

## **Christmas Day Nativity Service**

### **Service Date:**

25 December, 2011

### **St Andrew's Advent Carol 2011**

1

With Andrew we consider now  
An answer to this mystery:  
How God will tear down stone from stone,  
Yet make His people just and free.  
Light, light a candle, tie the blue:  
We'll wait and see what God will do.

2

With Zechariah we desire  
To keep things orderly and right.  
Should angels of the Lord appear  
We'd need a sign that's clear and bright.  
Light, light two candles, purple tie:  
Set tongues free so God's praise we'll cry!

3

With Mary's husband, Joseph, dream  
We of a perfect family.  
But when our aspirations fail,  
There, in the muddle, God we see.  
Light, light three candles, tie the red:  
God's gifts will bring us joy instead.

4

With shepherds watching flocks that night,  
We wonder why to us God spoke  
And fed our souls with angels' song,  
Not only rich or famous folk.  
Light, light four candles, tie the green:  
In us God finds true worth unseen.

5

With baby Jesus, God's own son,  
We laugh and see the world made new:  
New hope, new trust, new joy, new life,  
As we are born from God anew.  
Light, light the candles, every one:  
See! God's great rescue has begun!

*Rev. Dr. Sarah Hall and editors*

### **Hymns:**

**R&S 160** began life in Latin, possibly in the Middle Ages but more likely in the 18th century, and has been reworked and adapted ever since. The tune *Adeste Fideles* (O come, all ye faithful) has always partnered these words since it was first discovered.

### **Advent carol**

**R&S 163** comes from a Sheffield writer, James Montgomery, and was first published in his newspaper, the *Sheffield Iris*, on 24th December 1816. The tune *Iris* is an old Flemish or

French carol melody, and is named after Montgomery's Sheffield publication.

**R&S 147** has one of the most familiar origins of all carols: the organ in an Austrian church breaking down, on Christmas Eve in 1818, Joseph Mohr, an assistant priest, hastily wrote a new carol which could be played by guitar instead, the organist Franz Gruber setting it to music.

**Sermon:**

**John 1:1-14**

In a way, I could have stopped short with the words of our first passage this morning, from Isaiah, and left it there. The aiting is over. After what feels like at least a month's labour pangs, the new baby has finally been born, and we, his adopted family, can really start to celebrate.

What will he do, who will he be when he grows up? Will he be up to it? How can we support and care for him? These are questions we ask about every new-born child. And this particular child comes with such a heavy weight of responsibility on his shoulders.

'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' No pressure, then! But in Jesus' case we don't need to wonder what would become of him. We all know his story. And you've proved that this morning because we've just told it again to each another. When I was talking to someone about my plans for this morning, they asked me, Why tell the story again? Surely everyone knows it already.

But as we've discovered today, knowing the story isn't the same as retelling it. There are always new ways to see it, new words to express it. And unless the story we've all been told gets told over and over again, future generations will no longer understand or care why we are celebrating the birth of this baby, what hopes we have for this child and why.

Through this Advent we've heard how Matthew and Luke tried to put what they believed about Jesus' coming into words. And this morning we have heard John's attempt to do the same. It's a vain attempt, of course. How could he squeeze all the meaning of any child's birth into words on a page, let alone the meaning of this child?

For Jesus' meaning is not just for his parents. It's not just for Bethlehem, not just for the Jewish people, not just for humanity, but for the whole of time and space. So poor John's task is an impossible one, one he only achieves through poetry: using word-pictures of things we know about, light and darkness, acceptance and rejection, adopted children and the beloved only son, to express something completely new, completely different, completely strange:

The Word becoming flesh.

God pitching a tent on our campsite, pitching in with our common life.

When we told the Christmas story last year, it was different from this morning.

When we tell it next year, it will be different again.

For we will be different.

We may have witnessed birth or death. We will have lived through dead ends and new stirrings in our lives. New politics, new disasters, new hopes and fears in our lives and in the life of the world will flesh out the bones of the Christmas story we know so well and give us fresh words to express it.

But that's not all. Through the year, as we live our ordinary lives, as we cope with rumours of disaster, with disruptions to treasured routines, with unfulfilled hopes, with feelings of reluctance and inadequacy, around every corner we will find angels, ready to remind us that in Christ, through healing and forgiveness, through peacemaking and the call to justice, God

is with us: ready to encourage us to pass on that good news to others, in what we say and in how we live.

#### **Fourth Sunday in Advent: Carol Service**

##### **Service Date:**

18 December, 2011

##### **Luke 2:8-20**

**Sarah:** Thank you for sparing the time to talk to me, sir.

**David:** Sir? No need to call me that. I'm just an ordinary shepherd.

**Sarah:** They told me you were the senior shepherd of this flock.

**David:** Senior? That usually means people don't take you seriously any more. But never mind that. What can I do for you?

**Sarah:** Well, I've heard funny rumours of USOs in Bethlehem.

**David:** USOs?

**Sarah:** Unidentified shining objects. And I don't mean stars. So it occurred to me, why not ask a shepherd? After all, if anyone gets a clear view of the night sky, it's you.

**David:** I suppose that's right. Out with the sheep all night and all day too. That's why I don't get to synagogue much, and, as I'm afraid you'll have noticed, washing doesn't come too high up the agenda either. It's embarrassing, but there it is. You put up with it.

**Sarah:** Yes, quite. But about these USOs?

**David:** Well, I wouldn't call them unidentified. Quite the reverse. As soon as I realised this was an angel, I was terrified.

**Sarah:** *Another* angel? I seem to be tripping over them at every turn on this story. The angel didn't mention anything about a baby, by any chance?

**David:** Yes indeed. A baby king that had just been born. You've obviously heard about all this already. I'm afraid I'm not up on politics much. Or religion. They always seem to cause upset. And I had no idea any of this was predicted. You expect that, when you're older. Being out of the flow. But nor did young Zachary who was with me. He thought someone was 'having a laugh', as he put it. 'Oh yeah,' he said, 'a baby? In nappies?'

**Sarah:** And the angel said?

**David:** The angel confirmed that yes, this was a baby in nappies. But it was the rest of the angel's message that really confused us. You expect baby kings to be born in Jerusalem. Not down the road. Mind you, of course, originally Bethlehem was King David's city.

**Sarah:** Really? It goes back that far? I had no idea.

**David:** What do they teach in schools these days? That bit made sense. But then the angel muddled me up again. A king in nappies, fair enough - I suppose we all start out that way. But a king in an animal shed? Sleeping in a manger?

**Sarah:** In a *what*?

**David:** I forgot you're not in the trade. That's our word for the feeding trough the animals use. A nice job Joseph made of it, lining it with hay. I couldn't have done better for a newborn lamb myself.

**Sarah:** So you saw this child?

**David:** Well, yes. In the end.

**Sarah:** In the end?

**David:** Well, a lot of angels joined the first one. Talk about USOs - you've never seen such a lightshow in your life! And the sound... I can hear those hallelujahs still ringing in my ears. Better than I can hear you, in fact. Do speak up.

**Sarah:** Sorry!

**David:** But when we could see and hear again, I looked at Zachary, and he looked at me, and we both said: You go!

**Sarah:** Didn't you want to go and see if it was true?

**David:** Well, it was a long way in the dark... and a cold night... and my legs are all rheumatically these days...

**Sarah:** And? Surely, you could get over that, for something this important.

**David:** Well, if you must know, I thought: 'What will they want with an old man like me? I know nothing about babies. Never had any. I'll just be in the way. And all this God business... it's not as if I was ever much of a synagogue-goer. I don't know what's what. I'll do something wrong. Zachary should go,' I thought. 'It'll do the lad good.'

**Sarah:** And what did Zachary say?

**David:** Well, he thought I should go! 'No one listens to young people,' he said. 'They think we're all up to no good. If I take a lamb as a present for the baby, they'll only think I stole it. And anyway,' he thought, 'I don't know what to do. I'll only get it wrong, and they'll laugh at me.'

**Sarah:** So what happened in the end?

**David:** Oh, we both went. Our sheep are pretty good - there's just one out of this hundred who keeps on straying, so we took her along. And honestly, we needed each other to keep our nerve. So we both went. It wasn't far. And Zachary gave me an arm down the hill. He's a good lad really.

**Sarah:** And when you got there? What did you find when?

**David:** Just what the angel had told us. A tired young woman. A relieved-looking older man. And a baby boy in his first set of nappies, lying in the manger, with all the animals looking in. Our sheep felt right at home - I was happy leaving her there when we went back to check on the flock.

**Sarah:** And how did you feel?

**David:** Well, I'm not one for talking about feelings. But I felt... peaceful. Happy for them, of course. And happy for me and Zachary too, that an angel had thought we were important enough to be in on this new beginning for God's leader. And you know what? The baby smiled at me.

**Sarah:** I think you'll find that was just wind. Common in newborns.

**David:** I was there. And I know what I saw.

**Hymns:**

O little town of Bethlehem

Advent carol

The Angel Gabriel from heaven came

Long ago prophets knew

See him lying on a bed of straw

See amid the winter's snow

**Sermon:**

**Gospel reading: Luke 1:26-35**

David the shepherd could have decided not to go down to Bethlehem to see this strange sight of which the angel told him. He could have written off the angels as the result of cold, tiredness and one nip too many from his flask. He could have decided he was much too busy with the responsibilities of his flock to go haring off on wild goose chases. He could have pleaded age, or rheumatics, or not knowing his Bible, or not being a God-botherer, or simply

not being good enough. He could have made any number of excuses not to take up God's invitation. It was frightening enough seeing an angel without taking the angel's message on board and going into the unknown, with no guarantees that things would work out well. But he went.

Mary of Nazareth could have decided not to say yes to God. She was very young. She might be rejected by her fiancé, by her parents, by her village. She might die in childbirth - plenty of women did, then. She had her whole life ahead of her - time to grow up more before getting tied down to rearing a child. So far as we know, she wasn't particularly educated, or particularly gifted, or particularly holy. She might get it wrong anyway - and what a responsibility, to be bringing God's child into the world! How could anyone say yes to something open-ended like that? Surely it would all end in tears, with sorrow's sword piercing her heart!

But Mary said yes.

Every moment of every day, we can take God's messages to us seriously, or ignore them to get on with the rest of our lives.

We may think we're too old, or too young. We may think we should leave thinking or talking about God to the experts: ministers and elders and people like that. We may think we have nothing to offer to God, or to God's people; but we would be wrong there.

This Christmas, whether we're on your own or surrounded by family and friends, God will smile at each of us from the manger. We can put it down to wind in a newborn baby. Or we can realise, with trepidation, how much God loves the world, how much God loves us. And that love will enable us to pray and to act.

### **Luke 2:1-7**

Of course, the same is true in reverse. God could have said No to us.

Jesus could have chosen not to be born as human, but to stay in heaven, where I understand things are much better organised. He could have come to us as an adult, could have skipped the messy bits like nappies and teenage hormones and burst on the world as a fully-grown preacher.

He could have decided to make the conditions of his birth a good deal more pleasant. King Herod's palace? Or, thinking bigger, he could have thrown his lot in with Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire, the superpower of the age. It would have made the statistics on his reaching manhood a good deal more favourable. He could have chosen a high-born, well-nourished mother, attended by the best physicians of that time. Come to that, he could have fast-forwarded a few centuries and been born some time in our future, when, we hope, medical services will really have got the problems of humankind licked.

Jesus could have solved the problems of communication by being born to a military dictator, could have had his every word revered because of the firepower behind him. Or he could have been the son of a billionaire, with all the economic and political power that entails. And that's completely leaving out of the question the possibility that Jesus might come to us in the full power and glory of the Creator making us accept and love him.

But that isn't what happened. We believe that from the very beginning God loved us so much that God chose to lay aside all strength, all power, all compulsion; that Jesus wanted to be loved by our free choice, not because we were bribed or threatened or bullied into adoration.

The only power he retained was the power of a baby to draw love from us - the power of total vulnerability and need. This Christmas and beyond, how will we respond to such unconditional love?

### **Third Sunday in Advent**

#### **Service Date:**

11 December, 2011

**Sarah:** Joseph! Joseph of Nazareth! I'm sure we did have an interview set up. I wonder, has he forgotten? Joseph!

**Joseph:** All right, all right, I'm coming. Give me a moment to open the door, won't you? You young people are so impatient!

**Sarah:** Sorry - I just wondered whether I'd missed you and you'd gone to work already. I know you carpenters have to get up early in the morning to fit in all the jobs people want you to do.

**Joseph:** Well, no, actually, I must have overslept. Normally I hear the dawn chorus, but this morning I was still snoring when you started to thump on my door.

**Sarah:** I hope I've not done any permanent damage. I honestly didn't think the wood would be in such bad repair. It must be true what they say, the carpenter's door never fits.

**Joseph:** I'll be getting around to sorting it out any day now! Anyway, now you've woken me up, what was it you wanted?

**Sarah:** It's rather a sensitive topic I wanted to raise with you. If my sources are correct, I understand you've had a bit of a shock recently.

**Joseph:** Well, the Romans have put a new tax on finished wood products, but I couldn't really call that a shock. It was bound to happen sooner or later with all these foreign imports from Tyre flooding the Roman market.

**Sarah:** No, this is personal. Your... um... your fiancée?

**Joseph:** Oh, have you met Mary? Wonderful girl. What about her? She's not in any trouble, I hope?

**Sarah:** This is very embarrassing! Haven't you heard what sort of trouble she's in?

**Joseph:** Well, I'm aware of nothing apart from her pregnancy. And she's a fit young woman, Mary. From a healthy family. It shouldn't be a bother to her. Especially under the circumstances.

**Sarah:** Um, it was the circumstances I was wondering about. You have read your Bible, haven't you?

**Joseph:** Well, it's not my normal bedtime reading, but yes, I did go to Hebrew school with the rest of the lads. Why?

**Sarah:** You have read Leviticus, haven't you? About, um, how can I put this delicately, about untoward relationships? And the progeny thereof? And the penalties attached thereto?

**Joseph:** Look, young woman, I agreed to talk with you. But now I'm getting your drift I object! Mary is my fiancée, and you're not going to make any trouble for her by your nasty insinuations. Or for her baby.

**Sarah:** But that's just it. Her baby.

**Joseph:** Well? We aren't the first couple that didn't quite get around to having the wedding before the child came along, and we won't be the last. No news for your muckraking tabloid journalism there.

**Sarah:** But you're not trying to tell me, are you, that this is your child we're talking about? After all, I don't want to be offensive, but you aren't in the first flush of youth, are you?

**Joseph:** True, I'm not as young as I used to be. But in all the ways that count, this will be my child.

**Sarah:** All the ways that count? Apart from biology?

**Joseph:** Look, I know what you're getting at. And I may be old, but I'm not stupid. I know what this looks like. And to tell you the truth, if you'd been asking me all these questions yesterday, I'd probably have given you a very different answer.

**Sarah:** Such as?

**Joseph:** Mary's a lovely girl. I count myself lucky that she even looked at me, given my age. And she loves me. We love each other. Her father agreed to let us get engaged while I built up the business a little more, to give us financial security. A few weeks ago, Mary seemed to be a bit quieter than usual. She was putting on a bit of weight, but then that's not unusual with girls her age. And then she came round one day and dropped the bombshell.

**Sarah:** What did she say?

**Joseph:** I couldn't rightly make it out at first. Something about an angel and a baby. I had to get her to tell me twice, because I thought I must have heard her wrong. My ears aren't so good these days, after all. And when I did hear her, my heart sank.

**Sarah:** What did you think?

**Joseph:** What would you have thought? My Mary would never hurt me on purpose. I thought, what's so terrible that she has to make up this tarradiddle about God and angels? I thought horrible things about dark nights and Roman soldiers. Even about her dad. It was such a mess, the only thing on my mind was a quiet divorce.

**Sarah:** So why are you so cheerful about the whole thing now?

**Joseph:** Ah well, that was before the angel came to me too. In my dreams last night. I may not be much of a scholar, but I know an angel when I see one. He cheered me up no end. 'It's true what Mary tells you,' he said. 'Her baby will be God's child. Call him Jesus, God rescues. Look after him. He's going to show people God never abandons them.'

**Sarah:** What a dream! No wonder you woke up late.

**Joseph:** So you see, Mary has nothing to worry about. I'm looking after her. And the child. It's not what I expected. But God's in it with us.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 137:** Hark the glad sound!

Advent Carol

**R&S 138:** Come, thou long-expected Jesus

**R&S 141:** Make way, make way!

**Sermon:**

**Isaiah 61:1-11; Psalm 126; Matthew 1:18-25; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

It was a mess, all right. Poor old Joseph, looking forward to his approaching wedding, to a whole new family with Mary as his wife - unplanned pregnancy with no reference to him wasn't at all what he had been hoping for. And who can blame him? Whatever our own childhood experience, most of us get brought up with ideas of a happy family living in a nice house with a lovely garden, kept up by good steady jobs with prospects for improvement. Maybe particularly if our own circumstances were not so promising, we hope not to make the same mistakes our parents did, but to get it right this time.

Of course, we may not all be love's young dream. Though from the biblical accounts we have no idea of Joseph's age, traditionally he's seen as an older man taking a younger woman for his wife, and in that society, as in our own, such a pairing would not be impossibly unusual - think looks and fertility allied with resources. But though Joseph himself may have been no oil painting, evidently he had character. For when the bombshell of Mary's pregnancy dropped into their quiet lives, rather than playing the outraged cuckold, he was prepared to arrange a quiet divorce, not to organise the stoning party he

would, by law, be entitled to expect for an adulterous wife - in those days they took engagement seriously as a marital commitment in itself.

So when his world collapsed, Joseph was able to look beyond the hurt potentially leading from Mary's apparent infidelity to the possibilities of life for both of them, beyond the shattering of his dream. And on the personal level such a vision chimes in with that of our reading from Isaiah on a national level. The prophet didn't try to ignore the wounds of exile: hearts broken by being taken from their land; years of captivity in Babylon, nearly forgetting how to be Israelites; the devastation of long-loved places, discovered on returning home. Instead, he pointed to the seeds of hope, too small to see, which yet had the potential to sprout into praise of God: who had not left them on their own in Babylon, who would not leave them naked, shivering among the ruins of home, but would clothe them in wholeness, salvation, and in justice, righteousness.

Our psalm this morning does a similar see-saw act between despair and hope. There was the wild, incredulous hope felt by the exiles when Persian Emperor Cyrus issued decrees to let them go back home, when they couldn't help but laugh for joy. But there was also the sorrow they felt on arrival, when so much of their hope had been trampled underfoot by the realities of a generation of absence. It was like seeing dried up riverbeds where streams had once flowed, and hoping against the evidence of sight that the rains would come and once more rivers would flow to water the crops: no easy thing to do.

They could not deny their own grief. Yet neither could they deny the God-given hope sending them out as sowers of a new generation, weeping for what had been, but carrying the seeds of what would one day come to pass. The labour of sowing was worth it, they reckoned, even through tears; for one day they would carry home thick sheaves of corn, the results of their labours.

So what has all this to do with us, sitting here in church in 2011, with long lists of Christmas preparations in our heads though - if I'm lucky - not currently right at the forefront of our minds? The recession's deepening, belts are tightening another notch, but the rivers of our resources are not yet dried up, and for a while we just want to put worries out of our minds and focus on the celebrations to come. Well, for us too, on several different levels, the dynamic of disappointment and hope is at work.

Christmas itself can be an awkward time for those of us who do not conform to the pattern of the ideal family - and, let's face it, that's most of us real people. The commercial hopes manufactured for us by pre-Christmas advertisements are so impossibly high! Everyone in the family must gather; there must be expensive presents for all; food and drink must be piled to the rafters; everyone must perpetually be in the best of spirits: nothing in this scenario must go wrong, or somehow we have blasphemed against the spirit of Christmas. There is no room for worries that we may not be able to afford to make everyone's dream come true; for tiredness; for the results, physical or mental, of over-indulgence; for family discord; even for a quiet tear shed for those no longer with us.

At Christmas it may feel harder to bear than at other times of year that we may be disappointed, that we may disappoint others. But we shouldn't forget one crucial factor in all this: the angel of Joseph's dream.

I wonder how many of you gave some thought to my closing question last week: if an angel came to St Andrew's, how would we react? This morning my question is: if an angel were to come to St Andrew's, what might the angel say to us? As I don't care to put words in an angel's mouth, I won't go into specifics. But if we go by Joseph's angel, an essential part of it would be hope. Hope in the outcome of our own home circumstances. Hope that the labour

we put into this congregation is not in vain, but awaits God's rains to bear fruit. Hope that in the many problems of our world, financial, political and environmental, we will find the seeds of God's kingdom sprouting unseen.

And though I can't speak for an angel, I can press into service Paul's words to the young church in Thessalonica, one of the first letters he wrote to any church, words which still make sense for us 2000 years later. What does Paul say?

*Be joyful always, pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.* That doesn't mean we need to plaster a fake smile on our faces - think of Jesus crying when Lazarus died. It does mean that whatever's happening in our lives, God is there in the muddle, bearing it with us - and that is always a reason for thanksgiving.

*Do not restrain the Holy Spirit; do not despise inspired messages. Put all things to the test: keep what is good and avoid every kind of evil. When something or someone gives you hope, notice it and give thanks. Don't just brush it aside as naïve or unimportant. Notice, too, when something or someone is dragging you down, tempting you to despair. Ask for God's help to shield you against it.*

*May the God who gives us peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being - spirit, soul, and body - free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you will do it, because he is faithful.*

I don't really need to comment on that. Let's make it our prayer for each other, this Advent and Christmastide, as we prepare together for Jesus' coming.

## **Second Sunday in Advent: Holy Communion**

### **Service Date:**

4 December, 2011

### **Luke 1:5-20** (retold)

**Sarah:** I was looking back over my old reports from 30 years ago - I wasn't even ordained rabbi back then - and I found some very interesting interviews I taped around the birth of this Jesus Andrew was telling me about last week. Mind you, it's a bit embarrassing listening to some of them. I was so young! And maybe not quite as tactful as I might have been... Anyway, here's the first of my interviews, with a lady named Elizabeth.

**Elizabeth:** Yes? Can I help you?

**Sarah:** Well, actually I was looking for Zechariah. Zechariah the priest.

I hear he's had an incredible encounter of some kind, and our readers would like to read all about it in the Jerusalem Post.

**Elizabeth:** I see. Well, I'm sorry, but you can't. You'll have to speak to me instead.

**Sarah:** Why's that? What secrets don't you want him to tell the world?

**Elizabeth:** There's no secret. He's just not speaking to the press just now. Well, to be strictly accurate, he's not speaking to anyone.

**Sarah:** Sulking, is he? I know old men get that way sometimes...

**Elizabeth:** Nothing of the sort! Zechariah's a good man. And a kind man. I should know - we've been married for 50 years this week.

**Sarah:** 50 years? No wonder you look so -

**Elizabeth:** So what?

**Sarah:** So, um, so...

**Elizabeth:** Don't worry, I'm just teasing you. I know you young ones think we're all past it once we're over 30. But actually we can still have pretty exciting lives. I've been finding that

out recently, and so has Zechariah, to his great surprise.

**Sarah:** Well, why can't he tell me? Struck dumb by the possibility, is he?

**Elizabeth:** Pretty much, yes. It was all because of the angel...

**Sarah:** The angel? I know you old people are all into religion. But seeing angels? You'll not get me to believe that!

**Elizabeth:** That's just what Zechariah said. Mind you, it was a pretty unexpected thing the angel told him.

**Sarah:** Whoa, whoa, let's start from the beginning. Where was Zechariah when all this happened?

**Elizabeth:** He was in the Temple, on the incense rota.

**Sarah:** The incense rota?

**Elizabeth:** Every priest on the roster takes turns to offer incense to God in the Temple; burning incense is like offering prayers to God. They draw lots for it. And it was Zechariah's turn. I usually go shopping in the market and meet him at the Temple door when he's finished. And I did that this time too. But when he came to the door, he was in such a state!

**Sarah:** What had happened?

**Elizabeth:** Well, he couldn't tell me. Because he couldn't speak - couldn't say a word. It's only since then he's been writing and writing on his spare tablets. Thank goodness my father taught me to read - you know it's not every girl who gets any schooling, but we come from a priestly family too, so -

**Sarah:** Who cares if you could read or not! What about Zechariah? What had happened to him?

**Elizabeth:** You'll never get anywhere in your profession if you keep on interrupting, young lady. I'll tell you that for nothing. But back to Zechariah. Apparently he'd been lighting incense, exactly according to the book - and I can believe that, because my Zechariah's a very precise man, very good with detail - when someone tapped him on his right shoulder. He was about to be quite cross, because no one should have been anywhere near the incense altar, but then he turned around, and it was an angel!

**Sarah:** What did the angel look like?

**Elizabeth:** Like a very bright light in human form, he wrote. And all the incense started to burn on its own, with a wonderful scent of lilies.

**Sarah:** What did the angel want?

**Elizabeth:** Apparently, to tell Zechariah something that, if he'd only let me get a word in edgewise before rushing to the Temple that morning, I could have told him.

**Sarah:** What could *you* have said that an angel would know about?

**Elizabeth:** I'm pregnant.

**Sarah:** What? At your age? You must be joking!

**Elizabeth:** You really are going to have to work on your interview technique. And on your prejudices too. I know it's highly unlikely -

**Sarah:** I'll say!

**Elizabeth:** But God's done surprising things before. Think of Hannah, getting her longed-for child after years and years of prayer. I know how she feels.

**Sarah:** So you'd wanted a child for a long time?

**Elizabeth:** Both of us had been praying for a child for years and years. We'd not wanted to upset each other, so we'd never shared our longing. Silly, really. But God knew our hearts' desire.

**Sarah:** So why didn't Zechariah leap up and down shouting Hallelujah?

**Elizabeth:** Well, for one thing, he's not much of a leaper. And for another, he felt it was just too good to be true. Zechariah couldn't believe, after all this waiting and praying, and me getting on in years, as you so tactfully remarked, that we would finally have a son. Let alone a son who would be set apart to serve God, following in Elijah's footsteps. So he asked for proof. And the angel got all huffy.

**Sarah:** That doesn't sound very angelic.

**Elizabeth:** 'I'm Gabriel,' he said - or maybe it was a she - 'and if you can't take my word for it, you'll just have to wait and see without any words of your own to muddle you further.'

**Sarah:** That was tough on Zechariah, wasn't it? I'd want a bit of proof under the circumstances.

**Elizabeth:** But Sarah, this is God we're talking about. Read your Bible. With God, anything can happen - and maybe it will, once my John grows to be a man.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 129** is a familiar Scottish paraphrase of Isaiah's prophecy of a royal child to come. The tune Dundee/French has been associated with several psalms and paraphrases.

**R&S 638**, another Advent hymn, was published by Lewis Hensley in 1867, but the questions it poses have not yet been answered. The tune St Cecilia by L.G. Hayne originated in the church of

St John the Baptist, Oxford.

**CG 28** is a paraphrase of another passage from Isaiah, whose prophecy is one of the continuing themes of Advent. The tune Genevan 42 was originally written for dancing, like our Christmas carols, but has come to us from a Psalm setting.

**Sermon:**

**Isaiah 40:1-11; Luke 1:5-20; 2 Peter 3:8-15a**

Last week I sympathised with Andrew, an ordinary man scratching his head to work out where God might fit into the avalanche of bad news in his day. And today, many of us may sympathise with Zechariah - and, indeed, with Elizabeth. Poor old Zechariah was doing his duty in the Temple; he'd taken up his place on the incense burning rota as a good priest should - but he wasn't expecting an angel to interrupt him, let alone one that would bring him good news. He wasn't expecting that his heart's desire was about to be fulfilled in Elizabeth's pregnancy and the birth of their child John who would, when he grew up, be known as the Baptist.

Why was it so hard for Zechariah to hear and to believe the angel, so hard that, when it finally sunk in, he was literally struck dumb? Well, to start with, we don't need to consult Ian or Sheila Cooke to realise that in this case, conception was pretty unlikely. Gallantly, Zechariah expressed it in the following terms: 'I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years.' Moreover, according to the story, Elizabeth herself was not only 'getting on in years' but barren - not an unfamiliar diagnosis from the Hebrew Bible, where it always seems to be the woman's fault if there's no child in view. Anyway, given this context, the angel's news was pretty unexpected. So unexpected that, in fact, the couple had probably given up hope years earlier of ever having a child. They had each other; Zechariah had his ministry; there was family support, including Elizabeth's young cousin Mary. Why still hanker after an impossible dream? they may well have asked themselves. Why not be grateful for all they already had? We, too, as we count our blessings, may discount the possibility of change. Secondly, irrespective of the likelihood of this ever happening, Elizabeth and Zechariah had been waiting a very long time for a child. And when you wait a very long time for something, sometimes its lack begins to feel normal. Waiting at the bus stop sometimes, it feels very

unlikely to me that a bus will ever arrive, and when it does come I have to prompt myself to flag it down.

Even in the early days of Christianity, unfulfilled hopes for Jesus' return started to be part of the church's life. Paul in one of his early letters comforts the church in Thessalonica, some of whose members have died, that after the dead have met Jesus, they will all be reunited at his second coming. But by the time we get to our reading from the second letter of Peter this morning, we're in the second Christian generation, and some of them are evidently tempted to give up hope of Jesus' return.

The letter's writer falls back on the words of Psalm 90: that with God a thousand years is just like a day. Don't give up hope! he urges his readers. The delay before the end is because God wants everyone to come to their senses and turn back to God first. But, as the book of Proverbs reminds us: 'Hope deferred makes the heart sick.' Rather than carrying on waiting with joyful expectation for Jesus' return, over the next two thousand years it has become much easier for us Christians to stop hoping for the fulfilment of our heart's desire in the healing, reconciliation and justice God promises.

It's much easier for us, like Zechariah, to forget about apparently unattainable hopes, to derive our comfort instead from ritual and routine.

But anyway, how could poor old Zechariah possibly have known that it was an angel speaking to him that fateful day in the Temple, and not an unauthorised intruder? I embroidered this morning's dialogue with the description of someone who shone like light and smelled like lilies, but that's pure poetic license on my part. We have no idea what the angel looked like - except that there were probably no wings or halo involved, as these were added by painters in later centuries, to clue their viewers in to angelic qualities in the figures they portrayed.

For all we know, the angel could have been scruffy, or foreign, or a child, or confused - someone we'd not necessarily ask for directions in the street. And what credence would we give to a stranger wandering around in our sanctuary who suddenly started to tell us intimate details about our own family life? Not much, I fear.

And yet; and yet. Though Zechariah's hope was inconceivable and impossible to sustain, though the messenger of its fulfilment could be discounted, he did see an angel. The angel did bring him good news. And though at first he did not, could not believe it, God's good news was not withdrawn, though for a while, his own powers of communication were.

We've rather lost sight of Elizabeth in all this. We don't know whether an angel came to her too, or whether her body announced the news to her all on its own. She could have reacted just as badly as Zechariah did - after all, she was the one who would endure nine months of discomfort followed by a life-threatening procedure, not to mention the gossip that would inevitably surround such an elderly primipara. But when Mary, carrying her own shocking secret, came to visit, far from reacting in shock or silence, Elizabeth comes out with a great cry of praise, echoed down the centuries. 'Blessed are you among women,' she tells Mary, 'and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'

So, as we sympathise with Zechariah and Elizabeth, those elderly parents, and their potential reasons for discounting both God's good news and the manner of its delivery, which of them are we going to take as our role model? The one whose disbelief made him dumb, or the one whose trust in God came out in delighted praise?

The question is not, I want to make clear, one of 'men bad, women good'. Our answer will, however, be greatly influenced by our own experiences and expectations of God. Do we focus on the rotas and rituals which, developed to praise and serve God, now keep our

much-loved church institution open for business, week by week? Or do we recognise God as the one who brings not only good news of comfort and restoration but also disturbing news of the low raised high and the high brought low - in ways we may not at first take quite seriously?

As we prepare to celebrate, in familiar, time-honoured fashion, the meal which reminds us that God, in Jesus, is still with us, I leave this question with you now. If an angel came to St Andrew's to give us good news, how would we react?

### **First Sunday in Advent: Caledonian Service**

#### **Service Date:**

27 November, 2011

**Sarah:** May I introduce myself? I'm Rabbi Sarah, roving news reporter. You may have seen me on Jerusalem Today. But now there's been all these cutbacks, I've gone freelance, and something tells me that you, Andrew, have a very important story to tell.

**Andrew:** How do you know my name?

**Sarah:** Well, I've just been overhearing a very interesting conversation you were having with your friends. Peter, I think?

**Andrew:** He's no friend. He's my brother.

**Sarah:** Two rather excitable young men -

**Andrew:** James and John. They must have been the reason you started eavesdropping on us. They have no idea of a quiet conversation - it always ends up in shouting.

**Sarah:** And one more man. Jesus, I think you called him? It's a common name, of course, but somehow I seem to remember something about him. He's been in the news, hasn't he? A while back?

**Andrew:** Look, I don't know who you are but you can't have been around Jerusalem long if you don't know about Jesus of Nazareth. Everyone's heard of him. I almost wish they hadn't, all the fuss he's been causing. But that's Jesus. There's no way I'd want to stop him doing God's will - I just wish it wasn't so dangerous for him. And for us, too. Who did you say you were again?

**Sarah:** Relax - I'm not an informer for the Romans.

**Andrew:** That's what they all say. Right up to the time you end up on a cross.

**Sarah:** But it wasn't just recently I've heard about your friend Jesus. Something - oh, thirty years ago. When I was first starting up in journalism.

**Andrew:** It's now that bothers me. Now, and what's to come. Look, we weren't plotting revolution, or anything like that. But you can't help wondering about the signs of the times.

**Sarah:** What signs?

**Andrew:** Wars, and rumours of wars. Civil unrest. Famine. Earthquakes. All that's in the news, and you can't help asking yourself: what's God up to?

**Sarah:** Is God angry with us, for letting the Romans boss us about, do you mean?

**Andrew:** Quiet! Do you want to get arrested? Yes - that's the sort of thing I've been wondering. And so have the others. So we decided to ask Jesus about it. He's the wisest person we know.

**Sarah:** So what did he have to say, this Jesus of yours? Did he put your mind at rest?

**Andrew:** He was the one who started me worrying, this time! We're all Northerners, you know -

**Sarah:** Yes, I can hear it in your voice

**Andrew:** So we don't get to Jerusalem that much, just for Passover. And we wanted to do a

bit of sightseeing. That new temple Herod's built, it's fantastic architecture.

**Sarah:** So you did the tourist trail. What set Jesus off about that?

**Andrew:** He looked around at all these huge great walls, and he just said quietly, They won't stay put, you know. None of these fine buildings. Not one stone will stay put on another.

**Sarah:** I knew there was a story here! I know it's a grey area, but sometimes eavesdropping is in the public interest. So what is this, a Zealot plot? Is your Jesus a freedom fighter?

**Andrew:** He's all for peace! That's the weird thing! So we naturally asked him what on earth he meant, and that's when he started talking about wars and earthquakes and food scarcity - all the things that are on people's minds.

**Sarah:** And that's his cue for Armageddon, is it? Oh no - not another Messiah ranting and raving about the end of the world. I hear too many of those in my line of work, and they always come to grief.

**Andrew:** No, you've got him wrong. He warned against people talking up disaster and getting us to follow them out of fright. These things will happen, he said, but the end's not yet. It's only the very start of the world's labour pains, he said.

**Sarah:** Labour pains... *now* I remember! He was born in Bethlehem, wasn't he? I must look up my old notes. Oh boy, is this going to be a story! This'll put me back on the media map!

**Hymns:**

Jesus calls us!

Advent carol

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

**R&S 509:** O Jesus I have promised

**Sermon:**

**Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Mark 13:1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

Rabbi Sarah may well have a good lead to her big story - and if you want to hear any more about it, you're just going to have to come back for the rest of Advent - but I suspect she left Andrew pretty nonplussed. Wars and rumours of wars, reports of famine and earthquakes all around, and what does Jesus do? Express doubts as to the solidity of the Temple walls - the one thing that in those uncertain times seemed stable and reliable beyond doubt.

Thanks a lot, Jesus! Maybe some of us can feel for Andrew when it comes to reading the signs of the times. I must have been mentioning the Euro crisis in sermons or prayers for months now, but nothing ever seems to get resolved. Economic growth in the UK seems to be a pipe dream. Our own local church situation is creaking a little at the joints; and just in case we are ever tempted to feel a little more cheerful, don't forget global warming's still on the long-term agenda. No wonder our speaker at the St Andrew's Ball last night spoke of the feeling that everything seems to be on the down.

And as followers of Jesus we can have two responses. We can either soldier on with stiff upper lips - to mix metaphors - and try to suppress whatever's bothering us, or we can do what Andrew did: bring our worries about all these upsetting pieces of news to God.

Certainly, the prophet Isaiah would have gone for the second approach, for he was no advocate of leaving upsetting ideas be. Listen: O that you, God, would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence - as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil - to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

'Don't just sit there in heaven,' Isaiah implores God. 'Come and do something about this mess we're in. Yes, it's our fault. Yes, compared with your perfection, we're a crumpled heap of rubbish. But we've read our history. You helped our ancestors when they were

slaves in Egypt. And you're not the sort of God to go back on your commitments. So help us now!'

What sort of situation was Isaiah complaining about?

Well, it wasn't that the people of Israel were stuck in exile, far from home. God had influenced King Cyrus of Persia's decision to let them go back, under Nehemiah, and start rebuilding the city walls. It wasn't that the Temple was in ruins, either. Cyrus had thought of that, too, and sent Ezra with treasure to begin renovations. No, it was the realisation of the enormity of the task of restoration that lay ahead of them that caused Isaiah's heartfelt complaint. Why couldn't God just press a button and fix it all? Why did renewal have to come through conflict and politics and all the messiness of human relationships?

Isaiah is honest with God about his frustration. God can take that - some of the Psalms are even ruder, and I'd not be surprised if some of Jesus' friends' less polite reactions to his words were edited out of the final versions of the Gospels. But such blunt honesty implies that there's a real relationship there - or God's friends wouldn't be so upset about God's apparent neglect. That compares favourably with the reaction we may be tempted to show in practice, whatever we think in theory: not to bother God with our worries, because deep down we're not convinced that God a) listens or b) cares. Far better than such polite indifference is to batter the gates of heaven with the repeated response in our psalm this morning: Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; Let your face shine, that we may be saved. God, help us!

I must admit, though, that if Jesus' reaction to Andrew's query is any indication, when we dare put our complaints before God, we may not immediately feel much better. 'See these stones?' Jesus remarks, pointing to the Temple. 'They can't last. All those strong walls in which you take pride, in which you trust as a symbol of God and nation, they'll all be broken down.' And, as a matter of historical fact, he was right. A few decades after Jesus' death, in AD 70, the Romans finally lost patience with the people of Jerusalem, besieged the city and razed the Temple to the ground. The Jews blamed the Christians, the Christians blamed the Jews; the whole episode was a very shaky start to relationships between the two faiths, which helps to explain some of the later Gospel writers' violent prejudice against Judaism. If we ask for God's help in our need, things won't be put back the way they were. But Isaiah calls God both Father and Potter. If you've ever had a serious row with your parents, or with your children, you'll be aware that things don't go back to how they were before. But through forgiveness and reconciliation, you may be able to see each other and yourself in a new light, with more reality and also with more love. As we admit that we too may not always be easy to deal with, we may cope better with the imperfections and fragilities of others. And as God the potter shapes and reshapes our clay, God works through apparent hopelessness to bring something new into the world.

I'll be a bit more specific. I see God at work in the way, both in this church and in the Caledonian Society, people reach out: welcoming newcomers, supporting members and friends through times of trial. Someone said to me recently that after his marriage split up, it was the friendship of Caledonians that kept him going. As you will know better than I, those offering support are often going through hard times; yet their own troubles don't blind them to the need of others. Thank goodness, God is never limited to working in churches, and I also see God's generosity in the work of the Abundance group, a Sheffield based project offering help with fruit harvest and redistributing excess fruit locally on a non-profit basis; and in the Community Foundation Network campaign for those older people who don't need their winter fuel allowance to donate it to charities working against fuel

poverty. Even in these hard times, people are still sharing their resources for the common good. That's God at work.

We don't know, any more than Andrew knew, when the end of the world will come. Anyone who says they do is lying or mistaken. But though we have no control over that, or over many potential or actual disasters, I do know that when we ask for God's help, things do change for the better. Sometimes you have to look and listen hard for signs of hope. The great mountain of the Lord on which the new Jerusalem will be built may seem like a cairn composed of tiny pebbles. But you may recall that when God did rend the heavens and come down, he was seen in a manger, and heard in a gurgle.

Last Sunday before Advent: Music Sunday; Christ the King

Service Date:

20 November, 2011

[Margaret reads Matthew 25:31-46]

Margaret) [together] I was never so surprised in all my life!

Sarah )

Sarah: So the same thing happened to you?

Margaret: I don't know! How was your audition for the choir?

Sarah: I thought it was going really well. He had me sing a few scales to warm up.

Margaret: Yes, he asked me that too.

Sarah: I had a cold, but I could still get quite an impressive range, for an alto. It's all technique.

Margaret: I've still got a cold, and somehow I couldn't quite get the top notes. It was a little embarrassing.

Sarah: Then we did some sight-singing. Fortunately, it was a piece I already knew, so I could make a good job of it.

Margaret: Did you tell him?

Sarah: Oh, no! Why would he need to know that?

Margaret: Well, anyway, my sight-singing didn't go quite so well. But I got the hang of that modern hymn by the end of the third verse.

Sarah: Hmm. That doesn't sound too impressive. A choir has to have high musical standards, you know.

Margaret: I know. That's why I was so confused when he started to ask questions that didn't seem to have anything to do with singing.

