

First Sunday after Christmas

Service Date:

27 December, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on John (to-day is dedicated to him) - the John who wrote the Gospel, the John who wrote the letters and the John who wrote the book of Revelation. Are they one and the same?

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 181 Of the Father's love begotten

Rejoice and Sing 163 Angels from the realms of glory

Rejoice and Sing 149 Infant holy, infant lowly

Rejoice and Sing 150 Child in the manger

Rejoice and Sing 159 Hark! the herald angels sing

Sermon:

Readings

First book of Samuel chapter 2 verses 18 - 20 and 26

Colossians chapter 3 verses 12 - 17

Psalms 148

Luke chapter 2 verses 41 - 52

Christmas Day

Service Date:

25 December, 2015

This was a short family service of carols and readings led by The Revd. Robert Beard. Everyone had been asked to bring an unopened gift with them.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 145 O little town of Bethlehem

Rejoice and Sing 146 Away in a manger

Rejoice and Sing 157 See in yonder manger low

Rejoice and Sing 167 Once in Royal David's city

Rejoice and Sing 144 It came upon the midnight clear

Sermon:

Readings

Luke chapter 2 verses 1 - 6

Luke chapter 2 verses 8 - 14

Luke chapter 2 verses 15 - 20

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Service Date:

20 December, 2015

The service was a service of music and readings for Advent and Christmas on the theme of angels compiled by our Organist and Choir Master, Douglas Jones. We celebrated the birth of John the Baptist as well as the birth of Jesus. The Revd. Robert Beard presided. There was no sermon.

Hymns:

Christ, the fair glory of the holy angels

The angel Gabriel came down

Mary met an angel

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
Sing lullaby
Silent night
Infant Holy, infant lowly
While shepherds watched their flocks by night
Once in Royal David's city

Sermon:

Readings

Luke chapter 1 verses 5 - 25

Luke chapter 1 verses 26 - 28

Luke chapter 1 verses 39 - 48 and 56

Luke chapter 1 verses 57 - 67

Luke chapter 2 verses 1 - 7

Luke chapter 2 verses 8 - 20

Third Sunday in Advent

Service Date:

13 December, 2015

Worship was led by Professor Clyde Binfield who preached on John Knox, looking at his life from a social, political, historical and theological viewpoint.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 660 Hark what a sound

Rejoice and Sing 134 On Jordan's bank

Rejoice and Sing 626 Judge eternal , throned in splendour

Rejoice and Sing 200 The kingdom of God

Sermon:

Readings

Zephaniah chapter 3 verses 14 - 20

Luke chapter 3 verses 7 - 18

Second Sunday in Advent

Service Date:

6 December, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the Prophets, particularly the pivotal role of John the Baptist.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 126 O come, O come, Immanuel

Rejoice and Sing 138 Come, thou long expected Jesus

Rejoice and Sing 667 Songs of praise the angels sang

Hills of the North, rejoice

Sermon:

Readings

Malachi chapter 3 verses 1 - 4

Song of Zechariah

Philippians chapter 1 verses 3 - 11

Luke chapter 3 verses 1 - 6

First Sunday in Advent and Caledonian Sunday.

Service Date:

29 November, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. In his sermon he gave an account of two stories of how St. Andrew's came to be founded. In one, Regulus brought relics of the Saint to Fife and so made the county and the country holy - as do the later relics now resting in the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Edinburgh. During Advent we tend to anticipate the Christmas celebrations instead of using it as a time of spiritual preparation and anticipation. What can we do in every situation in which we find ourselves to bring something of the holy to it?

Hymns:

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult

Rejoice and Sing 570 A glorious company we sing

When Christ our Lord to Andrew cried

Rejoice and Sing 573 God is working his purpose out

Sermon:

Readings

Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 11 - 14

Psalm 19, found at Rejoice and Sing 673

Romans chapter 10 verses 8b - 18

Matthew chapter 4 verses 18 - 22

If you swivel your gaze to your left, and look at the St Andrew window in the south (although liturgically north) wall of the church, you will see at its foot a panoramic view of the cathedral and University City of St Andrews. In the left-hand panel, the tall, square tower of St Regulus' church rises above the surrounding ruins, Cathedral, reaching a height of over a hundred feet. Built in the 12th century, the tower would have been a welcome sight – like a lighthouse or a beacon, for the pilgrims who travelled from all over Europe to venerate the relics of St Andrew the Apostle housed within the church.

When I was a Divine – and even those who love me most would probably admit that the indefinite article is significant – studying for the BD at the University of St Andrews, and wearing not the famous red gown of the other undergraduates, but the Divinity student's black gown with the violet saltire, my friends and I would often enter the tower through the little door at its foot, climb the modern steel spiral staircase to the point where they connect with the ancient stone steps, continue to the open roof and luxuriate in the spectacular views of the ruined cathedral – inevitably reminding us of the appalling excesses of Reformation extremism – the mediaeval university city, the little harbour, and the coastline of the kingdom of Fife stretching out across St Andrews Bay, southwards towards the fishing village of Crail and northward towards the estuary of the River Eden.

According to the Gospels, Andrew and his brother, Simon, who were fishermen from Galilee, were invited by Jesus to become 'fishers of people'. Andrew was present at the Last Supper and in the garden at Gethsemane, and he saw the risen Christ after the Resurrection. After this, Andrew disappears from the New Testament narrative, which focuses on the Church in Jerusalem and the missionary journeys of St Paul and his companions.

Ecclesiastical tradition, however, tells us that Andrew, too, travelled widely through Greece and Asia as an evangelist, but that his preaching mostly fell on deaf Roman ears. Eventually,

he made his way to the Greek port of Patras, on the northern coast of the Peloponnese, where he initially met with modest success, baptising the wife and brother of the Governor of Patras. The Governor himself, however, was outraged by this act, and had the Apostle crucified on a diagonal cross, the symbol which is used, of course, in the Scottish saltire. The tradition then skips forward some three centuries, and – to be fair to scholars and historians – enters the realm of legend. In the year 345 AD, the skeletal relics of St Andrew were being preserved under the watchful care of a monk called Regulus (or Rule in English). Legend says that St Regulus had a dream in which an angel advised him to take some of the remains of St Andrew and hide them. Regulus obeyed, carefully concealing six of the apostle's bones – a kneecap, an upper arm bone, three fingers and a tooth – not long before the Emperor Constantine swooped down and carried off the remaining relics to Constantinople.

In a second dream, the angel advised Regulus to take the hidden relics 'to the ends of the earth' for protection. In one version of the story, the angel decreed that wherever he was shipwrecked, Regulus was to build a shrine for them, while in another, Regulus reached Fife and decided that that was as far from Greece as any reasonable angel could expect him to travel. Either way, the story says that he set sail from Patras, taking with him the five remaining relics and either landed or was shipwrecked on the north-east coast of Fife. I said that I should be fair to historians, and so I must tell you that my alma mater has offers a slightly more prosaic version of this story, suggesting that the bones were brought to Fife in 733 by Bishop Acca of Hexham, a well known collector of religious relics, who had previously been Abbot of St Andrews. The University further says that the religious foundation there may have been developed by the contemporary Pictish King Oengus I. What is certainly true is that St Andrews became the ecclesiastical capital of mediaeval Scotland, and the shrine of St Andrew one of the major pilgrim destinations in Europe. Moreover, the establishment of a Scottish church served to strengthen the national identity of Scotland, a powerful asset for medieval monarchs to wield over would-be invaders and against the Pope himself, although the Scottish Church was itself Roman Catholic throughout the Middle Ages, of course.

Pilgrims from all over Europe flocked to see the relics, and Queen Margaret – later canonised as Saint Margaret – endowed a ferry service across the Firth of Forth to make their journey easier. Hostels for accommodation were built on both banks, and these are still remembered in the names of North and South Queensferry.

Around 1127, a community of Culdee monks (Irish Céili Dé or "companions of God") set about building St Regulus' Tower. The stone was beautifully dressed, and the tower is extremely well preserved. A simple chancel would have been added to house the shrine and the precious relics which almost certainly preserved in an ornate casket or reliquary. Barely twenty years later, however, as the ethos of the Scottish Church moved closer towards the Rome, the monastery was granted to the Augustinian Canons Regular; the Culdee monks were 'displaced' and compelled to set up another house for themselves nearby. The Augustinian Canons had bigger ambitions than the Culdees. They enlarged and extended the buildings attached to the tower, but after a while these proved inadequate for their needs, and a magnificent new cathedral was soon rising from the ground next to the old church. St Regulus' Church remained in situ, however, until the Reformers sent in their wrecking crews on 14 June 1559, when the cathedral and shrine were desecrated by ardent followers of John Knox.

What happened subsequently to the relics of St Andrew is unknown, but it is likely that they were lost during the Reformation, when many religious artefacts and works of art were destroyed. Scotland obtained some more relics, however, in 1969, when Pope Paul VI gave some bones of St Andrew to Cardinal Gray; these are kept in St Mary's Cathedral in Edinburgh.

Why am I sharing all this with you?

Well, for the historical fascination, for one thing. We know that, as George Santayana declared, "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it," and – God knows – this has never been truer than in the twenty-first century of the Christian era, when so many urge us to believe that the answer to slaughter is more slaughter, and still more slaughter. More than that, however, in a world where religious faith is abused hourly by leaders on all sides of every conflict, the Church desperately needs to hear again, and then to proclaim, God's good news for all people, and the call to self-giving love issued by Jesus Christ to his Apostles, and by the Apostles to the world.

