we're welcoming Connor into today. With Adam and Eve, he's been made in God's image. With Noah and all the animals, he's survived the flood. With Abraham, Hagar and Sarah, he's left home and wandered as far as God's promised land. With Moses, Miriam and Aaron he's been given God's laws in the desert. With Jeremiah he's been defeated and driven from his country. With Jonah he's been spat out of a great fish so he can tell his enemies God forgives them. With Ezra and Nehemiah he's come back home and started to rebuild. And with Jesus he's died and risen from death.

He's still got a long, long way to go on his journey, but we'll be praying for you every step of the way. And in time, he too, with us, will be able to pass on good news to the next generation: God rescues us, forgives us and frees us to love.

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date:

10 January, 2010

John 2:1-11

You've heard that saying, 'Always the bridesmaid, never the bride,' haven't you? Well, that's me. Susanna bat Deborah, at your service, and yours, and yours, but not my own. And most of the time that's fine by me. It's a really stressful day for a bride, you know? Getting the clothes right, and the hair. Saying goodbye to mum and dad, and hello to thousands of his relations all looking down their nose at you for daring to marry their beautiful boy. Much better being the bridesmaid, making sure everyone has enough oil in their lamps, making sure the little ones don't run off or start yelling at the wrong time, making sure the bride gets to synagogue looking her very best.

But sometimes, at the reception, it gets you down a bit. When it's all sorted, and they have their happy ending, and it's over to the best man to sort out any problems, and you can get the weight off those really uncomfortable shoes. Sometimes you look round at all the couples, and think, When am I going to get my life sorted?

There's always a few other singles around, so you look out for good ones, just in case - and this time there were loads of unattached males in the party. The groom's mum's best friend had invited her son, and he'd invited all his mates along. Mostly fishermen, by the smell of it, though I could have sworn I saw a tax-collector in with them. Most unlikely, though - they're so unpopular, no one would ever invite one of them to a wedding.

Lots of laughing and a lot of eating from their side of the room, but at least no one was getting drunk. Then I saw the mum's best friend beckon her son over, and it looked like he was getting a right earful. 'Do something!' she hissed. 'Miriam's going to be so embarrassed if the wine runs out!'

I assumed she wanted him to run off to the wine merchant. Amazing how mums like to think they own their sons, even though this one must have been thirty or more. I gave him a sympathetic smile, and got one back. He turned back to her and said, 'This is really not the time, Mum, but OK then!' And then he turned to me.

'You look sensible,' he said. 'Where do they keep the purification jugs round here?' I couldn't think why he wanted to know, but I showed him a whole stack of them, ready to be filled with washing water before the next meal. 'Ok,' he said, 'where's the well? We need water here, pronto.' He was going to try to fill them all up himself, and they're heavy jars, so I got the waiters in on it. Now you're going to think I'd had too much myself, but I'm telling you: it was water that went in, but it was wine that came out. Good wine. We got compliments on how good it was - several people wanted to know what vineyard it came from. All I could say was, 'My lips are sealed.'

I've made enquiries about him - Jesus, his name is, from Nazareth - but from what they say, he's not one for marriage, any more than I am. But maybe that's not the only way I can get to know him. It must take him and his mates a lot of money to travel round the way they do, while he heals people and teaches the crowds. Maybe I could go on the road with them, help them out. I don't want to marry this man, but I don't want to lose sight of him either.

Hymns:

R&S 102: Praise the Lord, his glories show

R&S 367: I want to walk with Jesus Christ

At Cana's wedding, long ago

R&S 566: The church's one foundation

Sermon:

Isaiah 52:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; John 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

One of the things I love about having Douglas as our organist is the unexpected tunes he comes out with in the course of the service. Does anyone remember a few years ago 'The happy wanderer', when a toddler had run loose for most of the service? But last week, as some of you may have noticed, I did a real double-take, walking out to the Wedding March - for one disorientating moment, I wasn't quite sure what sort of service I'd been involved in! And as Sheila and I stood at the door, I muttered to her, 'That's the first and last time I go down the aisle to that tune!' When I asked Douglas afterwards why he'd chosen it, he simply replied: 'In Advent we were waiting for the wedding feast of Christ and the church - now, after Christmas, I thought we'd celebrate it!'