Sarah: You too? What questions?

Margaret: Well, he asked if I ever gave lifts to people in my last choir. And I said yes, of course.

Sarah: He asked me too. I said of course not - I'm an alto, not a taxi service!

Margaret: Then he asked me how important I thought having tea and coffee at the end of the rehearsal was.

Sarah: Snap! I said it was irrelevant, and a waste of time.

Margaret: Oh no, I can't agree with you there, Sarah. For some choir members, especially the new ones, it's a crucial way to get to know people.

Sarah: He asked me what I'd do if someone kept on singing a bit flat. Well, that's obvious.

Margaret: Yes - you'd have a quiet word after the rehearsal.

Sarah: I think not! You'd tell them then and there, in front of everyone. There's no excuse for dragging everyone else down. You'd think a conductor would know that sort of thing. And then, to cap it all, when he gave me a song to sing with the choir, he didn't even conduct! He just stood at the front, with his arms folded, watching us. Choirs these days aren't what they used to be when I was at school!

Margaret: Oh no, Sarah, the man who talked to us wasn't the conductor.

Sarah: What?

Margaret: The conductor is that little grey-haired lady, the one who stood by the organ. It wasn't always easy to get her beat, but it was very helpful to pick up my cues from the choir members both sides of me. They told me afterwards that they practise with the conductor in all sorts of positions, so everyone gets used to listening to the whole choir, not just their own part.

Sarah: That short old woman who asked me for a lift as I left? She was the conductor? You're joking! How could I be expected to know something like that?

Margaret: Oh yes, that was definitely the conductor - she was the one who congratulated me on joining. The man at the front was our organist.

Sarah: You mean I wasn't even auditioned and rejected by the conductor? Well, I call that most peculiar. A choir that operates that way isn't the sort of choir I'd want to join.

[Margaret sits]

We know the story of the sheep and the goats really well. But for Jesus' first hearers, it can't have been so easy to tell who were the goodies and who the baddies. After all, the people he calls the goats didn't do anything wrong. They probably went to synagogue each week, prayed and sang, thought that was what they should do. And it was. But we human beings are made to please God in many different ways. Sometimes it's through being creative; sometimes through caring for others. And it's not like singing in a choir and sticking to your part - praise of God and love of others are all part of our song.

Hymns:

R&S 382: Come, let us join our cheerful songs

R&S 39: All creatures of our God and King

R&S 114 (ii): Let all the world

R&S 292: When morning gilds the skies

Sermon:

Ezekiel 34:11-24; Psalm 100; Matthew 25:31-46; Colossians 3:12-17

God our shepherd. Christ our king. Powerful images, both of them - but not easy to tie up with modern experiences of authority. In my own experience, authority sits in an office or is heard at the other end of the telephone - if you ever manage to get through to the right person. In the experience communicated through thrillers, authority waves a gun in your face and snarls at you to get down on the floor.

What about authority in the church? Yesterday the URC's National Faith and Order Reference Group met - we're a sort of think-tank for the church, to offer opinions on theological matters. And one of the topics we were discussing was authority within our church, compared with the Roman Catholic Church. Theoretically, for the Roman Catholics, between the Pope and canon law there is always an authority to turn to, whatever decision is to be made. Of course, there are grey areas, depending on how much notice people take of their constituted authorities in what they actually do. In our tradition, however, there is even less clarity on what constitutes authority. General Assembly or Synod can make decisions, but unless a local church chooses to find out what they are, and feels bound by

them, that may not mean much. Moderators or ministers can pronounce from the pulpit, but it's a foolhardy minister who will try to implement her decisions, if her church is of a contrary mind. And the stress we lay as a tradition on conciliar government - deciding things by discussion rather than by diktat - means that we can always change our minds if we don't like any given decision we've already reached.

But that's structural authority - the authority you recognise in someone because of the official power they hold. A sheep obeys the shepherd, or the sheepdogs will want to know why. A subject obeys the king, or ends up on Tower Hill with an axe tickling their neck. Jesus' authority was somewhat different, for as a wandering preacher he had no official position, and only what respect people decided to accord him.

If we look more closely at our readings this morning, we can detect some of the marks of Christ's authority. According to Christian readings of Ezekiel, he is David's son, who carries the authority of kingly tradition as well as a family tradition of shepherding. But that doesn't mean he sits around in a palace telling others what to do. This shepherd serves the head shepherd, God. God searches out those of the flock that are lost, tends the sick, strengthens the weak; but also has an eye to the strong who have misused their strength, judging between sheep and sheep. And as the head shepherd does, so does Jesus, sent with heavenly authority to exercise both mercy and justice.

What of our first reading, from Matthew? As king, Jesus will come at the end of time in power and in glory. Yet he is already among us incognito. And we are judged by the compassion - or lack of it - we show to unimportant or despised other people, when no one else is there to witness our action or inactivity.

As I said at the beginning, the models of both shepherd and king as figures of authority are beyond the experience of many of us. But many here will have exerted authority in different ways. What, for example, of the teachers among us? How can they exercise authority in Jesus' way? Since not all of us here are teachers, let's think of it from the other side - from the perspective of those being taught.

I wouldn't be surprised if you have experienced, as I have, teaching by terror: the teacher who won't let you pick up a pencil sharpener without express permission; the teacher who explains in front of the whole class what a terrible piece of work you handed in; the teacher who bullies and allows classroom bullies to flourish; who has favourites and can be taken in by flattery; the teacher who never really knows what's going on in the classroom supposedly under his command.

This is evidently not Jesus' model of authority.

Instead, what are the marks of a good teacher?

Someone who not only knows their subject, but can communicate on the level of the pupils. Someone who can get to the bottom of trouble without unfair blame. Someone whom the pupils trust to make a peaceful learning environment. When we think of Jesus' authority, as well as his parables, comparing him to a good teacher isn't too far off the mark.

What about Jesus the doctor? Again, it's easy to think of how, as patients, we don't want to be treated by our doctors. We don't want someone who expects to be treated like God and never questioned. On the other hand, we don't want someone who claims the authority of the white coat, but is actually a fraud. We don't want someone who is always rushing on to the next patient and treats us or our problem as unimportant. Instead, we want someone who will tell us the truth, good or bad, in a humane way. Again, Jesus the doctor isn't too much of a stretch.

But on this Music Sunday, what about Jesus the choirmaster? Teachers can send a child to the Head. Doctors can refuse to treat obstreperous patients. But choirmasters have only the authority of their calling - the love of music, and the ability to channel it in others. No one forces choir members to turn up to rehearsal; no one checks to see if they're practising that awkward line; the choirmaster can't even make them sing in time or in tune - not that that would be necessary in the case of our choir! Some choirmasters frighten a good performance out of their choir. While the music can be excellent technically, the atmosphere is not pleasant. Others, like Douglas, love their choirs into a good performance. They don't let them get away with mistakes, but their belief in the singers in front of them is such that those singers can be inspired to great heights of creativity - as, for example, in my absence a fortnight ago. As our theme introduction indicated, a choir is a community in its own right, and in a good choir such as ours, members look after each other, welcome new recruits and look to their choirmaster to direct their creativity into accurate and beautiful music. Maybe that's not a bad model for us as a church, whether or not we see ourselves as musical!

### **Second Sunday before Advent: Remembrance Sunday**

#### **Service Date:**

13 November, 2011

We come now to our act of remembrance; its order is in your service sheets and it will proceed without announcement. Three points before we begin: The names of those inscribed on our War Memorial will be read in the form that was known to their families and friends. The two minutes silence is observed in thanksgiving for and remembrance of both them and all the others who have lost their lives in later conflicts. And we will end this act of remembrance by singing both verses of the National Anthem, which you will find on your orders of service as a prayer, on this our national day of remembrance.

We commemorate today...

Andrew Briggs

John Brunton

James Cumming

Bernard Duke

Charlie Goodsir

Roy Harrow

Charles Henderson

Frank Mastin

Bruce Mathews

Farquahar Nicolson

Harry Pilcher-Clayton

Ross Simpson \*\*

David Colquhoun

Tom Colquhoun

Sydney Hyde

George MacBeth

Ian Meldrum

Bob Tilsley

**Voice:** They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.

**All: We will remember them.**

**Voice:** When you go home tell them of us and say:  
for your tomorrow we gave our today.

*Signal for the Last Post;*

*The Two Minutes Silence: 11am*

*Signal for Reveille*

The National Anthem (R&S 762)

1 God save our gracious Queen,

Long live our noble Queen;

God save the Queen!

Send her victorious,

Happy and glorious,

Long to reign over us:

God save the Queen!

2 Thy choicest gifts in store

On her be pleased to pour;

Long may she reign.

May she defend our laws

And ever give us cause

To sing with heart and voice,

'God save the Queen!'

**Hymns:**

R&S 705: Our God, our help in ages past

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

R&S 641: We pray for peace

R&S 620: For the healing of the nations

**Sermon:**

**Judges 4:1-7; Revelation 6:1-8; 19:11-13**

Our first reading this morning can conjure up in our imaginations the generally positive emotions often experienced at the beginning of a war. The situation is bad - it needs changing. People are suffering unjustly. Those in authority - in this instance, Deborah, the only female Judge in the Hebrew Bible - realise that something needs to be done. Looking at their resources, they count up the resources available to them, and set their plans in motion: to seek God's aid in battle for a righteous cause; to stop the suffering and destruction of evil and tyranny; to win as soon as possible.

This is a war fought for freedom. There are other, less defensible motivations for fighting wars: for territory or resources, power or prestige; for the adrenaline of fighting and the scientific interest in trying out the latest weapons. And always in warfare there are mixed motives among those who lead and those who fight. But the war described in our reading from Judges could well be described as just: it is to decrease suffering and tyranny; it is a last resort; there are high hopes that it will succeed.

What happens? The war is won by Israel. But victory is clinched by an atrocity committed by a neutral party on the leader of the opposing forces. Jael, a woman from the Kenite tribe, not directly involved in hostilities, meets Sisera, the Canaanite general of King Jabin's army

on the battlefield as he flees defeat. She invites him into her tent, offers him milk and a refuge from the fight. But as he is sleeping, she hammers a tent peg into his temple and kills him. And Deborah leads the people of Israel in song celebrating the deed. Between Deborah, Israel's war leader and Jael, killer of an unsuspecting man with whom her people were not at war, let no one try to persuade you that if only the world were ruled by women, there would be no more war!

Israel wins; Israel rejoices. A mere seven years later, the Israelites are again captive, this time to the Midianites, and it's Gideon's turn to win a mighty victory.

What has been the point of all this? What have the Israelites learned from war? Precious little, it would appear, if you look at the cyclic nature of the whole book of Judges. Israel sins; Israel falls to an oppressor; God raises up a deliverer; the deliverer rescues Israel; the whole sad story begins again.

Maybe it is significant that this is framed as a cyclical story; in those days of short life expectancy, people with adult experience of war who might speak against it as a long-term solution to tyranny might not still be alive when the next bout of oppression began. And those at the sharp end of that experience would in any case not expect to have their voices heard. Such are the people for whom John the Divine is writing the book of Revelation. They are in small and persecuted churches, at constant risk from the mighty Roman Empire. They know only too well what war is like. Our passage from Revelation, describing the four horsemen of the Apocalypse - the end of the world, when the veil of reality is lifted, to reveal God's truth - is eloquent on the subject. War brings conquest, slaughter, famine, death. John speaks for the silent many who are not, like Deborah, in command of armies or, like Jael, able to slaughter potential threats, but must suffer for the causes of the powerful. Some of us here this morning have had direct experience of war, whether in the Armed Forces, as civilians keeping Britain working or as children trying to make sense of life at war. And we know about war not only from the stories of decades past but through comprehensive media coverage now. Many British men and women are currently serving the Armed Forces in Iraq or Afghanistan, and we have heard much of those expensive forays. The Arab Spring and the resulting unrest and civil wars in Egypt, Libya, Syria and elsewhere is the subject of news reports. Yet the experience of war is much more widely felt across the globe than only in those areas covered by the news. Manipulation of economic forces leading to high prices, poverty and political instability; effects of global warming and scarcity of resources, caused by over-consumption elsewhere and leading to mass migration - might these not also be symptoms of war, waged at a distance by the powerful against the powerless?

But against these deadly horsemen, John places another rider. He too is a warrior: yet his name is Faithful and True, a name even a feminist like myself would hardly give to Jael. His judgement, we are told, and the war he makes, is righteous. In case we are not sure of his identity, John tells us that his name is also the Word of God. So here is Jesus. Apparently marching as to war. Yet he is also the one we know from prophecy as the Prince of Peace. How can we make sense of this?

Maybe it depends on what we mean by peace. It certainly isn't just the neutral absence of guns firing, but something much more strenuous. Recently I saw a television programme about veterans of war suffering from traumatic stress syndrome. They were finally able, some of them decades after their original experience of war, to express and transform their feelings through the medium of art. The pictures and sculptures they produced expressed vividly the damage done to their minds and spirits by war but, in some strange way, their

unlocked creativity also began to heal and transform that damage. But this was no easy task, these tough men admitted. Looking in oneself to see both the aggressor and the victim of war took courage, determination and perseverance; maybe, I wondered, even more so than going over the top.

Taking another example of constructive peace, I've been following with interest the progress not only of the London protest camped outside St Paul's, but also our own Occupy Sheffield demonstration which has cropped up in the last week or so. On Friday, I went to have a look at what they were doing. Out front, a spokeswoman argued courteously with a passer by whose main and forcefully expressed view seemed to be that anyone who was unemployed was a lazy so-and-so who had brought it on themselves and shouldn't be helped. Further back, a quiet group of protestors in a circle were discussing how to share out responsibilities so no one ended up burned out. It could have been a church meeting! You may or may not agree with their points of view, but so far this group seems to be determined to put forward their case against the power of excessive wealth peacefully, however vigorous the opposition they face.

One of the difficulties about a service like today's is that, as we have already acknowledged, while some here have vivid and painful memories of war, others have no such direct experiences. Yet each of us knows times of triumph over someone's defeat, and other times when we have been victims. In each case, we have been locked into our own cycle of war: a cycle which, in the long run, changes nothing, for only positive peace can transform human hearts. Not an easy peace, built on complacency; not a cruel peace which walks away from distress; not an evil peace defending injustice; but the peace which Jesus offers us from the cross as he forgives his enemies: a hard-won peace, short-circuiting the endless cycle of attack and reprisal that is war. No matter how high the hopes and just the cause of those who lead and those who fight, his is the only wholly righteous peace. So as we remember all those killed in war, those who love and miss them, those whose wounds are still unhealed and those in danger from wars now, let us pray for God's peace for them, and for all.

## **Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: One World Week**

### **Service Date:**

30 October, 2011

### **Revelation 7:9-17**

This is the end of One World Week. I know some people here today who have recently been exploring parts of our one world beyond Sheffield.

- So please put your hands up if you've recently or in the past had a holiday elsewhere in the world. Where? Keep them up!
- Please put your hand up too if you've lived somewhere in the world other than England. Scotland sort of counts, but preferably somewhere beyond the British Isles altogether. Where? Keep them up!
- Please put your hand up if some of your favourite food originally comes from another culture -What? Keep them up!
- Please put up your hand if some of your favourite music was written by someone who comes from another country. What? Keep them up!
- Please put up your hand if you can say some words in a language other than English - and saying American doesn't count! What? Keep them up!
- Please put up your hand if this week you've had food or drink that was grown or produced in another country. What?

You can put your hands down now!

So even sitting here in the middle of Sheffield, the rest of our one world is surprisingly close to us.

The reading we've just heard talks about people from every nation, language and tribe joining together in heaven to praise God - more people than anyone could count - people from every place and every time. And though they come from such different places and times, they are literally all singing from the same hymn sheet - singing about how wonderful God is, how God has looked after them. They've all come through hard times, so they aren't saying life with God is a picnic. But through their hardships they've discovered how trustworthy God is.

Some of you will know that I occasionally do a 60-second-sermon for BBC Radio Sheffield, and I did one for last Sunday, the beginning of One World Week. I told them about some of the people from different cultures I've come across as part of being your minister - the Somali children at the Broomhall homework club; Colon and Evelyne, whose wedding I celebrated in Congolese and English ways; the Indonesian woman who edits the Broomhall News with me and the Ethiopian Orthodox church who use this church to worship on Sunday evenings.

I explained how the idea of One World Week is that when we understand each other's perspectives, our lives can be transformed and enriched. That makes sense to me, I said. If one God has created everything and everyone, the more we get to know others, the more we appreciate God. That'll be most true in heaven - but we can get a start here and now by experiencing and enjoying each other's cultures.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 293** (t.619): Ye servants of God

**R&S 666:** Sing we the song

**Hymn** (tune: Diademata, R&S 262) Firm in the faith of God

**R&S 658:** For all the saints

**Sermon:**

**Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; Matthew 5:1-12; Revelation 7:9-17**

Our readings this morning began swimmingly, right at the end of time, with the heavenly party to end all parties. But with our second reading this morning, from the book of Joshua, it felt to me as though we'd slipped back into bad old ways. It's a moment of high drama as the people of Israel prepare to cross the Jordan into the land God promised them, under the new leadership of Joshua. I can just imagine it as one of those old biblical epic movies: men, women and children gathered on the brink of the river, with flocks and herds and all their worldly goods, poised on the brink of finding a new homeland.

Then I zoom in on the pep talk Joshua is giving to God's people, and my heart sinks. For what do I hear him say? As the priests carry the ark of the covenant, the box in which God's commandments are kept, across the Jordan, as all the people cross the river, its waters will pile up on either side to keep them safe. A wonderful sign that God is with them! But when everyone is safely across, God will 'drive out from before them the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites'. Great. All the people who already lived in the land will have to leave their homeland so the Israelites can have their own. Cue several thousand years of war, bloodshed and tragedy in the Middle East, still being played out today.

So there seem to be two ways of describing the people of God. Either, as in our first reading, they come from every nation, language, culture and tribe. They are joined by their love for

God and their witness that through trouble and hardship, God has never deserted them. Or, as in our second reading, they come from our nation, our people, speaking our language and operating within the rules of our culture. If they come from other nations, they may be allowed in - so long as they conform to our ways and, preferably, do the dirty work that we would rather not do. And that goes a long way back. One tribe, the Gibeonites, got round Joshua and the Israelites by pretending to come from far away and making a treaty with them. When their trick was discovered, they saved their lives by becoming woodcutters and water carriers to the Israelites - perpetually.

You can tell, I suspect, which way of thinking about God's people I prefer. And I'm very thankful that this morning we've taken them in the wrong order; that through the several thousand years that elapsed between the origins of Israel in the book of Joshua and the broader picture of God's people we find in the book of Revelation, people have discovered more about the God we serve and love. And of course, those two ways of thinking about God's people are extremes. Most of us will recognise that of God in people of cultures other than our own. But when we talk of God's people, God's church, we're more likely to flesh out our ideas according to our own experiences. And when we encounter people who are seeking God, without thinking too much about it, we will probably want them to live a Christian life in the way we do.

But why at this time of year in particular are we thinking about God's people? Well, though Sheffield City Council sees fit this evening to promote Fright Night and the werewolves and zombies of Hallowe'en, Christians at this time of year remember tomorrow, the first of November, as All Hallows or All Saints Day. Hm. All Saints. That doesn't sound like a very Protestant idea, does it? I could imagine our hackles rising at the idea of there being two ranks of Christians, the saints (very holy, have St in front of their names and gold halos in pictures) and the rest of us, the also-rans. We shouldn't forget, though, that the second of November is also a special day: All Souls. Given that no one can be sure who fits into the very holy category and who doesn't - and especially since those of us who are really sure we're holy are almost certainly not - the church decided way back also to remember the rest of humanity still in need of some perfecting this side of death, and to celebrate them too. We could well leave it at that. For as Jesus reminded us, whenever we judge others we are in danger of being judged ourselves. We never have access to all the facts about anyone, so it is impossible for us to judge fairly what has brought them to the choices they have made. Moreover, if we try to apply the idea of saintliness, holiness to ourselves, it may seem impossibly exotic, like a far off foreign country we will never have the means to visit ourselves.

The capital-S saints seem to lead such extreme lives: doing miracles; fighting evil in deserts or fasting on top of pillars; martyred for their faith. What on earth has any of that to do with us and our lives? Precious little, it may seem.

Yet if we go right back, to Jesus calling his friends together on a mountaintop, to explain to them what it's going to be like to follow him, maybe that country of blessedness, holiness, saintliness, whatever you want to call it, isn't so far removed from our own struggling lives. *When you don't know how to be holy, Jesus says, but look to God for help anyway, God's kingdom is yours. When you mourn those you have loved, he says, you will find comforters. When you don't assume the whole world is run for your benefit, he says, all its resources will be open to you. When you care deeply about fairness and do something about it, he says, that will satisfy you. When you give others the benefit of the doubt, he says, that's what you'll get too. When you don't automatically think ill of others, he*

*says, you'll see God at work everywhere. When you bring people together, he says, they'll see God in you. And even when everything goes pear-shaped and life takes a nosedive because people don't like you putting my words into practice, he says, God will never abandon you.*

God does not grade us on the level of our holiness, doesn't even give us pass or fail, saint or sinner, for we're each a mixture of both. Holiness is not a far-off country we can never hope to visit. Rather, it is through our everyday lives that God makes saints of the most unpromising material; even of us, when we give God permission to do so. And of course God is doing the same in the lives of people all over the world. As our psalm this morning joyfully declares: O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. When we get to heaven, I suspect we may have two surprises: firstly that we are there, and secondly, who else we will find there. So as, following Jesus' way, we practise being citizens of heaven, let's learn to appreciate our future neighbours of every nation and tribe by getting to know them here and now.

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

16 October, 2011

Dr Daniel McGinnis, lead pastor of the Antioch Community Church which formerly met in St Andrew's buildings, said a formal farewell to our congregation.

Hymns:

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

R&S 583: The church is wherever God's people are praising

R&S 371: Take my life

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

Sermon:

Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96; Matthew 22:15-22; Acts 11:19-26

What's in the news at the moment? It all seems pretty bleak. The Euro crisis rumbles on and on. The Defence Secretary has resigned for not recognising the difference between a political adviser and a best man. A government minister has had to apologise for filing constituents' letters, among other paperwork, in a London park bin. And the last team from Great Britain is out of the Rugby world cup. It's not easy finding good news. The Queen is about to become a great grandmother for the second time, which is nice for her, but doesn't really cheer me up that much. A few days ago, I heard on the radio that an African parasite, the Guinea worm, which burrows into the tender parts of people, and then bursts out again painfully on entering water, is about to become extinct, thanks to human cooperation - infected people have buddied up with others who make sure they stay well away from water, thus cutting short the worm's life cycle. But as good news goes, that's pretty muted too.

But if we think we have problems, we should spare a thought for the people of Israel in the sixth century BC. Defeated and deported by the Babylonians, they are stuck far away from their language, culture and - apparently - their God. Now their Babylonian overlords have been defeated by the Persians. If I'd been an Israelite, I'd have been tempted to groan, 'So what?' But no. According to our reading from Isaiah today, the headlines in the Jewish

Chronicle, had that organ existed in their day, might have read: 'Modern Messiah? Persian Cyrus is God's unexpected choice'. Imagine the Israelites reading out their clay tablets over breakfast, and a sudden hush following that sentence. Who? Cyrus the Great, ruler of Persia? The Messiah? Imagine reading that the rulers of Burma were joining forces with the Chinese authorities to free Tibet, and you may get some idea of the shock factor involved. Cyrus, a pagan ruler who worshipped foreign gods - Cyrus, our God's choice as leader? Surely not! But Isaiah gives cogent reasons for coming to this conclusion. God is in command of the whole world. Light and dark, happiness and sorrow - they're all down to God. Because who else but the Creator of the Universe could be responsible for all that is bad as well as all that is good? So when Cyrus lets the people of Israel go back to their land, rebuild God's temple - unlikely as it seems, given he's a pagan ruler who knows nothing of God, God must be behind what he's saying and doing! With that idea in mind, let's look at how Jesus responds in our reading this morning to people asking him about taxes. And not any old people asking him, but the very people who know most about God's word, God's law and God's deeds - the religious experts. They come up to Jesus, hoping for a clear-cut declaration from him to get him into trouble. If he says, Don't pay taxes! the Romans will be onto him as a revolutionary. If he says, Do pay taxes! his followers will be onto him as a collaborator supporting the occupying forces. They've got him either way, they think. But maybe not.

Jesus - as he often and annoyingly does - turns the question back on them. Let's see what we're talking about, he says. Fetch me a coin, and let's see what's on it. One of them fishes out a Roman coin, with the emperor's Roman-nosed profile on it. Right, says Jesus. Whose face is that? The emperor's, they cautiously admit. OK, says Jesus. Give the emperor everything that's his, and give God everything that's God's.

Now Jesus knows, and the people listening know, and the people asking the question know, that this is no simple distinction to make, between God and the emperor. Because as he's just neatly demonstrated, the religious experts, who would turn up their noses at heathen Romans who don't even know God's law, let alone keep it - even they carry Roman coins around with them. They use them to buy and sell, and to pay their taxes. Just as much as the Romans, they are implicated in the system mixing up what is the emperor's and what is God's. And in a way, that's no surprise. If we live in a world where God is responsible for both light and dark, for both happiness and sorrow, we can't expect the dividing lines between the emperor's territory and God's to be clear-cut.

Some people take Jesus to mean that religion should stick to the private sphere of personal morality, and stay out of finance and politics - in public, the emperor wins. But that way, we'd have to throw away a lot of the Bible, including our readings this morning. Others think that only Christians should be allowed to make political and financial decisions, based on our faith. Yet in this very congregation, I could find you people who agreed fundamentally on following Jesus, but disagreed fundamentally with each other on what this means we should do, while cooperating with others who - like Cyrus! - would never name themselves as Christian.

That sort of mixed-up territory is where the followers of Jesus in Antioch found themselves, when they first started getting nicknamed as Christians, followers of the Christ. They had started talking about Jesus not only to Jews - who understood them, even if they disagreed - but also to Greeks, who'd never heard of Israel's God. A new Christian community was forming: but how should they best live out their faith? How could they be Christ-followers in a city and a culture Jesus had never known? These questions must have occupied Paul in

Antioch, coming to terms with his experience of Jesus on the Damascus road. They occupied the churches he founded and led, to whom he wrote the letters we now have in the New Testament. And they occupy us, in a post-Christian Britain. How can we see and pass on God's good news, in a world where bad news is the norm and, if you believe the media, 'Christian values' largely seem to involve rejecting evolution and being nasty to gay people? We are about to sing a hymn offering ourselves to God. It's tempting just to enjoy the sing without thinking too much about the words. But if we indeed offer all of us, not just the religious bits, to God, time and time again we will have to work out what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God. So keep two things in mind. Firstly, the whole world is God's world, and like the Israelites, if we look out for them we will find unexpected people helping us to do God's will. Even Sheffield City Council has helped us recently by making parking in the corner carpark metred and only four hours at a time! And secondly, forgiveness when we get things wrong is also part of God's good news!

### **Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Harvest Festival**

#### **Service Date:**

9 October, 2011

#### **Ruth (retold)**

- Harvesting's pretty hard work. You get an ache in your back just bending over to cut the corn into sheaves. The sweat falls into your eyes and stings them. And you get a raging thirst.
- But it's better than the alternative, I can tell you that much. I come from a land where there's nothing to eat or drink; the land of Moab. You'll have heard of Moab, maybe. Most folks here think Moab's a terrible heathen place. You should hear them whisper when I come down the street, 'Here comes Ruth, the Moabite!' But I don't care. There are people here who call me family, and that means a lot to me.
- To start with, there's Naomi. My mother-in-law, and I bet she knows all the jokes about that. But she's been like a mother to me. Better than my own mother, who cut me off without a penny when I married Chilion, Naomi's son. After that, I couldn't go back home. So when Orpah, my brother-in-law Mahon's wife, went back to her family, I chose to go with Naomi, on into Israel. On with her God, whoever that was.
- And if it hadn't been for Naomi, in those early days I'd have given up altogether. The way people looked at me in the street, as if I were mud under their sandals. I can't help not looking the way you Israelites do! And under the skin, we're not that different: we all need food, we all need work to do, we all need people to love.
- Food there was in Israel. Work was more of a problem. Naomi had no sons now, so we were on our own, no one to look out for us. And who was going to employ a foreigner, let alone a foreign woman? But Naomi had a plan. Go to Boaz' fields, she said. He's a cousin of mine, Boaz is. And a good man. And not bad looking. You go to Boaz' fields, she said, and we'll see what happens.
- So I went to Boaz' fields. In Israel they have a good custom: if you've not enough food to eat, you're allowed to take the ears of corn the harvesters leave behind. Little by little, it added up to enough bread for Naomi and me to get by.
- And Naomi was right that Boaz wasn't bad looking either. To start with, he noticed my hard work. Later, he noticed other things about me. He started telling his workers to leave lots of ears of corn for me to take. He let me have breaks with his workers, and drink water from their jars. And he told his young men not to bother me.

- That's how it started. One thing led to another, and now I'm Boaz' wife. We've had our own children, and quite a harvest of grandchildren too. My favourite is the youngest, David, though I don't tell him so - he's quite conceited enough already. But that young man will go far.

What have I learned in my lifetime? You reap what you sow. If I'd not stuck by Naomi in the hard times, if Boaz hadn't been generous to me when he had no need, we'd never have our little David. But in the end it's God - my God too, now - who gives seed for sowing and corn for harvesting.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 40:** Come, ye thankful people, come!

**R&S 124:** We plough the fields and scatter

All things bright and beautiful

Let us with a gladsome mind

**R&S 42:** For the fruits of all creation

**Sermon:**

**Gospel reading: Mark 4:26-29**

- Last night I was at a Caledonian Revival! With members of the Caledonian Society Theatre group, I went to hear the Soweto Gospel Choir, who got us all standing on our feet, clapping and even singing a few words of O Happy Day. Soweto's a byword for the bad things done to black South Africans in the apartheid years. But the choir that bears its name - who originally came from Soweto, but now from all over South Africa - are dancing and singing about God's love all over the world. You'd never have thought, twenty years ago, that such a thing was possible. Through small seeds of resistance to injustice, God has started to reap a harvest.

- That example may seem a long way away from our experience, but it happens closer to home too. We all have things we work really hard on, because we believe in them - maybe a garden or allotment that produces a wonderful harvest, as many have done this year. But maybe you also know about unexpected success that takes you by surprise.

- For me the Broomhall Breakfast has been a bit like that. I started going when this weekly community breakfast was at Hanover Methodist Church. The first few months weren't easy: trying to get to know people who were more interested in food than talking, and maybe a bit suspicious of ministers anyway. But as I got to know regular breakfasters, they got to know me too. By the time we moved to St Andrew's, a group of regulars developed who helped us set up and close down. And as I started to get to know people in the congregation, some of the breakfasters let me a little way into their lives.

- Two years ago, we'd have twenty people a week, maybe pushing up to thirty. Now we get forty or more on a regular basis, pushing fifty. Some have jobs, some have homes, some have neither. But at the Breakfast, for a little while, it doesn't matter. It's there for everyone: people with drug habits and people with coffee habits; people who like to start the day reading the paper in quiet, and people whose banter across the hall makes sure the rest of us stay awake; people from St Andrew's and St Mark's and St Thomas and people who have no use for religion, but might be interested in God.

- We're getting more interest from other people. Someone from the NHS has come several times to do free health checks on breakfasters. Someone from Sheffield University English department plans to do a creative writing project partnering people at the Breakfast with second- and third-year English students to reflect on the Breakfast and what it means to them. Forty students at the University Volunteering Fair have signed up to find out more.

And from next week two students from Cliff College will be placed with us for several months.

- The Breakfast is a seed growing secretly. Many of you will know very little about it, other than it's a bee in my bonnet. But I hope you can feel proud of this little shoot of God's kingdom. If the helpers didn't work, if you didn't provide room and food, the Breakfast wouldn't happen. But God's responsible for the friendship, the healing it provides. Now it's up to us to pray for a harvest of generosity in funding that will keep it all going.

### **Psalm 23**

You may have noticed - I hope you have done! - that our hymns today have been traditional harvest hymns. Many of you will have learned them at home or at Sunday school when you were little, when in childhood faith was sowed in your lives. Some of you will have kept on with church all through your lives. Others will have broken the habit, maybe through adolescent questioning, maybe through moving away from home, maybe through pressure of work or family life. But for many here, seeds of God's love were sown early in your lives and have grown secretly through all the ups and downs of life thereafter. Others, like myself, will not have come across God in childhood, but may have had that encounter later in life.

Some of our seeds of faith, of trust in God, sprout openly and grow strong. Some grow secretly, and come to light unexpectedly.

Some grow through the sunshine of love, given and received.

Some grow through the rain of tears.

What may be coming to harvest now, in your life?

For some, trust in God as the shepherd who gives us nourishment and rest.

For others, trust in God as the shepherd who leads us through dark ways, of fear or pain or loss.

For each of us, God spreads a table of plenty,  
in defiance of the lying enemies, fear and hatred,  
that tell us we are not worthy of God's love,  
that tell us that God has abandoned us, or only wants to punish us.

But God's table is not ours alone. It is for all to share.

The Soweto Gospel Choir has raised millions of pounds for charity on its worldwide tours, which goes among other things to support its foundation helping AIDS orphans.

Today, you have given food to support the Broomhall Breakfast in its work of combating loneliness and isolation as well as hunger.

When we remember people in need, whether they're in Africa or in Broomhall, we remember that God is their shepherd too, leading them into life;

and our quiet acts of generosity are seeds growing secretly to help that happen.

Like Naomi, we're blessed when we love others;

like Ruth we're blessed when we trust in God,

even the God we hardly know, who makes sense to others we love.

like Boaz, we're blessed when we share our own harvest

with the stranger and the refugee;

When we live this way, whatever our circumstances,

we can be happy and know it,

and give thanks to God who gives seed for sowing and reapers for harvest.

## **Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Communion**

### **Service Date:**

2 October, 2011

### **Comment**

As most of you know, I don't have a car.

Anyone who's been to the Manse and tried to park near there will understand why I don't have a car.

But that doesn't mean I don't drive.

I learned when I was 17 - passed second time, after the driving mirror came off in my hand during the first test, which rather distracted me. I've never owned a car.

But when I visit my parents, I drive to my mother's nursing home with my father as a passenger.

Recently, on my summer holidays, I went to France with my father.

And - brave man - he let me drive him on holiday.

The rules of the road are different in France to England. For one thing, they drive on the right while we drive on the left.

For another, they use kilometres instead of miles.

For another, their speed limits are different.

But basically, the rules of the road are the same in France as they are in England or Scotland for that matter: drive safely, and help others do the same.

There are times when I'm stuck at a red light and I really don't want to be held up by the traffic. There are times when the speedometer needle has nudged above the 30mph speed limit and I've had to brake and remind myself to keep an eye on my speed. My father got a speeding caution, and had to spend a day on a safer drivers course. But afterwards he said it had actually been useful to remind him of things he knew really.

So though the rules of the road can be annoying, basically they're there for our benefit. And the sight that reminds me of that is an ambulance coming full tilt up the road and all the drivers on both sides getting out of its way. Because we never know when we may need it.

The ten commandments are a bit like the rules of the road. Between us, can we remember all ten of them?

Don't worry about the order!

Let's see if we've remembered them all!

### **Exodus 20:1-17**

The ten commandments are very familiar to some of us - we may have learned them as children. And maybe their very familiarity may mean we don't notice them any more. Others may find the language of commandments strange, out of kilter with our modern experience. But maybe our experience of being out on the road can illuminate these ancient words for us.

1. No other gods but God - some of us really really really like our cars!
2. No idols/graven images - even people who aren't crazy about cars sometimes look at me as though I was mad when I say I don't own one. Being without a car for us in the West is like being without a television - it's hard for people to get their minds around. And yet millions of people manage to do it and still lead meaningful human lives, as well as polluting the planet less. Our cars are useful, but they are also sometimes an addiction.
3. No wrongful use of God's name - I have a pacifist friend who can swear like a trooper behind the wheel. But maybe it's not so much the language we may use if someone drives dangerously - though oddly no one swears while giving the minister a lift - but the way we

are apt to be totally in the right while all the other idiots shouldn't be on the road. God is God; we're not.

4. Keep the Sabbath holy and don't work on it - how often do we start a journey on Sunday because the roads will be a bit clearer, and how often do we decide to stay put at home and enjoy some rest instead?

5. Honour your parents - I have to admit that when I was first learning to drive at the age of 17, I made life hard for my father when he helped me practice. To me then it felt as though he was stifling my initiative and telling me what to do. Now I can see him as a real human being, with talents and frailties, and love him for it. Some people manage that all their lives; others never get out of the cycle of control and rebellion.

6. Do not murder - apparently road rage is on the increase...

7. Do not commit adultery - I hear there may be a few people who spend more time and effort on their cars than on their partners. Enough said.

8. Do not steal - I don't just mean don't take someone's car without consent, but don't cut someone up or take their road space. And in cases of dangerous driving, people's health or even their lives can be taken away.

9. Do not bear false witness against your neighbour - without going so far as court, it must be tempting if you damage someone's car and you're in a tearing hurry to drive off without leaving contact details; but that's lying.

10. Do not envy what is your neighbour's - especially if they have the latest model of the make you'd like to be able to afford!

The commandments may look so familiar or so old as to mean very little to us, but they can still give us a picture of how to live well with each other and with God. Even acknowledging a red light, however annoying, can remind us of the way we choose to live well with each other. Following the Highway Code helps us to be better drivers; following the Ten Commandments help us to be better people.

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 125:** Ye holy angels bright

The great commandment of our Lord

**R&S 434:** Jesus invites his saints

**R&S 496:** Fight the good fight

#### **Sermon:**

**Exodus 20:1-17; Philippians 3:4b-14**

So far we've been looking at commandments as positives, there to help us all live well with each other and with God. But as generally law-abiding people, we would think that, wouldn't we? And though I can't speak for anyone else here today, it's mostly been quite easy for me to be law-abiding. My health and constitution are good. I have generous parents whose resources, inherited from their parents, have helped me enormously. I had a very good education paid for by those parents, by the local education authorities and by the church. I live in a society where women's skills and gifts are taken seriously, with a major world language as my mother tongue and with the gift of the gab on top of it. On the whole, I'm one of those people our laws protect from other less fortunate people who can count fewer of such blessings their own. And as such, I'm also one of those people tempted to take the credit for my good fortune, as though I'd engineered the right environment to make me flourish.

While I hesitate to put Paul of Tarsus and me into the same breath - let's face it, he does have rather more of a reputation as a preacher and teacher than I do - in our reading from

his letter to Philippi today Paul is making a somewhat similar point. Can anyone pride themselves on their pure religion, their law-abiding nature, their academic achievements? Paul can match and outdo them. His parents fulfilled the law for him from when he was a baby; grown up, he came from a respected tribe in Israel, and from one of the most law-abiding subgroups of his faith's community. Paul could have added here that as a Jew living outside Judea in the diaspora, he's also highly respectable within the wider Roman empire, as someone born a Roman citizen - a standing other people in the empire would pay good money to achieve.

The temptation for Paul, as for me, as maybe for some of you, is to rest on his laurels; to say to himself, I'm one of the good guys. I have a clear conscience. I'm not like those lawbreakers who have no respect for God or others. I even warn others when they are in danger of breaking the law if they choose to follow that heretical rascal, Jesus from Nazareth.

But Paul doesn't come to that conclusion. Nothing like it. As far as respectable achievement goes, Paul's blameless, and he doesn't hide it. But knowing Jesus has made him throw away that whole scale of measurement to go by a completely different set of commandments. And now he reckons that everything he used to be proud of was actually a dead end, something that distracted him from the real goal of life. What is that? Riches beyond the dreams of avarice? Wisdom greater than that of Solomon? A loving wife and a household of fine upstanding sons and daughters? Health and long life?

No, actually. What Paul's aiming at is something completely different: to know the new sort of life Jesus offers his followers, eternal life beginning here and now. How does he hope to achieve this? By sharing Jesus' sufferings, in order to share also in his resurrection, his new life out of death. For Paul, anything else is second-rate, second-best. Anything else, in comparison with knowing Jesus, is rubbish, fit only to be thrown in the bin. Degrees, honours, titles? - forget about them. This is the real McCoy.

Paul's conclusion might serve only to depress us. After all, we have cars, or homes, or children, or work that we love dearly; that we may have sacrificed a lot to gain. And now Paul seems to be rubbishing all our efforts. It's an affront, really. And there are two ways we can treat it.

Either we can dismiss what he's saying as a bit of religious hyperbole, along the lines of cutting off hands and putting out eyes to get into God's kingdom. He didn't really mean it, I can reassure you from the pulpit, and we can all go back to concentrating outside the service on everything in our lives that isn't God.

Or we can admit that this could be a real problem for us, and consider it head on. After all, it's not only our problem here in Sheffield in 2011. Jesus' first followers struggled with the very same thing. In a reading neatly missed out of our lectionary, after Jesus has told his friends that just as no camel can shoulder their way through a needle's eye, no one can buy their way into heaven, Peter asks an obviously heartfelt question: Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?

How does Jesus answer him? Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. So it's not that all the things we value are in themselves worthless. After all, God made them all. No, it's a question of priorities. As Matthew's already told us Jesus said: Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. It's not that our families, our homes, even our possessions don't warrant our time and attention. What Jesus is saying is that we need to sit lightly to them.

Look for people to love beyond the bounds of biology, and your family circle will be enlarged. Share your money and resources with people who have less than you; their homes will become yours too, and their talents will enrich your lives as yours do theirs. That translation 'strive', however, - we're maybe more used to singing 'Seek ye first' - signposts the second thing I want to say. I reckon you're good strivers. Some of you have striven for a lifetime to follow the Ten Commandments, to follow Jesus' teaching. But there are snags about striving. It can be exhausting if we try to do it under our own steam. If we fail, we can be tempted to feel despairing. And if we succeed, we can be tempted to feel smug, and to look down on those sinners or those idiots - you know, the other drivers on the road - who haven't done as well as we have.