Whoever brought the relics of St Andrew to Scotland, whether St Regulus or Bishop Acca, and whatever our own view on the gift of more of the Apostle's relics from Pope Paul VI to Cardinal Gray, there can be little doubt that everyone who took part in these events believed that they were bring to Scotland something holy, and something that would bring holiness to the nation.

Relics may not be the Reformed Church's thing, any more now than during the Reformation, but as we enter the season of Advent, as we prepare to receive again God's sanctifying gift of the Holy Child to our chaotic human lives, I invite you to consider carefully, with me, what gifts we might bring into the situations in which we are involved, to sanctify them, to make them more holy.

Christ the King

Service Date:

22 November, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Keith Albans. In his sermon he reminded us that the story of Jesus did not end with his death, resurrection or even ascension, but continues. The church year is a cycle and we repeat that cycle from year to year. The kingship of Jesus was unlike any other.

The hymns reflected not only the kingship of Christ but also had a strong music theme, marking St. Cecilia's Day.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 414 When in our music God is glorified

Common Ground 86 Meekness and Majesty

Rejoice and Sing 691 God is our refuge and our strength

Rejoice and Sing 661 How shall I sing that majesty

Rejoice and sing 657 Rejoice the Lord is King

Sermon:

Readings

Luke chapter 23 verses 33 - 43

Jeremiah chapter 23 verses 1 - 6

Colossians chapter 1 verses 11 - 20

Christ the King Sunday – and indeed this Stir up Sunday

This Sunday – a strange point in the Church year. We’ve done the lot – through the life and teaching of Jesus, his death and resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the story of the early Church. We’ve done Harvest and Remembrance... And next week we’ll do the whole thing over again! This week we concentrate on the eternal reign of Christ the King.

Time – the linear nature as experienced in much of life... We get gradually older, new experiences are built on top of older ones...

Jewish notion of time is more cyclical – the seasons, agriculture etc. – experiences being repeated and rehearsed – lessons learned? Experiences reflected on? So that when the next cycle begins, we are in a different place to experience it, and therefore although much is the same, the experience is different.

Church life is one of the places where these two notions of time really do come together and interact. What I want to try and do is explore the parallel tracks of The Kingship of Christ and the Calling of the contemporary Church... let’s see where we end up!

As with any Christian community, as we begin to tell the story again, you are in a different place to this time last year... people who aren’t here and people who weren’t here. And if we look further back then some will reflect on the different places that have been travelled across that period of time – and of course as with all Churches, the past was a better place to be! But in each of those years, the foundational stories of our faith have been recited time and again, from the promise of advent to incarnation, from baptism to temptation, from wilderness to upper room, cross and empty tomb, and from outpouring of the Spirit to the ends of the world and to the promises of final vindication. And if we’re honest, that same story will have interacted with us differently from year to year, and it will have interacted with each of us slightly differently... And our shared story is the sum of those different interactions...

Old hymn... “It begins with a tale of a garden and ends with a city of gold” – a linear story – because that is the Bible... But, today we remind ourselves that instead of ending, the story begins again in anticipation of the birth of Jesus...

So as the Church year draws to a close, and we focus on Christ the King, what have our three readings to say?

Jeremiah 23 – In a season of nativity plays, we will soon be used to a surfeit of shepherds and kings – entering separately, dressed very differently and never confused. But in this passage, as in many passages of the OT, the two identities are offered together!

It is a very daring development of Jewish thought that can equate Shepherd, first with King and later even with God! Shepherd – ritually unclean, often outcast and suspect, low status... This is a real upside down stir-up Sunday idea of Kingship! Edgy characters – a bit like prophets!

Background of thinking – the connection – may come from the common experience of bad kings? In other words the prophets such as Jeremiah berate the Kings because they should have gathered the people like a shepherd, but have in fact scattered them to the ends of the earth! Ezekiel has a similar rant in some of his oracles...

And then Jeremiah gives us a promise. Firstly, God will ensure that the flock is gathered – proper shepherds will be appointed! And then as earthly Kings have failed, a better King will come who will embody the things God cherishes – covenant faithfulness, justice and loyalty...

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Luke 23 – Peter Sellers film, “Being There” – the gardener who accidentally became President...

Pope Francis – reminds me of that – the unlikely choice?

But the Jesus story takes it a few stages further. Ask Luke to tell us what the one promised by Jeremiah might look like – this King? And you get a bloodied man on a scaffold, crowned with thorns! The one who embodies the justice of God is on the wrong side of human justice, condemned to die a criminal’s death.

John 3:14 – “And as Moses lifted up the serpent...” same word for lifted up as is used for crucify in John’s gospel!

The picture of King is literally scandalous! And we are left questioning whether or not this can possibly be the one that Jeremiah had promised...

And of course that same questioning had taken place throughout Jesus’s life and ministry, hadn’t it? He was the edgy King – the one who met the marginalised, the poor, the downtrodden – perhaps that was why he met the end he did? But for Luke, as with John, the moment of absolute humiliation is in some sense a coronation – and one that is recognised and acknowledged by the penitent thief, who stands for all penitents... “If you are a King?” – What a King!

Colossians 1 – The scholar N.T. Wright suggests that this reading sets it all to music! Certainly Paul has used a poem to speak of Jesus in some pretty flowery and exalted ways. There are some pretty deep claims here, rooted in Jewish thinking about the wisdom of God as the creating nature of God. And the incredible claim that this Jesus, whom we have just

seem in his death throes, is both the one who has been around since before the beginning of time, and the one who holds it all together, embodying the ruling and reconciling work of the creator God.

A passage of scripture which can feel to speak of an almost absentee unreachable and unknowable God, actually witnesses to the exact opposite. And the joining together of shepherd and king in Jeremiah, which seemed so strange, is now seen unveiling his royal splendour most fully, suggests Paul, in the bloody work of peace-making...

If you are a King? A city of Gold? No the year ends with the celebration of Christ the King – but with a kingship which demands close scrutiny. Not the parading in robes and bejewelled, but outcast, suspect, compromised and bloodied. And with a kingship which embodies the real values of the kingdom of God and is recognised by all who are willing to see it for what it really is. “Jesus, remember me – when you come into your kingdom...”

And we need to remember that pattern of kingship as the story begins again in Advent. We have a nasty habit of forgetting it all too easily – post-Christmas and on Easter Sunday... we want the he-man King again... No! Christ the King – lifted up... on a Cross. Christ the King – found by Shepherd and King alike, lying in a beast’s food trough...

What does this have to say into our contemporary world? AB of C interview – events causing him to dialogue with God... Common view of absence of God – ‘old man on a cloud’. The image of Christ the King is the image of the incarnate God, in weakness and humiliation... (Gaze we on those glorious scars...)

And what does this have to say to the calling of the contemporary Church? And maybe particularly to a Church which feels that after 2,000 years that its best days are in the past? Is it not that if Christ the King is known in weakness and humiliation in Jesus, might he not also be known in the same way in and through us?

And if Jesus’s kingship is edgy, as Jesus himself was known on the margins, then why should we be surprised if we are to be found there too?

And as we approach a new Church year and it all begins again, and as people ask us to tell the story of the child born in obscurity to a single-parent mother, soon to become a refugee – let us own that again as our story and as God’s story – which runs against so much of what we value, and yet which is priceless...

If you are a King...? Today you will be with me in paradise. Amen.

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

15 November, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Walter Houston. While our prayers focussed on the recent tragedy in Paris, the main theme of The Revd. Houston's service was the significance and purpose of the physical building of the church. While it is the people who are the real church of God, the building means a great deal to people. Like the Temple for Hannah, mother of Samuel, it is a sacred place where we can open our hearts to God. But buildings do not last and in John's vision of the Holy City and the final coming of God there is no church or temple - God is simply in the world. Now we must ensure that our church buildings are being used to their full advantage for the community and beyond.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 563 How pleased and blest was I

Rejoice and Sing 583 The Church is wherever God's people are praising

Rejoice and Sing 628 O Holy City, seen by John

Rejoice and Sing 663 Love Divine, all loves excelling

Sermon:

Readings

First book of Samuel chapter 1 verses 1 - 20

Mark chapter 13 verses 1 - 8

First book of Samuel chapter 2 verses 1 - 10

Revelation chapter 21 verses 1 - 4 and 22 - 27

Christian congregations are deeply attached to their church buildings. That is one thing that 42 years of serving congregations has taught me, if I didn't know it already. Any proposal to alter the building will bring the members out in force, and the proposal will be in the balance as the proposals are tossed back and forth in furious argument. When Fleur was church secretary of Emmanuel URC Cambridge, she spent most of her two years in the post talking to members both in meetings and individually in their homes collecting views on a major development that had been put forward by a church working group. As for a proposal to close a building, that is viewed as equivalent to bringing the life of the congregation to an end, indeed it is generally only put forward in our denomination when the congregation itself has ceased to be viable. In the C of E, with its parish structure, a church may be declared redundant by the authorities, but the surviving congregation, and in rural areas often local villagers who never normally set foot in the church will fight tooth and nail to keep it open.