Douglas was certainly chiming in with tradition there. In the Hebrew Bible, talking to the whole people of Israel, God compares the relationship between them to a rocky marriage - instead of making God their priority, they put all their efforts into getting more money, power, sex, success and all the other idols that are still around to tempt us today. In the New Testament, one of the pictures of heaven is a marriage feast for the wedding between Christ and the church. And in our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus is actually at a wedding - though of course the story homes in on the reception.

But while it's important for us to remember that our relationship with God always involves other people too, the hymn we've just sung focuses in on our one-to-one relationship with Jesus - and maybe marriage isn't such a bad way to look at how we relate to God individually, too, because in both cases there are as many different set-ups as there are people.

There's the arranged marriage. The family expects it, you feel embarrassed not to go through with it. You go to church because you were brought up to it. You go through the

motions, though you don't know each other very well. You say your prayers, because that's what people do, but you've never really got the hang of a personal God. The arrangement may give some benefits, but while you stay polite strangers to each other, you're missing out on what it's all about.

There's the honeymooners. You've just come to faith. It's all fantastic, and you spend all your time with each other - who needs anyone else? You rather look down on people who don't see things your way. Nothing can ever go wrong again. But of course it does. You have your first shouting match. What happened? It was meant to be roses all the way. You feel let down, disillusioned; or guilty because you weren't good enough. Unless you can work out how to forgive, how to be forgiven, you're in danger of protecting yourself from further hurt by ceasing to trust or care - a self-destructive course of action.

Then there are the old stagers. You know each other almost as well as you do yourself. You make allowances. Through long habit, you trust each other, though you know there will always be surprises. You have been shaped by each other into more than you could be on your own; your relationship will outlast the strains put upon it, even that of death.

And of course there are all the people who for various reasons don't get married, or whose marriages don't work out. That doesn't mean to say they know nothing about love, for that's a plant that grows in many soils. But an unorthodox relationship with another person, or with God, may flourish, or may damage. The test is always the same: what are its fruits? If self-denying love increases, looking outward to others, as well as inward to one another, whatever name others may put on it, it's kosher.

There are many English words that try to translate the Hebrew word *chesed* which crops up in our psalm this morning: covenant love, steadfast love, faithful love. And it often turns up alongside another word in our psalm: *mishpat*, meaning justice, righteousness. Each of these ways to describe God's relationship with us has more meaning than one word can hold. But unless our relationship with God gives us some clue about *chesed* and *mishpat*, faithful love and justice, we've not really started to get to know God at all; the God who through Isaiah's prophecy promises the oppressed people of Israel homecoming and freedom; who through Jesus' turning wedding water into wine promises us that, with God, ordinary, everyday life can become rich and fulfilling.

Yet there's more to our relationship with God than a cosy me-and-Jesus, for God relates to us not just as individuals but as the whole church together. How can that work out in practice?

Our reading from Paul's first letter to the young church in Corinth may give us some ideas. To give them a working example of this new relationship, Paul reminds them that their very differences, given by God, can help them pull together. So whether you're the sort of person others ask for advice, whether you're someone people look up to because you help so many, whether you have the gift of making people feel better when you're with them, whether you can follow and clarify the trend of a discussion or whether you can communicate with everyone in language they can understand, it's the same God who's given you this gift, and everyone else can benefit from it.

Marion expressed this recently talking about the Budget Coordinating Meeting: when people talk through ideas together, new angles arise that no one would have considered on their own. We see this dynamic at work every time Network gathers us to support some good cause. It will be there in our next church meeting too, when, unhampered by snow, we meet to find out more together of how the life of our church can flourish - that's why it's important you are there, so that your view is heard and you can hear the views of others.

But of course there's more to the body of Christ than us in St Andrew's. Today is the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and next Sunday I hope I'll see you at St Mark's at 8pm, as we join with friends in Churches Together in Broomhill and Broomhall to pray that all churches may become one: not that we will all become clones, but that our different gifts, given each church by the Spirit, may help us work out how to serve God and love one another in this part of Sheffield. For unless we meet together and get to know one another, we have no chance of their enriching our relationship with God, or of us helping them. And it doesn't stop there. Before we can truly celebrate the heavenly wedding feast, the hymnwriter Fred Kaan has it right: *As guests of God created, all are to each related; the whole world is awaited, to make the table round.*

First Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date:

10 January, 2010

Luke 2:41-52

Over the past few weeks, a lot of us will have been in touch with our families, or celebrated Christmas with people of different ages. Of course, with the snow, many travel plans will have gone agley - I was glad to get back from my parents in Dorset just before the snow moved south - but still it's a chance to be together with different generations. I particularly noticed that for our Nativity and Christmas Day services, with both babies, children and young adults well in evidence. It was lovely to see many generations represented together in church.