But what Paul goes on to say to his friends in Philippi may help. Yes, he uses the language of striving. Because they didn't have cars in Philippi, he uses the metaphor of a runner straining for the prize to express his longing to share in Jesus' life, even his sufferings. But he says flat out that he's not got there yet. This is work in progress. Moreover, the power he draws upon is not his own: it is the power of Christ's resurrection. The commandments are a good trellis for the vines of our lives to grow on. But the trellis is not what makes us grow. That's the sap in the vine, the power of God's Holy Spirit within us, always more ready to help than we to ask, strivers that we are. And very soon, around the communion table, we will share the life of Christ in bread and wine.

### **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Service Date:**

25 September, 2011

*Miriam reads Exodus 17:1-7*

*Miriam comes over from lectern to where Sarah is sitting at the communion table, as a waitress taking an order in a restaurant*

**Miriam:** Are you ready to order yet, madam?

**Sarah:** No, not quite yet. But I am very thirsty. I think I'll order a drink before I look through the menu.

**Miriam:** What would madam like to drink? Shall I bring the wine list?

**Sarah:** Oh no, no. I don't drink alcohol or anything like that. Water, that's what I want. That's what will quench my thirst.

**Miriam:** Shall I bring the water list, then, madam?

**Sarah:** The water list? You mean there's more to choosing water than just still or sparkling?

**Miriam:** Oh yes, madam, a whole lot more. In this establishment we pride ourselves on our water.

**Sarah:** Well, if that's the case, you should be able to tell me the water list off by heart. What's good today?

**Miriam:** I can do that, madam, certainly. Would you like French water? Australian water? Peak District water?

**Sarah:** You mean you ship water all the way from Australia? Or even France? No thanks! Peak District water for me.

**Miriam:** Thank you. Would you prefer thirst-quenching water? healing water? enriching water?

**Sarah:** What's enriching water, for goodness' sake? Fortified with extra minerals, or something?

**Miriam:** No, that's enriched water, which we do also have in stock. But enriching water

makes you wealthier.

**Sarah:** Oh, and I suppose healing water makes you healthier?

**Miriam:** Madam has got it in one.

**Sarah:** Seriously?

**Miriam:** Of course seriously! We take our water very seriously indeed in this establishment.

**Sarah:** Well, it's tempting, but given the way the financial markets are going, if I try drinking enriching water I'm likely to end up with interior seasickness. I think I'll stick to thirst-quenching water. I am very thirsty. And I've not seen a drop of it yet!

**Miriam:** Nearly there, now. Would madam prefer water which quenches bodily thirst, or spiritual thirst?

**Sarah:** I'm not really sure. What's the difference?

**Miriam:** Well, our bodily thirst-quenching water is certainly of the very highest standard, but I have to admit to madam that once she has drunk a glass of it, she is sadly liable at some stage during her future life to be thirsty again.

**Sarah:** So?

**Miriam:** With our spiritually thirst-quenching water, on the other hand, I have it on the highest authority that once tasted, it will effectively quench all thirst forever.

**Sarah:** You mean, it kills you?

**Miriam:** By no means! That would not encourage Madam to make a return visit to our establishment, which would be deeply deplorable. No; it makes one feel so highly alive, one need never feel thirsty again.

**Sarah:** Hm. What exactly is this highest authority?

**Miriam:** John 4:14

**Sarah:** Oh. Expensive, is it, this water?

**Miriam:** On the contrary. It's absolutely free.

**Sarah:** What's the catch?

**Miriam:** Excuse me?

**Sarah:** There's got to be a snag somewhere.

**Miriam:** The only thing Madam may possibly have in mind...

**Sarah:** Yes?

**Miriam:** Well, I understand this water does have a very strong taste of God to it.

**Sarah:** God? But all I want is to have my thirst quenched. You don't think I want to make a major religious commitment, do you? This *is* a restaurant, I suppose?

**Miriam:** Certainly, Madam.

**Sarah:** Well, I'll leave the water for now. I really don't think I can be doing with such a very strong taste. Can you take me through the main menu instead?

**Miriam:** Certainly, Madam. Would madam like to begin with the loaves, or the fishes? [*Miriam sits*]

We're all thirsty for something. The Israelites in the desert were thirsty for water: thirsty enough for conflict to break out. Those fighting for their lives in the Horn of Africa today will know how that feels.

Sometimes other sorts of thirst can take life over; nothing else seems to be half as important. People may thirst for financial security, for health, for recognition, for a child, for a home, for love.

Being human, Jesus knew what it was to be thirsty. Dying on the cross, he croaked out, I thirst. But through his life he thirsted for God and God's kingdom. That's what put him on

the cross and raised him from the dead. What is your deepest thirst? How can it be quenched?

**Hymns:**

**R&S 104** is a paraphrase of Psalm 103 by H.F. Lyte. The tune Praise, my soul by John Goss was composed for these words.

**CG 82** was written by Helen Kennedy for the sprinkling rite of the Roman Catholic Church by which the congregation is reminded of their baptism, but is not limited to such services. The tune Leaving of Lismore is a Scottish folk melody.

**R&S 35** comes from the Congregationalist hymnwriter Fred Kaan, who described it as a creedal hymn, setting forth his Christian beliefs. The tune Linnington was composed for this hymn.

**R&S 345** comes from the Welsh Congregationalist tradition, but further back takes its imagery from Moses and the people of Israel struggling through the desert. The tune Cwm Rhondda (Rhondda Valley) was written for the annual Baptist Singing Festival at Pontypridd in 1905.

**Sermon:**

**Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Matt 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-13**

What is it you thirst for?

I guess at different times in your life, it'll be different things. Babies thirst for their parents' touch as well as for milk. Children thirst for approval, their parents' or their peers'. Younger people may thirst for success in their work or satisfaction in their relationships. Older people may thirst for health or for strength and independence.

But what is your deepest thirst?

The Israelites thirsted for water in the desert. So would any of us. But had their thirst for God been deeper, I wonder if, loving each other by sharing scarce resources, they could have avoided the conflict that ended up in a place named Strife. When we are without something vital to our wellbeing, it's hard to let go of our yearning that if only that thirst was quenched, everything else would turn out right. It is hard for us to trust more in God than in fixing our lives. Yet that's what God calls us to do.

Moving on, for the moment, from our first reading, you know how sometimes when you hear very a familiar passage, a bit of it leaps out at you as if for the first time? That happened to me this week when I read Jesus' words to the chief priests and the elders, who were trying to stop him teaching in the temple: Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

Listen again: Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

Can you imagine quite how offensive that must have sounded to his hearers? The collaborators, the homewreckers, the people whose faults were glaringly obvious - these people were going to get a special ticket to bypass the queue for heaven, were going to be given red carpet treatment? For heaven's sake, the religious people must have been saying to themselves, this man's a rabbi: how can he be he saying things like this? And why?

Jesus has already given them the why, but they never noticed it while they didn't suspect they were in the firing line. It's a tiny little story, and I suspect the scenario may be familiar to those of you with more than one sibling in the family. Can you help me on the farm this morning, son? the father asks one of his lads. Sure thing, Dad! the boy replies. But does he come? Does he heck! So the father tries again, with his other son. Can you give me a hand on the farm this morning? No way, loser! his son scoffs. But then he thinks of his dad toiling

away all alone, and in spite of himself, he does turn up for work after all.

So what's Jesus saying here? It's not enough to look good: what you do has to bear out who you seem to be. And those very same tax collectors and prostitutes, the ones good religious people would have nothing to do with, they'd taken notice when John the Baptist told them their lives needed changing. Maybe it was easier for them to hear than good respectable people. They could hardly deny something was wrong.

People in the Broomhall Breakfast have told me a bit about AA meetings, how when drink has got hold of you and turned you into a different person, someone who hurts and damages the people and things they most value, you may think you can change on your own by trying really hard. But in AA, everyone's on the same footing: that terrible thirst can't be broken by human effort alone. In the AA book you'll find the words: The alcoholic at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink. Except in a few cases, neither he nor any other human being can provide such a defense. His defense must come from a Higher Power. Those in Jesus' day with messed-up lives knew they couldn't change unless God intervened: they thirsted for mended lives, but knew that could only happen with God's help. Such a message must have been much harder to hear for respectable, hard-working people who'd never gone off the rails in their lives: but strangely, their thirst for God, their need of God, was just as great, though masked, even from themselves, by the other thirsts of their lives.

I get told by people at the Breakfast a bit about what it's like needing a drink; what it's like going to AA and admitting your problem. Because that's not my particular demon, I don't know from the inside how that feels. But Jesus does. Jesus has been to the bottom, to the worst place, the place addicts are in when they decide to change their lives because they can't go on like this. According to Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-even death on a cross.

It's not very flattering to hear Paul saying that in choosing to become human at all, Jesus was already going downhill - but I guess when you start off as God, with unlimited power and creativity, choosing to be anything else, even Archbishop of Canterbury, has to be a step down. But Jesus went much further. Dying on the cross, a condemned criminal of the worst sort, Jesus went right to the bottom, to the place first-century tax collectors and prostitutes would know well: the point where his whole life was irretrievably mucked up and everyone despised him for it. He couldn't have got lower than that by trying for a month of Sundays.

Why did he do it? For love of us, he chose to share all that is worst about being human: thirst, helplessness, death; to give us a way through and out the other side; to assure us that in the darkest places, we are never left alone. And as Jesus shares our condition, we can share his own deepest thirst: for God's kingdom and God's righteousness.

People come into AA from all walks of life, united by a thirst they daren't quench. All they are asked to do is to beat that thirst by staying sober for just one day at a time; but not on their own. Christians come to God from all walks of life, united by our human thirsts. All we are asked to do is to quench that thirst with another - the love of God, of others and of ourselves - for just one day at a time; but not on our own. For our Higher Power, God's Holy Spirit, is at work in each of us, giving us the power to love.

**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Celebrating St Cuthbert - led by Worship Group**

**Service Date:**

25 September, 2011

Lindisfarne or Holy Island is off the coast of Northumberland near Bamburgh. It was to Lindisfarne that Aidan came from Iona in 635 at the request of King Oswald of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria to help him convert his people to Christianity. Aidan established a monastery on Lindisfarne from which just as the Gospel reached Scotland from Iona so it reached Northumbria and the North of England from Lindisfarne. It was however Aidan's successor, Cuthbert, who became the saint most associated with Lindisfarne just as Columba was with Iona. It's appropriate to follow the services we've had in the past in which we've thought about Columba and Iona with today's about Cuthbert and Lindisfarne.

Cuthbert was born in 635 probably in the vicinity of Melrose where as a youth he tended sheep in the hills above the abbey. When he was 16, on the night Aidan died, he had a vision of the soul of the saint being carried to heaven by angels, which determined him to dedicate his life to the service of God. After several years as a soldier in the service of the King of Northumbria against the attacks of the King of Mercia, he entered the monastery at Melrose, where his devotion earned him high praise and he became Prior. This was a time of conflict between the Celtic and Roman traditions, culminating at the Synod of Whitby in 664 in favour of the Roman. Cuthbert had been raised in the Celtic tradition but acquiesced in the Synod's decision. He was sent to the Priory of Lindisfarne to ease the transition there to the Roman tradition, the ideal choice for this because of his reputation for devotion and sanctity and his qualities of gentle leadership. He spent a great deal of his time at Lindisfarne evangelising among the people of the area. After a time however he desired a life of contemplation and was given leave to take up the life of a hermit on Farne Island. After several years he was persuaded to return to a more active role in the church as Bishop of Lindisfarne. At the end of 686 he felt death approaching and resigned his see to return to Farne Island, where he died on March 20, 687.

His tomb on Lindisfarne became a magnet for pilgrims but in 875 the monks there, alarmed by the threat of a Viking invasion, fled the island with Cuthbert's bones. They wandered for seven years with these relics until given a church near Durham but after a century a fresh Viking invasion saw Cuthbert's bones on the move again, finally coming to rest in the new cathedral at Durham, where the shrine of Cuthbert became one of the most popular places of pilgrimage in the North of England. His tomb can be seen today in Durham Cathedral beside that of Bede to whom is due so much of our knowledge of Cuthbert.

In this service we'll focus on three themes which come out of Cuthbert's life and work and what they might mean for us today, creation, community and mission.

**Hymns:**

**CG 111** is a hymn by Kathy Galloway, the recent past leader of the Iona Community, drawing our attention to the wonders of God's creation, forgiveness, justice and people. The tune *Lobe den Herrn* (Praise to the Lord in German) originated as a secular love song in 1665 but is better known partnered with Joachim Neander's hymn of the same name.

**CG 97** takes its words from Kathy Galloway and its tune, *Life of the World*, from Ian Galloway. It reflects more deeply on the beauties of God's work in creation, reminding us that the ordinary is also the scene of God's presence.

**CG 1** has words by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. The tune, however, is a traditional Scottish lullaby air: *Dream Angus*, communicating some of the tenderness of Christ's love for the weary and broken.

**CG 50** comes, words and music, from the pen of Daniel Schutte, one of the St Louis Jesuits who in the 1970s, inspired by the Bible and the musicianship of his grandparents, wrote new hymns connecting biblical images with people's lives of faith.

**CG 130** has words by a URC hymnodist, Brian Wren, which have 'matured with its creator' (Companion to Rejoice and Sing). The hymn originally ended with the line 'We can see his power today', but now ends 'Live tomorrow's life today'. The tune Lauds (Praises in Latin) comes from the 20th century composer John Wilson.

### **Sermon:**

#### **CUTHBERT AND CREATION**

Go to Lindisfarne, as several of us have on Margaret's Northumberland trip a year or two ago, and you cannot but be conscious of nature and its power. Twice a day the tides sweep in and cut Lindisfarne off from the mainland for some five hours, making it truly an island, When the tides recede, you cross to the island by the causeway across the mudflats and sandbanks riven by streams and runnels as we did by bus to spend time on the island before going back before the tides cut the island off again. This is also an area teeming with wild life, above all, birds. The nearby Farne Islands are home and sanctuary for literally thousands of birds, terns, shags, cormorants, guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes, fulmars, eider ducks.

Just as with Columba there are a legion of stories of Cuthbert's love of all creatures, furred or feathered, great or small. By tradition his favourite creatures were the eider ducks and he established one of the first bird protection orders for them in 676. They are still known on Holy Island as Cuddy's ducks.

Once, when Cuthbert was staying at a monastery at St. Abb's Head on the cliffs near Eyemouth in Berwickshire, a monk noticed that Cuthbert would steal out at night. One night he followed the saint down the steep path to the beach at the foot of the cliffs and saw him walk into the sea up to his armpits, where he spent the night praying and singing hymns. At daybreak Cuthbert came out the sea and knelt on the sands. Immediately two otters came up to him, licked his feet and then rolled up, wiping them with their skins and warming them with their breath. Cuthbert blessed them as they went off. The watching monk was so awed by what he had seen that he confessed his spying to Cuthbert, who pardoned him on condition that he told no one of what he had seen as long as the saint was alive. This the monk did but after Cuthbert's death he told the story which came to be recorded by Bede in his Ecclesiastical History of the English People.

Does Cuthbert's view of creation speak to us today? There are two accounts of creation in Genesis. Chapter 1, verse 26, speaks of man having dominion over nature. Calvin saw this as meaning that the end for which all things were created was that none of the conveniences and necessities of life might be wanting to man, a view held by some Christians even today. Genesis Chapter 2 however presents human relations with nature as one of companionship and stewardship. The animal kingdom is brought into being so that humans are not alone and Adam is put into the Garden of Eden to till and keep it. This is a view to which surely Cuthbert's life testifies. He saw the relation between God and nature as positive and dynamic as it is seen in so many psalms where God's concern for all his creation is explicitly developed. In our Psalm today, 104, man is almost an afterthought. The other parts of creation are of value to God in their own right. It is this vision of the natural world responding to the love of its creator which Cuthbert's love for creation shows should be the dynamic of our stewardship of it.

A prayer attributed to Columba

Lord, you are my island  
In your bosom I rest.  
You are the calm of the sea  
In that peace I rest  
You are the waves on the shore's glistening stones  
Their sound is my hymn.  
You are the song of the birds  
Their tune I sing.  
You are the sea breaking on rock  
I praise you with the swell.  
You are the ocean that laps my being  
In you I dwell.

#### CUTHBERT AND COMMUNITY

Think of Lindisfarne and you may well think of the Lindisfarne Gospels, one of the world's great masterpieces of manuscript painting, produced on the island around 700 for God and St. Cuthbert, who had died in 687. The text of the Gospels was written by Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne, and probably took him at least two years to write. But the Gospels were much more than the work of one man. They are the work of the then whole community of Lindisfarne coming together to praise God in an act of human creativity, each member making their own particular contribution depending on their talents and work.

The Gospels comprise 258 folio pages, fifteen of which are elaborately decorated, and are now in the British Library. The making of books then was an extremely skilled and laborious craft. The pages were made of vellum, the skins of calves or sheep, and had to be prepared with great care, the text pages being ruled between prick marks to ensure straight lines. Quill pens were cut from reeds or goose feathers, there being no shortage of geese on Lindisfarne then as now. The dark brown, almost black, ink had to be made with soot or lamp-black bound with white of egg. All of this would bring in herdsmen, shepherds and poultry keepers as well as those making the ink and pens and preparing the vellum before Eadfrith could begin his work in the monastery's scriptorium. By far and away the crown of his achievement are the decorated pages coloured with a mass of glowing plant or mineral pigments - red and white lead, yellow ochre, orpiment, green verdigris, bright green malachite, red kermes from the bodies of oak eating insects, pinks and purples from plates and alkalines, blue from indigo and woad and most exotic of all bright blue lapis lazuli from a mine in the foothills of the Himalayas. Many from the Lindisfarne community and elsewhere must have helped bring all these pigments to the scriptorium.

The community's involvement did not end with the written and decorated pages of the manuscript. Some while afterwards Ethelwald, Eadfrith's successor as Bishop of Lindisfarne, bound it and a hermit monk, Bulfrith provided ornaments of gold, silver and jewels for this outer casing. Sadly this cover was lost and a replacement made in 1852. Finally Aldred, Provost of Chester-le-Street, some two and a half centuries later added an Anglo-Saxon translation to give the Lindisfarne Gospels as we now have them.

We only know the names of Eadfrith, Ethelwald, Bulfrith and Aldred as makers of the Gospels but there must have been many others, each making their own contribution even if only tending the hens whose eggs gave the white to bind the ink or collecting reeds and feathers for pens. Yet they all came together in praise of God in making the magnificent Gospels which have survived a turbulent history to come down to us today as a testimony to

their faith. This was Cuthbert's community honouring him after his death and is surely an inspiration to us as Christians today to come together in community to praise God through our witness and work, however humble.

A prayer

Birther of the human race

You summon the day to dawn

And call us to live in communion.

Lord Jesus Christ, Light of the world,

By your cross you have overcome all darkness that oppresses.

Come and shine on us in our communities

That we may grow and live together in your love

Which makes us one with all humanity.

#### CUTHBERT AND MISSION

In 635 Aidan, a monk from Iona, came to Lindisfarne at the request of King Oswald of Northumbria to help him convert his people to the Christian Faith. The Kingdom of Northumbria was then very much more than present day Northumberland including as it did much of the north of England and the Scottish Borders. Bede tells us that, while Aidan could do nothing without the consent of the King, he had a grass-roots approach. He sought out people where they were, far away from the royal presence and took time with individuals, drawing out their concerns and sharing himself and his worldly goods with them as well as his message. He build churches and monasteries as well as a school where boys were trained to for mission.

After Aidan's death Cuthbert took up the mission, undertaking a rigorous schedule of missionary journeys into the remoter parts of the border country and further south. Bede again tells us that Cuthbert preached in those villages far away on steep mountains which others dreaded to visit and whose poverty as well as ignorance prevented teachers from coming. Leaving his monastery he would often not return home for two or three weeks, tarrying in the mountains to summon the peasants to heavenly things by the words of his preaching as well as by the example of his virtue. In his writings Bede shows a profound admiration for Cuthbert.

The world of Northumbria in the seventh century was a pagan one which knew little of the Christian Faith until Adrian and Cuthbert began their work. Yet their faith and that of their fellow Christians which could worship God by creating such treasures as the Lindisfarne Gospels and which had a deep understanding of God as creator of the natural world met the challenge of evangelising the north. Theirs was a peasant society based on the land, most people illiterate and often living hand-to-mouth, very different from our present-day society with its consumerism and individualism. We however face the same challenge as did Aidan and Cuthbert. Today many people, whilst aware that there are churches around, know little of their message and what happens in them. Knowledge of the Bible is much less than was common fifty years ago. The worlds of Aidan and Cuthbert and of Christians in this country today have much in common with the world of the early church where Christians were a small minority in a pagan world as comes over in the epistles of Paul, Peter and the other apostles. Our world differs from those of the early church and of Aidan and Cuthbert in that theirs were pre-Christian whilst ours could be described as post-Christian. Yet the faith and example of the early church and the Northumbrian saints can be both an inspiration and a guide to us

Mahatma Gandhi was once asked how the Christian faith could be made more native to

India so that it was no longer seen as foreign. His reply was that Christians must start being more like Christ, practice their faith without blurring it or watering it down, put special emphasis on love because it is the central point of the Christian faith and therefore the decisive motivating force and study non-Christian religions with great sympathy so that they could appeal to people of other faiths more effectively. This is not advice which Aidan and Cuthbert needed since it was very much what they put into practice and is as relevant to us today as it has been through the centuries.

A prayer

O Christ, you had compassion on the crowds

You drew people to yourself

You repelled none who knew they were needy.

Grant us hearts like yours

Hearts that go out in genuine greeting and humble welcome

Until in the fellowship of sharing

Souls are drawn to you.

### **Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Service Date:**

4 September, 2011

#### **Romans 13:8-14**

**Ann:** What did you make of all those riots over the summer, then, Sarah?

**Sarah:** Words fail me!

**Ann:** That's not like you! Go on, have a try.

**Sarah:** Well, I thought they were absolutely shocking! Disgraceful! Those eleven-year-olds - where did their parents think they were at that time of night? And the young people who texted each other to go and grab things out of broken shop fronts - how on earth were they brought up? What sort of materialistic values can they be living by, when they don't see anything wrong with looting? I fear for the future of the nation, I really do...

**Ann:** Mm, thank you; that gives me a rough idea of what you're thinking.

**Sarah:** And if they had only been brought up to read their Bibles! After all, Paul gives us a pretty good idea about what to avoid. It goes right back to the Ten Commandments, doesn't it? 'You shall not commit adultery, he writes. 'You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'.

**Ann:** Absolutely, and...

**Sarah:** 'Let us live honourably as in the day,' says Paul, 'not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness.' Truer words were never spoken...

**Ann:** Written.

**Sarah:** All right, written.

**Ann:** 'And not in quarrelling and jealousy.'

**Sarah:** Who's talking about quarrelling and jealousy?

**Ann:** Well, Paul is. It's the end of the verse you quoted.

**Sarah:** So it is. Oh well, that's a bit of an afterthought, isn't it? After all, even in the best-regulated churches a bit of quarrelling comes up from time to time. It's only human nature. And jealousy... well, compared with rioting, it's not really that bad, is it?

**Ann:** Do you think not?

**Sarah:** What are you getting at, Ann?

**Ann:** Well, I've read the papers, I've heard politicians getting all hot under the collar about

the materialism and greed of today's young people. But wasn't it politicians a few years ago who were forced to explain to us why they needed to clean out their moats at public expense? A bit pot and kettle, isn't it? Some people riot; others try to get away with greed by stealth.

**Sarah:** Fair point, it's not just rioting eleven-year-olds who are too greedy. And now I come to think of it, there were youth workers, estate agents, even teachers - all sorts of people caught up in the riots, some more like our own families than we might want to think. Maybe it's not just badly brought up youngsters who need to read Paul.

**Ann:** You know Paul isn't my favourite writer, but I think maybe we do too. I was serious about jealousy, Sarah. It may not be as headline grabbing as rioting, but wanting what other people already have is the start of the very same process, and quarrelling is the more polite result which can be as destructive as rioting, in a family or in a church. And he's hit the nail on the head when he talks about love being the fulfilling of the law. If we really managed to treat each other the way we'd like to be treated ourselves, there'd be less rioting to condemn.

**Sarah:** So all we have to do now is to figure out how that can work in practice. I think I need a bit of divine guidance here...

**Hymns:**

**R&S 492:** Dear Lord and Father of mankind

**R&S 294:** Come down, O love divine

**Psalms 119:33-40:** Lord, I delight to recall Your commandments

**R&S 95:** God is love

**Sermon:**

**Ezekiel 33:7-11; Psalm 119:33-40; Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13:8-14**

'Love is the fulfilling of the law.' It's a wonderful quotation from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, isn't it? The only difficulty, as I was hinting at the end of our theme introduction, is knowing how to carry it out in practice; for if it were that simple, not just rioting but conflict in general would be a thing of the past - yet it's not, is it? And not for lack of warning, either. Speaking through Ezekiel, God sounds a bit fed up with Israel: almost like one of those magistrates who've had to hear cases against rioters on Sundays in order to process everyone. I don't want to have to punish the wicked, God says. It's not something I enjoy. I want people to change their ways so they don't get into this state to begin with.

When something terrible like the riots happens, it's easy for us who weren't directly involved to play the blame game. It's the young people. It's the parents. It's the nation's morals. It's the bankers' greed. It's the politicians' cuts. In a similar way, Michelle Bachman, running for US President, has recently opined that the devastation of Hurricane Irene in the United States must be a sign of God's displeasure with American politicians whose public spending is too high. Prophecies of that sort abound; though it's often not till years later that we can tell who were the true and who the false prophets.

But like Jeremiah before him, Ezekiel is concerned to remind us that, as much as any young rioter up before the Bench, we are responsible for our actions. Both of them quote the proverb: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge'; but both quote it with disapproval. People need to take responsibility for their own mistakes; if others have gone wrong, we are not to blame; but neither can we hide behind loud condemnation of their faults in the hope that our own will not be noticed.

Theoretically, it would be easy for me, from six feet above contradiction, to name and shame any members of this church whose words and actions may have led to conflict. Easy,

but it would miss the point. For I bear responsibility for those words and actions of mine that may have injured our peace.

Don't panic - there isn't anything terrible on my conscience that I'm about to confess from the pulpit, and nor am I alluding to any major congregational scandal brewing! In general, I'm glad to say, our congregation is not one that thrives on conflict, nor - thank God! - do we have trouble-makers whose chief pleasure is to set up disharmony between others. But as you'd expect, given that I'm human and not divine, a few times during my time here, what I have said, done or omitted to say or do has been the cause of conflict, which then required resolution. And given our readings this morning, it may be helpful for me to reflect in a general way on these experiences, to see what lessons I may be able to draw from them for our benefit.

In our reading from Matthew's Gospel this morning we have set out for us one New Testament method for dealing with conflict. A has a bone to pick with B. Rather than grumbling to all his friends about it, A confronts B directly in private, hoping that their difference can be resolved without anyone else having to get involved. If B listens to A, the matter can end then and there. If the conversation goes badly and B refuses to listen, A can try again, this time bringing a few trusted people into the conversation as witnesses so that neither party can thereafter refuse to admit in public what was said in private. At this point, the witnesses have a duty of confidentiality, and there is still the hope of resolution. But if B is recalcitrant, A has no choice but to bring the matter before the whole church and abide their judgement; after that, if B still refuses to admit her fault, she may no longer be welcome in that congregation.

The power of excommunication - that someone should become to the church like a Gentile and a tax-collector - is not one I would willingly exercise; and I am thankful that, in our tradition, this power is not reserved to ministers, but is part of the responsibility of the Elders and the Church Meeting. It's also worth noting that Jesus' teaching about forgiveness seventy times seven - in other words, without limits - immediately follows this passage, along with the parable of the unforgiving servant, indicating that it's not A's lack of forgiveness but B's lack of recognition of her fault or response to it that leads to this ultimate sanction.

Here we have a theoretical pattern of conflict recognition and resolution offered to us Christians as a way to live together. In my experience, how has practice compared with theory?

It has been really helpful when the person taking issue with me has said so privately. When I know someone's unhappy with me, and they explain clearly why, I have to take it seriously. Sometimes the person concerned hasn't wanted to communicate directly with me, and that's been a lot less helpful, because I've had to guess at their reasons for unhappiness, relayed by other people, and I've not always guessed right. Sometimes, I suspect, they have been too optimistic about my recognising the problem on my own, and it has increased in size and scope while I was blissfully unaware of it. Communication - with the person concerned, I mean, not with all and sundry - is key.

Stage 2 of Matthew's process, where I've been taken to task by the person concerned in front of a few witnesses, is never pleasant. And yet it's a good opportunity for both people to be able to understand each other - if they want to listen. For if I am already convinced that I have no case to answer, I'll not be able to hear the problems someone has with me, yet until I recognise them, those problems will not go away. Listening is vital.

I've not experienced stage 3, when the matter is decided in the congregation; if matters get

that far, something's badly wrong. And I would have an unfair advantage if it came to stage 4. It's much less usual for a minister to leave a church through conflict - though it does happen! - than for a member to feel sufficiently disgruntled to stop coming for a while. But I'm thankful for times when I've been given another chance by the person concerned. For just as we each of us must take responsibility for what we say and do, we are each of us imperfect people in need of God's forgiveness. And recognising that can help us forgive each other's mistakes. It may seem a long way from quarrelling and jealousy to riots and looting, but it's a road I've sometimes put my foot to. Instead, let's follow him who is our way, our truth, our life, by choosing to love and forgive our neighbours, even those who have done us wrong.

### **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Service Date:**

7 August, 2011

#### **Genesis 37**

- I always used to think God was on my side, but lately I'm beginning to wonder. Something's evidently gone badly wrong. I'm tied up with rope over the back of a very smelly camel. I can't understand the language anyone's speaking. And my own brothers have sold me off for a lousy 20 shekels. 20 shekels! That's outrageous! I'm worth a lot more!
- I'm starting to get camel-sick, so I'd better think of something else. Something nice, something a long way away from here.
- I'm thinking about the coat my dad got me. Top of the range model - every colour under the sun, and it had sleeves! Real fashion icon. None of my brothers had anything like it, and they hated it. But I was the special one, wasn't I? I was the one who got dreams from God.
- Fantastic dreams, they were. One time we were all out in the field, gathering the harvest, my brothers and I. And would you believe it, as we gathered the corn together into sheaves, mine was bigger than any of them. A real whopper! I was evidently the king of the harvest, because all their tiny little weedy sheaves bowed down to mine.
- Another time, I was up, up and away into outer space. And so were my dad and my mum and my brothers. Dad was the sun, mum was the moon, and my brothers were stars, but guess what? They all bowed down to me. I was the most important one in the whole family.
- But when I told them all, for some reason they didn't like it. Even Dad wasn't too keen on the idea, and as for Reuben and Dan and all the rest of them, they just laughed. Just because I was nearly the youngest! Only Benjamin backed me up, and he was really the baby so what he thought didn't count anyway.
- But I think Dad thought I was getting too big for my boots too, because the next time my brothers were all out with the sheep, he sent me after them to see if they needed anything, just as if I was their slave! But I put my new coat on - even if I was going out into the fields, I wanted to remind them who was boss.
- I had to trail around after my brothers - people told me this way and that - but finally I got there. And did they thank me for helping Dad and going to see them? Did they heck! Reuben said, Here's that little troublemaker! Let's show him what we think of his dreams! And they ganged up on me and beat me up. It really hurt. And they tore my coat.
- I thought they were going to kill me. But Judah, he's not so bad. He told them to dump me in a dry well instead, while they thought what to do with me. They could see things had gone a bit too far; they were going to get in trouble for what they'd done. So when the Midianite slave traders came past, they jumped at the chance to get rid of me without

killing me, and make themselves some pocketmoney too. All very well for them - but what about me? God, are you really there? Did you really send me all those dreams? Or did I get it all horribly wrong?

I reckon you know the end of Joseph's story. He's got a lot more growing up to do before the dreams God sends him come true; he's got a lot of bad things to go through, and a lot of big decisions to make. But in the end, his story has a happy ending. Joseph, of course, doesn't know that right now. He's in the middle of his story, and he doesn't know how things will turn out. He has to ask himself: does he really trust God? Does he really believe God loves him? Or is the whole thing a horrible mistake?

The writer of the psalm we're about to sing, Psalm 13, knew about bad times and hanging on by his fingernails till God came to his rescue. Maybe you know something about that, too - about times it feels we're in the middle of the story, our own story and the story of our church, not sure how it's going to turn out, good or bad, but holding onto our memories of God who has always helped us before. And if you're not in that place right now, let's sing the song for those who are, as a prayer that they will hold onto God as they go through the hard times in life, and see a happy ending to their story.

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 74** is by Joachim Neander, a 17th-century German pastor whose life had its fair share of chaos. The tune *Lobe den Herrn* ('Praise the Lord' in German) was originally set to the secular words of a lovesong when it was first published in 1665, but was adapted by Neander to fit the words of this hymn.

**R&S 671** has words paraphrased by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community from Psalm 13; the tune *New Thirteenth* (named in contrast to the wellknown psalm tune *Old Hundredth*) was also written by John Bell.

**R&S 58** is appropriate to sing with its author William Whiting's original heading 'For those at Sea' in mind, but can also, as in this service, be used to bring before God those whose lives can feel seaswept and chaotic. The tune *Melita* was composed specifically for this hymn by J.B. Dykes.

**R&S 543** reminds us that it is God who brings us through trouble to whom we should look for guidance, comfort and hope. It was originally written for children, specifically the children of the London Orphan Asylum, by James Edmeston, and first published in 1821. The tune *Mannheim* was adapted from a chorale by Friedrich Filitz.

#### **Sermon:**

##### **Genesis 37; Matthew 14:22-33; Romans 10:5-15**

Joseph's story must have been an exciting one to live, but I'm not sure I'd want to be him. All those ups and downs he went through in life: being the favourite son and God's dreamer; being sold as a slave by your own family; rising to become your employer's most trusted worker; falsely accused of rape by your employer's wife and thrown into prison; confided in by fellow prisoners, whose dreams you interpret; hoicked out of prison to interpret Pharaoh's dreams or else; suddenly, an expert on famine management and the second most powerful man in all Egypt; able to turn the tables on your brothers, yet to forgive them in the end, and finally, saving the whole family and giving your father a comfortable old age! Talk about twists and turns in the tale! He must have felt as if he was adrift on a very stormy sea with huge waves!

And a very stormy sea with huge waves is the setting for our Gospel reading this morning; a very appropriate setting for another story of ups and downs, both in faith and literally. The Sea of Galilee was noted for storms arising from dead calm, so the fishermen among Jesus'

friends would be perfectly well aware of what to do in turbulent conditions; yet that night even the professionals were having a hard time.

Like Joseph's story, this one could be retold in terms of the game Good news - bad news.

Good news: the disciples are getting away from the crowds now filled with waiter-service loaves and fishes; able to rest their weary legs in the boat. Bad news: Jesus has stayed behind to pray. Good news: when a storm comes up, the boat includes fishermen who know what to do in rough weather. Bad news: they're still getting a battering. Good news: someone seems to be coming to their rescue. Bad news: it seems to be a ghost! Who else, after all, would be walking on the water?

Of course, there is someone else it could be, someone other than a ghost: yet that may be even more frightening to contemplate in the middle of a boat in the middle of the night in the middle of a storm, in the middle of the disciples' story, which may have a happy or a sad ending: for them there's no knowing.

It might be God. God, after all, is famous for walking on the wings of the storm - Psalm 18 tells us so. God is also pretty good at multiplying loaves and fishes, both in the 'ordinary' way - the miracle of growth we experience every year - and through the prophets of the Hebrew Bible like Elisha, who for many days fed a poor widow through drought. This could be God coming to them over the water; God in the form of a man they had thought they knew.

In the original text of our Hebrew Bible story, Joseph doesn't actually call on God as his brothers sell him into slavery, though I wouldn't be surprised if the dreams God sent him were there in the back of his mind. But that's a very different net full of fish from our Gospel reading. For as this supposed ghost comes towards them, it says something. Not 'Be afraid! Be very afraid' but, of all things, 'Cheer up, lads! Don't be afraid: it's me!'

Now that sounds like Jesus. But Peter wants to find out for certain. If this isn't a ghost, if this is Jesus out there on the water, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the storm, then he knows he can trust him. OK then, thinks Peter, that arrant foot-in-mouther: OK, let's give it a whirl. So, taking a deep breath, he asks Jesus to ask him: to step out of the middle of the boat, onto the middle of the stormy lake, in the middle of the night, right in the middle of Peter's own story, though he doesn't know if it'll turn out a comedy or a tragedy.

And at this point, to be honest, it's looking rather like a comedy. Poor Peter! He is brave; he is faithful. But, like most of us, only in fits and starts. Then he suddenly starts to wobble; to think: Is this really a good idea? Can human beings walk on water? And before he knows it, he's taken his attention off Jesus long enough to find out the wet way that they can't. But Jesus doesn't penalise him for being a frail human being. He does point out that if Peter doesn't trust him, that's bound to happen. But his own hand is outstretched. Suddenly they're both in the boat, and the others are all putting two and two together and making infinity. The idea of Jesus being God's expression in human form might have sounded like academic theology before, good for arguing with rabbis but not much use in everyday life. But now it's real.

That's the funny thing about these stories handed down to us in the Gospel. They may appear to be long ago and far away, full of weird miracles with little to say to our lives. But reflecting on this episode in the life of Jesus' friends, similarities may appear. Is your life sometimes full of ups and downs, so that you can't tell how things may turn out? When things get really bad, have you ever decided, on very little evidence, other than your story so far, that God is able to hold you up, though all else seems to be failing? And if, in human frailty, you feel unable to go on trusting, have you found God's outstretched hand of

forgiveness: a fresh source of hope and peace and support?

Then the Gospel's stories are becoming your own.

If that does happen, don't be surprised. These stories were told and retold and remembered and eventually written down not only for their literary merit or poetic beauty, not only because they carried the history and values of our ancestors in the faith, but because they meant so much to the people who first heard them that they just had to pass them on to others. It's as if, nowadays, we might recommend to all our friends, or even buy them for Christmas, a book that helped us see our lives in a new light.

The ironic thing is that while we can be very confident in recommending to others a book we really believe in, often we're not nearly so confident about sharing the story of our faith and what it means to us. Maybe we think it's such a complicated story we'll be bound to get it wrong. Maybe we think it's a story that belongs to the experts - the people who read Greek and Hebrew, who've studied these things. But, as Paul reminds the church at Rome, we don't need to scale heaven or plumb hell to find the Gospel. It's there in the lives we have led; in the people we have met; in the trust in our hearts, maybe built up over the course of years, that God does care. And if it's there in our hearts, it can spill out onto our lips if someone plucks up the courage to ask what really matters to us in life. For if we don't tell them our stories, who can? How will they meet the God who is with us through trouble, who longs to take away our fear, and to pilot us, and all the world, through life's many storms?

### **Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Service Date:**

31 July, 2011

Mrs Christine Carrick preached and led worship at St Andrew's.

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 48.** Albert Bayly's hymn gives thanks for the fruits of harvest and for the human labour which produces those fruits. It also reminds us of the need to share those fruits and spread the blessing of God. The tune Bunesan was noted down by Alexander Fraser from the singing of a Scottish Highlander and named after a village on Mull.

**R&S 95.** Timothy Rees' hymn celebrates a loving Creator who suffers with us and continues to love us even when we are blind to His love. Love is ever present and will ultimately conquer sin and death. The tune Blaenwern is named after a small Welsh farm where the composer's son recuperated from tuberculosis.

**R&S 329** Brian Wren wrote this hymn in 1969 to celebrate Pentecost. Our actions and thoughts can mirror and portray the love of Christ. The tune 'Lauds' was originally written for a different hymn but the composer, John Wilson suggested its association with Wren's hymn.

**R&S 200.** Brian Rees' hymn is a celebration of the good news of the Kingdom of God and the redemption of society and the liberation of the outcast and oppressed. We sing it to the tune 'Paderborn', adapted from a German folk tune and named after the cathedral city where Sydney Nicholson who arranged and harmonized the tune, first heard it.

### **Sixth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Service Date:**

24 July, 2011

Linda Chambers of Christians and Sheffield Schools preached while the Minister led worship.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 96** takes its theme of God's faithfulness from the book of Lamentations and the letter of James, both from the Authorised Version of the Bible. Its author, T.O. Chisholm, was a Methodist minister, and lived to the age of 93. The tune Faithfulness was written for this hymn by W.M. Runyan at the author's request; it was popularized in Britain by the Billy Graham campaign of 1954.

**R&S 629** takes its words from a prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi. The words and tune were first published in a songbook of the Franciscan community in Los Angeles, of which the composer, Sebastian Temple was a member. Betty Pulkingham's arrangement of the music was made for Fresh Sounds of 1976.

**Psalms 122** takes its words from the Scottish Metrical Psalter; this version also incorporates words from Psalm 133. They are both pilgrim psalms sung on the way to Jerusalem. The tune York is a 'common tune', not assigned to any particular psalm. Its original Scottish name, maybe alluding to the stepping motion of the tune, was 'The Stilt'.

**Restore, O Lord** was written, words and music, by Graham Kendrick, well known as a worship leader and writer of contemporary worship songs.

**R&S 603** by Timothy Dudley-Smith was written for the centenary of the 'Children's Special Service Mission', better known as the Scripture Union. The tune Lord of the Years comes from Michael Baughan.