Now I'm sure you have all heard sermons about how that is all wrong, and the Church is not the building but the people. That is true, of course, but there are two things wrong with such sermons: first, they don't address this deep attachment which I've talked about, which means that the people can't imagine themselves without their building. And second, they don't generally go on to ask what is the practical use of church buildings while you have them. To put it theologically, what is the place of the building in the purposes of God?

Now this church as far as I can see have answered this question very well. You're a gathered congregation from all over Sheffield and beyond, so most of you don't live near enough to the church to be in and out of it all week, but you do come on Sundays for the church's main act of worship, for your offering of your life to God and your receiving of life from God for the week ahead. But that one hour a week is not sufficient reason to pay out for the heavy maintenance costs of a large building like this, and you have thought seriously about it and put it to maximum use on Sundays and the rest of the week. This space is the place of gathering for not just one but three congregations on a Sunday, and the rest of the building houses many different community groups and services, starting with the Contact Centre, which I was involved with when I was a member here.

But what does the Bible have to say on the subject?

Both the story of Hannah and the start of Jesus' speech in Mark 13 are set in a temple, or concern a temple: Hannah comes with her family to worship year by year at the festival at Shiloh, in the temple which was destroyed by the Philistines a few decades later, while the Mark story starts with the disciples admiring the monumental architecture of Herod's temple at Jerusalem. That temple was still being built at that time. All you can see of it now—I expect some of you have seen it—is the retaining wall on the west side of the foundations, the so-called Wailing Wall, and that certainly bears out the comment of one disciple, 'Look how big these stones and how great these buildings are!' I would suggest that the story of Hannah tells us what the use of a temple was in human terms, while the words

of Jesus warn his disciples, and the rest of us, that no building, however sacred, is going to last for ever.

Now, a temple is not the same kind of thing as a church, let me get that straight first, though some of their uses overlap. The prime function of a church building is as a gathering space for a worshipping community. That is not the prime function of a temple. A temple in the ancient world was thought of as the dwelling place of a god; the people came second. In the Bible a temple is called 'the house of the Lord', and might be meant literally, though the idea that God lived in heaven was quite happily held alongside that. The temple at Shiloh housed the Ark of God, which was the symbol of God's presence, and later so did the temple at Jerusalem, until the Ark probably went up in smoke with the rest of the building when the temple was burnt by the Babylonians. The main work of the priests who maintained the temple was to engage in various activities which symbolically 'served God': they offered sacrifices; they lit the lights in the windowless temple building, and there they also set out the so-called showbread, the loaves that were set out fresh each Sabbath and taken away at the end of the week. (They were then eaten by the priests: perhaps having to eat week-old bread was a noble sacrifice for the sake of their calling!) So, symbolically, God was fed and his house was lit up.

But the story of Hannah shows that there was a great deal more to a temple than that, that it was useful to human beings and not only to God, in ways which are quite similar to ways in which our church buildings are useful. Elkanah and his family came along with large numbers of others to Shiloh each year at its great festival, which would be basically a harvest festival, celebrating the gifts of God in the fruits of the field to keep his people alive for another year, thanking him and praising him for that. So the buildings—the courtyard rather than the small covered building at its centre—served to maintain a sense of community among those who gathered, and to enable them to express their feelings of gratitude for the year past and hope for the year to come. Each family of worshippers offered their own sacrifice; it was all offered to God, but only a few parts of the animal were burnt on the altar, the rest was cut up and cooked and made a meal for the person who had made the offering and his family and hangers-on. This created a bond between them and between them and their God that was probably felt more strongly than the bond created among us by the communion service, and at another level, it was one of the few times in the year that they would be likely to eat meat.

This is the context for Hannah's humiliation in the story. It is no ordinary meal where she is so miserable that she can't eat, but the high point of the year. A good comparison would be Christmas dinner for us, but it was even more significant because it was a sacred meal: the actual meat was holy because it had been offered to God. But Hannah doesn't want it, she is so wretched because of Peninnah's constant sniping and sarcasm. So that part of the temple service wasn't much use for her, but now she finds out how it can be of use for her.

She leaves the happy band of pilgrims guzzling their sacrificial meals, and wanders up towards the temple building itself, because that is where God resides, in her conception, and there she pours out her bitterness and her resentment and her vain hopes and her desperate pleas to her God. In other words, she finds it possible, here in God's house, to express her deepest feelings.

In the same way sometimes we find that it is easier for us to pray at depth, to express our needs and our hopes, and indeed our misery, in the quiet of our church with all its associations than at home with all its distractions and its secular atmosphere; for here we have prayed and praised joyfully over the years, here perhaps we spent our younger and

formative years, and it may be that our parents did before and alongside us, here perhaps we committed our lives to Christ, and for all those reasons our thoughts and hopes and fears more easily come to the surface and are expressed in prayer to the God of our life. So for Hannah the temple is the place where she can unburden herself to God most easily, it is a place of approach to God.

And corresponding to that comes a second advantage of the temple for her. Her prayer is noticed by Eli the priest, who at first totally misunderstands what is going on. 'I haven't touched a drop', Hannah protests, which is true—she hasn't been at the table where the wine was going round—'I am just miserable, and I've been pouring out my heart to God.' Now Eli gets it, and without even asking her what her trouble is, he assures her 'Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of him.' A modern-day teacher of pastoral care would think Eli needed getting up to speed on listening mode and empathy, but it doesn't matter for the story, for Hannah is comforted by what he says in any case, dries her tears and goes back to her family to eat and drink, and before very long she conceives and bears a son. For her the temple has been a place of assurance.

A place of approach, a place of assurance—that is what the temple is for Hannah, and that is what the church building often is for us, not just for the church members, but for other people from the surrounding community. In these surroundings people on the wrong end of life's stick, as we all are sometimes, meet the overarching love of God, and are given peace, nothing more and nothing less. It is not any particular word in the service that helps them, or even perhaps the service at all, but the mere fact that the church is there, and they can go in and sit for a bit and go away assured and at peace, like Hannah. I often think that it is a pity that our churches are locked and inaccessible when they are not in use, which often means Monday to Saturday. Many parish churches are locked too nowadays, but where the church is open, sometimes it can be just what we need to drop in and spend time in peace in that peaceful and holy place.

The impression we receive from 1 Samuel is of the value of the temple for the community and for individuals.

It is a very different word we receive from the Mark passage, but equally necessary. 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left lying on a stone: all will be pulled down.' The whole discourse of Jesus in Mark 13 is set in the context of the great movements of history for the Jewish community. About forty years after Jesus' ministry, the great rebellion against Roman rule moved to its tragic dénouement, with the brutal crushing of the rebellion, the storming of the temple complex in Jerusalem where the rebels had been holding out, and the firing of the temple which led to its total destruction, followed by the expulsion of all Jewish citizens from Jerusalem, their ancient capital. These events were of world-historical importance, and it is not surprising that they find a place in the New Testament, or that they are seen there as the final act of world history, followed by the return of Christ.

Naturally we can't attribute that kind of importance to the fate of a church. Yet just think! Although the destruction of the Jerusalem temple was due to very special historical circumstances, there are hardly any buildings from that time that are still in use: no palaces, no synagogues, almost no temples. The only one I can think of is the Pantheon in Rome, which has been converted into a church. Everywhere we look we see ruins. Palaces that were the pride and joy of kings, temples that were the focus of devotion of a people, are a few columns in a wildlife meadow, a pile of rubble in the desert sands. Nothing that humans

build lasts for ever, and the movements of history make all our valued institutions obsolete. One day churches too will not be needed, never mind any particular church.

But the Bible sees this coming, and is not fazed by it. In John the seer's great vision of the new Jerusalem, he sees it 'coming down out of heaven from God, arrayed like a bride adorned for her husband'. Here is the fulfilment of all that God's people in all ages have longed for: 'the tabernacle of God is with humanity, and he will encamp with them, and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.' This isn't about people going up to heaven, it is about God coming down to earth, if you like, and setting up the blessed and perfect community. And after describing the city in great detail—all its foundations of precious stones, and its four gates, which always stand open, and its immense size, big enough for all the peoples of the world, John goes on to say 'And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty is its temple, and the Lamb.' In the perfection of what God intends for the world, we won't need a special place for approach and for assurance. God will just be there, nearer than breathing, closer than hands and feet, and everyone in the city will share in the presence of Christ all the time.

That's a vision, that's perfection, and we're not there yet if we ever will be, so you may think we might as well ignore it. But these visions of perfection—there are quite a lot of them in the Bible—utopias if you like—are useful for us, not because they tell us exactly what will happen, but because they signal our direction of travel. We don't have temples any longer, because we don't think God needs to be kept in a box and serviced like a motor car, and we have gradually moved away from the idea of holy places that are essentially different from other places. We are beginning to accept that a church building is useful but not essential to being a church. We still need places of approach and assurance, but they may be anywhere. But we can still embrace and enjoy our heritage of buildings, as we do, but we are also conscious that we must make them useful, and in that I hope that St Andrew's, which is further ahead than most in this regard, will continue to lead the field.

Remembrance Sunday

Service Date:

8 November, 2015

The service was led by the Revd. Robert Beard who considered the contradiction of remembering the loss of life in world conflicts while we are still sending young men and women to kill and be killed. The process of training as a soldier includes desensitising. Revd. Beard considered the theme connecting the readings -that the act of giving should be voluntary.