If the snow allowed, maybe you've been able to go out on trips together. I remember the Chaplaincy administrator telling me recently about her family's trip to Eurodisney. The number of things she had to think about, travelling with her husband and two young children! The number of arrangements she had to make, the amount of packing she had to do! Apparently it was worth all the effort, but I was worried she'd be so tired she'd not enjoy it once they got that far.

It must have been a bit like that for Jesus and his family, travelling to Passover in Jerusalem for the first time. Jewish boys officially become grown up at 12 - nowadays there's a ceremony called bar mitzvah to celebrate that. But then, it would be the first year he could go with everyone else to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem - the holiest festival in the holiest city of Israel. They'd have to travel several days to get there - no snow to prevent them, but no cars or motorways either, and there'd be a risk of being attacked on the road, so big parties would travel together for security as well as for friendship's sake.

Once they'd eaten roast lamb, bitter herbs and unleavened bread together in Jerusalem, remembering their ancestors' escape from slavery in Egypt, Mary and Joseph must have breathed a sigh of relief. We've managed it. We got there, we did the important things. Now all we need to do is to get back home again. They would have relaxed and not kept such a strict eye on Jesus - he'd be around with the other youngsters somewhere. But you can imagine how panic-stricken they felt when suddenly after a day's journey no one could remember seeing him! They'd ask all through the caravan; but then they'd have to go back a whole day's journey to Jerusalem - and now it was forty-eight hours since they'd seen him - to find out what could have happened to the boy. And what's the result? He's sitting in the Temple, of all places, listening to the scholars debating the Law; asking them questions and offering answers of his own. And the scholars aren't throwing him out, punishing him for calling their authority into question! They're taking him seriously, listening to what he says,

impressed by the insight he shows.

I wonder, do we expect our children and grandchildren to be interested in talking about God, about church, about the things we find important? Do we pray with them, read the Bible with them, take them seriously as spiritual beings? What would we say if a young person commented on the way we do things here? Would we dismiss it - oh, they're too young to know what they're talking about? Or would we take them seriously on their own terms? Jesus, God's Word made flesh, wasn't just a baby in a manger and a man on a cross. He was also a teenager: asking questions, not satisfied with taking tradition for granted. So when we sing in a moment that God's word to us is life and health, let's bear that in mind.

Hymns:

Good King Wenceslas

R&S 321: Your words to me are life and health

R&S 429: Jesus our Lord and King

R&S 489: Be thou my vision

Sermon:

1 Samuel 2:18-26; Psalm 119:9-16; Luke 2:41-52; Acts 16:1-5

You'll have noticed, I hope, a theme running through the service so far: youth, and how we perceive young people. I started thinking about this because of this morning's Gospel reading about Jesus as a twelve-year-old. If we'd heard that story as an anonymous news headline, I wonder what you'd have thought of the boy concerned. Was he indisciplined, ungrateful for his parents' care? Was he arrogant, a know-it-all who cared nothing for the wisdom of tradition but only wanted to proclaim his own point of view? Should we blame the parents, for not keeping closer watch on him? Was it an example of the breakdown of community responsibility that no one else noticed when he wandered away from the group? If, because this is Jesus we're talking about, we're not inclined to make such harsh judgments on the young man involved, should that attitude of love and respect also carry over to young people today, trying to work out who they are in a society and an age much more complex than first-century Palestine?