**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Service Date:**

17 July, 2011

Rev Dr David Stec led worship at St Andrew's and preached.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 69:** Lord of all being throned afar (Tune R&S 63)

**R&S 623:** Eternal Ruler of the ceaseless round

**R&S 71:** O God of Bethel

**R&S 269:** Jesus shall reign where're the sun (Tune R&S 260)

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Celebrating the King James Version of the Bible**

**Service Date:**

10 July, 2011

We brought King James Version Bibles that had particular significance for us, and shared their stories in small groups.

Then we asked what phrases from the King James Bible had particular meaning for us, and why.

**Hymns:**

**Hymn** (tune: Southwell, R&S 515) Lamp of our feet, by which we trace

**R&S 124:** We plough the fields

**R&S 321:** Your words to me are life and health

**R&S 319:** Thanks to God whose Word was spoken

**Sermon:**

Our readings this morning - and I've not picked them specially for this service - are all about God's word: sent by God to accomplish God's purposes; sowed by God into each and every life, to different effects. And this morning we're looking at one particular way God's word has come to us: through the King James, or Authorized, Version of the Bible.

After Shakespeare, the KJV is the most common source of phrases in English. The King James in question was James VI of Scotland - oh yes, and James I of England too. He didn't write the text, he just authorised it as the only version to be read in English churches, hence the Authorised Version. So who did write it? 47 biblical scholars, working in six committees. It was first printed in 1611, 400 years ago this year and, as you may have noted from the Cathedral exhibition earlier this year, put together by Iona Hine, or from this exhibition, kindly lent to us by Central URC, it was by no means the earliest English translation of the Bible. John Wyclif's translation had come out in 1382 and William Tyndale's in 1528 - the latter forms the basis of a large proportion of the KJV. But unlike Wyclif's and Tyndale's Bibles, the language used in the KJV has persisted into the present-day. Many of its phrases have taken such deep root in English that we use them without thinking of their origin: sour grapes; salt of the earth; a drop in a bucket; the skin of one's teeth; the apple of one's eye; girded loins; feet of clay; whited sepulchres; filthy lucre; pearls before swine; a fly in the ointment; eat, drink and be merry.

But why was the KJV made? Most Christians at the time couldn't understand either the Hebrew or Greek that the Bible was originally written in, or the Latin it was first translated into. According to the Protestant Reformers, people should be able to read the Bible for themselves, not rely on the priest. But as James was a king, politics came in too. He didn't want a radical Bible translation, like Calvin's Geneva Bible, which kept reminding people in pointed footnotes that you didn't have to have kings to be good Christians. James wanted his own Bible, with his own translators whom he could control and keep on-message.

But why did the translators want to take all that time and effort, apart from it being good for their careers to please James? Let's hear their own words from the KJV Preface:

'Zeal to promote the common good, whether it be by devising anything ourselves, or revising that which hath been laboured by others, deserveth certainly much respect and esteem, but yet findeth but cold entertainment in the world. It is welcomed with suspicion instead of love, and with emulation instead of thanks: and if there be any hole left for cavil to enter, (and cavil, if it do not find a hole, will make one) it is sure to be misconstrued, and in danger to be condemned. This will easily be granted by as many as know story, or have any experience. For, was there ever any projected, that savoured any way of newness or renewing, but the same endured many a storm of gainsaying, or opposition?' In other words: try to do something new, try to improve what's already there, and boy, will you get it in the neck from people who thought the old version was quite good enough!

This is somewhat ironic. There are Christians in the world today who solemnly believe not only that the Bible was originally written in English but that King James was its author. But without going that far, many of you here this morning will have grown up with the phrases of the King James Bible; may have learned it by heart for your Scripture exams; may have it, like a favourite piece of poetry, in the back of your mind; may even see it as the real Bible. In our first group discussion this morning, we shared stories of Bibles which are special to us: maybe prizes we got for remembering the Bible by heart, or books given to us on a special birthday or our wedding day; maybe church Bibles, like the ones we've looked at earlier, which are special to a whole group of people. So the book the Bible is written in can be significant. In some churches, the bigger your study Bible, the more devout people think

you are! And though I keep telling the Elders that carrying in a small edition of the Bible gives it just as much honour, many still prefer to use one of the larger versions as we begin our worship.

But more important even than the written Bible, however small or large it may be, is the Bible each of us carries within us: not just colourful phrases but the Bible's stories. 'How the mighty are fallen' reminds us of David's sorrow when Saul and Jonathan fell in war. 'Vanity of vanities' calls to mind Ecclesiastes, trying to come to terms with the meaningless of riches and wisdom in the face of death. The 'fatted calf' brings back the generous father of the prodigal son, giving his errant son a right royal welcome home. 'Like a lamb to the slaughter' reminds us not only of Isaiah's prophecy of God's longed-for leader, the Messiah, but also of how Jesus silently faced his accusers; 'he gave up the ghost' recalls his crucifixion. We reflect on Paul, wrestling with the 'thorn in his flesh', who at the end of his life could still say that he had 'fought the good fight'.

We may not be able to quote chapter and verse of our remembered Bible. But that doesn't matter. At the Friday Breakfast last week, as I discussed hospitality with one of our breakfasters, she suddenly brought out the phrase: 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.' She hadn't thought of those words for years, ever since her father quoted it; she was quite surprised to remember that it was from the Bible, let alone the King James Version; but as we ate our fry-ups together, it spoke volumes to both of us. I wonder what phrases from the KJV have been particularly significant for you, and why; how God may have comforted you, challenged you, inspired you, changed you, through those words first published four hundred years ago.

The overriding image of the two KJV passages we've heard read this morning is seed sown to produce a harvest. We can keep the ancient words of the KJV in mind, appreciate their linguistic beauty. But if that's all we do, we're eating seedcorn meant for the harvest. For God, who sows the words of the Bible in our hearts, wants more of us than that. God wants a harvest from us: lives lived through many different circumstances, bad or good, to give God glory as we love ourselves, our neighbours and even our enemies.

### **Third Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Communion**

#### **Service Date:**

3 July, 2011

#### **New Testament reading Romans 7:15-25a**

- I can sympathise with Paul, can't you? There are times when I do something and then immediately wish I hadn't. I didn't want to do it. I knew I shouldn't have done it. But somehow, I couldn't help myself. Technically, it's known as a besetting sin - something wrong that tries to get hold of you when you're feeling tired or distracted.
- Of course, I don't know what sort of thing you have difficulties with, what sort of situation you know once you get into it you won't be able to get out of. For some people, it's the temptation to make that snide remark or pass on that juicy piece of gossip or win that argument at all costs. For others, it's taking that one drink too many, or that extra holiday you really don't need. It could even be piling up that bank balance for a rainy day instead of helping others who need it here and now. You'll know much better than I do what your own difficulties may be; and if your conscience is completely clear, either you're saintly or you could get to know yourself a little better!
- But because I don't know what besetting sins you struggle with, this morning I'm going to share with you one of my own.

- Especially when I'm tired, or stressed, or struggling up the hill to the busstop on a Monday morning when it's grey or raining, I have a temptation I sometime give in to: to lose hope.
- What is the point of working for the church these days? I wonder. Not many people want to know anything about God. Not many want to learn anything new about God. And not many have the energy or the time to do any more than hold the fort.
- Now before any of you get the chance to say so, I know my lack of hope is wrong. As a Christian, and especially as a minister, hope is one of the three virtues, along with faith and love, we're told never to let go of. And despair is seen as one of the great sins, because it implies that God can't do anything to change the situation.
- I know all that, but it's still a temptation for me; just as your besetting sin is a temptation for you, and Paul's besetting sin was a temptation for him. So what do we do about it?
- What did Paul do about his problem? We get a bit of a clue when he ends the reading we've just heard by asking, 'Who will rescue me from this body of death?' And he answers his own question: Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. So Jesus is the key to our problem, our besetting sin, yours and mine.
- How's that going to work out in practice? For me, first I need to realise what's going on in me, notice when I'm lacking hope. Then I need to ask Jesus for help. It sounds simple, even childish. But when I ask for the strength to overcome my besetting sin, I'm given it - and enough wisdom to know I should look after myself better!

**Hymns:**

**R&S 95:** God is love, let heaven adore him

**Hymn** (tune: 'Broomhall' by Douglas Jones) God, confronted with your might

**R&S 446:** Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness

**R&S 521:** Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go

**Sermon:**

**Matthew 11:16-30; Romans 7:15-25a**

Listening to the Moderator last week talking about sin, from Cain and Abel onwards, I realised that somehow I'd never preached on that passage myself. Checking up afterwards, this wasn't because I'd chickened out of it, but because the story isn't actually in our three-year lectionary: the Moderator had chosen his own texts rather than the ones set for last week.

It's a thought-provoking story, though, isn't it? Two people asked me afterwards what Cain's fault was - why God accepted Abel's sacrifice, but not his. The traditional Christian answer, that God saw into both their hearts, and knew Cain's to be evil, wasn't very satisfactory to any of us - after all, the Bible story says nothing of the kind. I looked up what the rabbis, the Jewish experts, said, and they came up with an answer that was in the story: while Abel offered God the firstlings or best animals of his flock, Cain just handed over 'the fruit of the ground' - not his prizewinning specimens, so not the best he could have given. Let me know afterwards what you think of that as an explanation!

That's a footnote to last week, but this week the theme of sin is officially with us, so I thought it was about time for me to tackle this thorny subject. As we've seen in the theme introduction, whether we see sin as turning away from God, or think of it as missing the target of a good life, whatever it is we habitually do wrong or don't do right, it hasn't got to be spectacular or headline grabbing, however much the tabloid press wants to cut sin down to sex or violence, or preferably both together. Indeed, while Jesus seems to have been reluctant to condemn people for sexual immorality, and forgave a dying robber, he had some very cutting things to say about people whose own goodness made them despise

others whose lives weren't so pure.

In our reading from Matthew's Gospel this morning, indeed, Jesus sounds quite exasperated with his hearers. I can't just get it right with you! he complains. It's like playing with children in a bad mood. You want to play at weddings? You can toot your recorder all you like - they won't dance. You want to play at funerals? They won't bother to shed a tear.

What's he getting at here? Well, God sends John the Baptist like one of the old-time prophets, all camel-hair and wild locusts, telling people to repent of their sins, to turn back to God and change their bad habits. What happens? People reckon he's off his head. OK, says God, and sends Jesus, who, unlike his cousin, doesn't fast all the time, and loves going to parties with rather risqué friends. What's the response? People look down their noses at him, and say he can't be a real prophet, not in that sort of company. Basically, whether sin is condemned or forgiven, God can't win.

Where might we stand on the issue of condemnation of sin versus forgiveness? In this church we don't go in much for hellfire preaching, though I have been told approvingly of past sermons when the preacher attacked particular congregational sins. I suspect, though, that they were other people's sins, for no one likes being brought to public account. When, during the Second World War, Mr Nicol, the then minister, dared to preach pacifism, he was quickly shunted out of St Andrew's. We are tempted to discount what might apply to us. On the other hand, we may also be tempted to keep to our own, our friends and relations, rather than to venture the trickier business of making contact with people whose lives and sins differ from our own. But I know this is a hobby horse of mine, so I won't elaborate on that today!

Jesus goes on to accuse the Jewish towns of Chorasin and Bethsaida and Capernaum, where he has been preaching, of sins greater than Tyre and Sidon and Sodom, non-Jewish cities condemned by God of old for their sinful ways - pride and lack of hospitality. So what have they done, these Jewish towns? They have not recognised God at work among them. They have not heard Jesus' message of God's kingdom breaking in.

They have not seen the way he transforms lives; or if they have heard and seen, they have refused to accept it, or him.

In my own minor way, I can identify with that disappointment. When you have experienced change and renewal, it's hard to see faith in God being understood as a license to carry on as normal. Yet unsurprisingly, Jesus shows himself here to be much wiser than I am. Instead of focussing on those for whom his message means nothing, and putting himself into danger of despair, he deliberately concentrates on those people who are hoping for transformation, who, instead of a mindset of distrust and cynicism, approach him with hope. Who are such people? Those whose burdens are heavy, who know they need God's help because life otherwise would be impossible.

As I admitted in my theme introduction, such an attitude can be seen as naïve, even childish, for it may be very hard for us to believe that the God who made all things has any specific knowledge of or interest in our own tiny lives. And just to avoid confusion, I'm certainly not claiming - as has sometimes been spread under the name of the Gospel - that those who follow Jesus will never have a moment's worry again. If we look at his first followers, this is plainly not the case; just think of Paul, whose moment of honest confession we were considering earlier in the theme introduction, and the difficulties he underwent, from stoning to shipwreck.

Even the image Jesus gives us of being yoked together is no promise of an easy life. Oxen were tied together with a yoke, as you see in the picture on your order of service, so that

they could work together more effectively than alone; the stronger animal lent its strength to the other; but they still had to work. How, then, can Jesus promise us rest? His yoke, he says, is easy; his burden, light. But what is it? The rabbis of his day spoke of the Torah, God's law, as a yoke, to help people live the way God wanted. Jesus' summary is much less elaborate: love God, love others, love yourself. But, as we have admitted earlier, we're still apt to break it. So how can Jesus help us?

Theoretically, for Christians, our whole lives, whether we eat or drink or sleep or get up, are yoked together with Jesus. Through prayer, through talking with others, fellow members of his body, or through sharing his presence in bread and wine, as we are about to do, he is always with us. That's the theory.

In practice I have found that whenever I admit that I am in need of Jesus' help, he strengthens me, or gives me a way out. But what's *your* experience?

### **Second Sunday after Pentecost; the Moderator preaching**

#### **Service Date:**

27 June, 2011

Billy and Ahmed; making friends across difference.

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 141:** Make way, make way

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

**R&S 704:** Lord, thy heart in love hath yearned

**R&S 366:** And can it be

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

### **CTBB Pentecost service at St Mark's Broomhill**

#### **Service Date:**

12 June, 2011

None

#### **Hymns:**

Come down, O Love divine

There's a spirit in the air

#### **Sermon:**

#### **John 4.19-29; Acts 2:1-21**

Yesterday morning, a special meeting of the Executive of Churches Together in Broomhill and Broomhall was convened to prepare our worship for Pentecost today. But somehow my heart wasn't in it. The whole Pentecost event, with its pyrotechnics and its tongue-twisting roll-call of international characters, seemed such a long time ago, such a long time away. Almost against my will, I started to wonder: what might it be like instead if Pentecost were to happen here? and now? And as if in a dream, I found myself putting down my biro and walking out of the John Wesley Room, out of the Beacon at Broomhill, out onto the Fulwood Road. No one seemed able to see or hear me, but I kept seeing people I expected, doing things I didn't.

A group from St Mark's was in Eurospar, crowding around the manager, handing in a petition asking for the shop to stock fairly traded products. I could hear David Price explaining what a difference it made in producer countries, and how stocking such products would make him more keen on shopping there. Another St Mark's group was down the hill in Springfield school, teaching the children to play handbells: Rosalind Rogerson had

decided that would be a bit less hard on the ears than starting them off on the recorder. And in the Broomhall Centre, a third group, led by Sue Hammersley and Kaltum, a local Somali activist, were showing each other old clothes, brought in to cut up for patchwork cushions, to make the hard chairs at the Centre that bit more comfortable. I could hear peals of laughter as people showed each other the sort of fashions they used to wear. Over at the Broomhall Community Garden, opposite St Silas, a bouquet of gardeners from St Andrew's, headed by Arroll Winning, was supervising weeding and harvesting from the shade of the Julian Sainsbury Memorial Potting Shed, while local youngsters did the bending and lifting. Some of our choir, along with Douglas Jones our organist, were in the Hallamshire nursing home, singing old songs to remind people with fading memories of good times they'd had in childhood. Others of us were practising English - or in many cases, Scottish - conversation with an international gathering at the Sunnybank sheltered housing in William Street, swapping experiences gathered from many different countries by people who had lived or holidayed there.

Back in Broomhill, the knit and natter group were being challenged by Jenny Carpenter to make some blankets for Oxfam next door. The Broomhill Festival must have been on, for there was an exhibition of Celtic art in the Ashgate Room, coordinated by Josie Smith, with lots of children and students, crayons in hand, having a go at spirals and endless knots for themselves. And some of the Crookes Valley church, who use the bus to get to and from Uni every day, were hopping on board and offering a carnation to every bus driver stopping at the Hallamshire, in appreciation of their work.

As you can imagine, with all this conversation quite a hubbub was building up in Broomhill and Broomhall, but one underlying voice seemed to be involved every time. I was just trying to focus in on it when Ian Wallis' voice came to my ears, asking if we'd completed our plans for Pentecost, and I came back to my physical self, seated in the John Wesley Room at the Beacon, clutching my biro.

In the bus on the way home, I considered my dream of Pentecost. To be honest, I was a bit disappointed. It was really low-key: no wind or flame involved, just people getting on with each other, getting on with life, in ordinary situations. And where in all this was God's Spirit? Might we not just as well have been a bunch of social workers or political activists? So I reflected on my dream in the light of this morning's Gospel reading. Any invisible eavesdropper on that situation would hear an ordinary conversation around a well, as we might talk around an office water cooler. They might be a bit surprised to find a woman drawing water in the heat of the day, and conclude that if she didn't come with other women in the cool of dawn or dusk, there must be something dodgy about her. They might also raise an eyebrow at a man meeting alone with her - in the Bible, after all, wells, are where future partners meet. But all they initially seem to be talking about is thirst, obviously a topic of mutual interest.

As we come in, God has just become the subject of conversation; apparently a deliberate detour by the woman from personal experience that is too raw, too painful. As you'd expect from a Jew and a Samaritan, the two have different points of view about God. But Jesus' unexpected contribution to the discussion is that differences in theological opinions matter less than the recognition that God is to be found in shared truth, discerned through the workings of God's spirit within and among the participants.

Thinking back to my dream, like that meeting at a well in Samaria, these encounters in Broomhill and Broomhall were happening on two levels. People were sharing their interests, their lives; as you know, that can sound quite ordinary and somewhat dull to everyone

except the people concerned. When I listened harder, the name of God came into the conversation, mostly not brought in by the people of our churches, but by their conversation partners who, recognising our lot as Christians, wanted to know what, if anything, their faith had to do with their actions. And the underlying message we brought was also clear. We're glad to be here with you, the people from our churches were saying. We want to share our experiences of the important things in life - creativity and justice, community and caring - and to discover your take on them. For we believe God values these things, and we believe God values you, too.

Time for me to come clean. You'll have realised from the beginning that this whole encounter was made up - after all, the CTBB Executive would never leave planning Pentecost to the day beforehand, and even if it did, I'd never drift off in a meeting like that. My conclusion about the workings of God's Spirit, whose truth is discerned through meeting and discussion, is suspiciously similar to the United Reformed Church belief that we find the Spirit's guidance through the councils, the official meetings, of our church, from Church Meeting right up to General Assembly. And for the URC this year is a year of evangelism - so since Advent we in St Andrew's have been reflecting on how we might be able to share our faith with others in words, as well as through the loving service with which we feel much more comfortable.

Given these factors, it's not hard to see why I dreamed this particular Pentecost dream. But my dream is not so far from reality, for our three churches are already involved in many life-giving ways with the communities of Broomhill and Broomhall in which we are set. As you may have noticed, I deliberately excluded anything we do which invites others to come into our congregations and do something on our territory. For on the day of Pentecost, the apostles didn't get people to come into their meeting room. They went out onto the streets and spoke to strangers about God in the strangers' own language.

We too speak more languages than the language of church, so instead of assuming that others will be able or want to put their effort into understanding us, we are still being challenged by the Spirit to activate those other languages, whether it's a creative interest or a social concern, and to trust that if we dare to open our ears and our mouths - preferably in that order - God will still speak through them to many in Broomhill and Broomhall; and even to us.

Happy Pentecost, everybody!

## **Seventh Sunday of Easter**

### **Service Date:**

5 June, 2011

### **Acts 1:6-14**

**Philip:** What do you make of all that, then, Thomas?

**Thomas:** I don't know, Philip. I really don't know.

**Philip:** It seems clear enough to me. We're to go back into Jerusalem, and wait.

**Thomas:** Yes, but wait for what?

**Philip:** 'Power from on high.' That's what Jesus said. You were there - you heard him.

**Thomas:** I know I was there, but to be honest, I'm still having difficulty in believing it. One moment, there he was... the next, there he wasn't. I know it gets cloudy enough up there in the mountains for us to have trouble with visibility, but I still can't make sense of it. And I hate not being able to make sense of life. It's been bad enough these past five weeks, ever since that first Sunday after Passover.

**Philip:** It's been even harder on you than the rest of us, maybe, Thomas. You really like to have things sorted out in your mind, don't you?

**Thomas:** It's the only way I can feel in control. Life's uncertain enough as it is, with taxes going up all the time, and illness coming out of nowhere. That was one reason I followed Jesus in the first place - because he seemed to know just who he was and what he was doing.

**Philip:** But hasn't it been a very unexpected life for us, following him? I never could have predicted it! The people he's healed who were at death's door. The people he welcomed I'd never have spoken with otherwise. All those snappy little stories he told, with an unexpected sting in the tail. After all that terrible business with the cross, God raising him from death, and now, if these two strangers know what they're talking about, taking him back into heaven. None of it's been what we expected, or what we could foresee or control. But hasn't it been marvellous, all the same?

**Thomas:** That's all very well. But what do we do now?

**Philip:** Weren't you listening? Go back and wait, the way he said we ought to.

**Thomas:** But what do we do while we're waiting?

**Philip:** How do you mean, what do we do?

**Thomas:** From what Jesus has been saying, Peter's in charge now. Will he start forming a committee, do you think?

**Philip:** A committee? Don't be ridiculous.

**Thomas:** It's all very well for you to mock. But if there's going to be some new sort of power from God, we'll have to work out how to use it properly, so everyone gets their fair share. On a rota basis, maybe?

**Philip:** I'm not getting your point here.

**Thomas:** And maybe we should think of having new robes made, so we can all look the same and recognise each other in crowds. What would you say to white? Or would it show the dirt too much?

**Philip:** Thomas, there aren't that many of us, and we all know each other anyway. I know how you love organising, but there really isn't anything to organise. All we have to do is wait and see what happens.

**Thomas:** All we have to do? Philip, waiting is the hardest thing I know. I don't so much mind waiting when I know how long I have to wait. But when I don't know what's going to happen or when it's going to start - that drives me crazy!

**Philip:** I know what you mean. But think what we've been told today. We're not to stand here like lemons - the show's over. And Jesus has told all of us together to go back to town and wait for God's power to come. So while we're waiting, we can meet and support each other. We can ask God to give us more of an idea what's going to happen.

**Thomas:** We can let everyone else know what we've seen and heard. Not all the women could get away from their households today, to start with. If we ask Jesus' mother, I know she'll be able to let them know what's happened.

**Philip:** That sounds like a plan!

**Thomas:** And I'm sure Jesus will want us not to give up on praying. Remember that story he used to tell about the widow who wouldn't stop pestering the corrupt judge for her rights?

**Philip:** There, you see? If we start remembering all the stories he told us, the waiting is bound to go faster.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 252:** Hail the day that sees him rise

View the present through the promise (tune: Carolyn)

**R&S 471:** Bless and keep us, Lord

**R&S 260:** Christ is alive!

**Sermon:**

**Psalm 68; John 17:1-11; Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11**

Like Thomas in our theme introduction today, I'm not too keen on waiting, when I don't know exactly what it is I'm waiting for, or when it's going to turn up. Like Thomas, I'd like to be in control of my life: no surprises, no disappointments. But that's not always possible, is it? For there are major forces in life which we do not and cannot control. Think of yesterday's Caledonian plant sale, planned to perfection for months beforehand by Sheila Cooke and her cohorts of Caledonian helpers. If on the day the weather had been wet, even Sheila could have done nothing to stop the rain. Or think of gardening in general. You can prepare the ground, choose the plant most likely to flourish there, plant it properly, water it appropriately. But even Arroll Winning can't give a plant a timetable for its growth. All we can do is to work, as well as we can, with the forces of nature rather than against them. It may feel as if in our theme introduction Thomas and Philip weren't very patient. After all, they only had to wait from Thursday till Sunday to find out what God had in store for them. But of course at the time they didn't know any of that. They didn't know about the coming of God's Spirit. We know the whole story, and I suspect that makes a difference to how we view it.

On the first Sunday of Advent we know that in five weeks' time we will be celebrating Jesus' birth. On the first Sunday of Lent we know Jesus' death and resurrection is only five weeks away. And here we are on the seventh Sunday of Easter, getting ourselves geared up for the coming of the Spirit at St Mark's next week, with all the hoopla of worshipping with our fellow Churches Together in Broomhill and Broomhall to look forward to. I understand why we've codified Christianity into the church year: we can look ahead and plan for each major festival. But it does rather take the surprise out of it. And that means we can be tempted to take the whole amazing story for granted. Yes, of course God came into our world as a baby. Yes, as a man Jesus healed, taught, suffered and died. Yes, God raised him from death; yes, he returned to heaven; yes, he'll come again - what were you expecting?

We have the church year under control. We can anticipate each twist and turn, each plot development in the longest ever soap opera: what God is doing with humanity. But our own lives? The life of our own church? That's another matter. And like Thomas and Philip, I suspect we are rather familiar with the phase between Ascension and Pentecost: the time in which we are waiting for God to come to our aid, without knowing just how that will happen, or what impact it may have on us.

What help may our other readings give us in this in-between time? How may our stories and our church's story connect up with the Bible's story, God's story? To start with, it looks as if we shouldn't expect our waiting to be easy. Look at our reading from the first letter of Peter, which jumps right in, assuring its readers: don't be taken by surprise when you suffer, as if it wasn't something we as Christians should expect. The letter is written to churches under persecution, in an age when Christianity was a banned religion, because those who practised it refused to give due respect to the Roman gods everyone else worshipped. But today, though there are places in the world where Christians are persecuted for their faith, Sheffield is certainly not one of them. Does the reading have any relevance for us, beyond prodding us to remember in prayer our fellow believers in other countries where it is a

dangerous business to admit allegiance to Jesus Christ?

It urges us to share Christ's sufferings, so that we can be glad when his glory is revealed. So let's look to our Gospel reading, where Jesus himself makes that unexpected connection between suffering and glory. Here, John portrays Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper, with his friends seated around him. Soon one of them would betray him, one would deny knowing him, nine would run away and, while he was dying in agony, only one would still be present. Yet his prayer describes his coming crucifixion, when he will be given into the hands of his enemies to do with as they wished, as a way to give God glory. It seems, then, that that moment of vulnerability, when all we can do is wait for power beyond our control to act upon us, is one we share with Jesus.

Not being in control is an unavoidable aspect of life. When we wait to see whether the plant will thrive, for the doctor's diagnosis or the exam results, for a friend's response to something very private we have chosen to share, we are sharing in the vulnerability of all humanity. I certainly do not believe that the more we suffer, the better Christians we are. But as Christians we know we share that experience with Jesus. He has known that time of waiting, of suffering, when we can do nothing to influence a vital outcome. And if, as he did, we deliberately choose to put our trust in God, to leave the result in God's hands, we are giving God glory, too.

Trusting the God who has helped us in the past to resolve our present waiting is nothing new for God's people. In our psalm, the writer looks back to the time when God led the people of Israel out of slavery and guided them through the desert to a land they could call home. Sadly, those who rule in Israel now remember those parts of their story which speak of victory over others who lived in the land, but not those parts urging them to protect foreigners because of their own experiences in Egypt. It is easy for us, too, to highlight some parts of our church's story. We remember with pride how even a bomb falling in this very sanctuary during the Sheffield Blitz could not stop us worshipping. I suspect we are tempted to forget the time when an organ was first installed in the sanctuary, and this new way of worship so troubled some at St Andrew's that a church member vandalised it by cutting the bellows. Today, with our worship so greatly enhanced by Douglas' musicianship, that seems a strange story to want to remember. But it can encourage us that developments in the life of our church which may initially seem strange or disruptive can help us in the worship of God, which is our church's reason to live. When the next generation looks back at our church's life, I wonder, how, with the benefit of hindsight, will they see our waiting resolved? What will they highlight as God's work with us? As we seek the answer to that question, let's go on waiting and praying together, like Jesus' first friends, for God's spirit to inspire and renew us, so that we in St Andrew's can continue to bear our part in the universal song: My God and King!

### **Sixth Sunday of Easter**

#### **Service Date:**

29 May, 2011

New Testament reading: Acts 17:22-31 retold as follows:

**Sarah:** And now, live from the Areopagus in Athens, it's the show you've all been waiting for: Mastermind, with your host Dionysius Dionysiusson. And as those famously menacing notes of the Mastermind theme music fade away, let us have our first contestant.

**DD:** Please come forward. What is your name?

**Paul:** Paul from Tarsus.

**DD:** And your specialist subject is?

**Paul:** God.

**DD:** God. Quite a large specialist subject. Are you quite sure about that?

**Paul:** Yes. God.

**DD:** In that case, let us begin. Do you have to know anything about God in order to worship properly?

**Paul:** Only that God is. Here in Athens, you have an altar inscribed 'to an unknown god'.

**DD:** Correct. We believe in covering all the bases in Athens. What is God's area of responsibility?

**Paul:** Making heaven and earth and everything in them.

**DD:** Correct. Does God live in human temples or need human service?

**Paul:** No. God doesn't need us for anything. After all, God made us too, all the nations and peoples on earth.

**DD:** Correct. Is God a long way away from us?

**Paul:** No. We only live and move and exist because of God. We are God's children.

**DD:** Correct. Is God made from gold, or silver, or stone?

**Paul:** None of those. God isn't like a work of art made out of our imagination. God is real.

**DD:** Correct. What does God want us to do?

**Paul:** God wants us to turn over a new leaf, get rid of our silly ideas about what God wants and do right instead of wrong.

**DD:** Correct. And how does God plan to change our minds?

**Paul:** By bringing someone back to life after he died.

**DD:** I'm sorry, I can't accept that answer.

**Paul:** I've started with that belief, and I'll finish with it.

Paul had a lot of common ground with the people he met in Athens. They believed the world wasn't made by chance, but had been created. They believed God wasn't far away, but could be found in the middle of our lives. They believed that one day God would put right everything that was wrong. Paul believed all that, and many people of different faiths living today would agree with that, too.

But Paul went one step further. He believed God had showed us how serious God was about putting everything right by bringing Jesus back to life after he had been killed.

This is the special idea Christians have that we can offer to people of other faiths or of none.

We share with everyone else our experiences of the beauty of the earth and the joy of human love. Sharing those experiences is one way into sharing our faith in God. But our belief that God has transformed human death by giving Jesus new life is something for which we can praise and thank God, something special that is ours to share with other people, when we talk together about how the world makes sense to us.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 115** is a setting of Psalm 145 by the English Congregationalist hymnwriter Isaac Watts, first published in the Baptist *Hymns and Psalms* of 1858. The tune Church Triumphant was written by J.W. Elliott and first published in *Church Hymns with Tunes* of 1874.

**R&S 41** according to the *Companion to Rejoice and Sing* was 'inspired by a view from a hilltop near [the author's] native city of Bath, when the spring beauty of the landscape caused him to meditate on the gifts of God'. The tune Dix is adapted from a chorale by Conrad Kocher published in 1838.

**R&S 284** is another Isaac Watts classic, exploring the glory of God found in nature and supremely in Jesus. The tune Truro was originally partnered with this hymn, in *Psalmodia*

*Evangelica* of 1789. The name is unexplained.

**R&S 38** is our most contemporary hymn today, written in 1813 by John Marriott and first given publicity at the Annual Meeting of the London Missionary Society in May 1825, about six weeks after Marriott's death. The tune *Moscow* is adapted from an original by Felice Giardini, named after the city where the composer died.

**Sermon:**

**Psalm 66:8-20; John 14:15-21; Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22**

I always prefer agreeing with someone rather than having an argument with them. It feels so much politer to agree, especially when it's a matter of opinion rather than provable fact. And yet sometimes you've got to stand up for what you believe in, even if others are not going to like it. To give you one small example, recently I was visiting someone who said she was going to see a psychic, and what did I think of the idea. It wasn't a one-to-one session, but someone coming to do a show at the Town Hall, and a friend had given her a ticket. The person I was visiting really missed her aunt, who was dead. Where was the harm in going for a bit of a laugh, to see if she could find out anything about her aunt?

I don't know anything directly about psychics; I've never been to such a show, or watched it on TV. So I had little direct evidence for forming an opinion - assuming, that is, that the psychic concerned was not fraudulent, which would obviously make paying them any money a very bad idea. All I had to go on is what I have read in the Bible, which is extremely negative towards the idea of trying to contact dead people, and my belief that God can be trusted to look after those we have loved and lost without our checking up on their wellbeing. My friend asked me what I thought, so I told her. She didn't like it much, but at least we both knew our positions.

In our reading from the first letter of Peter this morning, we're advised 'always to be ready to make our defence to anyone who demands from us an accounting for the hope that is in us'. The letter is being written to people who are in danger of persecution for their faith. We might imagine good advice in such a case would be to say, Try not to get into that sort of conversation, but if you do, don't say anything that could be used as evidence against you. But no: instead, the letter states baldly: if you've got to suffer in this life, you may as well suffer for doing right. In other words: if someone asks you about your faith, tell them, even if they're not going to like what they hear. That does not, of course, mean we should aggressively share our faith whether people want to hear it or not.

The same passage tells us to do it 'with gentleness and reverence'. Gentleness because yelling at people who aren't interested that 'God is love!' doesn't quite capture the message we're trying to communicate. Reverence because whoever we speak to is made in God's image, loved by Christ and inspired by God's spirit. As Paul put it in Athens, quoting a Greek poet, 'we are all God's children'.

The difficulty, or one difficulty, in talking about our faith may be that we're not quite confident we've got all the details straight ourselves. For example, what's all this a bit further down in the same reading about the spirits in prison and Noah's ark? How does that fit into the story we know about Jesus, his living, loving, dying and rising to new life? Well, it's a mysterious passage, but scholars think the 'spirits in prison' may refer either to those people who died in the days of Noah, before Jesus' birth, and therefore could not hear the good news he brought, or to evil spirits at that time who instigated the human evil which brought on the Flood. In either case, Jesus is portrayed, in those three dark days between death and resurrection, as making contact with and rescuing from death those who would otherwise have no hope. That's another little piece of evidence for my belief that Christians

should leave psychics well alone; Jesus is on the case. But it's much more than that. When we are under pressure because of our faith, the letter advises, we are to remember our baptism.

How can remembering our baptism help us keep the faith? Well, I don't mean the day itself, which most of us here this morning are unlikely to remember. It's the assurance it gives us that once we are baptised, we ourselves become part of Christ; our stories aligned with his story. We too, on the way through our lives, will have little deaths: losing family or friends; giving up work or letting go of things we used to be able to do; sometimes deliberately sacrificing comfort or security for the sake of others. We too, through time, may discover the joy of little resurrections: new life, new hope, each new day a gift from God.

The Psalmist too can testify to such experiences. As silver coins are tested to see their quality, God has tested him to see if his faith is genuine. He has felt trapped and hemmed in like a bird in a net; he has laboured like a heavily-laden mule; he has been attacked as if by cavalry, by fire and by water. But God has brought him through and given him breathing space so he can go on. Now in thanksgiving, because God heard his prayer for help, he wants to share with God his investments: the animals of his herds.

But our baptism, as the letter explains, also offers us God's gift of a good conscience: the ability to keep the commandments of love of which Jesus speaks to his friends in our Gospel reading this morning. We are to be loving to our family and friends - and sometimes that can be a challenge - but also to our neighbours and even to strangers. And part of that duty of love is for us not to hide from others, if they should ask, our account of the faith which motivates us.

Again, that doesn't mean we should expect immediately to win others over to our point of view. As we heard in the theme introduction, towards the end of his visit to Athens Paul started to tell the Athenians about God having raised Jesus from death. That broke up their discussion; most of his hearers scoffed, but some said, Let's talk again about this. And Luke notes that as a result several people, including Damaris and Dionysius, became Christians. We ourselves may never know the long-term results of a quiet word spoken in the middle of everyday conversation, but that should not deter us from expressing to others the faith that's in us.

This last week, I took part in the national Roman Catholic-United Reformed Church dialogue which happens twice a year. We come from all over the country, so the meetings can be anywhere, but this time, thank goodness, we were quite close at hand, in Leeds. One of our topics in this meeting was the question of Communion, and why it could not be shared between us. As you can imagine, it was not an easy conversation to have. I have known these dozen people for four years now. I appreciate them.

It was very hard for the Roman Catholics among us to explain how painful it was that their rules forbade them to share with us, and for us to hear them. It was very hard for the United Reformed Church people among us to explain how hurtful it felt that our invitation to Communion was not taken up, and hard for the Catholics to be continually invited when they could not take up such an invitation. But both sides spoke with gentleness and reverence, and truth was spoken and heard, if not the truth we would have liked to speak and hear.

The next morning, we went on to discuss the future course of our meetings. And then, as at each of our gatherings, we ended with Communion, which I was due to lead. It was a very strange experience. When I said the words of invitation, 'This is the table not of the church, but of the Lord', I was taken back to our discussion the previous evening; witnessing to the

truth of Christ as well as leading worship. As the URC participants accepted bread and wine from me, and the Roman Catholics, a blessing, we acknowledged the strength of the communion we share, however partial it must be for now. The dialogue must go on, perhaps for many more years, before things can change. Yet as a result of daring to speak and hear truth from each other, we, the participants have changed, for the better. This is not a sermon for everyone. Some Christians are brimming with confidence about what God has done for them, and need to be shut up (gently and courteously), so they can practise listening to other people. But others, and I suspect this congregation among them, don't like to put themselves forward as knowing anything. After our Tuesday service last week, the Moderator commented to me that we in St Andrew's don't like to talk about ourselves, in spite of all the good work we do here. But Jesus is worth our confidence and our praise. So why not, this week, give a bit of thought to what you might say if someone were to ask, Why are you a Christian? Even if nobody does ask, you can always put it into a prayer - give credit where credit's due!

#### **Fourth Sunday of Easter: Celebration service for users of our building**

##### **Service Date:**

23 May, 2011

##### **Acts 2:42-47**

The reading Jillian Creasy has just given us - and by the way, Jillian, congratulations on your recent re-election to the Council! - gives us a snapshot of the way the first Christians behaved. It's a write-up after the event, so we can be fairly sure that not everything in the garden was rosy; and, indeed, the next part of the book of Acts gives us a cautionary tale about how damaging it can be when people pretend to share their resources with others, but actually keep them for themselves. But if Christians then and now haven't always lived up to that ideal, it is a picture we in this church take very seriously of how we should be living, how we should be using what we have.

Rather than those who have riches priding themselves on their bank balance and keeping it for themselves, our ancestors in the faith thought it was more important for the haves to give to the have-nots, for those with resources to use them for the benefit of those in need. And in twenty-first century Sheffield one of the ways we follow that through is by sharing the spaces of our building with those in need of somewhere to work or to play. Apart from one-off celebrations and events, we have a huge variety of regular users of the building, as we will hear later in our prayers. And today we are very happy to welcome six sets of people representing those users: the Jesus Army, the Broomspring Writers Group; Councillor Jillian Creasy, the Antioch Church, St Andrew's Tennis Club and the Sheffield Youth Orchestra. All use our facilities or our resources in different ways. But, again like the first Christians, it's not a case of us at St Andrew's being the generous givers and the rest of you as the passive takers. Without the income we receive from hiring out our premises we would have a hard time to stay afloat as a church, but I don't just mean that.

As we progress through the service, you'll see just a sample of the huge range of talents the users of this building have chosen to share with us, ways in which we at St Andrew's and the wider community are enriched. It's a relationship of mutuality.

Those who use our building will have different reasons for putting their time, effort and money into what they do here. For some it will be a question of creativity, whether through words or music. For some, physical activity is a joyful end in itself, all the stronger when combined with social activity and support for members' lives. For some, a concern for

human justice and for the protection of our environment is a driving force.

But as the song just shared with us by the Antioch Church has expressed, for us at St Andrew's, and for two of our regular user groups, Antioch and the Jesus Army, it is the pattern of one particular life, the life of Jesus, which shapes what we say and what we do. Jesus was known for enjoying parties. There's been a suggestion that next year, we might throw a party at St Andrew's to celebrate with more people from our user groups than feel comfortable in a formal service of worship - for one thing, I struggle to see the Flying Teapots, the University circus skills society, fitting in, though I'd be very happy to give it a go if anyone can suggest how. But just for the moment, I'm glad to put the gifts and motivations of all this gathering into the wider context of God's creativity, God's love, God's welcome of each one of us into this place and this time. And now it's time for the children with us to go to their own groups.

#### **Hymns:**

**CG 66:** Jesus calls us here to meet him

I stand amazed (duet by members of Antioch Community Church)

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

In our city life is promise (tune: R&S 42, East Acklam)

#### **Sermon:**

**Psalm 23; John 10:1-10; Acts 2:42-47**

These readings come up time and again, because we work on a three-year cycle that covers the highlights of the Bible. And every time they come up, something else about them strikes me, depending on what's happening in my life, in St Andrew's and in the life of the world. This time, when I looked over the passage Kevin read for us from John's Gospel, it's the very last bit that hit me between the eyes: Jesus saying, 'I've come so people can have life, and have it abundantly.'

Partly, I have to admit, this is because the rest of the passage is one of John's less successful metaphors, at least for us in twenty-first century Sheffield. When Jesus says he's the door of the sheepfold, he's not trying to persuade his hearers that he's a wooden board on hinges. Palestinian sheepfolds, where the flock was herded in at night to be safe from thieves and wolves alike, didn't have doors. Instead, the shepherd curled up in the gap in the wall for an uncomfortable night's doze, knowing that if anyone or anything tried to get in that way, they'd wake him up in the process. But in any case, just after the passage we've heard, Jesus shifts the metaphor to one that works better for us, and talks instead about being a good shepherd. The image has tradition behind it. The psalm we've sung this morning, about God being the shepherd of Israel, would already have been known and loved for centuries. It's frequently chosen at funerals for its reassuring picture of God looking after us and making sure we'll be all right, no matter what dark road we may have to walk.