The trumpet playing of Gordon Truman once again enhanced and lifted the service.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 705 Our God our help in ages past

Common Ground 141 What shall we pray for those who died

Rejoice and Sing 629 Make me a channel of your peace

Rejoice and Sing 623 Eternal ruler of the ceaseless round

Rejoice and Sing 603 Lord for the years

Rejoice and Sing 762 The National Anthem

Sermon:

Readings

First Book of Kings chapter 17 vv 8 - 16

Psalm 146

Hebrews chapter 9 verses 24 - 28

Mark chapter 12 verses 38 – 44

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

1 November, 2015

Worship was led by the Revd. Margaret Herbert who preached on the new covenant with God.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 484 We come unto our faithful God

Common Ground 21 Longing for light

Rejoice and Sing 734 I'll praise my Maker while I've breath

Common Ground 51 How can I keep from singing

Rejoice and Sing 603 Lord for the years

Sermon:

Readings

Ruth chapter 1 verses 1-18

Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 1-9

Mark chapter 13 verses 28-34

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

25 October, 2015

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 285 O for a thousand tongues to sing

Rejoice and Sing 109 When all thy mercies, O my God

Rejoice and Sing 522 The King of love my shepherd is

Rejoice and Sing 521 Forth in Thy name O Lord I go

Sermon:

Readings

Job chapter 42 verses 1-6 and 10-17

Psalms 34 verses 1-8

Hebrews chapter 7 verses 23-28

Mark chapter 10 verses 46-52

Harvest Thanksgiving

Service Date:

11 October, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the fruits of the spirit and members of St. Andrew's Worship Group. The service included a presentation on Commitment for Life. Harvest donations of suitable food were made for the Broomhill Breakfast and the Food Bank supported by our neighbours the Jesus Centre. The children created a harvest tree and provided tasty and beautiful apple and cherry biscuits for us to enjoy with our coffee.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 124 We plough the fields

Rejoice and Sing 48 Praise and thanksgiving, Father we offer

Rejoice and Sing 42 For the fruits of all creation

Rejoice and Sing 40 Come, ye thankful people, come

Sermon:

Readings

Psalms 67

Galatians chapter 5 verses 16-26

Matthew chapter 13 verses 1-9 and 19-23

Service of Holy Communion

Service Date:

4 October, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. David Stec who preached on the Book of Job. The Book questions the idea that success in life is a blessing from God for the good the person has done while misfortune and suffering are punishments for doing evil. It makes us face the issue of undeserved suffering and reminds us of the undeserved suffering of Jesus.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 293 Ye servants of God

Rejoice and Sing 280 Join all the glorious names

Rejoice and Sing 460 Thee we praise, high priest and victim

Rejoice and Sing 367 I want to walk with Jesus Christ

Sermon:

Readings

Job chapter 1 verse 1 and chapter 2 verses 1-10

Psalms 26

Hebrews chapter 1 verses 1-4 and chapter 2 verses 5-12

Mark chapter 10 verses 2-16

Job 2:3

And the LORD said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause.'

"Have you considered my servant Job?" — this is not so much a question addressed to Satan, as a challenge presented to every reader of the Book of Job.

The Book of Job is probably a literary creation of its author, or in other words a work of fiction.

But to say this is not in any way to diminish it, for at its best fiction can be a very effective means of expressing some profound truths.

The person of Job is introduced to us in the first verse of the book: "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil."

Immediately we get a feeling here that the author is introducing a character of his own creation.

"There was a man ..." almost sounds like the opening of a fairy tale, and is not unlike the opening of Nathan's parable to David in 2 Sam 12.

The location of the land of Uz is completely unknown. It is also mentioned in the books of Lamentations (4:21) and Jeremiah (25:20), and was probably in the northern part of Arabia or Edom, though some have thought that it might have been to the north of Palestine. So Job may well have been a non-Israelite, and there is nothing in the Book of Job to relate it to anything in the history of Israel.

We do not know of anyone else with the name of Job, and its etymology is far from certain. Nor do we know at what time Job was supposed to have lived, though there are some hints that it might have been in the age of the patriarchs.

We are told that Job was “blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil”.

This might sound almost too good to be true.

Do you know anyone who might be described in terms like this?

Are not all human beings flawed?

Do not all persons have faults and weaknesses of some kind?

And it is precisely because this what is normal about humanity that the author of the Book of Job makes it absolutely clear that none of the misfortunes that happened to Job can be understood as punishment for some sin on his part.

The general view throughout much of the OT was that misfortune was sent by God as retribution for sin.

Thus at the Exodus the Israelites were kept in the wilderness forty years because of their rebellion against God.

In the period of the Judges and for much of Israel’s history the sins of the nation were frequently punished by God by subjecting it to defeat at the hand of its enemies.

And in this respect, the ultimate catastrophe for the nation was the exile of its people.

Out of this crisis, some of the prophets, most notably Jeremiah and Ezekiel, sought to give a message of hope by teaching that what the individual person did was important, and that each person would be punished for his own sins, and not for the sins of his fathers or those of the nation as a whole.

This gave rise to the notion underlying much of the Book of Proverbs that the person who leads a good life will be rewarded by God, whereas the one who does evil will be punished. Consequently, success and prosperity in one’s life are a sign of God’s blessing for the good that one has done, whereas suffering and misfortune are sent by God as punishment for doing evil.

But the Book of Job was written to question this notion, not necessarily to reject it completely, but to point out how inadequate this is to explain what happens in the world ... and how little we as humans understand about why God allows people to suffer and bad things to occur.

Job was a blameless, upright and God-fearing man, and it would seem that his rectitude and piety were being greatly rewarded, since Job had a large and happy family and very great wealth.

But all this changed one day at a meeting of the divine beings in the heavenly court, when Satan appeared also.

“Whence have you come?,” asks God, and Satan replies, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.”

At this, God poses to him the question, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?”

Satan responds with the cynical view that Job's good and pious life are motivated by what Job hopes to get out of it, but if his family and his wealth are taken away, he will surely curse God and thus incur sin.

So Satan is given authority to put Job to the test, and a series of disasters occur by which Job's enormous flocks and herds are destroyed together with Job's servants, and his sons and daughters are killed.

But despite all this, Job is not moved to sin or curse God.

At another meeting of the heavenly court God once again expresses confidence in Job's good character, and this time Satan suggests that if Job is made to suffer physical pain himself, he will be moved to curse God.

So Satan is again given authority to put Job to the test, with the condition only that Job's life must be spared.

Thus Satan afflicts Job with "loathsome sores" all over his body, but he still he does not curse God.

Then three friends arrive on the scene to comfort him, and much of the Book of Job is taken up by a poetic dialogue between Job and his friends, in which Job insists that he is entirely innocent of any sin, and his friends try to persuade him that his misfortunes must be retribution for some wrong that he has done.

In all this, the reader knows that Job is suffering to vindicate God's confidence in his good character, but Job does not know this, nor do his friends.

To Job, all his misfortune is totally inexplicable, a complete mystery; all he knows is that he has remained faithful to God and committed no sin.

To the three friends, God is just, and Job's misfortune must be brought about by God because of something that Job has done.

In a soliloquy at the end of the dialogue, Job makes a final impassioned plea of his innocence.

This is followed by some rambling speeches by an obscure character named Elihu, and then God answers Job out of a whirlwind.

God describes some of the wonders of the natural world, and points out that Job has little understanding of these things.

Curiously enough, God does not actually answer Job's complaint of injustice.

It seems that Job's quest for personal vindication is taken to imply criticism of God's government of the world order, which God is not going to change.

At this, Job is moved to bow in submission before God with the words, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know ... therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

In the end, Job's fortunes are restored, he gains even greater wealth than before and is blessed with more sons and daughters and a long life.

The Book of Job is by no means easy to read either in English or in Hebrew. .

The arguments in the dialogue between Job and his friends are often difficult to follow. It has several textual difficulties, and often uses words found nowhere else in Hebrew literature.

But the Book of Job has always been a great favourite of mine.

It deals with an issue that all of us have to grapple with at some time in life: What do we make of undeserved suffering, whether it be our own or that of someone else?

With our belief in the justice of God, it is so easy to have a lingering thought somewhere deep down that perhaps such suffering may not be totally undeserved, and that there must be a reason for it.

The author of the Book of Job does not claim to have all the answers, nor does he claim that all suffering can be attributed to the same cause as that which lay behind Job's suffering. But in providing us with the example of Job who was suffering to vindicate God's trust in him (even though Job was unaware of this), he points out to us that it is possible for suffering to be completely undeserved.

And he reminds us how little we understand of God's ordering of the world.

As Christians, each time we meet around the Lord's table we affirm that at the centre of our faith is one whose suffering was absolutely undeserved.

Of course, the passion of Jesus cannot be compared with the suffering of Job or that of anyone else.

It was a unique event and necessary for the fulfilment of God's purpose of salvation for mankind.

What Jesus went through on the cross was something that he had to go through, if he was to be completely identified with us in our human experience, of which suffering is very much a part.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it like this: "We see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering."

As we partake of the body and blood of Christ symbolically through the bread and wine of the communion, we acknowledge that his humanity was made perfect through his passion, and we receive the benefits of his sacrifice.