But before we get to the youth of today, let's consider some of the other snapshots of young people given in our readings this morning. In our reading from 1 Samuel we get two stereotypes: Samuel, the blue-eyed boy - well, probably not literally, considering he was Jewish, but the one who could do no wrong; and Eli's sons Hophni and Phineas: the yobs, the young tearaways who forced their attentions on women and - as we hear in another passage - grabbed for themselves the choicest cuts of meat brought for sacrifice to God. Samuel gets a good biblical press: the youngster dedicated to God in response to his mother Hannah's answered prayer for fertility. Brought up from a baby in God's house, he can hear God's voice calling him in the night, but is too inexperienced to recognise God's tones, and must be tutored by old Eli in the right responses. Samuel is evidently going to be a prophet, to play a great role in Israel's destiny, and he is already showing the signs of his vocation. Eli must have set his hopes on the lad, especially considering his own sons were turning out bad, trading on their positions as heirs of his priesthood to get what they wanted. I wonder, though, if it's possible that Eli's sons turned out bad partly because of Samuel.

Who could compete with that miracle child, the apple of their father's eye? Better, they may have thought, to turn bad and leave Samuel and their father to follow the path of righteousness together, than to be crushed under the reproach of never being as good as him.

Sometimes we project a lot onto the coming generations. They will follow in our footsteps;

they will succeed where we have failed, because we are there to guide and to warn them; they will adopt our values and priorities, gained over a lifetime, and turn out so well we can boast of them to others. Or that's the theory. I am the living proof that it doesn't always work out that way; my parents, good agnostics that they are, are still, I think, bemused that I ended up in a pulpit. Thankfully, they have supported me on my path. But it cannot have been easy for them holding the balance between wanting to transmit their behaviour and values and supporting me as I turned out differently. As it is, my father and I are only now cautiously beginning to talk together about what is important to us and why, and I recommend that process to you too; it's a delicate business, when you don't want to hurt feelings, but it has brought us closer together as a family.

So rather than sticking with saintly Samuel and the sinning sons of Eli, let's look at a more realistic example of youth in the Bible: Timothy, son of Eunice, grandson of Lois, and one of Paul's main companions, presented to us in our reading from Acts this morning at the very beginning of his missionary career. You may wonder why we know the names of Timothy's mother and grandmother- actually, the information comes from the letter called 1 Timothy rather than from the book of Acts - yet not his father's name. Remember that genealogy of Jesus beginning Matthew's Gospel which we studied in a Vision4Life service last year - all those begots from father to son? Knowing the name of someone's mother is unusual in the Bible. But there are two reasons why we may know about the women but not the men in Timothy's family. Firstly, it may be because Lois and Eunice played an important role in their church, so their names are remembered. But secondly, you may have picked up something else about Timothy in that brief reading: he was mixed-race. While his mother and grandmother were Jewish, his anonymous father was Greek. And Timothy's name was Greek, meaning 'Fear God' - though 'Timothy' was also the name of one of the heroic Jewish freedom fighters of a previous age, the Maccabees. Being mixed-race, Timothy was in danger of falling between two cultures: Greeks didn't see why he wanted to follow a Jewish teacher like Paul, and Jews didn't understand why he hadn't been circumcised, like every other male Jew, at a very young age.

Whether Timothy's father had died, whether his parents' marriage had broken up, whether he was the child of a brief relationship with an absent father, or whether his father just didn't want to be involved, Paul seems to have stepped into the role of surrogate father to the boy. After Timothy's circumcision, avoiding offence to Jewish Christians, Paul took him under his wing and gave him experience of the life of a travelling missionary. Later on, he sent Timothy as his envoy to churches at Corinth and at Philippi. Writing from prison, Paul calls Timothy his son in the Gospel. We don't have Timothy's account of the relationship between them, but here is a fruitful partnership between generations. Tradition says that Timothy became Bishop of Ephesus and was killed while protesting against a procession of pagan idols there - you may remember Paul had trouble in Ephesus too with worshippers of the goddess Diana and the silversmiths who supplied their temple.

Like good King Wenceslaus and his pageboy, Timothy and Paul needed each other's knowledge, strength and support to get the job done. And today too, young people, those related to us and those who turn up in the headlines, aren't heroes like Samuel or villains like Phineas and Hophni, but real people like everyone else. Sometimes, like Timothy, they have difficulties in their background to overcome. But again like Timothy they are well able, working with older people and independently, to pass on to their peers and others what they know of God. It may not be how their parents would phrase it; their texts, Facebook posts and twitters may well be beyond our technological competence! But unless we take

young people seriously on their own terms, as the elders in the Temple took the teenage Jesus, even before his baptism gave meaning to our own, we run the risk of missing out on some very good questions, and some even more interesting answers.