That's the good side of it. The bad side, of course, is that each shepherd had his own flock, and knew very well which sheep were his and which were not. It's tempting for Christians to feel smug about being God's little lambs inside the fold, leaving inferior sheep and even goats to wander around outside, getting into trouble. One of the things people outside churches say of insiders is that we think we're perfect and they're rubbish - and while that's obviously not true, we can sometimes give that impression.

Fortunately, Jesus also speaks a bit later on in the same passage of having other sheep that belong to a different fold. Whether he meant people who weren't Jewish, or people who wouldn't understand themselves as his followers, it's a timely reminder for people in

churches that we don't have a monopoly on him. But before I get sidetracked, let's get back to the line that struck me about this reading: Jesus saying, 'I've come so people can have life, and have it abundantly.'

I suspect this sentence stood out for me because of how it contradicts what we keep on hearing these days: that there is a financial deficit, that there must be cuts, that in order to get back to life as we once knew it, for the next few years we will have to tighten our belts and sacrifice many of the public services that help those in most need. The economic situation in first-century Palestine wasn't wonderful either, with smallholders being thrown off their land and forced to work for absentee landlords for a pittance, or even go into slavery. So was Jesus being irresponsible, promising the earth to his hearers so they would follow him and overthrow the Romans? It seems unlikely, for the man who reckoned it was more likely for a camel to get through a needle's eye than for rich people to get into heaven. What did he mean, then? Pie in the sky when you die? But he seems to be talking about life here and now, not just heavenly rewards.

We may get a clue to Jesus' meaning when we look at what he told Peter, one of his best friends. On hearing that rich people wouldn't be first into heaven, Peter not unreasonably asked Jesus, 'Well, we've followed you from the beginning. What will we get out of it?' Jesus' response is cryptic: 'Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.' A hundred houses? A hundred brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers? A hundred children? A hundred fields? The only way it makes any sort of sense is for us to go back to Acts, and the first Christians' habit of sharing what they had.

We in churches might read Jesus' words a bit ironically. Every now and then someone asks me why I don't have a family, and I reply, almost sincerely:

It takes me all my time and energy to look after the church! I couldn't cope with having a family too! But seriously, when churches are working the way they should, it is like having an extended family - yes, misunderstandings and fallings out, but more often interest, kindness, support and help offered in times of need. And when churches are working the way they should, that response applies not only to those in the right fold, whether that's labelled Antioch, Jesus Army or St Andrew's, but to everyone who comes into contact with us.

Jesus famously never stayed put in a particular fold himself: his friends included prostitutes, financiers, freedom fighters, labourers and foreigners, but not many religious people. His idea of abundant life, unlike our own temptation in these anxious times to get all we can and keep it safe for us and ours, was to find people who'd been left out of communal life and bring them back in. That's what he said God was like, too. Unlike our own, God's resources of creativity and love never run low but are always abundant. And Jesus reckoned God, as a good shepherd, was more interested in people who'd got lost and wanted some help getting back to the fold than in people who never put a foot wrong to start with.

That's good news for us in this church. We know we don't always get things right, in our dealings with each other or in our relationships with the other users of our building. We have fears about the future, what role God will call us to play in it and how we will be able to respond to that call. But in spite of our fears, we believe God calls us to share what we have with those who are in need. And we believe we too benefit from the God-given gifts of others: of music, poetry and prose, of song, prayer and activity, of the thirst for justice. The only sensible way I can describe all this is abundant life, seen through the many and

different gifts which God has given to us and all the users of this building for the benefit of all. Thanks be to God!

### **Third Sunday of Easter**

#### **Service Date:**

8 May, 2011

Retelling of the journey to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 240:** Jesus, Lord, Redeemer (tune i)

**R&S 107:** The love of God comes close

**R&S 354:** Come, living God, when least expected

**R&S 529** (tune 566): Light of the minds that know him

#### **Sermon:**

##### **Psalm 116; Luke 24:13-35; Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 1:17-23**

As you can tell from the butterflies, today we're still in the season of Easter - as we will be for another month yet - but as well as that, we're thankfully starting to get back into the rhythms of normal life, after all these bank holidays, not to mention the royal wedding. Maybe the couple we've heard about this morning on the road to Emmaus might want to get back to normal, too. Empty tombs, angels, mystery gardeners - they can't cope with all these unexplained events. They want to get back home, where they know what's what and who's who. And given the horrible shock they've had, you can't blame them.

But it's such a huge happening, it won't go away. Do you remember in the days before the royal wedding last week, when all the papers, all the TV channels seemed to be talking about nothing but The Great Event? Or maybe you'll call to mind the sad days after an unexpected death, when every face in the street looks like the one you've lost? In a similar way, however much they may want to get back to normal, the walkers on the road to Emmaus just can't get Jesus' terrible death out of their minds.

And God knew that. God knows when our minds are so taken up by sorrow that we cannot focus on anything else. So even as Jesus walks along the road beside them, waiting for them to really see him, waiting for them to be ready to hear what he has to say to them, he offers them the chance first to share what's on their minds with him.

I wonder, though: do we always take up that opportunity? I have heard a woman of this congregation say to me, 'I'm so upset about what's happened to me recently, I'm feeling so hurt, that I don't want to come back to church until I feel better again.' And while I could sympathise with her desire not to lose control and show her vulnerability in front of others, I was sad that she could not consider bringing her hurt to God in worship, when, as that couple on the Emmaus road discovered, God longs to hear what's on our minds and hearts; to take our hurts and carry them for us; to begin the gentle process of healing that is possible when we expose our innermost truth to ourselves and to God.

For when we do give God the burden of our hurt, when we dare to speak and hear that truth, we become able to hear God's voice speaking into our lives, throwing light on darkness, giving meaning to suffering. I wish with all my heart that those two on the road to Emmaus had thought to take notes of all the ways in which Jesus' suffering was foreshadowed in the Bible; yet I suspect each of them will have heard the words that would mean most in their individual circumstances. Had you been there, had I been there, we would each have heard and passed on different aspects of what he said.

Speaking to God, hearing God, however, is by no means the end of the story when we walk the Emmaus road. For words alone cannot carry all the meaning of our lives. Sometimes symbols or gestures can express even greater depths of meaning: like butterflies, symbols of new life, the same yet different from the old; or like Jesus' way of blessing and breaking bread which brought back to his friends the memory of so many shared meals. In our Communion services we deliberately recall this memory; yet that's only five times a year. Why not, as the Salvation Army do, extend the Communion symbol of food blessed and shared to every meal we eat with others? And if we take up that way of living, the whole of everyday life can become a meeting point with God - from the wild flowers whose beauty reminded Jesus of his heavenly Father's care, to the journey on which we may meet him in a stranger's guise.

And the story continues. For when our hearts have been warmed by our meeting with God on the road of life, how can we keep that to ourselves? The walkers to Emmaus shared the joy of their sudden recognition of Jesus with the others who followed him. They found, to their surprise, that those others also had their own distinctive story to share; for God deals with each of us as individuals. But in our reading from Acts, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter takes it one stage further, explaining to crowds of strangers, coming from every land to worship God in Jerusalem, just what the significance of Jesus is; offering his hearers a way, through baptism, to respond to his invitation to change their minds, change their hearts, change their lives: to meet God for themselves.

And we should be warned by this that the encounter with God will not leave us unchanged. Our reading from the first letter of Peter comes from a point even further down the road than our reading from Acts, following on from the energy and motivation Jesus' friends find on the day of Pentecost when God's Holy Spirit kick-starts the church. This letter was written to Christians who already knew what it was to be a church, and the writer reminds them that when they met God, their status changed. They changed the way they lived; they put their trust in God; they had genuine love for each other. And all this had happened not through their own attempts to live a different life, but because of their new relationship with Jesus.

We're back to the Royal Wedding. For the media it was portrayed as a 'happy ever after' for Catherine and William. But the day which saw their wedding was not only the end of their lives as single people, but the beginning of their new life together as Duke and Duchess of Cambridge - and, more importantly, as husband and wife: one flesh, in which they are no longer to think only of themselves, but first to consider each other. In a wider way, the encounter with the risen Jesus on the Emmaus road did the same to the friends who met him there, turning them from acquaintances to his committed followers. And that same unexpected encounter, turning up at any point in their ordinary lives, has transformed Christians ever since. But what in practice do I mean by that rather loose and woolly phrase, 'the encounter with Jesus'? How it happens will be different for everyone, but here are some of its results. For some, it's a word of hope heard through grief which makes it possible to go on. For some, a deep healing of hurt, restoring them to the world. But, thank God, not everyone who encounters Jesus is in a position of need. What about those for whom life is going well? On their Emmaus road, they will meet the one who can make sense not only of their own lives, but of the world with all its difficulties and contradictions. They will find a whole new family to love and be loved in ways they never envisaged. And they will find both joy in serving others and the unquenchable hope that, in spite of evil and sorrow, all will yet be well.

## **Easter Sunday**

### **Service Date:**

24 April, 2011

### **Comment**

Can you guess what these are? [Easter eggs]

Why do we have eggs at Easter? [chocolate, Easter bunny, new life]

What sort of new life comes out of eggs? [caterpillars, birds, reptiles, dinosaurs, chickens etc]

What sort of new life will come out of this egg? [open: empty]

That's strange. Should we try again with the other one? [open: empty]

Well, it's a funny sort of new life we're celebrating if it's all about something you don't find. I must be looking in the wrong place to find it.

Let's listen to our Gospel reading this morning, and listen out for something the people in it don't find, because they're looking for it in the wrong place.

### **[Matthew 28:1-10]**

What were the people in that story expecting to find?

[Jesus' body]

What did they find in the tomb? [an angel; nothing]

Who did they find outside the tomb? [Jesus, alive again]

That's one reason why we eat eggs at Easter - because we're remembering the tomb Jesus was buried in, and the big surprise Jesus' friends had when they went to see his body. They thought he was still dead. But while no one was there, while no one was looking, God had given Jesus new life, a different sort of life, just like a bird is different from the egg that held it. So we remember the empty tomb - and eat the empty Easter eggs. Would you like a few more to eat? [pass round]

We'll share the chocolate in the big eggs together when we meet in the hall after church.

But in the meantime I'll leave them here, to remind us of the huge and unexpected answer Jesus' friends got when they looked for him dead, and found him alive.

All the way through Lent we've been asking hard questions, which we see in the five big question marks we've made. Last week we remembered Jesus' death, and made three crosses to think about him dying with men who'd done something wrong on either side of him. But today we should turn the middle cross into an exclamation mark, because Jesus is alive again - God's big answer to all the questions that bother us, but an answer we may not be looking in the right places to find.

And let's sing again, remembering how Jesus' story started: as a baby, then grown up as a man who knew what it was like to be in pain, then someone who went through death: but whose love for us and everyone never stops. Because that's the biggest answer of all: how, no matter what happens to us, we can go on loving and looking after people.

### **Hymns:**

**R&S 232** comes from the pen of the great Methodist hymnwriter Charles Wesley, and was originally published in *Hymns and Sacred Poems of 1739* with eleven verses. It may have been modelled on the Latin hymn 'Surrexit Christus hodie' (Christ is risen today). The tune Easter Hymn was first published in 1708 and was used by Wesley, for some unknown reason under the name Salisbury.

**R&S 522**, by the 20th-century hymn-writer Graham Kendrick (words and music), does not directly describe Christ's resurrection. However, the story going from Gethsemane ('the

garden of tears') to Christ's triumphant return to heaven would make no sense at all without Easter.

**R&S 435** also has words written in the 20th century, by a URC minister, Colin Thompson. It was designed to be an offertory hymn, bringing our gifts of love and life as well as of money to God, but it also has an Easter-like and springtime feel to it. The tune Ave virgo virginum (Hail, Virgin of virgins in Latin) is a medieval German melody.

**R&S 247** was originally by a French writer, published in 1884 as 'A toi la gloire' (Thine be the glory), and translated into English both in 1924 by R.B. Hoyle and in 1988 by Alan Gaunt. Though the second set of words is a much more modern paraphrase, the earlier words have now become enshrined in church tradition. The tune Maccabeus comes from Georg Friedrich Handel, originally being used in the chorus 'See the conquering hero comes'.

### **Sermon:**

#### **Jeremiah 31:1-6; Matthew 28:1-10**

After six solid weeks of big questions, you might have thought that you'd be due nothing but answers today. But our Hebrew Bible passage this morning isn't playing fair, for it raises yet more questions!

I think it's fair to say, in general, without being overly harsh about it, that the prophet Jeremiah didn't make his name by being cheerful. The very word Jeremiad means a long-drawn out complaint. Given how God kept on giving the prophet important things to say, but people kept on not listening to a word he said, I can quite understand why. But in our reading this morning, Jeremiah's not in the mood for a jeremiad. Here he's a positively jolly Jeremiah, and the question is: why?

It's not as if he's relenting and cheering up as we get towards the end of his prophecy. Believe me, after this chapter there are another twenty-odd to go, most of them full of enough gloom and doom to satisfy the most exacting prophet-watcher. The other odd thing about this prophecy is how it promises much more than Jeremiah's hearers could have expected. Not only will all the exiles of Judah, the southern kingdom, return from Babylon; exiles from Samaria, the northern kingdom lost to Assyria centuries before, people they'd written off as lost, not part of Israel any more, will do just the same. Just like Miriam and the women of Israel, singing and dancing with tambourines on the far shores of the Reed Sea after their escape from Egypt, the whole people of Israel will once more rejoice in God. And as those who plant vines can enjoy their fruit, as guards who watch for trouble on the borders can decide to give it up and make pilgrimage to Jerusalem instead, the kingdom will be reunited in peace, as it once was under David and Solomon.

Why is there such hope, tucked away in the middle of a jeremiad where we might never think to look for it? Well, four of the six verses we've heard read today mention God as the source of all this activity, all this unexpected joy. It looks as if when God answers a question, it's a big answer.

But sometimes there seems to be little point in asking the question to start with. It can't have been easy on the first Easter Sunday to see why anyone would care what happened after just one more political killing. Sure, the relations and well-wishers of the victim would want to visit the tomb, say their private goodbyes. But to be bluntly honest, why should anyone else be interested? The events of the week before were sad, but they were history. What was needed now was for everyone to forget it and move on, hoping things might pan out better next time. Right?

Wrong. We've already established in our theme introduction that the women who went to Jesus' tomb discovered they'd been asking the wrong questions. They'd been looking for an

answer to the question - and it was an important one - how can we open up the tomb, so we can treat Jesus' dead body with the respect it deserves?

What they found was an unsought and unexpected answer to an even bigger question: where has he gone? And the angel's reply comes as a shock: not here, among the dead: he has been raised to new life. The answer they'd hoped to hear turned out to be much too small to fit the huge reality of God's response.

I think sometimes we in churches can be satisfied with answers that are too small, answers that fit our expectations of reality, but don't take God's habit of giving big answers into account. On Easter Sunday we properly rejoice together that Jesus is alive. On Easter Monday we resume our normal lives: Bank Holiday travel arrangements; planning our summer holidays; keeping in touch with the family, managing work and health and finances. What difference, if any, might the news of Jesus' resurrection make to all that?

Well, if you've been listening to what I've been saying for the past six years - and if not, I'm jolly well going to change my name to Jeremiah - you'll know I don't think God waves a magic wand to fix our problems. If that had been the case, it would have happened for Jesus, and his friends and followers would have mourned his death decades later in bed, at a ripe old age. No, God's answer is bigger than that. Better than that.

God takes the questions we live with every day, our real concerns, and answers them with Jesus. He has gone on ahead of us into Galilee, our ordinary lives, so that as we live our ordinary lives we can start to see the new life of God's kingdom shining through.

Fine words, but how do I see this working out in practice?

Have you felt the depths of God's love for you, love that will never let go, love that can help us let go of our fears and reach out to others?

Have you been forgiven when you know you were wrong?

Have you been able to forgive others in spite of your hurt?

Have you found unexpected peace in the middle of crisis?

That's God's new life, working in us and through us.

But God's new life is not only for us and ours. Jesus is the Yes pronounced upon God's promise of a good creation and of a peaceful and just society. When fish swim in a river that once was polluted, when ancient enemies sign a peace accord and begin the process of truth and reconciliation, when people of different races and nations honour God's image in one another, that too is God's new life, which cannot be stopped. For Jesus' resurrection shows that goodness really is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death.

Answers don't come bigger than that. But an answer is only any good when it's heard, and understood, and acted upon.

Our Moderator, Kevin Watson, asked us at a recent ministers' retreat which day in Holy Week we thought was the most important.

Some would say Good Friday, when God showed us just how far love can go. Some would say today, Easter Sunday, when God showed us how death and destruction do not have the final word. But Kevin would say tomorrow, Easter Monday: the day we resume our normal lives, go back to our ordinary concerns. For if Jesus' friends, who discovered his tomb to be empty, had not followed his command to go and share the news with friends, there would be no Gospel and no Christianity. Answers this big have to be passed on.

## **Fifth Sunday of Easter**

**Service Date:**

22 May, 2011

For Robert Beard's sermon, please scroll down.

**Hymns:**

**CG 130:** There's a spirit in the air

**CG 16:** Brother, sister, let me serve you

**CG 128:** The servant king

**CG 108:** Sing of the Lord's goodness

**Sermon:**

**Rapture and Responsibility**

OK, first things first: Are we missing anyone? Take a good look around you; is anyone absent this morning whom you expected to see here?

Alright, next question: Has anyone noticed any small heaps of clothes, shoes and personal possessions, such as wallets, mobile phones or jewellery, lying around in unexpected places?

No? Ah well, maybe the Rapture didn't happen yesterday after all.

Just in case anyone missed the news story, 89-year-old Californian evangelist Harold Camping calculated from his own interpretations of the Biblical evidence that the Day of Judgement was imminent. In an interview with The New York Times, he said, "When we get to May 21 on the calendar in any city or country in the world, and the clock says about - this is based on other verses in the Bible - when the clock says about 6 p.m., there's going to be this tremendous earthquake that's going to make the last earthquake in Japan seem like nothing in comparison. And the whole world will be alerted that Judgment Day has begun. And then it will follow the sun around for 24 hours. As each area of the world gets to that point of 6 p.m. on May 21, then it will happen there, and until it happens, the rest of the world will be standing far off and witnessing the horrible thing that is happening."

Mr Camping claimed that 6.00 p.m. yesterday evening was exactly 7,000 years after the Flood. His organisation's website, familyradio.com, states that "We learn from the Bible that Holy God plans to rescue about 200 million people (that is about 3% of today's population). On the first day of the Day of Judgment (May 21, 2011) they will be caught up (raptured) into Heaven because God had great mercy for them."

Those left behind would then endure six months of anguish and misery, culminating in God's destruction of the world on 21 December.

Such was Mr Camping's faith in his own predictions that he organised a worldwide, multimedia advertising campaign. The announcement that yesterday would be Judgement Day featured on hoardings, sandwich boards, car-stickers, radio and television broadcasts and, of course, all over the internet.

For once, atheists and mainstream Christian denominations found themselves allies in denouncing Mr Camping's prognostications, albeit for rather different reasons: the Churches on the Biblical grounds that Jesus said no one knew the day or the hour, and the atheists on the grounds that all religion is, at best, well-intentioned fantasy.

Among the responses I've come across, my favourites are, first, an atheist and entrepreneur from New Hampshire, Bart Centre, who set up a business for Eternal Earth-bound Pets, to look after the pets of those who believed they would be raptured. He has more than 250 clients who are paying up to \$135 (£83) to have their pets picked up and cared for after the rapture. They would be disappointed twice, he told the Wall Street Journal. "Once because they weren't raptured and again because I don't do refunds."

Secondly, an associate of Mr Camping's who said, "The only countries I don't feel too good

about are the 'stans' - you know, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan..."

and, thirdly, a Methodist minister who said, "Apparently, Jesus is coming today to take all true Christians to heaven. Regular Sunday services will remain unaffected."

And here we are!

As the hours ticked by yesterday, the usually talkative Mr Camping remained uncannily quiet. A 'RaptureFail' map was posted online where people were invited to post their locations as the appointed time came and went. Atheist and Humanist groups in the United States planned weekend-long 'Rapture after-parties' to celebrate the non-event.

It's all hugely entertaining, of course, but it raises some serious challenges for everyone, not least those like me who find it so entertaining, because I have a theory about what's really going on here.

I can't help but notice that, whatever religious tradition gives rise to them, these prophecies of doom invariably seem to emerge from beliefs that recognise the appalling mess the world is in, and rely on a deity or other supernatural or spiritual being who, sooner or later, will come and sort it all out for us. It's that last bit that bothers me.

Last month I celebrated my fiftieth birthday. That may make me still a relative babe in arms compared with many people, but it's given me long enough to notice that one way of looking at Christian believers is to divide us into two main types:

On the one hand, there are those who believe that Jesus' life, death and resurrection brought salvation to the world, and that our calling is to believe in him and proclaim this message to others. This is sometimes described as the "religion about Jesus".

On the other hand, there are those who believe that in his life, death and resurrection, Jesus pioneered the way of salvation, and that our calling is to follow him in that way and invite others to accompany us on the journey. This is sometimes described as the "religion of Jesus".

Both types of Christian believing carry risks.

Those who reckon that Christianity is primarily about what you believe, are all too often either plagued and tormented by doubt, or fall into complacency, smugness and a sense that they are somehow superior to non-Christians, although most of them would hotly deny this. Nonetheless, their words and actions almost invariably betray a sense that they have found the one thing that everyone needs, and while they are willing, sometimes aggressively willing, to share it, the only way this sharing can take place is for everyone else to become like them.

Beyond that, the danger is that they don't feel any vocation to engage with the challenges of sickness, poverty, injustice and conflict that beset human life; but take refuge in their conviction that God will intervene and sort it all out without any effort on their part. This attitude can present itself variously as awkward, embarrassing, tiresome or downright offensive.

Those who reckon that Christianity is, at heart, about how you behave, are susceptible either to despair at the state of the world and the futility of trying to solve its problems, or to a moral and ethical idealism that protests noisily and incessantly against the status quo in local, national or global politics and economics.

Beyond that, they may question whether or not it matters what people believe, so long as they behave in a civilised manner; forgetting that what we believe affects how we behaved and has historically shaped what we think of as civilisation. This attitude can present itself variously as awkward, embarrassing, tiresome or downright offensive.

If there is one thing that these two approaches to Christian belief have in common, it is that

they are, quite rightly, focussed on the person of Jesus Christ as their foundation and inspiration.

I suggest, therefore, that whatever our own individual or corporate approach to Christian believing and behaving, we must look to Jesus Christ for the constant challenge and correction we need; only fools or villains believe that they need neither challenge nor correction.

We have, of course, three sources for our knowledge and understanding of Jesus: first, the accounts and interpretations of his life, death and resurrection contained in the Gospels and the other books of the New Testament, set against the background of the Old Testament - rich, varied and, to be honest, ambiguous; secondly, the traditions and teachings of the Church, the movement he started - rich, varied and, to be honest, ambiguous; and thirdly, our own reason, our personal experience of prayer and practice as individual Christian believers - rich, varied and, to be honest, ambiguous.

These three pillars of Christianity, Scripture, tradition and reason, are the means by which we gain access to the person of Jesus Christ. If we can keep them in constant interplay, we shall never cease to be challenged and corrected by the multiple ambiguities and paradoxes of our faith:

- a God of both judgement and mercy
  - a Lord crucified and risen
  - a people saved and yet sinners
  - a kingdom present and yet to come
- to name but a few.

As I suggested last time I stood here, the opposite of faith is not doubt; doubt is essential to the development and health of a living thinking faith. The opposite of faith is certainty; that dogmatic conviction that survives only by doggedly refusing to acknowledge or engage with any contrary evidence.

From the first chapters of Genesis to the final chapters of Revelation, the Bible records people's struggles to integrate their love of God with their experience of the world.

From the quarrels among the Apostles to the doctrinal chaos of the 21st century, Church history tells of debates and divisions as it tries to establish commonly acceptable doctrines and practices.

From our first childhood tantrums to our adult struggles with pride and greed, fear and grief, our own experience teaches us that life is not about following a straightforward and well-mapped route, but about making a succession of complex choices.

In all these ways, Jesus was no different from us. The Gospels record his love of God - "Abba, Father..." - and his struggle with doubt - "Why have you forsaken me?" They record his commitment to the Law - "Not one stroke or letter shall pass away..." - and his refusal to let it tyrannise his followers - "You have heard it said... but I say to you...". They record his love of family and friends - his obedience to his parents and his grief at Lazarus' death - and his agony at the knowledge that he must break their hearts - "Yet not what I will but your will be done".

If all these deeply holy, deeply human things teach us anything, it is that we must not give way to despair but cling to faith for ourselves and for each other, even at the darkest moments of our lives, and that we must not simply wait around for the Second Coming to put things right but take the responsibility ourselves to follow Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, throughout our lives. In other words, we must love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength; and our neighbour as ourselves - and we must do

these things actively, constantly seeking ways to do them better, both as communities and as individuals.

What this means in practice is that we must nurture and hold together our Church communities, supporting each other through times of personal or corporate fragility and constantly praying and working for the greater unity of the whole Church and ultimately of all humanity.

It means that we must develop ways of debating our beliefs and our behaviour that promote both honesty and unity.

It means that we must strive with ourselves to love unconditionally and serve unsparingly all whose lives we can affect for good or ill.

And finally, a kindly thought from a very close friend of mine, who texted me last night with the suggestion,

"On Sunday, when the Rapture people feel really upset, we can console them by saying, 'Cheer up - it's not the end of the world!'"

Good Friday: Jesus' Seven Last Words from the Cross

**Service Date:**

22 April, 2011

**Attachment**

**Attachment**



[Christ's Seven Last Words from the Cross.ppt](#)

**Opening responses**

**Leader:** We bring our own lives to God:  
the glad parts, the sad parts;  
the bits that make little sense.

**All:** But now is the time to keep our eyes on Jesus.

**Leader:** We ask our own questions of God:  
hard ones, some of them;  
ones we hesitate to answer.

**All:** But now is the time to listen to Jesus.

**Leader:** Now is the time to focus on Jesus:  
on his life, on his death.

**All:** For in them we will find the meaning  
of our own.

**Hymns:**

When I survey the wondrous cross  
Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended?

**Sermon:**

**Hymn** (with intercessions) - words

**1. Father forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34)**

Forgive them, Father dear,  
they know not what they do,  
Forgive all those who, for my sake,  
forgive as I forgive.

Short prayer with response:

Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer.

**2. Today you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43)**

This day redemption dawns,  
the world begins anew.

This day you will enjoy with me  
the peace of Paradise.

Short prayer with response:

Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer.

**3. Behold your son: behold your mother (John 19:26-27)**

O mother of my heart,  
behold your newborn son;  
and here, my brother and my friend,  
behold your mother dear.

Short prayer with response:

Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer.

**4. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46)**

I cry to you, my God:  
why have you left my side?  
Yet you will be with me at last  
when vict'ry will be mine.

Short prayer with response:

Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer.

**5. I thirst! (John 19:28)**

I thirst with those who thirst  
for living streams of grace,  
I long to lead my thirsting sheep  
to springs of endless life.

Short prayer with response:

Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer.

**6. It is finished! (John 19:30)**

My task is now fulfilled;  
my Father's work is done.  
The Son may now retire to rest  
within his Father's home.

Short prayer with response:

Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer.

**7. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (Luke 23:46)**

Dear Father, I commend  
my spirit to your care,  
With this last prayer at eventide  
I sleep in perfect peace.

Short prayer with response:

Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer.

**Maundy Thursday Passover Seder: Questions, questions**

**Service Date:**

21 April, 2011

The word seder means order and describes the pattern used for centuries by Jews across the world to celebrate the Passover meal. Numerous orders have been devised and adapted for different situations, just as we adapt ours today to express our faith in Christ.

Out of respect to Jewish believers, it is important for us to recognise that what we will be sharing this evening cannot be equated to a Passover meal as it is traditionally understood. We will use ideas, words and customs derived from Passover in the light of Christ. This free use of the Passover is, however, no modern invention, for it was begun by Jesus. A Jew himself, he would have participated in numerous Passover meals during his lifetime. Through breaking bread and sharing wine at Passover, Jesus deliberately gave it new meaning.

This Lent, we have been looking at some of the big questions of life. One important Passover tradition is that the youngest person present asks a number of questions to shed light on what is done and why. Those questions lie at the heart of our meal together tonight.

**Sermon:**

### **Lighting of Passover candles**

**Leader:** Every seder begins with the lighting of candles.

**Youngest:** Is this simply to give us light?

**Leader:** That's part of the reason. Traditionally two candles are lit at every table, symbolising light and joy. Some also say that the candles stand for two key words associated with the Ten Commandments: 'remember' and 'keep'.

**Youngest:** So who's going to light the candles?

**Leader:** The custom in a seder meal is for a mother or grandmother to light the candles.

**Youngest:** Why is she chosen?

**Leader:** Because without everything mothers do, we would not be able to celebrate this meal. I've asked Sheila Cooke, then, as a representative of motherhood, to light two candles for us, from which the others are lit.

The candles are lit.

**Mother:** Lord of all,  
in celebration of your loving purpose that has called us here,  
setting us apart as your people,  
not by any merit of our own but by your grace,  
we light now these candles.

Shine in our hearts, and through our lives,  
bringing glory to your name. Amen.

**All:** Shine on us, our homes, our loved ones and our world, by your presence granting to all your blessing and peace, now and always.

**Hymn R&S 649:** Let the world rejoice together

**Youngest:** In what way does this night differ from any other?

**Leader:** A good question. Tonight differs from others because it reminds us of how God delivered our ancestors in faith from captivity, leading them to a new life, a fresh start.

**Youngest:** So where were they held captive?

**Leader:** For many years, after first having settled and multiplied in Egypt, they were forced to work as slaves, making bricks and building towns and cities. They were cruelly treated, life so hard that they cried out in despair.

**Youngest:** And what happened then?

**Leader:** God heard their cry and sent Moses, who, as a child, had escaped Pharaoh's slaughter of Israelite newborn boys. Moses went to Egypt and demanded that his people be

set free.

**Youngest:** What did Pharaoh say to that?

**Leader:** He not only refused, but also increased the workload of the Israelites, so God sent ten plagues on to the land of Egypt, until Pharaoh at last agreed to let the people go.

**Youngest:** But why do we call this meal Passover?

**Leader:** Because before the last of the plagues - the death of the Egyptian first-born - God commanded the Israelites to daub the blood of a lamb over their doorposts, as a sign that the plague should pass over their homes and leave their children untouched.

### **Blessing and sharing of first cup of wine**

**Leader:** In a traditional seder, four cups of wine are drunk, the first called the cup of sanctification and blessing.

**Youngest:** Why is it called that?

**Leader:** It speaks of God's grace, rescuing his people from all that held them captive. It speaks to us of redemption from everything that enslaves us in turn, all that destroys and denies life, estranging us from God, obscuring his purpose and frustrating his love. As we drink, we set this occasion apart as something special, consecrated to God in grateful response.

A first cup of wine is poured.

**Leader:** For the wonder of creation and your faithfulness across the years, Lord, we praise you.

**All:**For your gift of life, overflowing and abundant,

Lord, we praise you.

All drink. The leader takes the shank bone from the ceremonial plate and holds it up for all to see.

**Youngest:** What is this bone for? Does it mean something?

**Leader:** It represents the Passover lamb. Through their faithful response to God's command, the people of Israel were passed over by the avenging angel and ultimately delivered from captivity, set free to begin a new life.

The leader takes the egg from the ceremonial plate and again holds it up for all to see.

**Youngest:** What about this egg? Tell me what it means.

**Leader:** Having been roasted in fire, it represents all those who have faced the ordeal of grief and mourning, thus offering a reminder of the suffering and sorrow in our world. But eggs also are traditionally a symbol of new life. They speak, then, of the God who offers new life to us and to all.

### **Blessing and sharing of green leaves in salty water**

The leader holds up parsley and a bowl of salty water.

**Leader:** For our first course we eat green leaves - parsley - dipped in salty water.

**Youngest:** Parsley in salty water! Why do we eat that?

**Leader:** The green of parsley reminds us of springtime, symbol of a fresh start, new life bursting out of the ground. It speaks of the renewing power of God, the transformation God brought to the people of Israel as God led them out of Egypt, and the change God can make in our lives too.

The salty water recalls the tears shed by the people of Israel as they suffered in Egypt - tears of pain, sorrow and despair. It reminds us that as well as springtime there is winter, a truth echoed in our lives, yet even there, it tells us, God is present, at work to bring new life for all.

**Leader:** Let us thank God for this parsley and water.

**All:** For your renewing love, Lord, in good times and bad, gratefully we worship you.  
All take some parsley, dip it into the salty water, and eat it.

### **Breaking of unleavened bread**

**Leader:** We now eat unleavened bread, matzot, made without yeast.

**Youngest:** On other nights we can eat whatever bread we like, so why tonight are we eating unleavened bread?

**Leader:** It recalls the time when the people of Israel, waiting in Egypt for their deliverance, were instructed to eat their meal with unleavened bread since there would be no time for them to let bread rise should it be made with leaven. As the Scripture puts it: 'They used the dough they had brought from Egypt to bake unleavened bread; unleavened because there had been insufficient time to add yeast when they fled from Egypt, or to prepare any other provisions.' It is a reminder of God's deliverance, but also of the suffering the Israelites endured before it, the bread therefore being called 'the bread of the affliction'. It speaks of God's provision, for leavened bread would quickly have grown stale and mouldy, whereas unleavened bread keeps longer so the people could eat it following their flight from Egypt. And it also represents lives freed from whatever separates us from God.

The leader uncovers the unleavened bread, holds up the middle piece, and breaks it into two pieces, setting aside the largest piece to serve as the afikoman and placing the smaller piece between the remaining pieces of bread. The leader then lifts up the tray bearing the bread.

**Leader:** Here is the bread of suffering eaten by our forebears in Egypt. If you are hungry, seeking meaning and purpose in your life; if you are crushed by heavy burdens, seeking release from your load; come now and eat, asking that God may free you too.

**All:** Lord, feed us.

The leader breaks the bread and distributes it. When everyone is served, all eat. The leader then lifts up the afikoman and wraps it in a napkin.

**Youngest:** Why do you put some bread aside, wrapping it up?

**Leader:** It is known as the afikoman, and symbolises the fact that the final fulfilment of God's redemptive purpose is yet to come.

### **Drinking of the second cup of wine**

The leader pours out a second cup of wine, participants, if appropriate, doing the same.

**Youngest:** What is the meaning of this second cup?

**Leader:** It is the cup of deliverance, symbolising the joy of the people of Israel when God delivered them from Egypt. Yet alongside joy it also represents sorrow, many recalling as they drink the ten plagues of Egypt, the suffering caused by Pharaoh's refusal to obey God's command. As we drink, let us remember those we know for whom life has brought pain, sadness or hardship.

All drink.

**Hymn R&S 398:** O Lord, hear my prayer (x3)

The leader puts down the bread and holds up bitter herbs.

**Leader:** Another ingredient of our meal is bitter herbs.

**Youngest:** Why do we eat those when on other nights we can eat whatever herbs we like?

**Leader:** They remind us of the bitterness of life endured for so long by the people of Israel until God set them free.

The leader puts down the bitter herbs and holds up the bowl of charoset.

**Leader:** As well as dipping parsley into salty water, we also dip lettuce into charoset, a mixture of fruit, nuts, wine and spices.

**Youngest:** I'm confused. On other nights we do not season herbs at all, so why tonight do we season them twice?

**Leader:** Like the salty water charoset speaks of sorrow and hardship, for it represents the clay and straw that the Israelites used in Egypt to make bricks and mortar.

All dip the lettuce into the charoset, shaking off residue so that its sweetness cannot hide the bitterness of the herbs.

**Leader:** May this bitter taste help us to empathise with those whose lot is still hard, and to reach out in love towards them.

**All:** Speak to our hearts,  
and inspire us freely and wholeheartedly to respond.

All eat the bitter herbs.

**Leader:** The hint of sweetness, though, reminds us that God is able to turn those tears to laughter, our sorrow to joy. In other words, our meal speaks of the contrasting sides of life - joy and sorrow, hope and despair, wholeness and suffering, life and death.

The leader takes the remaining portion of unleavened bread and breaks it in two, putting a little bitter herb on one half and placing this back on the ceremonial plate. The leader then holds up the bowl of charoset.

**Leader:** Give thanks for the sweetness of this mixture, a reminder of hope vindicated and faith justified as God came to the rescue of his people.

**All:** Glory to you, sovereign God, for all this signifies.

All break their piece of bread in two, dip lettuce into the charoset, place these on top of one piece of the bread, and then place the other piece on top again to make a sandwich, which we eat.

**Leader:** For the knowledge that you are with us, Lord, whatever life may bring, able to turn even the deepest darkness to light, we praise you.

**All** In joy or sorrow, good times or bad, we will trust you. Amen.

### **Drinking of the third cup of wine**

The leader pours out the third cup of wine.

**Leader:** We fill now a third cup, the cup of redemption.

**Youngest:** A third cup? Why do you drink wine again?

**Leader:** Through this cup we thank God for delivering his people, both from captivity and from the angel of death that struck the firstborn in Egypt. For Christians it takes on extra meaning, calling to mind the sacrifice of Christ, the blood of the new covenant poured out to set us free and bring us life.

**All:** Lord, we thank you.

**Leader:** Let us thank God for this wine.

**All:** Glory to you, God of grace, for your loving provision.

**Leader:** Let us thank God for the new wine of Christ.

**All:** Glory to you, God of grace,  
for offering life in all its fullness.

All drink the third cup of wine.

## **The Hallel Psalm**

**Leader:** Let us, then, offer God our worship.

**All:** Praise the Lord, give praise to God's name.

**Leader:** Trust in the Lord, people of Israel,  
for God is our help and our shield.

**All:** Praise the Lord, give praise to God's name.

**Leader:** God has been attentive to our needs,  
and will continue to bless us.

**All:** Praise the Lord, give praise to God's name.

**Leader:** God grants blessing to all who fear God,  
whoever they are.

**All:** Praise the Lord, give praise to God's name.

**Leader:** What can we give back to God,  
in return for the treasures God has showered upon us?

**All:** We will lift the cup of salvation, and call on God's name. We will consecrate our lives to  
worshipping and serving God, publicly, in the presence of God's people, committing  
ourselves to God's cause.

**Leader:** We will gladly serve God,  
for God has set us free from the cords that bound us.

**All:** In gratitude we bring God our sacrificial offering,  
calling upon God's faithful name.

**Leader:** God is our refuge and our strength.

**All:** Praise the Lord! Praise the name of the Lord!

(From Psalm 113:1; 115:9, 11-13; 116:2, 12, 13, 16a, 17, 19b)

**Youngest:** (pointing to the empty place laid at the table)

Why is there a place laid for someone at the table, yet no one is sitting there?

**Leader:** This place is laid for the prophet Elijah.

**Youngest:** Elijah? Who's that?

**Leader:** He was one of the great Old Testament prophets, speaking God's word despite  
great personal danger, trusting in God despite the way things seemed.

**Youngest:** But why set a place for him?

**Leader:** In Jewish tradition the name of Elijah was associated with the promised Messiah,  
many expecting that he would be the one to usher in his coming. Leaving room for him  
symbolises faith in God's continuing purpose.

**Youngest:** Is that the only reason?

**Leader:** No. The place setting reminds us also of our responsibilities towards others: God's  
call always to give a welcome to the stranger who calls at our door, remembering that we  
were once strangers in a foreign land.

## **The fourth cup of wine**

The leader pours out a fourth cup of wine.

**Youngest:** Yet another cup of wine? What does this one mean?

**Leader:** The fourth cup of wine drunk at a traditional seder symbolises thanksgiving and  
hope. It is a reminder of all God has done, and of all God will yet do.

**All:** Glory to you, Lord. Glory and praise to you. Amen.

All drink.

## **The Lord's Supper**

**Leader:** A traditional Jewish Passover meal would now be drawing to a close, but as Christians we see Passover in a new light, taking a fuller and deeper meaning in Jesus Christ. We do so because Jesus himself clearly did the same, choosing the time of this festival to be the time that he would suffer and die.

**Hymn:** R&S 450: Jesus, we thus obey

All move into the church sanctuary from the church hall

**Leader:** As the Scriptures tell us: 'On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Jesus' disciples came to him and asked, "Where would you like us to get things ready so that we can eat the Passover together?" (Matthew 26:17). When the appointed hour came, he and his disciples sat down at the table. Then he told them, "I have yearned to share this Passover meal with you before facing the suffering I must go through, for I will not eat it again until it finds its fulfilment in the kingdom of God.'"

**All:** Lord, we also would share Passover with you.

Bread and wine are on the table.

The leader breaks the bread into four pieces and places these on to four serving plates.

**Youngest:** Is this the same as the bread we shared earlier?

**Leader:** No, this yeasty bread carries for us a different meaning, calling to mind the words and promises of Jesus. 'I am the bread of life,' he told his followers. 'No one who comes to me will ever hunger, and whoever trusts in me will never thirst.'

And then, as he shared Passover with his disciples, he took bread and broke it, saying to them, 'This is my body, broken for many.'

**All:** Lord, sustain us through this bread of life, nourishing our souls and bringing fullness of life.

The leader distributes bread among the participants. Participants stay seated, breaking off a morsel and retaining it until all are served.