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

27 September, 2015

Worship was led by Mrs. Val Morrison who drew parallels between the Israelites fleeing oppression and the current crisis of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers trying to reach Europe. The readings give us some pointers as to how we should respond to-day; share the burden; remember that following Christ may involve sacrifice; listen to those outside the centre of power; be at peace with each other.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 104 Praise my soul the King of heaven

Rejoice and Sing 295 Breathe on me breath of God

Rejoice and Sing 353 There's a wideness in God's mercy

Rejoice and Sing 629 Make me a channel of your peace

Rejoice and Sing 695 Son of God eternal Saviour

Sermon:

Readings

Numbers chapter 11 verses 4-6, 10-16, 24-30

Mark chapter 9 verses 38-50

4000 years ago and the headline story was, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, Israelites (with a few hangers-on – the rabble) fleeing oppression and hoping for a better life.

So nothing changes. But historians will tell us that one of the primary reasons for studying history is so that we can learn from the past.

Reading those verses from Numbers I suspect many of us were reminded of the pictures we see daily at the moment, of 21st century refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers. The parallels are too close for comfort and the knowledge that mankind has not in fact learnt anything from history about how to treat each other is depressing.

Here they were, stuck in the desert, 600,000 of them, in conditions which were (even for a nomadic people) uncomfortable, frustrating and threatening. In such conditions it is natural for human beings to want to change things, to remember the best of the life they have left and this group were no different from any other group. They harked back to their time in Egypt when suddenly the memory of meat and fish (apparently free) and the lure of tasty vegetables and fruit became overwhelming in the face of yet another day of manna to eat. I think there are two things to note from the opening verses of today's reading. The first is that it was the 'rabble' who were leading the discontent. These were people who were not Israelites but who had joined the exodus, presumably in the hope of capitalizing on the promises which had drawn the Israelites to make the journey. A dangerous and uncomfortable journey but of course the 'rabble' would have had no real understanding of God's covenant with his people nor of the unique bond which made that covenant so compelling.

The second is the way in which people can (I think the term these days is mis-remember). The 'rabble' would have been a small group but their discontent and lack of knowledge was able to stir up the Israelites to weep again and together they were able to build up in their minds pictures of the good things available when living in Egypt. And yet if we read the accounts of conditions they endured it would seem that they were not always well fed and were often harshly ill treated. It is easy to see the past through rose coloured spectacles whilst failing to see the promises for an unknown future even when those promises are made by God. God's daily provision of manna which both sustained them and taught them trust in him was forgotten as they sat in that in between place, the now but not yet place in the desert.

Moses felt huge responsibility for these 600,000 people. He knew that God had required him to lead them out of Egypt and he felt justified in blaming God for his current predicament. But it feels as though he was at the point where he also felt that God might take some responsibility too. After all they were God's people, Moses did not create them or give them birth.

This is, of course, one of a number of conversations between Moses and God during this period of history in which Moses was constantly attempting to maintain the relationship between God, the people and himself. There had been times when the result of their conversation had been to have God suggesting that he and Moses go off and abandon the Israelites and that God would make of Moses 'a great nation'. But Moses ended that encounter by persuading God to let the people go to the promised land, even though he refused to travel in their midst. Again Moses pleaded the cause of the Israelites and God agreed to travel with them.

In today's passage we find an exasperated and exhausted Moses feeling alone and abandoned himself. Imagine the scene, not only is he surrounded by desperately unhappy people but he is having to endure the same living conditions, the same boring food and the same fears as the 600,000 people he feels responsible for.

As I read on in chapter 11 of Numbers, I heard the voices of the leaders of the European nations. “They come weeping to me – I am not able to carry all this people alone “ shades of European leaders across the continent.

I guess the stark difference between Moses and the 21st century leaders of nations is that Moses had a close relationship with God and a knowledge that God was at the centre of the predicament. Though the people had fled oppression and cruelty which had been man made, just as many of those fleeing today are escaping from man made oppression and cruelty some of which is done in the name of a god which is not recognized by the majority of the faithful.

Over the weeks of the current refugee crisis there have been many who have said, we have to do something and even more who have said yes, but what can we do? The answer has come in many different ways and seems to swing from humanitarian to cruel, from practical to harsh, from pragmatic to totally impractical.

But as people of the Christian faith it seems to me that we have a responsibility to examine what our Bible tells us which may be relevant and may inform our thinking and ultimately our response.

It is certain that we have in today’s passage from Numbers, as well as from the verses we read from Mark’s gospel, some pointers to the characteristics of leadership and discipleship which could be helpful.

The common thread in both passages is about sharing the load. God’s wise solution to Moses’ problem is to call on others to share the burden and Moses’ wise response is to accept that help. Sharing authority and receiving wisdom. All of which seems to me to be a good starting point for many a problem, whether it is what we do about refugees or what we do about who makes the coffee or gives out the hymn books. There are places where leaders and others seem to think that they are the only people who can do that particular job.

I think leadership is about enabling others, accepting help and support and recognizing that no-one has the ultimate solution to any problem nor the skills to deal with all eventualities. God made each of us unique and calls us to contribute to the whole, though it is not difficult for any of us to be that stumbling block which Jesus refers to because we fail to recognize our place in a given situation

In both passages of course the real crunch point comes when people beyond the core and chosen group start acting as though they have the authority of that core and chosen group. Both Moses and Jesus give a similar response, Moses to his followers and Jesus to his disciples.

In both cases God had had a hand in the actions.

When Moses gathered the 70 elders, God took some of the spirit which was on Moses and gave it to those elders. A recognition that we none of us do anything without the spirit of God being present in our lives and Jesus, in response to the disciples, spoke about the unknown individual doing deeds of power in Jesus’ name. Deeds of power are only possible with the backing of the name and the spirit.

But what about those people who are outside the core group who probably do things differently? Who maybe come up with a way of operating which is outside the norm.

Well before I answer that question, let’s just think about what discipleship means. Jesus has some harsh words to say in those verses from Mark’s gospel. I don’t think anyone really thinks that we should take literally the command to cut off hands and feet or to tear out our

eyes. But Jesus certainly sometimes said things starkly to make a point and this may be one of those things.

It's part of a passage in which we are reminded that discipleship is difficult and discipleship demands sacrifice. There is a bit of a notion around at the moment that the only reason for following Jesus is for personal fulfillment and satisfaction, following a way of personal spirituality which meets our felt needs.

But this is not what Jesus modeled this is not what God called us to. Had it been so, Moses would long before chapter 11 of the book of Numbers, have gone off to a peaceful place and communed with God leaving the challenge of the 600,000 Israelites to their own devices. Jesus would have stayed in one of those remote places he found for conversations with his father, leaving the challenge of the injustices and inequalities of living in a Roman occupied country for others to deal with.

What both of them knew was that they were living in a particular time and place, but that they were part of something much bigger. Part of God's plan for the world which would extend well beyond the 40 years in the desert or the 3 years of ministry and that without their involvement God's plan would not progress in the way he would want it to

So it is with us

The daily onslaught of images from the media, showing the welcome some are giving refugees and the violence at various flashpoints on their journey are a part of something bigger. Whether you see it as people genuinely trying to find a better, peaceful place to live or people trying to live off our welfare state, God sees human beings, more like us than not, created in his image, fearful, desperate, tired and hungry and God sees the response of the leaders and people in the countries to which they have come, fearful, desperate, but with comfortable homes and food to eat

Leadership demands that the load be shared, that everyone recognizes how small contributions from many people will make the whole exercise possible. It demands that leaders listen to those voices which are outside the centres of power. There are many examples of this being the way forward within the history of Israel and we know that the voices of the people have been heard in many of the countries currently struggling with the weight of numbers of people crossing their borders.

Discipleship demands that we look carefully at Jesus' life. Think about three things from today's passage -

First, remember that there is more than one way to work for God's purposes. We 'inside' so to speak do not have the monopoly on good ideas nor even on commitment. God works through many different people with many different skills.

Second, remember that it is very easy to be a stumbling block when the world around us is expressing racist or xenophobic views failing to challenge those views provides the stumbling block. When someone suggests a way forward which requires some sacrifice on our part, sacrifice of comfort, wealth or security, our response may be to say that is a step too far but we need to be careful that our actions do not provide a stumbling block.

Third, remember that verse about having salt in yourselves and being at peace with one another

Surely with that base and with the spirit of God in our hearts we can contribute thoughts, ideas and prayers which will contribute to solutions.

And finally just as the 70 elders and the 12 disciples had to learn that others may be acting as part of God's plan so must we learn that lesson. Continually attentive to genuine voices

of the spirit, wherever those voices may come from, speaking God's word of hope and judgment in a broken world.