**Leader:** Lord Jesus Christ, knowing what was to come - your body battered, broken, buried - still you gave thanks to God.

**All:** We too give thanks. Amen.

**Leader:** Eat this, remembering that Christ died for you.

**All:** Lord Jesus, for all you have done, we thank you.

**Leader:** Eat this, remembering that through his Spirit he is with us now.

**All:** Lord Jesus, for all you continue to do, we praise you.

**Leader:** Eat this, remembering his promise to come again.

**All:** Lord Jesus, for all you will yet do, we acclaim you.

All eat the bread.

The leader pours wine into a chalice and lifts it up for everyone to see. A second chalice has non-alcoholic wine.

**Youngest:** Why do you pour out wine once more?

**Leader:** Once more it recalls the words and deeds of Jesus at that last supper with his disciples. 'He took a cup,' we read, 'and, having given thanks, he said, "Take this, and share it among you, for I will not taste the fruit of the vine again until the kingdom has dawned.'" It represents his blood, poured out for us and for all.

**All:** Lord, may the new wine you offer sparkle within us,  
coursing through our veins and flowing out to others.

The chalices are passed around the table

**Leader:** Lord Jesus Christ, knowing the cup you would drink from the cup of betrayal and denial, suffering and death, still you gave thanks to God.

**All:** We too give thanks. Amen.

**Leader:** Drink this,  
recalling God's gracious dealings in years gone by.

**All:** Lord Jesus, we remember.

**Leader:** Drink this, keeping faith in the present.

**All:** Lord Jesus, we trust.

**Leader:** Drink this, anticipating God's future.

**All:** Lord Jesus, we hope.

All drink.

**Leader:** In bread and wine we have remembered Christ's love, his sacrifice, his pouring himself out for us and for many.

**All:** So, then, we will go out in faith,  
with joy and thanksgiving in our hearts, celebrating what he has done and continues to do,  
his love that sets us free,  
his purpose that will not be defeated.

**Leader:** The feast is ended. Go in peace.

**All:** Amen.

This service is adapted from Nick Fawcett's *Celebrating the Seder*

## **Palm and Passion Sunday**

### **Service Date:**

17 April, 2011

### **Who is this man? A father's question**

James and John! I used to know their family. But they'd been up north in Galilee for years, so what were they doing in my farmyard? Had to be Passover. I'd heard something about a Galilean prophet coming into town, talking big about God's kingdom. Maybe they were with him. Me, I can't be doing with religion much. Synagogue on Saturdays to keep the wife happy, and now we've got the boys, we send them to Saturday school. But no need to go overboard. I've enough to do with the farm.

When John had his breath back, he didn't bother with how's the family, nice to see you or any of that. He just blurted out: 'Can we have a loan of your donkey?' I was a bit surprised. 'Which one?' I asked him. 'The one with the colt,' he shot back. 'Can we borrow it? Jesus is our friend, and he wants to make a splash coming into town.'

'Who is he?' I asked them. I could see hero-worship coming out of their eyes. 'He's fantastic!' James said. 'Come and see! Bring the family - he loves kids, and they love him.' Well, the farm was quiet, so Sarah and I and the kids went with them and the donkey with her colt. Anyway, I wanted to make sure they'd treat her right.

There were crowds round the city gate. People all over, waving palm branches like a conquering hero was coming. My boys met friends and dashed off. Good thing I was there, because the donkey didn't fancy all those people. I had a job to get her and her little one

through. When we got there, he said thanks and smiled at me. Then the kids - my kids too - started singing something about Hosanna - I think that's synagoguespeak for 'God help us' - John took off his cloak so he could use it as a saddle, and Jesus mounted and rode off on my old donkey, just like a king coming into a city he'd beaten. But I don't get it. Who is this Jesus? Why's he so special?

**Hymn** (tune: Horsley, R&S 223)

1. They welcomed him just like a king,  
Children to greet him ran,  
But why a donkey as his steed?  
Who is this humble man?

**Hymns:**

**R&S 141** is a modern hymn with words and music by Graham Kendrick, sometimes associated with Jesus' coming into the world at Christmas. Yet his triumphant entry into Jerusalem which we remember on Palm Sunday is another invitation to us to let him into our own lives.

**They welcomed him just like a king** describes many ways in which different people tried to make sense in their own context of the question: who is Jesus? The tune Horsley is better known to the Good Friday hymn 'There is a green hill far away'.

**R&S 207** was written by Samuel Crossman, a 17th-century Anglican minister, and its tune Love Unknown by the 20th-century composer John Ireland, written in fifteen minutes on the back of a luncheon menu one day in 1918.

**Sermon:**

**Who is this man? A disciple's question**

I've known Jesus three years now, followed him up and down Palestine, watched when he healed people, listened spellbound when he told us about God's kingdom, where everyone has a place. Some people love him, the ones he's helped; some hate him, the ones he's shown up as more interested in themselves than God.

Three years we've eaten Passover together, the close group of us he called to be his friends, remembered the story of how God helped our people so many years ago. He's asked me to get the place ready beforehand as usual, because I know what's needed - bitter herbs of sorrow to remember the years we spent in slavery, unleavened bread for the hurry in leaving, wine for the joy of escape and lamb remembering those who were sacrificed so we could live. But this year is different.

Something's up. He eats and drinks with us, but there's no celebration in his face. He talks strangely: one of us will betray him. But which of my friends would do that to Jesus? Could I? Would I know?

As the meal goes on, it's not the way it usually goes. He shares bread with us, yes, tearing off the soft folds to give us each a taste, but suddenly he's talking about not bread, but his body, that it will be broken the way you break bread to share it. What does he mean? And as we drink the last cup of wine he's talking about his blood spilled, to end divisions. Or have I had too much to drink? I've followed Jesus for three years now, but I don't understand him any more now than I did when he first called my name. All I understand is that he loves us, that he says God loves us.

**Hymn**

2. He broke the bread of Passover  
as if he had a plan.  
But now he says we'll let him down -

Who is our friend, this man?

### **Who is this man? Judas' question**

I don't think anyone noticed when I slipped out. I couldn't stay there with his words ringing in my ears: one of you sitting at the table will betray me.

He must have known for a while that I've been talking to the chief priests. He wants us to love our enemies - well, I've been putting that into practice. Telling them where he is.

Heaven knows, they hate him! I thought I understood why. I thought he saw through that power game they play with the Romans. I thought I could trust him to rise up and sweep away the lot, bring in God's rule. But in the end he hadn't the nerve. At Passover supper he talked about his body being broken, his blood being poured out. Well, I've called his bluff. Now I've told the priests where to find him, he'll have to use his power to stop metaphor turning into reality.

I've waited so long for God's kingdom to come with power. And maybe it's fitting that I'll show them with a kiss which one he is. Jesus, master, you've talked so much about God's love for the least and the lost, about reaching across barriers and finding God's image in others. Well, now you're the one being kissed, the one being chosen to demonstrate someone else's idea. We'll see how you like it.

But I do wish they'd hurry up and arrive. All this hanging around in Gethsemane is beginning to get on my nerves. He's over there, praying, with Peter and James and John, the inner three. Always them. Why couldn't he have given me his confidence? I'd have understood him better than that bunch of fisherboys. But it's too late now. Though I'm starting to wonder, after all, if I've done the right thing...

### **Hymn**

3. I know that I've betrayed his trust,  
but he our rift began:  
he'll lose all power by being weak;  
who is this wilful man?

### **Who is this man? Peter's question**

I was sure Jesus was wrong, this time. A lot of times, it's been me that's been wrong. I know my foot usually ends up in my mouth. But I was so sure this time he was wrong. How could I not stick by him, after all this time, after all these wonders, after all the times he'd taken me and James and John aside and showed us even more of what he meant?

How could I ever let him down?

Easily, as it turned out.

Well, I was feeling panicky after that strange Passover meal. It was bad enough in Gethsemane, with all the night sounds of the olive orchard. But somehow I still drifted off, even though I knew Jesus was praying, really upset. Even though I knew he needed me there. Have you ever let down someone who really needed you? That's how it felt.

It was even worse when Judas kissed him and the temple guards came out of the shadows to arrest him. Guess who waved a sword around and cut off one of their ears? I couldn't help myself. And when the guards bound him and took him away - I can't even try to tell you how it felt, knowing he was on trial for his life, knowing I couldn't even get into the courtroom, let alone do or say anything to help him.

But as soon as I could say something, as soon as someone asked me if I was with him, guess what? I denied it. Three times. Yes, I was in fear for my life. But I'll never forget just what I'm capable of.

And I won't forget, either, how he looked at me as they led him away. A look of pure love,

love that nothing I did could change.

### **Hymn**

4. How could I say I knew him not?

Three times away I ran;

And he foresaw, yet loved me still -

who is this steadfast man?

### **Who is this man? Caiphas' question**

I don't know why they keep on trying, these Messianic idiots. They obviously have no understanding of politics or theology. Rome is in power. There is simply no point in talking about God's kingdom - all it does is put more soldiers on the streets and more Jews into their graves. So if it's necessary to massage the facts a little, to make the case come out right, that's what I do. If one man has to die so the people can live, that's an acceptable loss, in my book.

But this one got up my nose, if you'll pardon the slang. He's been making my fellow priests look faintly ridiculous, with that old chestnut about the woman with seven husbands. I could have warned my colleagues: don't bandy words with a prophet. The crowds are always on their side. What you need to do is to appeal to people's patriotism. We can always hold Barabbas in reserve. No one is going to want Rome's choice of a candidate for freedom. And if anyone does consider choosing Jesus, I'm sure a few well-chosen words from our temple guards will make them see sense.

But in the meantime, this trial has to come out right. The paperwork has to be in order. And this Messiah's not going to give us the right result on his own, so I'll just have to give him enough rope to hang himself. A few witnesses primed to push his remarks over the boundaries of acceptability. And if he goes on giving us the silent treatment, he can always be forced to incriminate himself on oath by blasphemy. I've got my special pre-ripped robes, so tearing them in sorrow won't do too much harm to my wardrobe. Judicial process? Look, this fool is begging to be killed.

### **Hymn**

5. Another lout who threatens us

with Rome's all-powerful hand!

Messiah, yet! A blasphemer!

Who is this foolish man?

### **Who is this man? Pilate's question**

I never normally worry so much about the job. And if things do get on top of me, I can always go home to Claudia and she'll make me forget everything political. But it didn't work this time.

This morning, she sent me a message that she'd dreamed about some Jesus man, that he was good, so I must do nothing to hurt him. That shook me. Claudia never interferes.

But this man has made some really bad enemies among the priests. Annas, Caiaphas, they were on my doorstep first thing in the morning, wanting him dead as soon as possible, if not sooner. They hate me like poison, of course, because Rome has occupied their backward little country, so the very fact that they were coming to my unclean house so early in the morning clued me in that this was major. I tried my hardest to stonewall them while my advisers found out what was up, but even when they'd briefed me, I couldn't work out what the problem was. These holy men, some of them are troublemakers, but so far as I could make out, this one hadn't done anything beyond healing people and showing up some of the religious bigots for what they were. You had to admire him, really.

So I did my best to get him off the hook. I tried to engage him in conversation, but he wouldn't say a word to defend himself. I tried to use my right to free a prisoner for their Passover celebration, but the priests had got in ahead of me, and everyone told me to free Barabbas - public enemy number one! I have a nasty feeling it wasn't a free choice, but what could I do? You can't fix every situation. Claudia will be disappointed, though.

### **Hymn**

6. I tried my very best for him,  
but had to wash my hands;  
my wife defends; his priests attack;  
who's this fought-over man?

### **Who is this man? A soldier's question**

I've never seen anything like it in this gods-forsaken backwater of a province. Give me Rome any day - they know how to worship. Here, all you get is every Thomas, James and John crowding into town to eat their funny food. Remembering freedom, they say. Well, we've given them civilization.

To start with, I thought he was just a mad Messiah. They think their god's sent them to save them - from us. So sometimes the lads get a bit narked when yet another Messiah turns up, and give him the royal treatment. Crown, purple robe, bowing down in homage, the works. It's a laugh, isn't it?

But covered in blood and spit, he almost made me think he was a king. Something about how he looked, as if he was the one in charge, but letting it go on for his own good reasons. He carried his cross like a good one. We had to take it off him in the end, make one of the lazy beggars in the crowd take a turn. And when we got to the top of the hill, and offered him the usual wine to drink - rough stuff, but it takes the edge off the pain - he shook his head. Looks like he wanted to be with it right up to the end.

Some of the priests came and yelled in his face. The two hanging on either side of him joined in, though they were for it too. But he took no notice. A while after that, he called out in their heathen language - something about Elijah, one of their big prophets. And then he gave up the ghost.

I tell you, if he'd been a Roman, I'd even have called him a son of the gods. He faced his death that well.

### **Hymn**

7. We kill a lot of rebels here;  
they take wine if they can;  
but he refused his pain to blur:  
who's this courageous man?

### **Who is this man? Joseph's question**

I am a respected man, a learned man, a member of the Sanhedrin. But I have to admit that some of the women who were followers of Jesus were more courageous than I dared to be. Was I there when they crucified that innocent man?

No.

Was I there when they took him down from the cross, and tried to comfort his mother?

No.

But I did find enough courage to ask for his body from Pilate. I could see the Governor was very glad to find a way out of his dilemma. Handing the body over to those who had cried out for his execution would have been inhumane. But giving it to that rabble of fishermen, tax-collectors and prostitutes he called friends might have led to a riot.

As a member of the establishment, though not the Roman establishment, I was the ideal choice. Pilate knew I would not embarrass him further. And for the first time in my life, I had the courage to stand out as a follower of Jesus - though by this time it was far too late. Too late to talk with him, as I had often longed to do - but, unlike my friend Nicodemus, had never had the courage to begin.

Too late to find out from him something of the vision of God's coming kingdom which had transformed so many lives.

Too late to offer him my friendship, my loyalty, my support.

I had left making contact with Jesus to a future time, when my colleagues could not sneer at me. He was so much younger than I. Though his life provoked the rich and powerful, even the supposedly godly, how could I have foreseen how soon the end would come for him, or the depth and the dignity of his suffering?

### **Hymn**

8. I never was a public friend;  
supporting him was banned.

And now I never will find out:  
who was this suffering man?

### **Who is this Jesus?**

Everyone is asking that question. A father, bystander while Jesus rides into Jerusalem and his children sing Hosanna, God help us, with the rest, wonders why he's chosen a donkey rather than a warhorse to make an entrance. What's so special about this man, a charismatic leader who chooses such a workaday way of travel for his big entrance?

His friends, even those who've travelled with him since the beginning, are also confused. Why is he talking about a body broken and blood shed? What's that got to do with God rescuing them at Passover? Who does he think is going to betray him? They love him, for through his words and actions he's shown them something of the God who loves and believes in them. But they still can't understand a lot of what he says or does.

Judas thinks he understands Jesus. He thinks the revolution is coming, and the rich will be first against the wall. He thinks Jesus is going to make people good, using God's power. But recent events make him realise he can't project his dreams onto Jesus and expect all his own wishes to be fulfilled. Jesus isn't a clothes horse on which he can hang his ideals.

Peter knows he doesn't understand what's going on - but that's nothing unusual. He does think he can rely on his own goodness, his own courage, to help him stand up for Jesus right to the end. He's got another think coming. Yet however terribly he lets Jesus down, however badly he disappoints himself, he cannot destroy Jesus' love: so forgiving, so all-embracing, he can't get his mind around it.

Caiaphas is not interested in understanding Jesus. He understands the political and religious power balance, delicately poised between Jerusalem and Rome, through which the Jewish people can maintain their territory. If some irresponsible idiot babbling about God is unbalancing the status quo, it is Caiaphas' task to prevent him, by any means necessary.

Pilate would like to understand Jesus, if the political situation allowed. But keeping the Pax Romana is his primary concern. There are always tensions in leadership which cannot be resolved, and though he is intrigued by this man's predicament, and touched by his own wife's concern for him, he's got to be pragmatic and authorise the death sentence, though his own distaste is clear.

Soldiers are not paid to understand, but to carry out orders. They can do so from a position of superiority; their forces, after all, are in charge. However, they are also human beings

with personal codes of morals. Judged by those, Jesus, although one of the subject race and follower of a heathen religion, can be seen as admirable, almost Roman, in the way he dies. Joseph of Arimathea would have loved to have understood Jesus, had he only decided to follow him. Now all he can do is to use his limited authority to give the man a decent burial, something which executed criminals would not normally receive. All he can do is to think of what might have been, had he given Jesus his time, his public commitment, his love, earlier. For us Christians, it's the biggest question of all: who is this man? We have heard some of the answers given by those who saw his final hours, but because they are very different people, these answers are very different from each other.

Who is Jesus? A celebrity; a friend; someone to fulfil our desires; someone who will never reject us; an unattainable ideal; a victim; a role model; someone we would like to know but cannot truthfully say we do?

Who is Jesus for us? This is the question each of us must answer for ourselves, but others may want to hear what we think, as part of making up *their* minds.

### **Fifth Sunday in Lent**

#### **Service Date:**

10 April, 2011

#### **John 11:1-45: Martha's story**

- I'm the down-to-earth sister, the common-sense one. Mary can sit around with Jesus and swap Bible references, but I'm the one who gets things done.
- You wouldn't believe what a difference it made in our house, when Laz died. He'd been ill for ages. We all knew what was coming. But in the end, when it happened, it still came as a shock. Mary couldn't cope. She just sat around, staring into space. I had to be the practical one, as usual - arranging for our parents' tomb to be opened, getting the rabbi to say the proper words, inviting everyone who should have been there.
- Everyone, that is, except Jesus. He was off somewhere with his friends. He knew things were bad for Lazarus, but still he didn't come back, even when we sent a message. And though I knew it wasn't his fault - wasn't anyone's fault - I started to get really angry with him. Four days after the funeral, in he swans with all his mates. And I'm ashamed to say I had a real go at him.
- What do you think you were playing at, Jesus? I demanded. If you'd got here in time, Laz would still be alive! But oh no, you couldn't make it, could you? Your precious friends say you talked about him falling asleep - but no, Jesus, he's not fallen asleep. He's dead. Take it from me, you don't wake up from that.
- He said Laz would rise to life again. Fine preaching talk. But just then, it wasn't the right thing to say.
- Don't give me that! I snapped. I know he'll come to life again at the day of judgment, when everyone does. That's no good to us. We need him now, Mary and me! I thought you loved him too!
- I do love him, Jesus said. And I do know about rising to life, Martha. I am life. God's life is in me, and even if my friends die, I'm still life in them. Do you believe me?
- And the funny thing was, in spite of everything that had happened, in spite of all the signs of mourning round the room, I did believe him. Because it was Jesus. If anyone could tell me, in my dead brother's house, that he was in charge of life and death, it was Jesus. And somehow, he helped me calm down. But I'd been so angry with him before, I'd forgotten to keep my voice down for Mary's sake. And sure enough, I'd disturbed her out of the first

good sleep she'd had since it happened.

- She struggled into the room with her eyes all puffy, and as soon as she saw Jesus, she started crying again. It wasn't easy to tell what she was saying, but it sounded a bit like what I'd said. If only you'd been here, Lazarus would still be alive. And she was crying so bitterly, it must have been infectious, for I saw tears gathering in Jesus' eyes too. And men never cry.
- I couldn't bear seeing them, so just for something to say, I told Mary: Let's go and show him the grave. That way he'll have something to remember Laz by, when he leaves us again. I didn't mean to sound bitter, but I think I was. Why couldn't he have come earlier? If he'd asked God, I do believe Lazarus would still be alive.
- We tried to get out quietly, but it was no use. All the people hanging around the house in case they could be a comfort or a help in any way immediately spotted us. Well, they immediately spotted Jesus. And I could hear a few murmurs in the crowd: Call himself a friend? Why couldn't he have come back before? Well, it's dangerous for him too near Jerusalem. Even so! Look, he's crying!
- And now Jesus really was crying. Bawling out loud. As though he'd only just realised how terrible death is, how it takes away everyone you love and won't be denied. And I won't deny, I thought to myself: What about you being life now, eh? Reality struck, has it?
- But then I was ashamed of myself. Because he was really suffering. And when he gulped and asked us, Where did they put him? Mary pointed out the tomb, and I could see she held nothing against him either. Death's death, and no one can help it.
- But the next thing he said went beyond anything I could have imagined. Pointing at the whacking great stone stopping up the mouth of the tomb, he looked round at me and said, as if he was talking about weeding the garden, 'Get someone to take that away.'
- And I stood there with my mouth open, looking at him. It's four days! I said. Four days since that stone was moved last time. Four days since Lazarus' funeral. What do you think you're doing? It's going to stink in there.
- But he looked at me and said, Martha, what did I just tell you? Do you believe me, or not? Take away the stone!
- Mary was no help. I had to make this decision, as I'd had to make so many recently. I nodded to the synagogue staff. Do as the man says, I told them. Take it away.
- What happened next has gone all round town, so I don't need to tell you all over again. Laz can tell you himself, come to that, if you'd like to come round for some mint tea with the family. But it won't be the moment when he came out that sticks in my memory, even though heaven knows it was dramatic enough, with all his grave cloths unwinding, and his mouth wide open with surprise and delight, breathing the good clean air again.
- No, it was that moment just before I gave the order to open up the tomb. I knew about death. Our parents had both died many years before. I knew it hurt, that it was shameful, that it stank. But looking into Jesus' face, somehow I could believe that he was so full of life, next to him death couldn't hold its own. And I still do.

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 94:** Give to our God immortal praise

Martha, meeting Jesus, looked at him and said

**Psalms 130** (tune R&S 78) Lord, from the depths to thee I cried.

**R&S 239ii:** Jesus lives!

**R&S 295** (tune 499): Breathe on me, breath of God

#### **Sermon:**

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-45; Romans 8:6-11**

What happens when we die? Is that it? Well, it's the trillion-dollar question, isn't it, and in spite of spiritualists and séances and Ouija boards, no one has been convincingly documented as coming back to tell us the answer. Apart from one man, and that's another story for another Sunday. Lazarus died, as you heard this morning in our retold reading from John's Gospel, but so far as we know, his death was a dress rehearsal - he'd still have to go through it all over again.

We don't have to take Lazarus' story seriously. He may have been in a faint or a coma. He may have had some death-mimicking condition unknown to the doctors of the day. His story may seem a long time ago, very far away and pretty metaphorical. There are many ways to get around the story of Lazarus and make sure it has nothing to say to our twenty-first century lives. But his sister Martha was absolutely right and totally up-to-date when she didn't mince her words about death. It stinks. While, yes, when it comes to someone in great agony, or someone full of years who wants to lay them down, death may come as a mercy or even as a blessing, the whole idea still stinks. The life given us by God and breathed into us by God's spirit, how can that life die?

The people in Ezekiel's time might have taken this question and turned it around: how can we still be alive? They had lost the argument with Babylon, lost the war. They had been taken away from their own land, their capital city, everything that was precious to them, into exile. They were like a pile of bones, old, dry bones, heaped up in the desert after some ancient catastrophe: hopeless, helpless, useless. After such a disaster, what could they look forward to? What could they hope for? With the glory days behind them and a recent history like that, how could they think of living? Surely, the only sensible thing to do was to prepare for their own deaths, so far from home: to crawl into a foreign corner, curl up and die. Wasn't that the only possible option for them, individually and as a nation?

But Ezekiel said No!

Ezekiel was as much in exile as all the rest; he was the priest of a temple which no longer existed, of a people in despair. But God told him otherwise. God gave him the vision of a valley of bones, very old, very dry, very dead.

'What are these?' God asked.

Ezekiel told it like it was. Old bones, dry bones. That's what he saw. That's what he said.

'But can those bones live?' God persisted.

Ezekiel, very wisely, refused to commit himself. 'You know the answer to that one,' he said. And God did indeed know the answer to that one. Through Ezekiel, God spoke to the bones, to the old, dry bones. Sinews tied them together; flesh covered them up; skin covered the flesh; but still they were dead. Then on command Ezekiel prophesied again. God blew on the bones, on the old, dry bones; and there was life in them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast crowd.

Then, just in case anyone hadn't got the point, God said to Ezekiel: "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And literally, as well as metaphorically, that's what happened. Through politics, through community cohesion and community conflict, through Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the civil servant, God brought the people back into their land, and back to life.

Not everyone chose to return. Some people had got used to exile, and didn't want the

challenge of a new beginning back in the old land, as under some circumstances a sick person, having made up their mind to die, might not want to hear about hope of a cure. Think of poor Lazarus, called back to life by Jesus, knowing that he'd have to go through the whole lot again.

It may sound strange, preferring to die rather than to live; yet sometimes living can feel as hard as dying. Think of someone in the grip of clinical depression, who may find it a struggle even to get out of bed in the morning. Yet in the depths of despair, there can still be a spark of hope. Our psalmist this morning calls to God from the depths of his spirit. He doesn't pretend to be faultless; if God only listened to people who were perfect, who would bother to speak up? But he dares to remind God of promised forgiveness. He waits and hopes, hopes and waits for God's help, more than the night watchman hopes for dawn and an end to his work; and he refuses to give up his trust in God.

Of course, the choice of hoping for life or being resigned to death isn't just a matter for individuals. Israel as a people, we as a congregation, must decide over and over again whether we will wait and hope in God who gives life to dead bones, or whether preparing for an orderly funeral is in fact the more sensible option. If we were to give Paul this choice, however - and he knew a lot about near-death experiences - he wouldn't even have to think about it. For as far as he's concerned, If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to our mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in us.

This puts a different complexion on the question. It's not so much: 'Is there life after death?' Like the old Christian Aid slogan, 'We believe in life before death', it's more a question of: is there life in us now? For if God's spirit, God's life lives in us now, then after our deaths, that life cannot but continue within us. In a little while we will be holding our Annual Church Meeting. As we hear the reports being read, I should like you to consider the question: where is God's Spirit to be seen in what we have done this past year? Where is the mutual love, the care for others beyond our number, the challenge to injustice, the invitation to hear God's good news? Every life has its time to end, though death still stinks. But if God's life lives in us here and now, I believe that, here or hereafter, that life within us cannot die.

#### **Fourth Sunday in Lent: Mothering Sunday**

##### **Service Date:**

3 April, 2011

##### **John 9:1-41: The blind man's mother's story**

Reuben never could get over it, how my poor Joseph was born blind. He couldn't see it being his fault. He was a good man, and nothing like this had ever happened in his family. So it must be my fault, or the baby's fault. Somehow I had to keep Joe away from his father when he was growing up. And when he was grown, Reuben kicked him out altogether. Said he didn't want someone else's bad luck. He wanted me to stop seeing Joe, but I couldn't. He's my son. But I had to keep an eye on him quietly, so Reuben never found out.

And the question stayed in my mind, all the years Joe was growing up. Was it my fault that he was blind? Had I done something wrong? Was God punishing me for it? I couldn't think of anything, but in the middle of the night I did wonder. And I'd ask around - not about me, you know, just what did people think about suffering? Whose fault was it? Nobody ever seemed to know for sure.

I was talking about it to Mrs Cohen one day, while Joe was at his normal begging pitch, when a group of young men came by. And they started talking about it too. One of them

seemed to be the leader, and he was looking a bit fed up. Suddenly he stopped the conversation. It's not a blind man's fault he's blind! he said. It's not his parents' fault either. And somehow he caught my eye, though he couldn't have known I had anything to do with Joe. What a very positive young man, I remember thinking.

Then he walked over to Joe, who heard the footsteps and brought out his begging bowl. And I followed, just because it sounded as if this man did have an answer to the whole business of suffering. This man was born blind, he announced, loud enough for everyone to hear him, so God's glory could be revealed.

Was that it? It sounded a bit disappointing to me - like the people who told me it was all a test of my faith and I'd understand in time. But then he did something. He stooped down, and made a mud poultice, and smeared it on my Joe's eyes. And he told Joe: Go and wash your eyes in Siloam Pool.

Well, one thing I will say about Joe. He always found his way around town, knowing it so well. So off he went to Siloam Pool. But I couldn't go with him. I didn't have the strength to hope, after all these years. So I was still sitting there when Joe came racing back with his eyes wide open as if he couldn't believe it. Nor could I.

I couldn't help it. I ran towards him and hugged him. And he hugged me back. Mum! he said. Thanks for being there for me, all those years when Dad was being an idiot.

How did you know I was there? I asked him. I've got ears, haven't I? he said. And you always wear that rose perfume. Even if you couldn't do anything to help, you were always there. And that kept me going.

I was crying for joy. But not for long. Some of the top men in the synagogue came over, and I suddenly realised it was the Sabbath, when people should be resting, not tearing around being healed. But Joe felt me shrink. Don't worry, Mum, he said. I can fight my own battles now.

Apparently some busybodies had seen him healed - well, you couldn't really miss him, running that fast - and had started arguing whether he really was the same as the blind man who always begged for his living. Joe told them patiently yes, he was, and said what had happened. His sharp ears had picked up what my old ones missed, that the man who'd healed him was called Jesus. And as soon as they heard that, well, there was a sharp intake of breath. Some of them hated him, maybe because he'd broken the Sabbath rules. But others said, how could anyone that bad do something so good? And they all started arguing again. They asked Joe what he thought, and he looked at them as if they were daft. He's got to be sent by God! he said. But they didn't like that.

Then I saw Reuben coming, and he didn't look at all pleased. Come over here! he said. And keep quiet, you stupid woman! If I'm not very careful, your son will get us both thrown out of the synagogue! And he started telling the synagogue officials: yes, that's Joseph my son (he didn't like that, but he couldn't help it); but no, we know nothing about why he used to be blind but now he can see.

Ask him! Reuben told them. And I could see he wanted Joe to get into trouble, to make up for all the trouble he'd caused by being blind in the first place.

But Joe didn't mind being asked again. It's obvious! he said. Only God can heal people. So if this Jesus did it, it's because he's from God. What part of that don't you understand?

Well, they threw him out of the synagogue. How could a blind beggar teach them? But this time I went with him. My son could see now, but he still needed my love. And after Reuben stormed a bit, he'd calm down and want me back again.

We were just walking away, me shaking a bit, when I saw this Jesus coming up to us. Of

course, Joe didn't recognise him. But once Jesus started talking, he recognised that voice. So they had a bit of a chat, and the way Joe was looking at him, I could see he'd be joining Jesus' young men soon.

Why did you do it? I asked Jesus. His face went dark a moment, and he answered: Looks like I've got two jobs: to help people who can't see, and to turn the people who think they can see blind.

One of the experts - Pharisees they call them - heard, and he was furious. Are you calling me blind? he demanded. Jesus looked really sorry. If you admitted you had a problem, I could help you, he said. But there's none as blind as those who won't see.

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 645:** Father of mercy (tune: Angers)

**R&S 361:** Come, Lord, to our souls come down

Lay your healing hand upon us

**CG 21:** Longing for light

#### **Sermon:**

**1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; John 9:1-41; Ephesians 5:8-14**

We're onto our next big question this Lent: Why do people suffer? And I guess what people normally mean is, Why do innocent people suffer? or Why do people suffer disproportionately compared with what they've done? After all, if you stick your hand into the fire, or if you eat too much and have indigestion you expect it to hurt - if pain wasn't a warning bell, stopping us doing unwise things, we'd get a lot more damaged than we do, as people with leprosy who lose sensation in their toes can testify. But when we ask this question, we're usually seeking someone to blame for suffering that is not the fault of the person concerned. Why should a baby be born blind, finding life much more of a challenge than those of us who can see? Using figures from 2008, why should children born in the richest part of Sheffield live on average 10.4 years longer than those born in the poorest part? It's not their fault.

Of course, we can always turn the question around: why should we not suffer? A Buddhist story speaks of a woman who begs a wise man to heal her son, though the boy is already dead. He tells her that he will be able to help her if she brings him a mustard seed from a household which knows nothing of death. Eagerly, she sets out on her quest, but returns empty-handed, for every household in some way has been touched by bereavement.

Through this sad journey, the grieving mother is reconciled to the death of her son. So who are we to protest against suffering, since in a limited world of fragile people it is bound to happen, and bound at some stage to happen to us? We could use our Hebrew Bible reading this morning to back up that argument. King Saul was handsome and rich and chosen by God. Yet he suffered from depression, which only David's music could soothe, and from paranoia that David would take away his power, a fear which was realised when God chose David as king instead. David, loved by God, suffered through his desire for Bathsheba, and later through conflict with and between his own children. No one's life is so perfect they can avoid suffering. Yet Christians have a different take on the world from Buddhists, who believe that suffering is the basic reality of this universe.

We believe that God made everything good. And while it is tempting for us to try to assert control over uncontrollable reality by assigning blame for suffering, preferably to someone we disagree with and think God should be punishing, our Gospel reading this morning tells a very different story.

Why was this man born blind? people ask Jesus. Was it his fault, or his parents' fault? This

sort of thinking is almost inevitable for us too, used to a blame culture where accidents are big business for lawyers, and where even religion is very good at controlling people by making them feel guilty. But Jesus refuses to play the blame game. This man was born blind, he tells his friends, so that God's glory, God's transforming power, could be demonstrated. And there's a wider point at work here. What's the point of suffering? To be transformed into healing. What's the point of ugliness? To make beautiful. What's the point of sorrow? To change into joy. Our psalm makes a similar point. We praise God, our shepherd, because God transforms hunger and thirst into satisfaction, stress into peace, the dark valley of death into the banqueting table of life.

We should note that in the psalmist's experience, sometimes God relieves our suffering and sometimes God keeps us company on the way through it. I know which I'd rather have, but the choice is not ours to make.

This last week I was away on retreat for two days at Whirlow Grange, along with other ministers from Yorkshire Synod. We agreed that we would spend one whole day in silence, apart from some short talks by the retreat-giver, reflecting on the words of Psalm 139, which speaks of God's presence in the whole of human life, even in the darkest times. That should have been comforting, but at the time, remembering some of the darker moments of my own life, such as the distress of my mother's continuing incapacity, it felt disturbing and uncomfortable. That experience made me realise how the hurts we live with daily, whose edges are blunted by habit, can still have power over us if, like the Pharisees who thought there was nothing wrong with their sight, we try to pretend they do not exist. If, however, we share our suffering with God, the pain becomes easier to bear, though the situation may not appear to have changed.

It would at first glance have felt far more comfortable to reflect in that retreat on our reading from the letter to the Ephesians, written from the perspective of suffering ended, of eyes opened. 'Once you were darkness,' it urges, 'but now you are light. Live as children of light.' It sounds so simple. Before you were Christians, it argues, you had all sorts of trouble. But now you've seen the light - metaphorically speaking - everything's hunky-dory. And yet a few chapters earlier in the same letter, we read that its author is: 'a prisoner for Christ Jesus'. Whether this letter was written by Paul, imprisoned for his faith, or by another Christian in his name - most scholars think the latter - the first Christian centuries contain enough persecution for us to take seriously the letter's confidence that the decisive change has been made. Our eyes are open; we know the Lord; and that makes all things bearable. But what has all this to do with Mothering Sunday? Well, I don't believe that if women ruled the world, all would be well - I just have to think of the Spartan mother's injunction to her son: 'Come back from war with your shield or on it!' But one praiseworthy aspect of mothering is suffering with and for one's child. Biological mothers go through the pain of childbirth, though as we all know, not every biological mother can care for or love her child. Adoptive mothers will equally feel the pain of wanting things to work out well for their child, but not always being able to smooth their path in life. The mother of the man born blind is purely my invention, yet if she didn't exist, someone pretty much like her did. Looking at the maternal relationship the other way around, I reckon each of us this morning could think of someone - maybe our actual mothers, maybe someone else - whose mothering love has healed our hurts; who, when things looked darkest for us, has stuck with us and given us hope to go on. Way back in the fourteenth century, a woman called Julian living in Norwich prayed to Jesus as our mother, feeding, nurturing and suffering for us, because he loves us. We suffer with and for those we love; God suffers with and for us. I still don't know why it

must be, but I believe Julian of Norwich when she tells us, as from God: All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

### **Third Sunday in Lent**

#### **Service Date:**

27 March, 2011

#### **John 3:1-17: Nicodemus' story**

- Why should I believe anything he said? I'm a respected teacher of the law. I've studied years to get where I am now. And this young whippersnapper who's never been to college, he thinks he knows it all. I don't even know why I went to talk to him.
  - I do know really. It was the things I've heard he's done. Amazing things no one could possibly do, unless God was on their side. Enough wine from water for a whole wedding party. Making people better who'd been sick for years and the doctors couldn't help them. I'd like to argue with the facts, but I can't.
  - I can argue with him, though. Teaching his grandfather how to suck eggs! What's he mean by being born all over again? Typical young person - wanting everyone to see things from his point of view. Why do things have to be new all the time? What's wrong with things being tried and trusted and good and old? And then he starts off again about the wind, how no one knows where it's come from, or where it's going to, and that's how it is with God's spirit too.
  - Why should I take any notice of him? All this airy-fairy stuff about the spirit. You can tell when the wind's blowing, all right - I agree with him there. Hurricanes and tornadoes don't let you forget. So if he can point to God at work like that, maybe then I'll listen.
  - It's easy enough to talk. But if what he's saying is so good and so true, why didn't I know about it? I'm meant to know what's what.
- If I find out something new, something I didn't know before, won't people laugh at me for changing my mind? Won't they mock me because I should have known about it years ago? It's much easier just to keep on thinking what I've always thought than let the wind blow through me and mix up everything I thought I was sure about.
- Then he started talking about the Bible. About Jacob, and the ladder he dreamed about where angels went up and down between heaven and earth. About Moses, curing the people of plague because they looked at the shape of a snake God had told him to make. Strange stories, that to be honest I've never really been sure about myself. But somehow he made all these ideas make sense. He tied them all up with who he is and what he's come to do. I have to admit I got quite excited about it.
  - But then I thought: if I follow this man Jesus, all my colleagues will laugh at me. I'll have to go around with a bunch of uneducated yokels. And I'll have to admit I've got things wrong about God all these years, that I've wasted most of my life. I couldn't do it.
  - But I still think about the last thing he said, that God's more interested in rescuing people from their mistakes than in condemning them for getting things wrong. And I wonder: does he think there's hope for me yet?

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 489** was originally a Gaelic hymn dating back at least to the tenth century. Mary Byrne made a literal translation into English in 1905, and Eleanor Hull made a metrical adaptation of some of the verses in her Poem-Book of the Gael in 1912. The tune Slane was published in Patrick W. Joyce's Old Irish Folk Music and Songs in 1909, to the words 'With my love on the road'.

**R&S 518** was written in 1975, words and tune, by Jenny Hewer. It expresses a trust in God as our loving parent in both easy and difficult parts of life.

**R&S 610** is from the nineteenth century, written by Horatius Bonar for a Baptist hymnbook. The words are based on 1 John 4:7, describing the love of God which Christians are to mirror in the belief that God is love. The tune Song 46 was first published in George Wither's Hymnes and Songs of the Church of 1623. It consists of the opening two phrases of a nine-phrase melody set by Orlando Gibbons to a hymn for Christmas Day.

**R&S 586** is a paraphrase by Robert Bridges of a seventeenth-century hymn by Joachim Neander, first published in the year of Neander's death at the age of thirty. The tune *Meine Hoffnung* ('My hope' in German) also comes from Neander.

**Sermon:**

**Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; John 3:1-17; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17**

Why should Nicodemus believe Jesus? Jesus doesn't have the certificates, he doesn't have the track record, he doesn't have the influential friends to introduce him. All he has is a growing reputation that can't be argued away for doing good things, things that have to bring God into the picture as the only possible explanation. And on that basis, Nicodemus goes to check Jesus out - cautiously, by night, in case someone sees him.

In our times, it's harder to use the 'we can't explain this so it must be God' argument.

Anyone who's seen Professor Brian Cox's recent series on the fundamental laws of science will realise that we can very successfully explain a lot of things that were once put down to God's direct intervention; and the fewer gaps in our knowledge, the less scope the so-called 'God of the gaps' has to make any impact on our lives. Similarly, though there are still unexplained recoveries from illness that those who benefit from them can thankfully call miraculous, much of modern medicine depends on our detailed knowledge of how our bodies work and our use of that knowledge to help them work better. I'm not arguing that if we understand something, that stops it being anything to do with God. I still remember the first time someone explained to me the amazingly complex process by which green plants turn carbon dioxide and water vapour into sugars, a process on which our own lives depend, and giving thanks for the God whose universe contains such wonders. But unless we are already thinking in terms of God, a whole universe of wonders may not help us to do so. Why then should anyone believe us if we try to share with them the praise, the wonder, the thankfulness we find through our relationship with God? Our psalm this morning is often used at funerals to sum up the life experience of a Christian, and it speaks powerfully of the psalmist's experience of God: help and protection from the maker of all things, trusted presence through all life's transitions. But when we speak of these things, why should anyone believe us? It is our experience, not their own.

There are strong reasons, indeed, why people should not believe us if we want to share the Christian story with them. For we say that our experience of God, whom we have not seen, is as real and as uncontrollable as the wind blowing in our face: but using evidence you can weigh and measure scientifically has become the accepted way to stake a claim to truth. We say that this is not just our own story, but has claims to make on everyone, whoever they are: yet our society finds such universal stories hard to take. And while we say we know God as love, everyone can point to times and places where Christians have been as hate-ridden and destructive of those with whom they disagree as people of any other faith, or none. So why should they believe what we say about God, others could reasonably ask, when what some of us do clearly contradicts that?

Abram had the opposite problem from people in our society, blasé about Christianity

because they believe it has had its day, that it can have nothing interesting or useful to say. In his day, belief in one God who created everything was a strange novelty no sensible person would entertain - for there were many, many gods, each looking after a particular country or a particular aspect of life. The idea of taking off into the unknown because God told you to do so would have been just as strange then as now, but for different reasons: it would mean abandoning the gods of your ancestors, worshipped in your own homeland according to your own laws, for an unknown deity with no track record of blessing or cursing to offer you and your family for their protection.

When Paul looks back at Abram's life, at the trust he must have had in God even to entertain the notion of uprooting his family and going off into the unknown that way, he can't point back to any cast-iron guarantees that Abram and his family would be OK. In fact, he argues the contrary: that Abram's actions show the strength of his trust in the God who, though then unknown, calls into being new things which have never before been seen and can give life even to the dead.

And that God, Paul argues, didn't just call Abram and his family. That God calls us too, both Jewish and Gentile people, calls every person on earth, to go out into what is unknown to us, with no guarantees but only a promise of blessing. For there is no one set of rules people must follow, not even the Jewish Law in which Paul himself once set such store, to be sure of finding God. All that we need is trust.

So why should people believe us, when we speak of this God? We see from Nicodemus' story that it's not at all easy to let yourself believe in something that entails changing your mind about life, the universe and everything. So let's consider an example where the stakes aren't so high. My parents are great evangelists for birdwatching. So far as I can make out, they started by inviting their friends out on a walk, and pointing out birds that could be seen or heard without specialist equipment. My parents have a good knowledge of ordinary birds, so they could give hints on what to look out for. And their own enthusiasm made others really look at birds for the first time and see the beauty there is even in a sparrow. They bought their friends bird guides; they suggested birding holidays. And now my mother's cousin and my mother's oldest friend from school are birders too.

How did this happen? The couples concerned already knew and loved my parents, so they gave their enthusiasm a respectful hearing. My parents could act as interested guides, could offer resources to increase knowledge. They didn't talk down to their friends, or bore them rigid, but showed through the time and money they spent on birding just how important it was to them. But all that wouldn't have made any difference unless wild birds really were as interesting as my parents claimed.

So there are two main reasons why people may believe what we say about the God we worship. If they trust us enough to give time to what we say. And if through their own experience they can test the truth of what we say. The acid test for both is the same. Do we live as if we believed God is love? And do we show God's love to others, even to those who hate or fear us?

## **Second Sunday in Lent**

### **Service Date:**

20 March, 2011

### **Exodus 17:1-7**

The Israelites' story

- Where is God?

- In Egypt that's easy to answer: gods are in the temples, covered with gold and jewels, or painted on the walls of tombs. It's not like that with our people. Our God doesn't have any pictures, so you can't tell even whether God's a he or a she, let alone what God looks like or where God is.
- When we wanted to escape from Egypt, our God sent terrible plagues to make Pharaoh let us go. But we weren't hit. So maybe God was with us and not with the Egyptians. It's not easy to tell when you can't see God.
- When we escaped, God sent signs to show us the way. Clouds in the day. Fire at night. So then we could tell God was with us, guiding and protecting us.
- When we ran out of food, we asked God for help. And help came. Flocks of quails flew out of nowhere. And we started finding manna in the desert, enough for us to eat every day.
- But now we're in the middle of the desert, and we're running out of water. And I'm wondering: where's our God now? Is God angry with us, like God was angry with the Egyptians? Is God going to leave us in the middle of the desert to die of thirst?
- Moses should be the man who can tell us where God is, and what God wants. He led us out of Egypt because God told him to. But Moses is looking tired and fed up. What if he doesn't know where God is either? What do we do then?
- Moses is going over to a rock - looks just like any other rock in the desert - and he's hitting it with his stick. The same stick that he used for his miracles. And the water comes gushing out of this very ordinary rock!
- I'm thankful we have water to drink. But I still want to know: where was God in that? In a magic stick? In an important leader? Or in the way we needed water? And can we trust God to be there the next time?
- I wish I knew where God is, who God is. If we're off across this desert, we need God even more than water.

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 47** is a paraphrase of Psalm 104 by Sir Robert Grant, an 18th-century English lawyer and MP born in India. The tune Hanover is probably named after the royal house of that name.

**R&S 689** is also a psalm paraphrase, this time of Psalm 42, by Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady. The tune Martyrdom is Scottish.

**Tectonic plates** is the hymnwriter Andrew Pratt's response to recent events in Japan. The tune Strength and Stay is appropriate!

**R&S 560**, by John Newton, is set to Abbots Leigh, a twentieth-century written for this hymn by Cyril V. Taylor.

#### **Sermon:**

##### **Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; John 4:5-26; Romans 5:1-11**

It's not unreasonable for people to ask us, when we admit to believing in God: OK, so where is this God of yours, then? But because unlike modern celebrities our God doesn't get spread all over the media, it's not always an easy question to answer. When things are going well, does that mean God is not only there but also pleased with us, like a teacher handing out gold stars for good behaviour? Or, put it the other way around, when things are going badly for us, does that mean God has packed up and left us in disgust? The question is just as perplexing when we consider other people. If they are doing well, does that mean God loves them, and that therefore they are Good Things? If they are suffering disaster, does that mean God has decided to remove protection from them? And that therefore they must be wicked?

All through their escape from Egypt and their desert wanderings, the Israelites must have gone through a high degree of uncertainty as to who and where God was. It wasn't that long since Moses had first reconnected them with the God of their ancestors, of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel. Since then, on the plus side they'd escaped tyranny, but on the minus side they were daily facing the danger of death through starvation or drought. And all they knew about God, apart from family stories, was the name God had given Moses: I am who I am. And that didn't really get them very far forwards. So they grumbled about food; they grumbled about drink; when they got to the borders of Canaan they grumbled about the dangers of entering an inhabited land - it turns out that they weren't so far wrong on that one - and, in the end, the story tells us, God got so annoyed with the people, God sent them right back into the desert for another forty years, till they could say with trust and confidence, out of their own long-travelled experience, just who their God was, and just why God would never let them down. Of course, that experience was quite beside the point for subsequent generations of Israelites, who had to learn all over again in their turn - since the experience of their parents was clearly out of date and irrelevant - who God was for them.

By the time we fast-forward a few centuries to Jesus' meeting at a well with a Samaritan woman, there were some pretty clearly defined ideas about where God was and where God wasn't. But, surprise surprise, these ideas were often in conflict with one another. And as Jesus and the woman talked about God together, their ideas clashed, as may well happen if we summon up the courage to talk about God with someone else. The Samaritan woman was quite sure that God was to be found in the Samaritan temple, on Mt Gerazim. Jesus was equally sure that God was to be found in the Jewish temple at Jerusalem. Their conversation could have ended there, with disagreement and mutual suspicion; or they might have decided, if they were to form a friendship, never to discuss religion, since it obviously led to conflict. And that is one major reason why the hard question, 'where is God?' is rarely asked or answered, even between people who know and respect each other.

But that is not what happened. Jesus turned that conversation around. Notice, he didn't give up on his own convictions. But geographical and theological details weren't crucial. Because God is spirit and truth, he maintained, all who thirst for God, if they worship in spirit and truth, will be able to find God, whatever their starting point.

It's significant that the conversation hadn't begun there. First, Jesus got to know the woman on her own ground. He empathised with her thirst, having to carry heavy water in the heat of the day, only to return again and again. He touched on her relationships, even the embarrassing ones, without making her feel condemned. When they began to talk theology, he did not treat her as stupid or blasphemous. As a result, when he offered her a completely new answer to the question, 'Where is God?' she did not dismiss it or him as absurd, but rushed off to share her new discovery with others.

We have an advantage over that woman from Samaria. We know that Jesus is Messiah. So we're tempted to see her as slow-witted in her gradual realisation. But if you or I had been standing at that well, would we have seen any sooner that the answer to 'Where is God?' would be 'Standing right here beside you!'

It wasn't an easy answer for Paul to give to his Jewish colleagues, who could not conceive of God's Messiah, God's leader, being a carpenter from Nazareth who ended up by getting himself crucified by the Romans. How could a shameful death like that be equated with the sacrifice of pure animals in the Temple, a sacrifice laid down in scripture in order to restore the relationship between God and God's wandering people?

Paul said it could. Paul said that the willing death of Jesus, innocent of wrongdoing, had been the one last sacrifice for sin making the whole Temple system of sacrifice obsolete. And because of Jesus' death, bringing us back into friendship with God, Paul argued, it makes no sense to speak of suffering as punishment meted out by an angry and absent God. On the contrary, he added, suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character enables us to hope in God's love, experienced through God's Spirit, rather than grumbling like the Israelites wandering the desert, constantly asking ourselves, as our lives become better or worse: Is God with us or not?

Paul's approach is not an easy one to take. Sometimes suffering can be ennobling, showing us how our faith is well founded. Sometimes it can be destructive, making people conclude that there can be no meaning in a universe where such terrible things occur. Moreover, the question: Where is God in this? does not only have Christian answers. The Japanese people, for example, stoically suffering the aftermath of earthquake and tsunami and the possibility of nuclear disaster to come, are drawing on the religions of Shinto, which sees suffering as a natural element of human existence and Buddhism, which sees it as the main fact of life, as well as on Christian principles.

Whenever we ask ourselves and each other: Where is God? we can seldom expect clear-cut answers or total agreement. But as Christians we have two unique insights to offer into the conversation. We believe that because in Jesus God became human, in every human being we can find, as the Quakers say, 'that of God'. And we believe that all who seek God in spirit and truth, whoever they are, will find an answer in Jesus which quenches their thirst.

## **First Sunday in Lent**

### **Service Date:**

13 March, 2011

### **Eve's story**

It's not so much the snake I remember from the Garden of Eden. It was the honeybees. The honey they gave us, Adam and me, it was rich and sweet and delicious. And because in Eden, the bees were happy to give us some of their honey, they didn't need to sting. And they didn't need to die when they'd used their stings.

I don't know why we ate the fruit from that tree, really. God told us it wouldn't do us any good. We had fruit from all the other trees to eat. And we had milk and honey whenever we wanted - all the food you don't have to work for.

I look back to that time, when I see poor Adam come in from the fields really tired with all the digging and weeding and harvesting, and I wonder why we didn't believe God. Maybe it was like being babies. We didn't know what was right and wrong; we just knew what we wanted. And as soon as God told us not to eat that fruit, I knew I wanted some. The snake said it would be OK. He said we'd be like God when we ate God's food. But as soon as I'd done it, the fruit did its work, and for the first time I knew I'd done wrong.

I don't know why I gave Adam some of the fruit too. Maybe I wanted him to get in trouble. Maybe I was angry with him because he hadn't stopped me. It's not easy when you get something wrong. You're afraid, and you want to blame everyone else. I wanted to blame the snake. Adam wanted to blame me. But really, we'd decided what to do ourselves. It was just easier to let someone else take the blame. Then God was angry with us, and we had to leave the Garden. We had to have clothes to wear, we had to do hard work, we found out about pain and death.

I've heard that through the centuries, a lot of men have blamed me for the whole thing. They thought women were the cause of all the world's problems, because I didn't listen to God and ate the wrong fruit. But I wonder if they wanted someone to blame for all the wars and the trouble in the world they caused. Not that I'm saying if the world was run by women it'd be a better place. We make just as many mistakes.

When you look around at the world, it can look like a mess. You can't just live on fruit and milk and honey. If you try to get honey from a beehive, the bees sting you. I've heard of a man called Murphy, who wrote a law that goes: What can go wrong, will go wrong. It's easy to see Murphy's law in action. And it's easy to blame other people for what goes wrong. But one thing I've learned is that the only person I can change is me. So I can take responsibility for what I've done wrong. Another thing I've learned is that I can't do it on my own. I need to ask for God's help. If I'd done that, back in the Garden, instead of listening to the snake - maybe I'd have made the right choice.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 543:** Lead us, heavenly Father

It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer

**R&S 285:** O for a thousand tongues (tune: Lyngham)

**R&S 579:** Lord, thy church on earth is seeking

**Sermon:**

**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Matthew 4:1-11; Romans 5:12-19**

I've got a nice easy subject to begin this Lenten series of sermons on hard questions, haven't I? 'What's wrong with the world?' The question comes to mind every time we switch on the news. Earthquake and tsunamis in Japan; revolution in the Middle East; cuts and high prices in this country; hundreds of police and a security barrier in Barker's Pool: it might be quicker for me this morning to concern myself only with what's right rather than what's wrong with the world. And maybe that's not such a bad place for me to start. When from every side the message we hear is, 'We're all doomed!', it's easy to overlook the things about this world that are good, and worthy of thanksgiving. The taste of honey. The love of friends and family. The roof over our heads. The food in our stomachs. The freedom we have to gather on a Sunday morning to worship God in our own building.

But the question remains: what is it about this world that makes Murphy's law valid? Why does it seem that what can go wrong, will go wrong? Sometimes Christians, especially from the Presbyterian tradition, are portrayed as gloomily pessimistic about the whole world. Their view can be traced back to the second creation story in the book of Genesis. Where the first creation story begins with God's words: Let there be light! and speaks of all creation, and human beings within it, having been made very good, this one, though it starts with God putting humanity in the Garden of Eden, ends after their catastrophic disobedience with the expulsion of Eve and Adam from paradise. And those Christian traditions which lay great weight on that original disobedience believe it to have been so great that the whole human race, and the whole of creation, was fatally infected with decline and death. For us in the 21st century there is a problem in this story of the fall: it runs directly counter to the scientific story of evolution, which is one of progress. Where Adam and Eve declined from milk and honey to thorns and thistles, we like to think of ourselves as continually improving. Yet still we need to account for what's wrong with us and with our world.

Interestingly, those Christian traditions which make original sin the culprit for everything that's wrong now still present the Gospel as good news. How do they do it? Paul gives us a

clue to this in our reading from Romans this morning. Though human beings - subsumed in Adam, for in this reading, poor old Eve gets written out altogether - have indeed been guilty of death-meriting sin, there is still hope. For the perfect human being, Jesus, has rerun Adam's choice, but done it very differently.

Here we come to our Gospel story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. Jesus has chosen to submit himself to God's will in the Judean desert, almost the mirror image of the fertile Garden of Eden. On three separate occasions he reruns the human choice of allegiance either to God or to the devil, portrayed in Genesis as that snake in the grass who gave poor Eve such bad advice. Yet instead of going by his own desires, or by the devil's insinuations, Jesus looks directly and specifically to God, speaking through the Scriptures, as his only source of authority and strength. So, according to the pessimistic view of human nature, though we are hopeless, helpless and useless, God through Jesus offers us value and hope. It's a story of powerful truth. For though we may hope to make good choices on our own without any reference to God, in practice we may well find that our vision of truth is not clear enough, or our will is not strong enough, for us to do so. 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous contain as their first three steps the recognition that on our own we human beings are powerless against the destructive forces that want to rule our lives; the acknowledgment that a higher power than our own could help us; and the decision to turn our lives over to that power. That holds good for all of us.

Our psalm this morning tells a similar story. When we pretend that we have not gone wrong, the energy we use up in pretending saps us of strength. But if we admit that some of what's wrong with the world is down to our bad choices, not those of other people, God offers us forgiveness and the chance to make amends. And this is true on a communal as well as a personal level. We live in a world where cheap food and clothing for us necessarily mean inadequate food, housing, education or health care for the people who grow or make it for us. Trying to ignore this, or blaming it on their poor life choices or those of their governments, does not lessen our responsibility. But when we admit our own role in unjust world systems, and start to look for ways, like fair trade, in which we can redress the situation, we will find God's forgiveness waiting for us.

That's a good example of how we can react to what is wrong with the world. If we condemn humanity utterly because of the choices of our mythical forebears, we ourselves have no responsibility in the matter, and are absolved of any need to make good choices ourselves - which is absurd. If we try to blame non-Christians for all the world's woes, this is just not borne out by reality. If, however, we hold the world's problems to be entirely our responsibility, burnout and despair are inevitable. Instead, we need to take seriously the strength and wisdom which, as the psalmist promises, God will give us as we need guidance. The life lived by Adam and Eve in Eden was like that of small children: loved, nourished, protected. But as part of growing up, finding out the difference between right and wrong, they had to live with the consequences of their choices. Being adult is more complicated than being a baby. It involves hardship and pain. But as we look to God's guidance, the choices we make, individually and as a church, can take us closer to God's kingdom, where mutual love, forgiveness and justice are more precious for having arisen through our deliberate decision rather than through ignorance of the alternatives. We will need such values over the next few decades as we go on dealing with what's wrong with the world: disasters, revolutions, economic problems and those of government, and the results of sin in ourselves and others. And in Christ they are ours for the asking. I don't expect in this

world to taste honey gathered from stingless bees; we won't go back into Eden. But following Jesus we can look to the future with hope.

### **Last Sunday before Lent**

#### **Service Date:**

6 March, 2011

**Matthew 17:1-9** (Joshua to read)

**Sarah:** Tell me, where will you go on holiday this year?

**Jean:** We were wondering about going camping with Rosie and the boys. As long as the weather holds.

**Sarah:** I'm not sure about camping. You sleep on rocks, and the birds start singing far too early in the morning. And then, more often than not, once you've got up, the midges eat you alive. No, I don't think I'll follow your example. Unless I can find a holy campsite.

**Jean:** A holy campsite? What's one of them?

**Sarah:** You know, like the one Joshua's just told us about. Peter and James and John on the mountain with Jesus.

**Jean:** I was listening, but I don't remember anything about a campsite, let alone a holy one.

**Sarah:** Yes, you do! Remember when Peter's talking to Jesus? When he talks about making three tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah? Now that's what I call a holy campsite!

**Jean:** So what's special about a holy campsite, then?

**Sarah:** Well, to start with it should be right on top of a mountain. You'd get a great view!

**Jean:** But the wind would be terrible. And it'd be so rocky, you'd never get the tent pegs in, let alone find a soft spot to sleep on.

**Sarah:** Oh. Well, even though people used to think you'd be closer to God on a mountaintop, maybe the mountain's not the really important thing about it.

**Jean:** So what is the important thing?

**Sarah:** That it's holy, of course! You can tell that in the story Joshua read because it talks about having Moses and Elijah as your next-door neighbours. The guy who gave us God's laws and one of the really top prophets. You'd know exactly what God wanted you to do then.

**Jean:** Doesn't sound much like a holiday to me. Still, it takes all sorts. But honestly, Sarah, you'd not expect to find Moses and Elijah round your campfire, would you? They've been dead for thousands of years!

**Sarah:** OK, I'll give you that. But I suppose it could still be a holy campsite. If there was someone around who made me think of God.

**Jean:** Someone with a long white beard, a frowning expression and a pile of thunderbolts, you mean?

**Sarah:** Of course not! Someone who made me glad to be alive, because I knew they loved me. Someone who stuck by me even if things went wrong. Someone who forgave me when I went wrong. Someone like Jesus.

**Jean:** So let me get this right. You'd know somewhere was a holy campsite if it was on top of a mountain, though the altitude doesn't matter too much; if you had someone wise as your neighbour, advising you about what God wants; and if someone on site made you think of Jesus.

**Sarah:** That's right! Oh yes, and a bright cloud you couldn't see through.

**Jean:** Yes. Well. Sarah, have you been camping much?

**Sarah:** Not for years and years.

**Jean:** Somehow I thought so. Sarah, I reckon you'd do as well to stay at home for your holidays this year.

**Sarah:** Why's that?

**Jean:** From what you tell me, you're not really that keen on camping. It's the holy bit that attracts you. Right?

**Sarah:** Well, I suppose so.

**Jean:** And from what you say, to find holiness you don't have to go up a special mountain, or find Moses and Elijah.

**Sarah:** Well, no.

**Jean:** What you need for holiness is people who can help you find out what God wants, and people who make you think of Jesus. Well, you don't need to trek up a mountain for that. If you watch and listen, you can find holiness right here in St Andrew's. Or out on the street in Broomhall.

**Sarah:** Jean, you're quite right! What a relief - I can cancel my campsite reservation. Oh - but what about the bright cloud?

**Jean:** Going by the sort of weather we've had recently, that shouldn't be any problem.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 67** was published in 1876 by W. Chalmers Smith, a minister of the Free Church of Scotland. The tune St Denio is Welsh.

**R&S 203** comes from J. Armitage Robinson, a Cambridge theologian, in 1888. Venice is a 19th-century hymn tune.

**CG 12** is a contemporary hymn by David J. Evans.

**R&S 558** is also contemporary, coming from John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. The tune Kelvingrove is traditionally Scottish.

**Sermon:**

**Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99; Matthew 17:1-9; 2 Peter 1:16-21**

A week yesterday, I had a URC meeting in Cambridge. As you probably know, I haven't a car, so I went by train. And boy, is the countryside around Cambridge flat! After nearly six years living in Sheffield, it struck me more than ever how boring flat countryside can be when you're looking out of a train window. If I'd been riding a bicycle, I suppose I'd have appreciated the change from Sheffield's everlasting hills, but as it was, in spite of the ache in my legs every time I climb to the bus-stop, I was very glad not to be living in that part of the country all the time.

When Matthew and the other Gospellers portray Jesus meeting with Moses and Elijah on the holy mountain, of course, they're not thinking about the aesthetics of scenery or even the aching of muscles. Moses had received the Ten Commandments from God on just such a mountaintop. Elijah had heard God's still, small voice in just such a place. Mountains were fitting places to meet with the holy. And mountain wilderness was also, in the Hebrew tradition, the place where the Israelites had been guided by God, as they wandered there for forty years. So when Peter, James and John see Jesus shining like the sun, it's Peter's natural reaction to prolong that holy, that mountain-top experience by offering to make shelters or tents for these three holy men, just like those used in the festival of Tabernacles, in which to this day Jews remember their ancestors' wanderings in the wilderness with God by living, eating and even sleeping outside.

I fear Peter sometimes gets a raw deal in sermons. He's portrayed as constantly hopping around with foot in mouth. But here I can sympathise with him. For sometimes life feels flat.

Nothing's actually wrong; it's just that nothing seems very interesting. There seems to be a whole swathe of time stretching ahead with nothing to look forward to. In that sort of mood, I really look forward to metaphorical mountain tops, because they provide meaning and intensity to life. And this experience would have been one Peter would ponder for the rest of his life. So no wonder he wants to prolong it.

Peter's mistake may have been to assume that holiness was only to be found while he could see it, shining off Jesus like the result of some celestial washing powder; that when holiness could no longer be seen, it was no longer present. That mistake is understandable. Think of the scriptures he would know by heart: of Moses going up the mountain of God into a cloud which covered the mountain, a cloud signalling the glory of God's presence, bright as a devouring fire. Think of our psalm this morning, reminding God's people of God's desert guidance through a pillar of fire, a pillar of smoke. In the Hebrew Bible holiness is portrayed as a living, active, dangerous quality, only really appropriate for qualified people like leaders and prophets to deal with. If you unexpectedly encounter it, the safest thing is to back away, and wait till Moses comes back to hand out the minutes of his meeting with God. To his credit, Peter didn't flee the mountain of transfiguration; but instead, he assumed that the holiness they had witnessed up there would vanish unless they stayed put.

And you could argue that circumstances thereafter bore out his assumption. Barely are they down the mountain, minus Moses and Elijah, when the climbing party get embroiled in a heated argument between a desperate father and some embarrassed followers of Jesus who wanted to heal the man's epileptic son but found themselves unable to do so. Jesus himself seems to have reacted rather sharply to this sudden change from the holy to the hullabaloo, rebuking those around for their lack of faith in God. What price holiness now? Peter may have asked himself, caught up in this schemozzle. I can imagine him looking wistfully back up the mountain, wishing he were still up there, where law and prophecy personified stood side by side, where, incredibly, Jesus could be seen the way he truly was, where the clear, thin air made everything seem so much simpler to understand. And yet God's holiness understood as palpable light, fire, energy, cannot be the only sort there is. For in spite of his irritation, back down the mountain, Jesus still healed the lad.

At Christmas we sing with delight about the holy virgin, so tender and mild; about the infant holy, infant lowly; about the holy night and the holy family. It doesn't bother us that in Bethlehem God's holiness was manifested through teenage pregnancy out of wedlock, through birth into hay and animal dung, through welcome not only by angels but also by synagogue-dodging shepherds and followers of a different faith.

And we are right not to query that link, begun at the Nativity and carrying through to the cross, between divine holiness and human frailty. God has come down from the heights to join us in the mess and muddle of humanity; yet still and always, God is holy, whole, perfect. It is only our eyes, unhelped by the clear mountain air of transfiguration, that may have difficulty finding holiness in an out-of-work preacher who keeps company with the lowest of the low, touches and heals those who admit their need and teaches those who have not already made their minds up; who challenges religious and military power; whose death matches the ignominy of his life.

We may not have that difficulty with finding holiness in Jesus himself. As good church-people, we have been brought up to see the whole of his life overflowing with God. But how can we match that reality in our experience? For some, a mountain-top vision of God may feel like something that is not for them. Leave prayer, leave silence in God's presence, to the holy ones, to ministers or to elders. Give us the down-to-earth work and play of the church.

Yet Peter, the down-to-earth fisherman, could tell you a different story, of a moment of glory and clarity that would colour all his days. For others, God's glory may be found in the ordered worship of a Sunday morning, but it's much more of a struggle seeing holiness in the fragile and broken lives we know in ourselves and see in others, Monday to Saturday. Yet Peter, later a major church leader, would discover in himself both fear, causing him to deny even knowing Jesus, and God's grace to know himself forgiven. We are, each of us, holy ground; on the mountain and on the plain, God's presence is with us, and with all people.

### **Rev Robert Beard preaching at St Andrew's**

#### **Service Date:**

20 February, 2011

For Robert Beard's sermon, please scroll down.

#### **Hymns:**

**CG 34** For the gifts of all creation

**CG 116** Spirit of the Living God

**CG 49** Heaven shall not wait

**CG 62** If you believe and I believe

**CG 50** I the Lord of sea and sky

#### **Sermon:**

#### **Choosing between God and Mammon**

In the name of God, who comes among us incarnate in human life and human love.

For centuries now, God has been in retreat. As science has advanced, God has been left defending a shrinking territory consisting of only those mysteries that remain unexplained - 'God of the gaps'. And then last autumn, Stephen Hawking, arguably the world's greatest living scientist, announced that God was no longer necessary for creation.

This brought an immediate reaction from the Archbishop of Canterbury, who said that science still didn't explain why there was "something rather than nothing", but if this is the best that can be said in God's defence, I'm not sure it amounts to much more than nothing. I think we can do better than that.

The cardinal difficulty of my work as policy adviser with a national charity is to maintain my professional, intellectual detachment from the implications of the policy upon which I do the advising.

At present, I am required to present the opportunities presented by the 'Big Society' idea as well as the challenges, to promote and enable negotiation with politicians and civil servants, to seek accommodation and compromise with national and local government... while all the time my humanitarian instincts are urging me to down tools and take to the streets. It's no easy matter to retain my balance on this political tightrope.

At least here in Church I can attempt, under God, to appear as I truly think and feel - or at least as I should like you to believe I truly think and feel - and to present the vision of an opportunity for Sheffield to take a leading Spirit-led, values-based role in the Big Society. Every Sunday we celebrate the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ in the past, and look outward for signs of incarnation in God's present world and God's present people; for, as my Professor of Divinity at St Andrews University once observed, "Wherever a creature responds to God's will, incarnation takes place."

Before outlining my vision, I should like to offer some theological reflection on the situation in which God must now be incarnated.

At last year's annual conference of the Faith-based Regeneration Network, Neil Jameson, Executive Director of Citizens UK, suggested that the opposite of faith is not doubt, which is in fact pretty much a pre-requisite for any sort of 'living, thinking faith'; nor is it certainty - that unquestioning, dogmatism that avoids any challenge by ignoring any contrary evidence. The opposite of faith, Neil said, is the market.

Well, that made us sit up and take notice!

The market, explained Neil, exploits every known means to cajole, persuade and compel us endlessly to buy goods and services we don't need, with money we don't have. The market feeds on debt and constantly adapts to guarantee itself an ever-increasing supply of debt. If there is faith, then the market will do everything in its power to ensure that that faith is in the goods and services that the market produces.

I think he's right.

Never mind that goods and services cost money to produce, their sale will always ensure a greater return. Never mind that people can't afford food, so long as they service their debt. We have allowed ourselves to become the servants, not of God, but of the market; and we spend our lives scurrying backwards and forwards to ensure that the market has all the debt it needs to thrive.

I think the market is like God: for both God and the market symbolise the offer to us of life in all its fullness.

But the market is also unlike God: The market makes life available to us only so long as we pay our debts - in full, and with interest. God, however, longs to make life available by forgiving us our debts. We really cannot serve God and Mammon.

The market is more unlike God than that, too: There is no place in the market economy for those who can no longer pay or even service their debts, but no one, no matter how poor, is ever excluded from God's economy.

We live in harrowing times. As a nation - even as a global society - we have discovered what many developing countries discovered a decade or more ago - and we really should have learned from them - that we can no longer pay our debts.

The market economy will not forgive us our debts, and we have long ago turned away from God's economy. We have continued to buy goods and services we don't need with money we don't have, while people around us have starved and died because they lack the money to buy the goods and services they do need.

We can't plead ignorance. It's not as if we didn't know. Thanks to instant global communications technology, the inhabitants of Pakistan, Ethiopia, Iraq and Somalia have become our neighbours, whose business we know as well as - if not better than - the business of our actual next-door neighbours.

Locally, we have long known of the work of organisations like NOMAD and HARC and the Archer Project and ASSIST among homeless and destitute people in Sheffield. We have at least some idea of the appallingly tough choices their workers must make to prioritise one person's well-being over another's. And we have heard enough of their appeals to be aware of the challenges that chronic under-resourcing presents to these organisations. The situation is still changing, but not for the better.

When I first came to Sheffield in 1988, the gap in average life-expectancy between the east side of the city, where I started work, and the west side was 10 years; in 2006, 18 years later, according to NHS Sheffield's Health and Well-being Atlas it had widened to 14 years and the latest figures indicate that just 4 years later it now stands at something like 17 years.<sup>1</sup>

It is seductive but too simplistic to blame the economic recession through which we are now wading on the irresponsible gambling by many of the large banks, although they certainly played their part and have largely got away unscathed; the latest figures show that bonus payments are now back at the level they had reached just before the sub-prime mortgage crisis revealed itself.

The very bravest among our political and social analysts are beginning to say what many still dare not even think - that the welfare, health and social care systems that were established in the middle of the last century have proved economically unsustainable. An ageing population, the demand for vote-winning low rates of taxation and the ever-growing gulf of inequality between the rich and the poor have placed too great a burden on the mechanisms that finance public services.

The government's abandonment a few weeks ago of the statutory socio-economic duty, defined in the Equality Act 2010, which would have required public bodies to consider the impact of policy on people from poorer backgrounds, may indicate that they too see the fight against inequality as a lost cause.

Today is the first day of the Church's week. In the weeks and months ahead, we are going to see hundreds of thousands of people denied access to the goods and services they need, hundreds of thousands of people lose their livelihoods, and at least thousands of people lose their homes.

A report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, with whose figures the Conservative Party used to berate the former Labour government, show that the initiatives announced in the emergency budget would deprive the top 10% richest in the country of 1.1% of their income on average while the bottom 10% (poorest) would lose 5.6% of theirs. And - guess what? - single mothers and women living in poverty will be the hardest hit.

Models derived by the Local Government Association from the cuts announced in the government's recent Spending Review show that local authorities in the wealthiest areas, whose Area Based Grant from central government makes up a relatively small part of their overall budget, will have to find cuts of only 2 or 3%, while authorities in the poorest areas, where the government grant makes up a much higher proportion of their total income, will have to find cuts of up to 36%.

Sheffield is more vulnerable than other cities of comparable size to the current and coming massive cuts in public spending. Our city lost most of its coal and steel industry in the 1980s, and while other northern cities, like Leeds and Manchester, jumped on the financial services bandwagon, Sheffield became disproportionately reliant on its public sector both for direct employment and for jobs resulting from public sector contracts with private sector companies.

And yet, as I indicated at the start, I believe that Sheffield is uniquely placed to take a leading Spirit-led, values-based role in the Big Society.

I am fortunate. At the end of last year, both my wife Jennie and I faced the real prospect of losing our jobs at the end of March, with all that that would have entailed - inability to continue supporting my sons Philip and Joseph, no income with which to pay the mortgage, and so on. But we have family and friends who would not have seen us destitute, and so although life as I turn 50 may not be quite what I hoped for at 25, it will at least continue to be life surrounded by love and care.

But many in Sheffield are not so fortunate. There are many who, for whatever reason, lack the love and care of family or friends. Should they lose their livelihoods, they and their families will become dependent on the kindness of strangers. They will be adding to the

increasing demand on goods and services provided by public sector or voluntary and community sector organisations, at precisely the point when these bodies are experiencing precipitous falls in their own resources.

I believe that now is the time for people who love people to step up to the plate.

Can we rise to the occasion?

Can we, at long last, abandon our faith in the market to provide us with life in all its fullness, and return to faith in God to do that instead?

Can we turn Sheffield into a crucible, where our faith in the market economy, with its reliance on the payment of debt, is broken up and melted down, and a new faith in God's economy, which relies on the forgiveness of debt, takes shape?

Can we stop buying things we don't need and start buying things that other people do need?

Can we become family for those who have no family, and friends for those who have no friends?

As we celebrate the incarnation of God in the past, can we become the incarnation of God in the present?

As my Vicar, Ian Wallis, said recently, "...this radical freedom to give of self is the defining Christian capacity and motivation, the impulse linking our humanity to that of Jesus, and it is as good a measure of any of how far we have come in sharing his faith and embodying his risen life."

We believe we share the body of Christ. We say we ARE the body of Christ. The time is coming, and is already here, when believing and saying are no longer enough, not that they ever were.

The time is coming, and is already here, to turn prayerful rhetoric into practical reality.

Note:

1 I was recently challenged on these figures. My source was the Channel 4 News FactCheck blog which examines the claims made by politicians.

See <http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/big-life-expectancy-gap-between-rich...>

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## **Seventh Sunday after Epiphany**

### **Service Date:**

27 February, 2011

Have you ever been in a traffic jam, stuck behind the wheel of a car or jammed into a bus seat, and found yourself unable to do anything but think? I wonder, what do you think about then? When I'm in that sort of situation, what I find myself thinking about is how I'm about to be late for my meeting. Then my mind does a sort of sideways slide to the things I haven't got round to doing, or what programme I'm missing on TV, or maybe what shop I need to visit if I'm going to eat this evening. If I'm not careful, I can work myself up into such a state worrying about all these things, I hardly notice when the bus does start moving again.

Here's a sample of my interior monologue:

**Sarah:** I need some more cheese. Better stop at the deli on the way home. Maybe they'll have some of those oatcakes I like. And I should pick up some more butter too.

**God:** Excuse me?

**Sarah:** Let's see, what meetings do I have tomorrow? Chaplaincy first thing, then the Tuesday afternoon group. And there's someone coming round in the evening. Bother! When will I have time to peel the potatoes?

**God:** Excuse me?

**Sarah:** And I should probably be taking more exercise, so if the bus does ever start up, maybe I should get off one stop before home - What? Did someone just say, Excuse me?

**God:** I did. I was wondering when you'd notice.

**Sarah:** Who are you, wandering around in my mind?

**God:** Don't panic. It's just me. God.

**Sarah:** But you never said you were coming! I wasn't expecting you till Sunday morning, and my thoughts are all of a mess! Hold on a moment, and I'll try to think about something more holy! Umm... do you want to talk about my sermon?

**God:** Not particularly. Unless you'd like some ideas?

**Sarah:** Well, as you may have noticed, I could do with some inspiration. But, um, I don't want to sound rude, if you don't want to talk about the sermon, what are you here for? Have I been falling behind on my prayer quota again?

**God:** I'm interested, that's all. Interested in your life.

**Sarah:** My life, maybe - but my grocery shopping? I find that hard to believe of the Creator of the universe.

**God:** Well, I did design you to need food. So why wouldn't I be interested in your getting it? But really it was your worrying that caught my attention. Your worryometer reading's off the scale!

**Sarah:** Worryometer?

**God:** One of my better ideas, if I say so myself. You humans get so much wear and tear from worrying, I thought I'd better track your worry and intervene when it got to danger levels.

And I have to say you're pretty near that point now.

**Sarah:** Gosh, that's worrying.

**God:** See? You do it to yourself.

**Sarah:** But what do you expect me to do? People rely on me to be there, to get the job done. And when I'm already late and the bus driver decides for some unknown reason to wait ten minutes by the side of the road, of course I'm going to worry!

**God:** Does your worrying make the bus start again quicker?

**Sarah:** Not that I've noticed. But at least I feel I'm doing something about it. Besides, I come from a long line of worriers. My granny used to be a champion worrier about the family. If I sneezed in her presence, she reckoned I'd be bound to get flu.

**God:** So did you use to sneeze when she was around?

**Sarah:** Of course not! If I had a cold, I'd just not talk to her until it went away. Then she'd worry about not hearing from me, of course. Towards the end of her life it got so bad, I'd not tell her anything important about what was going on for me, in case she started worrying about it.

**God:** Was that what she wanted, do you think?

**Sarah:** Not at all. She really cared about the family, but it's a funny thing, her worrying actually got in the way of her loving us.

**God:** Anything you want to think about there?

**Sarah:** All right, I get your drift. But life feels so complicated sometimes, it's hard not to worry. Especially with money getting tighter and my parents a long way away.

**God:** Well, when things get tough, worrying's not the only way you could react.

**Sarah:** What else would you suggest?

**God:** I made some pretty good flowers, if I say so myself. Why not look out for them when you're stuck in a jam, now the spring's coming up? Or what about the birds? Don't you love the way they wheel round in a flock, or play hide-and-seek in the trees?

**Sarah:** Now you mention it, I do love watching them. And somehow it calms me down to realise there's more to life than my worries.

**God:** Good news! Now you're in a better frame of mind to look out for me, and give me some help with my work. And don't stress about what you need. Give me that worry, and I'll sort it for you.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 74** comes from the pen of Joachim Neander, a seventeenth-century German theologian, and is translated by Catherine Winkworth. The German tune *Lobe den Herrn* (Praise to the Lord) from the same period was originally used with a love-song.

**R&S 512** is a twentieth-century round with music (the tune 'Seek ye first') by Karen Lafferty and words taken from our Gospel reading this morning.

**And now, O God** is another contemporary hymn written by Andrew Pratt, a teacher and Methodist minister who was formerly Chair of the Methodist Peace Fellowship. The tune *Dominus regit me* (The Lord leads me) is better known with the words 'The King of Love my Shepherd is', for which it was originally written.

**R&S 95** is our third twentieth-century hymn today, written by Timothy Rees while he was at the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield and published posthumously. The tune *Blaenwern* was written during the Welsh revival of the early twentieth century.

**Sermon:**

**Isaiah 49:8-16a; Psalm 131; Matthew 6:24-34; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5**

We are a church that is not afraid of hard work. On the contrary, I believe we pride ourselves on virtuous activity, whether it's contributing to our worship on Sunday mornings, serving each other and others beyond the church through our weekday groups, meeting to plan or support our out-of-church activities, or following other interests in God's world, whether it's volunteering, playing bridge or attending lectures. What we find it much harder to do is to stop doing things, unless or until poor health forces us to do so. And one particular word chosen in my own version of this morning's Gospel reading does not in the least help us to question this addiction to activity. The word I'm talking about is 'strive'. According to the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, a version we often use in church, we are urged to strive first for God's kingdom and righteousness, and everything else will come to us.

In one way, I'm 100% behind this, as I hope our theme introduction indicated. When we put our own interests first, we are bound to worry either about present difficulties in getting what we need, or the possibility of having to go without in future. When we look first to God's priorities - serving others, loving enemies -mysteriously, we will find that our own needs are also met. Where I have a problem is with the idea of striving. The Greek word used - see, it was worth my going to college, after all - can mean either looking for something or working hard for it, so while most versions use 'seek', my translation is justified in choosing 'strive' instead. Apart from one crucial point. We in our church - and, I suspect, many others in many churches - are already conditioned to strive, and I think we shouldn't be encouraged to do any more of it.

Why am I so down on striving? Do I think we should be lazy, expecting God to do everything

for us? By no means! as Paul used to exclaim in his letters when people misunderstood him. Yet that's not our temptation in St Andrew's. We are tempted to work very hard at being good Christians, so that God will love us. But that endeavour is doomed to failure. Why? Because God already loves us more than we could ever merit, however heroically hard we worked.

The whole idea of being loved more by God if we deserve it more by being better people falls at the first hurdle. It's just not that sort of relationship. Take the picture used in our psalm this morning, of the psalmist talking to God, comparing himself to a weaned child resting in her mother's arms. I understand that teething can be a severe challenge to the bond between parent and child, especially when the little darling won't stop yelling. But think of a parent who would tell her child: 'I'm only going to go on loving you if you never cry again.' Think of a parent who, when her toddler does something wrong - and, let's face it, if they haven't already, they will do - would react by putting the child up for adoption. For ninety-nine parents out of a hundred, such a reaction would be unthinkable. And speaking on God's behalf, Isaiah assures the Israelites: 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.'

So we have no need to work hard to impress our creator. God isn't like the sort of relation you may have been taken to see as a child, dressed in your best clothes and primed with your best behaviour. God's not like the school-teacher who will mark our work out of ten with oceans of red ink. God is the mother rocking her toddler to peace.

That's what the psalmist says; that's what Isaiah says. But what do you say? Have you met God as the one who reassures you, who calms your fears and takes away your worries? Or are you so busy doing your duty, fulfilling what God requires of you, that you are left with no time to experience God's peace? One way we are kept from that peace is external busyness, and heaven knows there are enough tasks associated with St Andrew's to keep us all busy till the kingdom comes. Another way is our internal busyness, a constant stream of thought and worry, illustrated in our theme introduction, which stops us from seeking peace. And we can be tempted to hold onto this interior babble in order to mask the voice of condemnation we fear to hear from God, telling us we are unworthy, inadequate, a waste of space. From the sound of our reading from Paul's first letter to Corinth, I suspect he knew that voice of condemnation.