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

20 September, 2015

The service was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. He shared his concerns that many people feel uncomfortable in church. The house of God should be a place where all can feel comfortable, welcomed and loved; where we can be open and show our weaknesses and concerns, sure of understanding and support.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 45 Morning has broken

Rejoice and Sing 316 Lord, I have made thy word my choice

Rejoice and Sing 503 It is a thing most wonderful

Rejoice and Sing 47 O worship the King

Sermon:

Readings

Proverbs chapter 31 verses 10 - 31

Psalms 1

James chapter 3 verse 13 to chapter 4 verse 3 and verses 7 and 8a

Mark chapter 9 verses 30 - 37

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

13 September, 2015

The service was led by the Revd. Robert Beard. His theme was that the only way to really know who Jesus is is to follow him - and that has consequences and implications. To deny oneself means redefining and elevating our relationships with other people. All people are our brothers and sisters.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 292 When morning gilds the skies

Rejoice and Sing 371 Take my life and let it be

Rejoice and Sing 229 We sing the praise of him who died

Rejoice and Sing 267 Immortal love for ever full

Sermon:

Readings

Proverbs chapter 1 verses 20 - 33

Psalms 19 found at Rejoice and Sing 673

James chapter 3 verses 1 - 12

Mark chapter 8 verses 27 - 38

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

6 September, 2015

This date is 'Back to School with God Sunday'. Worship was led by The Revd. Brenda Hill whose first career was in teaching. She reflected on how Jesus is the greatest teacher of all,

using language and concepts with which his listeners could identify. Brenda shared with us that she had been brought to faith by the Christian behaviour and kindnesses of other people and expanded on the idea of the 5 pillars of faith.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 285 O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise

Rejoice and Sing 492 Dear Lord and Father of mankind

Rejoice and Sing 367 I want to walk with Jesus Christ

Rejoice and Sing 509 O Jesus I have promised to serve thee to the end

Sermon:

Readings

John chapter 14 verses 1 - 10, 15 - 17 and 28

Isaiah chapter 65 verses 17 - 25

Philippians chapter 2 verses 6 - 11

Most of us here, I guess, had scripture lessons in which we learnt the principles of Christian living from the study of the Bible in the Old and New Testaments learning what our relationship should be with God... thus the principles of Christianity through the stories of the people of Israel culminating in the life of Jesus and his disciples.

Today the approach must be different because we live among many people following several religions, religious and cultural practices. So RE teaching studies the same things but looking at them through the main world faiths, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism and sometimes includes thoughts about Humanism, Jainism, or Confucianism according to local populations ...each authority has to produce an Agreed Syllabus as a guide to teachers; I have been involved in drawing up two.

So one syllabus is built around 5 pillars in the form of questions:

- Who am I?
- Why am I here?
- Where am I going?
- Under what authority do I live?
- How do I express my faith in worship and life?

Just a brief summary of how Christians answer those questions.

Who am I?

I know that I am the unique creation of a loving God and I know this from the Bible and from my experience of God's presence in my life, particularly in times of difficulty and distress. I know it too because God loved me so much that he gave his Son to give me a life of real worth here and beyond in the everlasting.

Why am I here?

I am here to play my part in a universal plan of God's to bring heaven and earth together as one entity. At present the world is not fit to be joined in the perfection of God's full presence. We would be unable to stand the blaze of glory that surrounds him. We couldn't cope with Jesus because his way is so far higher than our way. So how much more would be the fear of the full Godhead living in person among us? Perfection and sinfulness are incompatible!!

Where am I going?

I am going on a life long journey of change and struggle to follow the way God, through Jesus is leading me. My goal is to rise Godward until at my life's end I am able to be with God in Spirit having left my earthly, worn out, body behind. I can only get near to that goal

by service to others and a commitment to faithful actions continually. I will only rise above my flawed humanity because God is a forgiving and gracious God who sees my failures, forgives me and re-commissions me to do his will.

Under what authority do I live?

The Bible is my primary authority; not as a book that is perfect but as a series of encounters of people and communities with God...some good some bad. Stories which stretch from the creation stories told in earliest times through a rabble of slaves migrating from Egypt to the beginning of the church. The Old Testament holds many insights into life and shows ways men and women have found God and tried to follow his way using the laws of Moses as a guide, but a far higher authority is given in the New Testament where God's Son shows us how we should live and what following a law properly means. Which is set out by Paul and other leaders in answering the struggles of new Christians in the epistles.

How do I express my faith in worship and life?

This is the most practical of the 5 pillars and Christian worship can be shown in its many different guises.

However the subtler point about expressing faith is in service. Each Christian strives to fulfil Jesus' demand that we love our neighbour as ourselves. Modelled on the life of Jesus...disciplined by the 10 Commandments modified by Jesus, in the Beatitudes, Christians should lead a life of love and peace in fellowship with all our brothers and sisters.

That leads me neatly from my very brief summary of answers to the most important questions there are for us in life from a Christian position to where we as individuals and as a church have a task to do for our children and young people.

Let me tell you from my own experience a great many years ago though a similar state exists today. I didn't find faith from the scripture lessons at school nor from the deeper studies and theology I did in a college. It was the church that nurtured me.

The elderly man who worked as a jobbing gardener and who was poor and crippled by his work who knew all the children and when he met any one of us was delighted to see us, remembered what we had told him the last time we met. He just glowed with faith. It was the Junior Church leader who worked full time as a teacher, yet had time to visit me when I was ill and who saw my potential and encouraged me to train as a teacher and who wrote me long letters every week while I was there. Then there were the three business people... one was fashion editor of a well-known magazine...who took me, and several others at different times, to all sorts of outings and who showed me living faith in people. The church was actually a café in the week and was replaced by a Nissan hut a bit later. It was war-time and in the SE London suburbs so life was hard and even my atheist father had to acknowledge that my church friends had really got something!!

I guess you will say," But we don't have the children here to do those sorts of things with them." But I'm sure you have contact with your own children and grandchildren and influence them. Are there opportunities, perhaps with other churches to do holiday clubs or special events for children... not to preach to them or convert them, but to show them loving attention and your faith.

I leave you with this story... recently a woman who has just retired came to an elderly person's event to bring her mother who was frail so her daughter stayed too. The mother

sadly died after a few months but her daughter stayed. She knew nothing about Christianity... some family trouble with a church had made her parents determined she should be kept away from any Christian teaching or information. It through the people who loved and cared for her during her bereavement, and beyond, that she became a seeker and found faith. No school teaching, no scripture... nothing... but Christ sought and found her and faith came from very ordinary Christian people

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

30 August, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Canon Mike West who preached on the text from James chapter 1 verse 27 -

'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this; to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.'

Caring for those in need and fighting for social justice is central to Christian faith and practice but this can be a challenge in the culture in which we live.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 103 Praise to the Holiest in the height

Rejoice and Sing 734 I'll praise my maker while I've breath

Rejoice and Sing 261 At the name of Jesus

Rejoice and Sing 127 Hail to the Lord's anointed

Rejoice and Sing 603 Lord for the years

Sermon:

Readings

Deuteronomy chapter 4 verses 1, 2 and 6 - 9

James chapter 1 verses 17 - 27

Mark chapter 7 verses 1 - 8, 14, 15 and 21 - 23

Survey:

Who has friends or relatives who worship in other countries?

About 1 or 2 people in each of:

Europe, N America, S & Cent America, Africa, Asia, Australia.

I think of Patricio now back in Chile since July. He was a member of St Augustine's for 2 years whilst he studied for his Master degree in Linguistics.

And Yvette now working in her home country of Singapore, having gained a degree in Journalism in Sheffield.

St A is only 400 yds from the Endcliffe Student Village so we attract a number of first year students. Some come because we are "a church like home" Other come as part of their search for a meaning and purpose in the adult lives. Our task is to retain those who come seeking.

A group of Art students came because their 2nd year project was to negotiate a public space to display their art, and to create some pieces that were specific to that space. Two of them found the experience connected with their dormant faith, and joined us for worship for the rest of their time in Sheffield.

In July last year Echen, a Chinese post graduate student who had had a little contact with a church in China very unlike St Aug began to worship with us. He valued to fellowship with people who were not students. In Sept he brought a flat mate, Matthew, who had no experience of Christianity; and both became regular members. At Easter this year they

approached me seeking Baptism.

It's always an exciting but challenging process to prepare adults for Baptism or Church membership but in their case there were 3 extra issues.

First language: although they had passed the University's English test and being taught in English, their English was rather limited, and they found the Bible and technical/theological words often difficult. We tackled this with the help of bilingual Bibles – parallel texts in Chinese and English. Each week they would meet together to study a set passage in Chinese, so that when I met them they had prepared their questions.

Secondly they did not have the kind of background knowledge we might assume for anyone who has been to school in England, seen nativity plays even if they were never in church. So we were starting a long way back.

Thirdly, and for me the most challenging was the fact that they will return to China at the end of September. In what ways could we in these short months, in 7 or 8 sessions prepare them to live as Christians in a very different society? The church in China is not like is most of the rest of the world, the result of missionary work within the framework of colonialism and at present being a Christian can be a disadvantage in employment and political issues.

The questions we had to face in our meetings was

“What is central to Christian faith and practice?”

Today's Gospel reading (Mark chap 7; vv 7 – 23) can help us with that question. What was it that marked our faithful Jew? What was it that defiled a person? Not a hygiene issue. The Law, and its basis in the Ten Commandments was the main determining factor, but around that had grown “traditions of men”. The Pharisees were particularly insistent that all these extra rules should be followed to the letter if a person was to be “a good Jew”. Jesus is quite clear – he sweeps away all these extra demands, he frees his followers from the “traditions of men” whilst reaffirming the central role of the Law.

This was very important for Mark, writing for the early church in which the question of how Jewish Christians had to be was not yet finally settled. Perhaps the questions of circumcision had been settled but Paul still had to advise on whether or not Christians could eat the meat which had been offered in Greek temple worship.