But rather than letting it overwhelm him, and rather than identifying such condemnation with the voice of God, he left judgment in God's hands. And that is the only safe place for us to leave it. We never know the whole story about others whom we may be tempted to condemn. We never know the full story even about our own unconscious motivations. Only God is competent to try our case, so we need not do so.

But if we did try - just as an experiment - to slow down, to stop our external busyness for a while, even when not immobilised by snow or flu; if we did try - just as an experiment - to ignore the nagging voice of condemnation within, what would we do instead? How might we encounter that peace of God which passes human understanding? For some people, being alone with art or music, poetry or prose can foster this encounter. For others, the lilies of the field or the birds of the air, the grandeur of the peaks or the lapping of the ocean will lead into God's presence. For others, the quiet company of a dear friend. But your preparation need not be elaborate. It may be as simple as taking some deep breaths, and reminding yourself of God's love for us and for all.

However you choose to invite God's peace into your life, it will, of course, not offer you any

guarantees of freedom from hardship, present or to come. The Israelites for whom Isaiah wrote had known the pain of exile, and would encounter further difficulties on their return home. The man who told his friends to rejoice in birds and flowers, who in his own life put first God's kingdom and righteousness, would be deserted by his friends, condemned by his tradition and put to death by his rulers. Yet ultimately Jesus' trust in God was warranted and the life he gave into God's hands was restored.

If we in St Andrew's were to dare to strive less, to worry less, to trust God more, what difference might that make to our lives, individually and as a church? Our bank balance, our age profile, our activities might or might not change as a result. But we would be able to see more clearly the signs of God's kingdom within and beyond our lives. And since God knows, better than any of us, what it is this church needs, I believe our needs would be fully met. But do we dare?

### **Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**

#### **Service Date:**

13 February, 2011

During the last election campaign, I kept on hearing on the news about a website called Mumsnet that all the politicians were trying to get good reviews from so mothers would vote for them. Did any of you hear about it? I'm not a mother, and barring miracles I'm not likely to be one, but it intrigued me, the thought of lots of mothers signing in, sharing news online and supporting each other in bringing up babies and children. When I was being brought up, of course, there wasn't the internet. What we had was Dr Spock. Maybe some of you or some of your children were brought up with his best-selling book *Baby and Childcare*. The bit I really liked about it was that though I was a fussy eater, Dr Spock told my mother not to worry. Let her eat what she likes and leave the rest, he said, as long as she tries a little bit. And so we avoided a lot of arguments and tantrums.

But Mumsnet have their equivalent for Dr Spock too: baby-led weaning. The idea is that when a baby is ready to eat solid food, she'll show you, by being interested in lumps of real food, not just milk, or even puree, even if to start with she throws it around as much as eating it. I'm sure Dr Spock would approve of this approach, and I like the idea of being trusted to move on and develop through life, not just sticking to someone else's timetable to decide when I should be ready to do what.

The downside, of course, is that a baby may decide that milk's so wonderful that there's no point in trying out the solid stuff. It'll get itchy bits in your gums. And all those different tastes, salty and bitter and sweet, they're overrated anyway. Let's stick with the good stuff we know.

And it's not just babies who are tempted to stick with what we know. Let's hear from Paul complaining about his friends in Corinth.

#### **1 Corinthians 3:1-9**

There's nothing wrong with milk, with starting out in the Christian life, Paul tells his readers. The mistake would be to stop there, with what we first learned, whether it's through Paul or through Apollos. And it's a mistake we're all tempted to make, even if we've been on solid food for decades. The first preacher I heard who really made sense. The old hymns I know off by heart from childhood. The ideas about God I learned in Sunday school. They're all good; they're all nourishing. But God has much more for us than that - a whole banquet more!

The other problem, of course, is that people who prefer Paul's teaching can look down on

Apollos' fan group and vice versa, just as on Mumsnet there are spirited discussions about whether baby-led weaning onto solid food or spoonfeeding with puree is better for your baby. But there are many different ways to develop in the Christian life, or we'd only have one sort of church rather than lots. The main thing is to remember who we're following: for Jesus, our ultimate authority, is the one who helps us all to grow into God's unique vision of us, just as every child grows up unique. That way we can accept and even welcome people who are different from us.

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 95** was written by Timothy Rees, then a member of the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield. The tune Blaenwern was composed during the Welsh Christian revival of 1904-5.

**R&S 646** is by Fred Kaan, a URC minister, and published in 1974. The tune Acceptance was written by Brenda Stephenson specifically for this hymn.

**R&S 318** comes from George Caird, Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford, who incorporated 17 biblical quotations in it. The tune Cornwall comes from the 19th century composer S.S. Wesley.

**Lead us to freedom** is also a twentieth-century hymn by Michael Forster, an Anglican minister who writes many new hymns to familiar tunes. The tune Maccabeus is better known partnered with the hymn 'Thine be the glory'.

#### **Sermon:**

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; Matthew 5:21-37; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9**

Jesus is certainly exerting his authority in our reading from Matthew this morning, isn't he? Over and over he tells his friends, 'You have heard it said,' but I tell you...' and then he drives to the heart of his subject. Matthew will probably have passed on Jesus' teaching very strongly because at the time his Gospel was being written there was a right royal battle going on as to whether only the rabbis had authority to tell Jews what to do, or whether those following Jesus as Messiah could also legitimately say what God's will was. But Jesus didn't pull his punches either, with his original hearers or with us today. It's not even that the original rules he's quoting are weak. 'Do not murder; do not commit adultery' - they come straight out of the Ten Commandments. But Jesus isn't letting us think they only apply to criminals. He's highlighting our own passions which, beginning in small ways, can lead to such terrible consequences as murder or faithlessness.

While in our theme introduction, Paul was encouraging his friends in Corinth to move beyond baby steps towards the Christian life, here Jesus is warning his friends that baby steps away from that life can lead to enormously destructive consequences. If we begin to treat another Christian with anger or contempt, it will get in the way of our relationship with God as well as our relationship with that person, for it is impossible, practically speaking, for us to love God, who is invisible, whilst simultaneously despising our brother or sister who is very painfully present. That is why our worship normally begins not only with our adoration of God, but also with our admission of our own failings, asking for God's help in admitting and putting right what has gone wrong for us over the course of the last week. Similarly, if we treat anyone as a sexual object, to gratify our senses or to be discarded when we are disappointed with them, we will injure ourselves too. And unless we are already people of integrity, whose words echo our internal reality, whatever impressive forms of words we may use to try to back up our assertions - think technical jargon as well as actual oaths - are worse than useless.

If we think about it, we know this to be true - so why do we still let ourselves speak sharply to each other; why in the privacy of our heads do we dwell on inappropriate thoughts; why

do we try to pass off shoddy intentions behind a façade of weasel words? The writer of Deuteronomy must have asked himself that question; looking back over centuries of Israelite history where turning from God and disaster seemed intertwined, he must have wondered why people never seemed to learn how their bad choices would go wrong. And so all the more strongly he gave Moses this urgent plea: Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him. But we only develop that sort of insight with maturity. A baby starting to eat solids will try eating a lot of things, whether or not they're actually food. As we get older we discover not only our favourite foods but also what will do us harm. People with allergies become hypersensitive to tiny traces of the food to which they react, because they know how bad the consequences of overlooking it can be. And in the same way, we can learn about our own weak points. Maybe we have a short temper, and when we're stressed others bear the brunt of it. Maybe there's a particular person to whom our thoughts return and whose presence we seek, even though their loyalties are elsewhere. Or maybe we say we're useless, to get attention from others. We all have ways of behaving that are destructive; though we may not be aware of them, our family probably is. But Jesus' teaching gives us a wake-up call to notice our little temptations and pray for wisdom and strength to make better choices before they are manifested as big problems in public. How can we do that? At night I review the day that is past, asking myself where I have felt the presence of God in it and when it felt as though God was far away. The process highlights where I have gone wrong, but gives me a way to notice and deal with it. Quietly reading the Bible and reflecting on how it speaks to our lives can also help. And if we ask for God's help, it's always there, helping us take that next small step towards Christ.

### **Holy Communion**

#### **Service Date:**

6 February, 2011

#### **Gospel reading Matthew 5:13-20**

**Sarah:** I have a guilty secret to share with you. Some of you will have no time for it at all; others may actually share my bad habit. In any case, I'd better tell you now: sometimes I watch daytime TV.

Some of it is interesting; some of it is usefully repeated from another time of day when I couldn't watch it; and some of it is the media equivalent of wallpaper. But we have to face it: on average, in Britain we spend 2-3 hours a day watching the box. And that has to mean, whether we intend to or not, we get at least some of our facts, our opinions, our wisdom from TV.

Imagine an average viewing day, with me switching from programme to programme to try to find something worth watching. It might start off with a cookery programme, trying to show me in half an hour how to make something spectacularly tasty, extremely healthy, very cheap and utterly simple to prepare.

**Reader:** You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

**Sarah:** Interesting. That almost sounds like something Jesus might have said. He lived way before the days when people worried about their salt intake, when it was a precious commodity, so being compared to salt then would be complimentary, not implying we could be the cause of a heart attack. But I can't keep my attention on cookery, especially as I never have the right ingredients to do the recipes at home. I'll switch over to a design programme. They always have such impressive ambitions.

**Reader:** You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

**Sarah:** Well, that's a pretty big ambition: not just appropriate lighting effects inside the house, but some sort of personal built-in lamp too, that can be useful to others too. Maybe I can check it out on the internet - sounds like a new sort of device, and pretty useful, as long as it uses green energy.

But before I start coveting lots of gadgets and spending too much money on them, I'll switch over to Judge Judy. She's always got the right idea about how to sort people's problems out, even if she is a little fierce when she thinks you're in the wrong.

**Reader:** Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

**Sarah:** That sounds a bit drastic, doesn't it? Whoever enjoys complaining about health and safety legislation or even the European Court can't have heard about this attitude to the law.

**Reader:** Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. [sit]

**Sarah:** Well, I suppose it's not all bad news. If we break the law we may become least in the kingdom of heaven, but at least we're not in danger of being kicked out altogether. I'd better come clean, though, and you may have suspected it already: all those little vignettes that were supposed to be from daytime TV actually came from today's Gospel reading.

Given that it's unlikely Jesus had scripts for cookery shows, home makeovers or even televised trials in mind when he originally said these things, it's interesting to see how similar people's preoccupations were two thousand years ago - food, home, rules. And yet, it's very different too.

For while Jesus talked about everyday things that his hearers knew all about - indeed, when he was talking about salting food, I suspect in practice his mother would know more about it than he did - he was also speaking of something else, that seems very different from ordinary life: the kingdom of heaven. We expect talk about God, theology, to involve lots of big words and complicated ideas. But Jesus doesn't seem to look at wisdom that way. He's more interested in our finding a vision of God and God's kingdom in the whole of our lives.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 651:** O God, by whose almighty plan

**R&S 489:** Be thou my vision

**CG 147:** Wisdom's Table

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

**Sermon:**

**Matthew 5:13-20; 1 Corinthians 2:1-11**

You might think from what I said earlier that I see God's kingdom as just a bigger and better version of our own experience, like high-definition digital telly instead of black and white analogue. But our second reading this morning should give me pause for thought if I were to

make that mistake. For Paul, as we heard last week, God's foolishness is infinitely wiser than human wisdom. And this week it seems that, according to him, the mystery that is God cannot be expressed in even the loftiest words of philosophy or theology. When he tells his friends in Corinth that he came to them in weakness, fear and trembling, determined to know nothing except Christ, and him crucified, we can raise a sceptical eyebrow. It's a great rhetorical technique, used by our politicians too, to say that you've decided not to use any rhetoric but just keep things simple. But Paul wants the Corinthians to trust in God not because he's won them over with cunning arguments, but because they have encountered God's power, which is completely different from human cleverness.

That shouldn't surprise us too much. You'll have discovered that the more we know about any subject, the more we find out there is to know - why shouldn't that apply to our understanding of the Creator who made it all? What's more, Paul implies that the wisdom which can understand God isn't obviously there for anyone to see; and when we look at our world, full of chaos and destruction as well as love, joy and peace, it takes some level of trust in God for us to say that it is in the hands of good rather than evil. So if we can't understand it, how do we encounter the mystery that is God, bigger than our minds can comprehend?

Maybe because it is unanswerable, Paul doesn't address that question. Instead, he turns it around. Because with our finite human minds we are incapable, however many resources we use in our quest, of coming to any sound understanding of God, God has already decided to cut the Gordian knot: to come to us, in order to be known by us, instead.

And Paul reckons that contact is for our benefit: What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, that God has prepared for those who love him. Here he shows the limits of his own wisdom by mangling a quotation from the prophecy of Isaiah: From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. But what can that mean in practice?

Like a lot of Paul's letters, he gives no concrete examples of just how we may hope to encounter God. But this morning I should like to suggest one very familiar way, which we may take for granted: the bread and wine we are about to share in Communion.

Oceans of ink have been spilled - more regrettably, oceans of blood have been shed - on trying to understand exactly what happens in this meal, and how it is we can encounter God there. Some believe it to be purely a way to remember the life and the death of Jesus.

Others see it as a re-enactment of those events, in which we, through our trust in God, find ourselves there with him. And Calvin, our great forefather, believed that as we participate in Communion, God's Spirit takes us up into heaven to encounter God there. But all these are ways of trying to say the unsayable, and today I don't want to get caught up in big words and profound theories. Today I want to take a leaf out of Jesus' book and try to see God's kingdom through an everyday experience: sharing a family meal around the table. And yet, as we've already seen, we can't take our experience and assume things are exactly the same way with God.

Let's go back for a moment to the images we've already encountered this morning, of salt in food and light in darkness. Jesus isn't just saying that these are good and necessary things. They are also distinctive from what is around them, and if they lose their distinctiveness, they lose their power. Unsalty salt is useless to give taste or as a preservative. Dark light would be no good to see by or to give others light. So Christians should be different and Christian experience should be different from what surrounds us.

That's not a comfortable way to think. It's a lot safer being like our non-Christian

neighbours; it doesn't lead to comment or criticism. As I overheard someone say incredulously at the Broomhall Breakfast last week: Surely you can't be a Christian! You're normal! In so many ways, we have grown up with the same influences as others, have the same hopes and fears. Of course others who are not Christian are very well able to be examples of love and service to us. Moreover, sadly, Christians can sometimes interpret being different from others as giving them a license for prejudice. Yet if we are exactly the same as everyone else, how have we allowed God to work in our lives, to transform us into people who can be salt and light for others?

So when I turn now to understanding Communion in the light of a family meal, I don't mean husband and wife sniping at each other; children silent under their parents' condemnation, or fighting for their parents' approval; punishment for eating too much or too little; controlled conversation ignoring anything important or painful; guests excluded or ignored. I mean Jesus' meals with taxgatherers and sinners, where no one was excluded, unless it was strictly religious people excluding themselves. I mean his last meal with his friends, where he anticipated his own death, ate with those who would let him down or even betray him, yet showed them how loving servanthood is at the heart of God. I mean his meal at Emmaus, where his incredulous friends could only believe in the good news of death's defeat when he broke the bread at supper and blessed it for them.

God's kingdom, God's wisdom are as different from human experience and knowledge as salt is from tasteless food, as light is from darkness - but because of God's initiative, through the loving action of God's spirit, we can look out for true understanding in any and every part of our lives, from the first to the last. In a moment, the choir will be singing the Nunc Dimittis, old Simeon's song of thankfulness that at the end of a long life, as a newborn baby is laid in his arms, he has encountered the God in whom he trusted.

At the end of our lives, I hope we too will be able to say, 'My eyes have seen your salvation, a light to lighten the world, and your people's glory.'

#### **Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

##### **Service Date:**

30 January, 2011

You may know that at the beginning of every year the Church Roll committee meets to see whether anyone should go onto the roll of church membership or come off it. This is a matter of church fellowship, but it also has a financial dimension, because for every member we keep on our books we have to pay a certain amount to central church funds. I've come across a set of guidelines for church membership to help us decide who's in and who's out, and to aid transparency and confidence within our membership, I thought I'd share it with you all now.

- rich people are welcome, as are those with friends in high places - they will give us influence and status
- we want people who always have a smile on their face, because we don't want people to look as though they aren't enjoying the service, or to remind others of their own problems
- we want people with loud voices and the last word in any argument, who will convince others to join us
- we want people who know what's in their own business interests, because they will be able to look after the church's interests too
- we want people who know what's right and wrong, and leave wrongdoers in no doubt as to where they've gone wrong - that way we keep standards high

- we want broadminded men of the world, if you know what I mean, so no one feels too pious or embarrassed about joining us
- we want people who'll fight for their own way and ours even if others may want to make peace
- and, of course, we want people who never get into trouble or the headlines, even if it's in a good cause

Is that the sort of people who should count in church? [*discuss*] Let's hear a different set of criteria about who counts. **Reading: Matthew 5:1-12**

You'll have guessed, maybe, that for that first set guidelines I took a mirror image of Jesus' ideas about whom God blesses. And you will have noticed that I've cheated a bit, because I've taken Matthew's words 'blessed are the poor in spirit' and turned them into 'blessed are the poor'. We'll come back later to what that mysterious phrase 'the poor in spirit' may mean. But in the meantime, it's interesting to consider how Jesus describes people who are blessed. Think of our church: see who you can think of to fit into Jesus' list: those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Are we those people? Do we want to be those people? It may feel much safer to be like those mirror-images in the list I started off with: rich, cheerful, persuaded of our own rightness and other people's wrongness, never overstepping the mark. Yet if we only go that way, and avoid the rest, it seems as though we may lose touch with God. And if we are not put off by such strange blessings, God has promised that we will be blessed: that we will find Jesus in touching and being touched at the low points of life.

#### **Hymns:**

**R&S 67:** Immortal, invisible, God only wise

**CG1:** Christ's is the world

**CG 49:** Heaven shall not wait

Beauty for brokenness

#### **Sermon:**

**Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; Matthew 5:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

Well, I promised you I'd get back to that awkward phrase, 'the poor in spirit', and here we are. I know what it means to be poor-spirited - the sort of person who won't say boo to a goose - but given the sort of things Jesus was in the habit of saying, both to his opponents and to his friends, when they got things wrong, I can't really make that fit. I know what it means to be mean-spirited - the sort of person who'd be glad if something went wrong for others - but that doesn't fit either. It's a puzzle. But even the words 'poor' and 'poverty' aren't so easy to understand as we might think. Sometimes people say to me, 'There's no poverty in England. Not like there used to be, or like there still is in other countries.' But maybe poverty's not just a matter of not having money in the bank. One minister who works on estates certainly thinks there's more to poverty than that.

According to her, poverty means not having resources, or choices, either. 'Poverty,' she says, 'is being told for your whole life that you are worthless. You have no money, you have no worth. And society just pretends you are not there. You become invisible.' Do people who find themselves in situations like that, do they count with us, I wonder? Or do we assume that basically, they've only themselves to blame, because surely they must have gone wrong somehow, brought their problems on themselves? It's not always easy to tell from outside a situation what's really going on, so I encourage you to follow up on the CAP website the witness of two women living in debt, telling some of their story.

Theirs are tales of struggle and hardship. Yet these women aren't poor-spirited. They get on with their lives as best they can, putting beans on toast on the table if they can't afford a Sunday roast. One looks after her young grandchildren, and wants them to get a good education - so she pays for school uniforms. The other woman's grandchildren are older, and now one of them's going to college, she's paid for a computer to help. They both volunteer for Church Action on Poverty, doing something to change the lives so many have to lead. And they're not mean-spirited, either. They aren't complaining about bankers' bonuses or fat-cat industrialists. But they do want to set the record straight. One woman wants to challenge 'sweeping statements that people who are on welfare benefits of whatever kind are scroungers. Because we are not.'

I'd like to argue that in the Gospel phrase these women are 'poor in spirit'. For they know the lives they live are not right as they are; they know something needs to change. And that humility means God can do something to help them. We find the same thing in our readings from Micah and the Psalms this morning. It's not the person who gives most, to God or to charity, who's got it right, but whoever lives justly, loves kindness and walks humbly with God.

But isn't that just an impractical, churchy way of looking at things? Hard business sense says that banks are bound to loan money to people who have a lot to invest; that no one is forced to pay out money to watch television; that something must have gone wrong for a bad credit rating to be given to begin with. It's easy to point the finger at these women, and many others in their predicament, to call them naïve and foolish to expect that their point of view should count in any way. And they know it. 'You would think,' one says, 'that people could look down and say, we are being taken for a ride, we are being foolish, but they have never been in our position. They don't know what it's like.' Should Christians not have fellow feelings, though, with those who seem weak or foolish?

In our reading from 1 Corinthians we see Paul trying to face in two cultural directions at once. By birth, he was orientated towards the Jewish world, who wanted to be convinced that Jesus showed the signs of God's leader, the Messiah. But what sort of Messiah got himself crucified? The unsuccessful sort, turning up all the time in that historical period, who arose, gathered followers, caused a revolt and was killed as a result. How was this one any different?

And by culture, Paul was orientated towards Greek philosophy, which sought to understand the universe logically. What sense could it make for God to come into creation in weakness rather than strength, to persuade by love, not compel by force, to be handed over to death? Yet Paul's message did make a lot of sense to many in the first Christian churches, slaves and women, at the bottom of the social pile. Seen as weak and foolish, they had never before been counted as full human beings. Yet if Christ had died for them, they had to count.

There are practical solutions to many of the problems of poverty and homelessness: we know of and are involved in some of them already, which we will be remembering in our prayers later in the service. The Action Week prayer which we have already used is on a calendar for this coming week. It invites us each day to read a little about people in different circumstances and to pray for them, suggests some action we might take and a small sum of money to give to Church Action on Poverty and Housing Justice, organisations which support people in trying to change their lives - the videos we saw came from Church Action on Poverty, whose local branch in Sheffield we support as a church. Coincidentally, this week is Hospital Sunday, and when we take up our collection today we will be invited to make an offering to support people in hospital who cannot afford some of the unexpected

expenses surrounding medical treatment.

If I'm right, being poor in spirit doesn't necessarily go along with empty pockets. That mindset may be easier for people whose lives are obviously marked by poverty, who cannot avoid their need of change, their need of God. But let's be honest: we here today are in need, too: maybe of health, of friendship, guidance or rest. And if we admit our poverty to God, it can become a blessing to us. For if our lives were perfect, we might be tempted to get along without more than lip-service to God or casual charity to others. But that way we would miss both Jesus and the kingdom of heaven we will find in answering his call here and now.

### **Third Sunday after Epiphany**

#### **Service Date:**

23 January, 2011

**Isaiah 9:1-4** (incorporated in dialogue)

**Reader:** *But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*

**Sarah:** I've often wondered what colour that light was.

**Reader:** What?

**Sarah:** That great light that's spoken of in the Bible reading, that symbolises the Messiah coming, especially when we read it before Christmas. I've often wondered what colour it was. Purple, I've always imagined it would be. That's my own favourite colour, imperial purple.

**Reader:** But what's that got to do with anything?

**Sarah:** People feel very strongly about colours, you know. They're important! Just consider the possible consequences of wearing the wrong colour scarf at Hillsborough or Bramall Lane... What's your own favourite colour, would you say?

**Reader:** xxx [whatever it is!], I suppose. But really, I don't see that's got anything to do with this reading. Can I carry on?

**Sarah:** Fine, go ahead. I was just wondering.

**Reader:** *Those who lived in a land of deep darkness-  
on them light has shined.*

**Sarah:** Or of course the light might be blue, like the blue of the saltire, St Andrew's flag. Not light blue, of course. Cambridge people are quite wrong there.

**Reader:** Surely it would be white, that light?

**Sarah:** White? Do you think so? But white's not a colour.

**Reader:** If we're talking about a light coming out of darkness, that sounds like a star, or maybe the sun. And that's white light, surely? Light to see everything else by?

**Sarah:** Now I understand! Let's see if we can get any more light out of the rest of the reading. Do please continue.

**Reader:** *You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.* [pause] What's the day of Midian?

**Sarah:** Do you remember Gideon?

**Reader:** Vaguely.

**Sarah:** He lived in the days of the Judges, when the Israelites were looking for a hero to save them from the Midianites.

**Reader:** Was he the one who met an angel, while he was threshing wheat in the wine press? I never worked out why he was doing that in the first place.

**Sarah:** Because the Midianites would have confiscated any wheat they found - he was harvesting it in secret. Do you remember what happened then?

**Reader:** Didn't the angel come to tell him he was the one God wanted to save Israel? But he wasn't too enthusiastic about the idea.

**Sarah:** He said, I'm the youngest member of the least important clan of my tribe. No one's going to want help from me! But it turned out in the end that God didn't worry about which clan he came from. With God's help, Gideon and a few friends beat all the Midianites. Hence the day of Midian, a day of victory for Israel.

**Reader:** I wonder if you'd get a Campbell or a Macdonald to agree that it doesn't matter what clan you come from. Even now, people tend to stick to their own.

**Sarah:** Like the football tribes, Wednesday or United. Maybe instead of having blue and white or red and white as their colours, they could both change to purple and white. That would look much nicer.

**Reader:** But then you wouldn't know who was who. People like knowing who are their friends and who are their enemies without having to think too hard about it. Just think how rude people in the south can be about northerners, even when they've never come as far north as Sheffield!

**Sarah:** Nothing's new under the sun. You know the land of Zebulun and Naphthali that the beginning of this reading was about, Galilee of the nations? They were two of the northernmost tribes of Israel, that got settled by foreigners when the northern kingdom was defeated by Assyria. And the southern tribes, especially Judah, thought they weren't much cop. But in the end, Jesus grew up and did his work in multiracial Galilee, so the tribes others thought were useless had their place in God's plan.

**Reader:** I've had an idea. You know I thought that light in the reading was probably white light, from the sun?

**Sarah:** Yes?

**Reader:** If all different sorts of people, not just those we like, are needed in God's plan, is that like using every colour in the rainbow, not just our favourites, in order to make white light?

**Hymns:**

**R&S 38** was written in 1813 by John Marriott, a minister in the Church of England who was also a close friend of Sir Walter Scott. It was not published until after his death in 1825, but in the same year was quoted during the Annual Meeting of the London Missionary Society, about six weeks after his death. The tune Moscow is adapted from a tune written by Felice Giardini, an Italian violinist, composer and director who died in that city.

**R&S 572** links the natural world in which the sun rises and sets with the metaphorical light given to us by God's Son, Light of the World. It was written, words and tune, by Sue McClellan, John Paculabo and Keith Rycroft in 1974.

**R&S 571** is another twentieth-century hymn, written by Bishop George Bell in 1931, in the shadow of Hitler's rise to power. The tune Vulpius is much older. Its present form comes from 1609, but its German composer Melchior Vulpius may have arranged a much earlier melody.

**CG 21** is also contemporary, coming from the Roman Catholic hymnodist Bernadette Farrell,

one of Britain's leading liturgical composers. Isn't it encouraging that these days an ex-Presbyterian church can make good use of Christian music from a source that might formerly have been considered unacceptable? The ecumenical movement must be doing something right!

**Sermon:**

**Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27; Matthew 4:12-23; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18**

Isn't it pleasant to come across Andrew, our patron, from time to time, especially when we're not also busy dealing with the beginning of Advent and the Caledonian Service? Last week, if you followed the lectionary with John Rogerson, you will have had the prequel to this Gospel story: how, on John the Baptist's recommendation, Andrew went to see Jesus at home, how he was so impressed that he rushed back to get his brother Simon so he could also meet this man, and how Jesus gave Simon his new nickname of Peter. Today we hear how Jesus challenges Andrew and Peter, along with James and John, to leave behind the work and the lives they had known; to join him on the road.

Andrew and Peter, James and John may have thought they knew each other well, working alongside each other in the same trade. But my guess is that it wasn't till they were travelling together that they discovered each other's annoying little quirks: Peter's habit of jumping in with both feet where angels wouldn't; James and John's sudden fits of temper; Andrew's very cautious approach. But they'd not seen anything yet. Over the next three years they'd be joined, among others, by a tax-collector, a freedom fighter and two men called Judas. They would meet Romans and Samaritans, Syrophoenicians and even women - sometimes at the same time. Infectious people and desperate people, rulers and peasants, religious experts and small children, all would want Jesus. And somehow, Jesus had a word for everyone. He might have come from the tribe of Judah, but no one could tell which team he supported.

I wonder if that was a bit trying for Andrew and Peter, James and John, his first followers? It must have been hard not to feel as if by virtue of their longstanding commitment they had rights in him, could speak for him and protect him against outsiders. But of course when they tried to do so - think of the time they tried to keep mothers and babies from bothering him - it all went wrong. For they hadn't realised how important everyone was to him.

I suspect that the Christians in Corinth may have been afflicted with a similar desire: to show they were in the know, backing the right team. Whether they wanted to be in Paul's gang, because of that impressive conversion story and his eloquent letters; whether they were more on Apollos' side, because after all, he was a Greek like them and would know where they were coming from; whether they aligned themselves with Cephas - that's the Aramaic form of the name Peter, the Jew who had seen Jesus in the flesh and travelled round with him - they wanted to be in the in-crowd, theologically speaking. And some Christians in Corinth must also have been students of one-upmanship before its time: imagine how telling it would be to leave everyone else arguing about who was the best leader, and then at the last moment to slip into the conversation: 'Well, I don't know about you, but I belong to Christ'.

Isn't it human, to want to belong in a group? But Paul was exasperated by this display of party politics, and as a church leader I can sympathise with him. For if we get our sense of self-worth from being different from and better than people in another group, we are completely missing God's point. Remember Gideon, the youngest member of the most insignificant clan of his tribe? That self-description made no manner of difference to God: the important thing was whether Gideon would trust God to help him do what needed to be

done. What's more, a sense of entitlement or privilege based on membership of a particular grouping, whatever it may be, can be hurtful to others outside that group. Imagine being an older person going into a church to discover that only young families with children are welcome. Think how someone black would feel to be told, You'd be much happier in the church down the road where there are more people like you. Imagine how it might feel for a woman to find that a church only recognised men as leaders. And then think how many gifted people we would miss in this church if we were to operate a policy either of banning Scots, or of behaving as though only people from north of the border mattered here!

At this time of year we are picking up the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, his haunting call to all, including us: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. And we in the church need to take a good look at our ways and to turn away from some of them, just as much as those without these walls. For if we find ourselves operating only by the standards and expectations of our in-group, whatever it may be, we know we have distorted the light of the Gospel, making it blue, or red, or even purple, rather than the pure light of the Son within which every colour is united.

This afternoon we will be marking the week of prayer for Christian unity with a service in the hall at 3pm, joined by our friends from the Beacon Methodist Church at Broomhill and St Mark's Church. I can guess pretty well whose faces I will see there. Some absentees will have good reasons for being elsewhere, whether family or the need of Sabbath rest! Others, I suspect, will not even consider the idea of meeting with Christians beyond our own tribe. Indeed, I have heard from members of St Andrew's a doubt expressed as to whether thirty years ago 'we' should have gone into the URC at all. Whenever I hear that, it's interesting suddenly to turn into one of 'them' - but I can tell you, it's not pleasant!

Yet Peter and Andrew, James and John; Christians in Corinth following Paul, Apollos and Cephas; Anglicans and Methodists and URC people in Sheffield: whether we like it or not, we're all on the road together with Jesus. We all have our irritating little ways; some of our groups have higher worldly status than others; yet it is only together that we as Christ's body can shine with his light, a light badly needed in a world still, centuries after Gideon's victory over Midian, filled with the deep darkness of hatred and of division. Where that light shines brightly on our own unreasoning prejudices, for or against others, I pray that we may turn away from our sins and towards our Lord. For in Jesus the kingdom of heaven, where all are made welcome, has indeed come near: not only in Galilee of the Gentiles but also in Broomhill and in Sheffield today.

## **Epiphany of the Lord**

### **Service Date:**

9 January, 2011

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

**Sarah:** As we all know, that's the end of the story of the wise men, but here's how the beginning might have sounded...

**Balthazar:** Caspar, have you finished with that present list?

I need to make my mind up and choose the right gift for this new baby, so I can pack it before we set off.

**Caspar:** Well, whatever you go for, it can't be gold. Melchior has bagged that already.

**Balthazar:** Gold! That's the easy option - just give him the shekels, and the baby can buy whatever he wants with it once he's grown up. Melchior has no imagination.

**Caspar:** Well, he has got strong views on the gold standard. And he's not called a wise man

for nothing: for a king, money is power, because it's gold that pays your soldiers.

**Balthazar:** I still don't like the idea. There's nothing personal about a pot of gold. You could give it to anyone.

**Caspar:** Well, what's your great idea? Obviously we can't rely on anything local - Jerusalem's such a provincial little capital, it won't have any shops worth considering, so we'll have to take the presents with us. I was wondering about an elephant.

**Balthazar:** In heaven's name, why?

**Caspar:** Power, of course! Only the very greatest kings can afford to keep elephants. But then I thought about the hassle of feeding it on the way. It's quite bad enough with the camels, what with the price of fodder going up all the time. So I decided, better not. Something small and light and precious, that's the ticket.

**Balthazar:** So we're looking for gifts to say something about this new baby king?

**Caspar:** And about us. We've got reputations to keep up. Can you imagine bowing low before the greatest king in the world, opening your treasure chest and offering him a cuddly toy? Not very dignified for future ages to retell.

**Balthazar:** I take your point. So if it's not an elephant, or a cuddly toy, what will you be giving him?

**Caspar:** I've got the very thing! A bejewelled jar of incense! Frankincense, to be precise - the finest there is.

**Balthazar:** Hold on a moment. I thought you said this present had to say something about us, as well as about the baby.

**Caspar:** Absolutely. That's the way it's done.

**Balthazar:** But incense? That's used for worshipping the gods. Be honest: isn't that a bit much for us to claim, even with our great reputation for wisdom?

**Caspar:** I'm not claiming we're divine. But I've been doing my homework. Looking up the ancient writings of the Jews. Traditionally, they call their king God's son. It's in the psalms. So a bit of worship won't go amiss. It'll show we're au fait with local customs.

**Balthazar:** You don't mean they really think their king is a god, like the Romans call their emperor divine Augustus?

**Caspar:** I very much doubt it: their god is one on his own. It's a question of power again. Under God, the king has ultimate authority, so as God's son he's supposed to represent God: to protect his people and act for the common good.

**Balthazar:** Are you sure about that? From what I've heard about King Herod of Judea, no decent god would want him in the family.

**Caspar:** Well, Herod's more of a puppet ruler for Rome. So far as the Jews are concerned, not really a proper king.

**Balthazar:** Isn't that's going to make our task a bit complicated? Treading on Herod's toes, so to speak?

**Caspar:** Don't you worry about that. Melchior handles the economic questions, but I have a certain reputation for political punditry. Just follow my lead and you won't go too far wrong.

**Balthazar:** And what's my reputation? I've been wondering for a while: why is it I'm on this mission?

**Caspar:** You... Um... you have the wisdom of humanity!

**Balthazar:** The wisdom of humanity? What on earth is that supposed to mean? You know perfectly well that psychology isn't going to be invented for centuries yet.

**Caspar:** Melchior knows all about the markets, I've got my finger on the political pulse, but to be honest, we both of us know precious little about what makes ordinary people tick.

That's your department. You've been complaining our present ideas lack the human touch - well, now's your chance to do better.

**Balthazar:** I have been thinking a lot about this.

**Caspar:** And?

**Balthazar:** We're travelling thousands of miles to pay homage to this child. Melchior will offer him gold as the greatest of all kings. You will bring frankincense for his divine power. But even with all that power he's still going to be a human being, with the frailty and weakness that involves. So what is it that's common to all humanity: to us, to the great King we're travelling to greet and even to - oh, I don't know, a homeless child born in an outhouse?

**Caspar:** What?

**Balthazar:** Death. To remind the most powerful king on earth of his own mortality, I'm going to give him myrrh, for the day of his burial. And may it be a long way off!

**Caspar:** Well, I suppose you've got a point: even kings are subject to death. A king who could conquer death, now that would be something to write home about! But I can't see his royal majesty, or his entourage, being too happy to be reminded of that. Are you sure you don't want to take him an elephant instead? A baby one wouldn't need all that much fodder... [*sits*]

**Sarah:** Like most of us giving presents to people, the wise men will have chosen gifts that said something about who they were as well as who they expected this new baby king to be. They offered him money: their economic power. They brought incense: their godlike qualities of creativity and love. They brought their own imperfections: the unavoidable fact that none of us goes on forever. And Jesus accepted both their gifts and themselves.

**Hymns:**

**R&S 162:** In the bleak midwinter  
We three kings of Orient are

**Psalm 72** to be found at R&S 269 (t.260): Jesus shall reign

**R&S 184:** As with gladness men of old  
We bring our gift of gold

**Sermon:**

**Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12**

This morning we're actually three days late, for Epiphany itself, the twelfth day of Christmas, was on the 6th of January. But since on the first Sunday after Christmas some of us considered that shocking result of the wise men's journey to Bethlehem, the slaughter of the innocents, it seemed only right that today we should look back to the beginning of their epic expedition, continents and cultures away.

And now Christmas is safely over, we can consider with a little more dispassion the whole question of gifts. There's the 'help, they've given us one so we'd better give them something' sort, a kind of social barter. There's the 'you helped me so I want to say thank you' sort, which feels better to receive. But best of all is the gift which has cost its giver something important - money, or thought, or effort; which brings with it something of the giver, and which is handed over with no strings attached (unless, of course, it's a violin).

What sort of gifts were those the wise men brought? They travelled in the expectation of meeting at journey's end a royal princeling, wrapped in silks, surrounded by slaves, whom their own wisdom had foreseen. They anticipated giving him gifts befitting his station and receiving respect in return. But they arrived to find an infant with startlingly few resources. Why give the son of a carpenter gold? What need could that sort of child have for incense,

or myrrh? Yet instead of snatching back their gifts, these truly wise men gave them freely into the tiny hands of their unexpected recipient.

Others had already given gifts to the baby Jesus. From the Gospels we have no idea - sorry, Christina Rossetti - whether or not the shepherds gave a lamb, any more than we know the number or names of the wise men. But we do know that Joseph had given Jesus the gift of fatherhood, when he decided to stand by Mary and not to divorce her for untimely pregnancy. And we know, too, that for nine long months Mary had given him even more than that: flesh from her flesh, bone from her bone, development and growth in safety, rocked in the cradle of her own body.

Yet there's more to it even than that. For, as we heard on Christmas Day, before the world was, God's Word was already there, and through the Word all things were made. So it was through God's prior gift of life to Mary that she in her turn could give life to Jesus.

That pattern, of gifts received from God and human gifts offered in response, is found throughout the biblical story. It comes across in our reading this morning from the letter to the Ephesians, describing Paul's mission to the Gentiles. The grace God had already given him - free, undeserved love - made Paul able to pass on to the non-Jews he had formerly despised the good news of God's love for them, of Jesus' relationship with them. God's immense gift of wisdom changed him from a persecutor of Christians to someone eager to add to their number, to give to more and more people that gift he himself had received. In fact, by describing himself as a servant of God's good news, Paul was not only devoting his resources, thought and effort to God's work; he was actually making his whole life a gift to God. That gift was by no means risk-free, any more than it was for Mary or Joseph, or even for the wise men, constrained by Herod's anger to return home by another route. Yet faced with such generous giving on God's part, how else could they respond?

Where do we fit into all this? And what kind of gifts are our own responses to God's generosity? To some extent, they will be social barter: God gave us life, so it is our duty to give God our allegiance. We may also find our response to God fuelled by gratitude for all the good and beautiful things in our world. As our relationship with God develops, we may also find ourselves wanting to respond not out of duty, or thankfulness, but out of love, offering our very lives to God. But that sounds a bit vague, so let's get back to specifics: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Most Epiphany hymns begin by describing the wise men's gifts, and end by urging us to follow their example. Many writers follow Christina Rossetti's lead in urging us to give God our hearts: gold of obedience, incense of lowliness. They may have felt embarrassment in making churchgoers sing about giving their literal gold to God while the offertory plate beckoned.

Yet money, whether we have it or not, plays a crucial role in all our lives. So how we deal with money, whether it's earning it, investing it, borrowing it or spending it, is necessarily part of our response to God. I wonder how many of you, like me, decided this last year to give a proportion of what we spent on Christmas to charity. I have got to the stage of totting up the total, but not yet of writing the cheque, so I'm hoping that being honest from the pulpit will speed my donation; maybe I'm not the only one with great intentions about my use of money for God that only partially get put into practice.

Of course, I'm not going to stand up here and tell you that when it comes to giving to God, worship is less important than money, for setting gold against frankincense would be ridiculous. At the choir party last week I thanked the choir, Douglas and Alan on your behalf for all the ways in which they enrich our worship through their music. Back came the response: But we enjoy it! And that is how God has made us all, whether or not we are

musical. When we find peace and challenge in prayer, when we delight in growing plants or reading words that are true, in creating beauty or bringing up children with love, when our friendships develop over the years, all that is part of our worship, praising God through the gifts of life God has given to each of us.

If that's gold and frankincense, what about the myrrh? This last Advent we have faced together some of the fears we feel for our world, for our church, for ourselves. I don't know about you, but I found it an uncomfortable process, as we looked forward to the celebration of Christmas. Yet we know we live in a world where ill health or ill will may be just around the corner; so our gift of myrrh is our honest acknowledgment that we and the world are fragile and impermanent. As we confront our fears, together in God's presence, God gives us hope, bringing to mind the ways in which we and others can see God at work in our world. For we have a king who delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper, a king who has conquered death. This is our God, to whom we offer gold and frankincense and myrrh, the strong and beautiful and painful parts of our lives. Come, let us worship Christ the Lord.