Our reading from James tells us that this is not about belief in the abstract

“Be does of the word not just hearers”.

And our OT reading makes it clear that the Law, the basis for our Christian practice, is not only about personal or private behaviour.

Deut chap 4

“Give heed to these statutes and ordinances, that is all the Law of Moses”

And other nations will see Israel doing this and say

“Surely this is a great nation, a wise and discerning people”

For these Laws and their interpretation are the basis for the good society

About public affairs as much as about private acts of love and service.

The Law gave plenty of examples about how the 10 Commandments should be applied in their situation. One of my favourites is in Lev 19, v 9

When you reap the Harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes: you shall leave them for the poor and the alien

But the world tries to stain our attempts to apply that to our situation

“What's mine is my own”

“Why should I pay such high taxes – I've worked hard for all this”

And how will Echen and Matthew apply that in China, where criticism of the state's actions can be seen as treason or where to achieve the one child per family policy abortion on demand is practiced?

I have recently been helped to be more aware of how much the world and its values stain my values, my way of looking at situations, and how our world-wide fellowship in the church could help us do that.

Who watched Songs of Praise two weeks ago?

It came from the Ethiopian Church of St Michael, in the refugee camp in Calais. It's a shack of old timber and plastic sheets, yet it provides a place of peace and even hope in that desperate place. It made me think that our common fellowship in the church, despite our widely different situations should be the firm base on which to make judgements and proposals to remedy their situation. By contrast on the following Monday I read the headlines in some papers (Mail and Express) which were very critical of the BBC for being "so biased and political" for making Songs of Praise from St Michael's.

A second example

The Catholic Parish of Sacred Heart in the small Texan town of MacAllen. It's near the Mexican border where refugees from the violent situation in some Central American countries El Salvador Honduras and Guatemala cross into the USA. Those with connections in the USA are usually granted asylum. But they cross with only the clothes they are wearing. So Sacred Heart parish hall has become a welcome centre where they are given clothes, a hot meal and baby things.

In 2014 they helped 18,000 refugees. Let's view the situation of refugees from the standpoint of their amazing charity.

For Christians in China, Iraq or UK

In our private and our public life

Facing questions about refugees

About the role of the Welfare State

Or about the marriage of same sex couples

The challenge is this:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

23 August, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. In his comment he spoke of the plight of refugees and our responsibility in Europe to organise ourselves better to help them more effectively.

Instead of a traditional sermon The Revd. Beard invited the congregation to reflect on and share their personal memories of the two members who had died recently and so remember not just the personal loss to us as individuals but to the church life as a whole.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 378 Awake my soul

Rejoice and Sing 522 From heaven you came

Rejoice and Sing 198 A stranger once did bless the earth

Rejoice and Sing 566 The Church's one foundation

Rejoice and Sing 207 My song is love unknown

Sermon:

Readings

First book of Kings chapter 8 verses 1, 6, 10 - 11, 22 - 30, 41 - 43

Psalm 84

Ephesians chapter 6 verses 10 - 20

John chapter 6 verses 56 - 69

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**Service Date:**

16 August, 2015

The service was led by The Revd. Dr. Keith Albans who preached on the relationship between God and ourselves and between ourselves and others. God and Jesus accept us as we are. We must accept others in the same way.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 414 When in our music God is glorified

Common Ground 23 Says Jesus, 'come and gather round'

Common Ground 39 Glory to God above (setting of psalm 148)

Common Ground 67 Jesus Christ is waiting

Rejoice and Sing 605 Son of God, eternal saviour

Sermon:

Readings

Matthew chapter 20 verses 1 - 16

Genesis chapter 4 verses 1 - 16

Second letter to the Corinthians chapter 5 verse 14 to chapter 6 verse 2

With us, worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of anyone.

2 Cor 5:16

- BBC radio play this week – set around the building of the Churchill Barriers in Orkney. It also features the building the Italian Church there, made from two Nissan huts but beautifully decorated inside. The prisoners asked to stay on beyond the end of the war in order to finish it!
- Made an interesting link to the press coverage of tonight's Songs of Praise – recorded in Calais where migrants have built a Church. Reaction in the press has been hostile. Church Leaders have issued a press statement on the crisis this week. Amongst other things, it says "It is important that public debate is grounded in values of compassion and that decisions are made on the basis of facts."
- This hasn't been a great summer for images of European harmony! The migration issue and its associated effects on Kent's traffic have been widely reported...
- Two of the statements made by our own PM have not helped! The language of "Swarms" – dehumanises and redolent of stigmatising of Jews (rats) and Rwandans (cockroaches) in a way which legitimises ill-treatment or worse. And then there was the headline "The migrant chaos in Calais could last all summer" Is it really all about us? This is an issue with roots

going back to 1916 decisions, plus decisions made post war in 1945, to the fall of Eastern Europe in 1989/90 and the Balkan crisis of the early 1990's. It has links to the Iraq wars and to the expansion of the EU. Why should it not last beyond this summer?!

- Individualism v wider society – perspective necessary!
- There is, and always has been, within the Christian religion, a danger that we become obsessed with the question of an individual's relationship with God. It's important - and part of our witness is the offer from God of a personal relationship with our creator - but not to the exclusion of everything else.
- Such an obsession has been a peculiarly Protestant disease over the past 400 years - and is seen most clearly in language of many choruses - though by no means all of them! The Me-God relationship becomes the entirety of Christianity - nb Methodist beginnings and Class Meetings.
- And yet, Jesus and the main thrust of NT teaching constantly draws us away from that simple straight line, giving instead a third point of reference and introducing the idea of a triangle of relationships. The third point is my brother or sister in the human race. [nb Present from Cain and Abel story and is part of the whole biblical narrative.]
- And Jesus doesn't simply throw in this third point, he uses the triangle to draw a link between the state of relationships within the triangle. Let me suggest 2 examples.
- Lord's Prayer - Forgive us our sins as we forgive others. - i.e. the state of the Me-God relationship w.r.t. my forgiveness is related to my Me-Brother/Sister relationship. And that's right, as Jesus showed in some of his parables - perhaps especially in that of the unforgiving servant.
- Or again, in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The whole thrust of that is that what we have or haven't done in our my Me-Brother/Sister relationship, is reflected in the God-Me line.
- As I say this idea is a central feature of Jesus' teaching (against the rabbi's literalism?) But it is one most of us find hard to follow in practice. Statements of faith and belief - not always reflected in our actions - at least mine don't!
- Now Paul, in 2 Cor turns the screw further - because he uses this triangle of relationships and finds me and many others sadly wanting. He focuses on the God-me line and stresses the fact that the status of our relationship with God has nothing whatsoever to do with us - "Christ died for all" "All this has been the work of God".
- And having stressed that, he focuses our attention on the Me-Brother/Sister line. If God has accepted us as we are, through pure grace, then that has implications for the way we view and treat others people who seek God through us and through his church.
- And in this I think we come very close to one of the radical features of Jesus that people

found so hard to stomach, as he taught and practised what he preached. He was scandal precisely because he didn't simply teach about God's accepting love, he did it - he accepted all-comers!

- The Gospels can be described as a catalogue of scandal as one unworthy person after another found the accepting love of God in Jesus. Jairus, the Rich Man, the lepers, the paralysed, the blind, the Roman, Levi, Zacchaeus, children, various undesirable women etc etc. Tradition and common practise counted them outside of God's love, and yet Jesus counted them in. And it wasn't just his enemies who were scandalised - his disciples found it hard to cope with as well!
- So Jesus told his story about the workers in the vineyard - to try and make clear what he was about. The workers hired early did a full days work in the heat of the day and beyond. Those hired later did a good few hours, while some were hired just before dusk. And yet all got the same pay.
- Was it fair? Of course not! Was it just? No way! It was an act of pure undeserved grace, given in love by one who accepted all-comers equally and wanted all to share in his grace.
- And Paul wants us to see ourselves not as those hired early - broodily resenting the way others have been treated. After all, he knows himself to be among those hired late, receiving not what he deserved, but what God in his grace chooses to give. And if that is how God has treated us, can we treat others with any less grace? - Yes! Quite easily!
- In 17th century, Nell Gwynn, a lady whose reputation had not been improved by her friendship with King Charles II, left £100 in her will to the parish poor, and requested that she be buried in the Church vaults. The respectable people of the parish were scandalised and refused - so the Rev. Thomas Tenison praised her for her generosity and buried her in the vault reserved for Vicars!
- Or listen to this - part of a poem by Nigel Forde – which accompanied a C of E video called Children in the Way:

*A church should feed the spirit and the mind
of every taste, sex, age that makes mankind;
none should be left out or left behind*

*(And if one is, will it be Major Thrales
Or young Ben Brow with grin and dirty nails?)
Or is a church just a useful apparatus to sort
us out according to our status?*

*As if the steward were to hear a knock
At the west door and, opening it, take stock:
"Horn rimmed specs, bank balance, safe career?
Come in! Come in! We think you'll like it here!"*

*But eight-year-old? Or toddler? Or just
A babe in arms? 'Well - come in... if you must!'*

- The gospel of God 'making friends with all humankind through Christ' is good news on the one hand, when we think of ourselves. But it can be hard news when we remember the link between God's acceptance of us and our acceptance of others.
- So how can we make the leap?
 1. Mediate on God's acceptance of us. Many take it for granted, perhaps it happened so long ago it has no contemporary power? Or perhaps we haven't even begun to really feel it as a present reality?
 2. Mediate on the pain of rejection - either in personal experience or that of others –
nb Migration?
 3. Meditate on the text - "With us, worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of anyone." What does that mean for me? What might it mean?
- Edwin Markham wrote:

*He drew a circle that shut me out Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had a will to win
We drew a circle that took him in.*

- The message of Jesus, the message of Paul, is that that's precisely what God has done for us - and that the circle he draws is wider than we can ever imagine. And he calls us to push out our circle in all sorts of directions. Or as Paul puts it: "Sharing in God's work, we make this appeal, you who have received the grace of God, do not let it come to nothing!"
- May God who in Christ accepts even me and you, give us the grace to be an accepting people, using God's standards and not our own in our estimate of all men and women.

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

9 August, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard . The theme of bread featured significantly in his sermon. In John's gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the bread of life, then as the living bread. What is the significance in this shift in description?

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 382 Come, let us join our cheerful songs

Rejoice and Sing 268 Jesus is Lord!

Rejoice and Sing 92 Amazing Grace

Rejoice and Sing 295 Breathe on me, breath of God

Rejoice and Sing 345 Guide me, O thou great Jehova

Sermon:

Readings

Second book of Samuel chapter 18 verses 5 - 9, 15 and 31 - 33

Psalm 130 found at Rejoice and Sing 728

Ephesians chapter 4 verse 26 to chapter 5 verse 2

John chapter 6 verse 35 and 41 - 51

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

2 August, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. David Stec who preached on the story of David's sin in committing adultery with Bathsheba and then arranging the death of her husband. In a parable, Nathan pointed out David's sins to him. Unusually for that time, David took the rebuke seriously and repented, recognising that he had sinned against God. Like David, when we fall short of what God requires of us, we can only repent and trust in His mercy.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 536 New every morning is the love
Rejoice and Sing 360 Come thou font of every blessing
Rejoice and Sing 560 Glorious things of thee are spoken
Rejoice and Sing 353 There's a wideness in God's mercy
Rejoice and Sing 546 March on, my soul, with strength

Sermon:

Readings

2nd. book of Samuel chapter 11 verses 26 and 27 and chapter 12 verses 1 - 13a

Psalms 51 verses 1 - 12

Ephesians chapter 4 verses 1 - 16

Matthew chapter 7 verses 1 - 5

2 Sam 12:7 Nathan said to David,

You are the man.

According to the psychologist Karl Jung, one characteristic of human nature is that we tend to see in others faults which are really our own.

We can see that others have these faults, but fail to see that we are equally guilty of them. So often we criticise others for doing the very same things which we ourselves do, but without realising it.

This is something which would certainly apply to King David.

He was visited by Nathan the prophet, who proceeded to tell him a parable.

It is quite possible that David did not realise that it was a parable.

He may have thought that Nathan was bringing to his attention some great injustice that had taken place in the land without the king's notice.

After all, the king had a responsibility for seeing that justice was maintained.

He was often visited by someone who wished to present a petition, seeking the king's judgment on some legal dispute; and doubtless sometimes a person might present a petition on behalf of someone else.

Or else, it may have been that David did realise that Nathan was telling a parable, but that the prophet told it in such a realistic and moving way that for David it became an account of something that actually happened, and he was moved to protest at the injustice of it.

Certainly, Nathan told the parable with great skill.

In a certain city there was a rich man and a poor man.

The rich man had large flocks and herds, but the poor man had only one ewe lamb, which he loved as a pet.

We are told that it grew up with him and with his children, and that “it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him.” One day the rich man had a visitor.

He was unwilling to slay one of his own large flock to give to his visitor.

And so he took the poor man’s only lamb which he loved, and prepared it for his guest. At this, David was outraged. “As the LORD lives,” said David, “the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

Nathan’s reply was simple and straight to the point, “You are the man.”

He could not have found a better way to drive home the meaning of the parable.

This came as a shattering blow to David.

He had just heard an extremely touching story; he had rightly been moved to anger at the wickedness of the rich man in the parable.

Yet, by his reaction, he had condemned himself out of his own mouth.

For he had failed to see that the parable was a superb description of his own behaviour.

He was indeed the man, the rich man of the parable!

As king, he had great riches, very likely including flocks and herds.

He certainly had several wives and concubines too, but he was not satisfied.

When he saw Bathsheba, the beautiful wife of one of his soldiers, he wanted her too.

He sent for her and committed adultery with her, and she became pregnant.

So he arranged for Uriah, her husband, to be given a position in battle where he would almost certainly be killed, and he was indeed killed.

David then married Bathsheba.

David had not only taken the poor man’s lamb, but he had arranged the death of the poor man too.

He was even worse than the man whom he had condemned in the parable!

David had allowed his selfishness to determine his reactions and blind him to the real nature of his crime.

He knew that what he had done was wrong.

He knew that adultery was contrary to the laws of God, and was considered to be a very serious offence in Ancient Israel.

He knew too that it was very wrong to have effectively arranged for the death of Uriah.

But it was only when Nathan told his parable that he realised the true extent of his crime.

He was the rich man of the parable, who had deprived the poor man of the one precious thing that he had – his beautiful wife – and then even of his very life.

Sometimes all of us need to have someone like Nathan to say to us, “You are the man, or the woman.”

All of us tend to see things from our own point of view, and to have convenient minds which overlook our faults.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus warned us, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.”

These words would have been very applicable to King David when he passed judgment on the man in Nathan’s parable, and thereby condemned himself.

Jesus went on to say that we should be careful lest we see the speck in our brother’s eye but fail to notice the log in our own.

To try to remove the speck from your brother's eye when there is a log in your own would be hypocrisy.

But how easy it is to lapse into hypocrisy without even noticing it.

And it is then that we need a Nathan to open our eyes to our failings and to rebuke us.

Of course, it can be very annoying when someone does this.

No one likes being told that they have done wrong.

But David took Nathan's rebuke followed by his prophecy of retribution upon his house very well.

He realised that he had done wrong, and did not try to defend himself, but simply responded with the words, "I have sinned against the LORD."

David was deeply sorry for what he had done, and made a sincere repentance.

It was entirely in character for David to do so.

This is something that was appreciated by those who compiled the Psalter later in Israel's history, and who believed that David was the author of many of the psalms.

As they read the psalms they tried to see in them what events from the life of David might lie behind the words that they read, and they added titles to some of the psalms to reflect this.

Psalm 51, which we read earlier, has the title, "To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."

And when you read Psalm 51, it is easy to see why it was understood to reflect the sincerity of David's repentance following Nathan's parable.

The psalm opens with a plea for God to blot out the psalmist's transgressions and cleanse him from his sin.

The psalmist then says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless in your judgment."

This reminds us of David's words to Nathan:

I have sinned against the LORD.

Notice that he does not say that he has sinned against Uriah, but against the Lord.

Clearly David had done a great wrong to Uriah.

But David realised that any sin against a human being is also a sin against God, because it involves breaking the laws of God.

We sometimes divide the Ten Commandments into those concerning our duty to God and those concerning our duty to man.

But to break any commandment is a sin against God, because all of them are the laws of God.

Even more than this, David realised that he was subject to the laws of God.

This may not seem very remarkable to us, but in the ancient world it really was very remarkable.

Normally a king would not have thought twice about taking the wife of one of his subjects, had he wanted to do so.

And it would have been regarded as completely normal for a king to arrange the death of one of his subjects whom he wanted to remove.

Had a prophet rebuked him, at best that rebuke would have been ignored, and at worst the prophet might have been thrown in prison or executed.

We should remember that John the Baptist lost his head for condemning the marriage of Herod the Tetrach to his brother's wife.

But David knew how to take a rebuke, and he did not cherish any grudge against the one who made that rebuke.

Nathan the prophet remained one of his advisers for many years, and Nathan would later help David and Bathsheba to ensure that the succession to the throne went to their son Solomon.

David realised that even a king is subject to the laws of God.

Indeed, of all people, the king should be the first to set an example of service to God, for he is God's anointed.

When he heard those words, "You are the man", he realised that the only thing that he could do was to repent and trust in the mercy of God, which is all that any of us can do when we realise that we have fallen far short of what God requires of us.

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

26 July, 2015

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the feeding of the five thousand, a story found in all four gospels. This continued his theme of Jesus as the shepherd, having compassion for people who are lost and leaderless. The feeding also shows a meal taken out of the confines of the Temple to the people - telling us that the church must go out to the people.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 461 Strengthen for service

Common Ground 108 Sing of the Lord's goodness

Rejoice and Sing 61 Lord speak to me

Rejoice and Sing 44 God of grace and God of glory

Rejoice and Sing 262 Crown him with many crowns

Sermon:

Second book of Samuel chapter 11 verses 1 - 15

Ephesians chapter 3 verses 14 - 21

Psalm 14

John chapter 6 verses 1 - 21

If you were here last Sunday, you'll recall that the compilers of the lectionary left a gap in the middle of the reading from St Mark's gospel, as we followed the theme of Jesus as the "compassionate shepherd", through his thwarted attempt to find solitude following the murder of his cousin John the Baptist, to his healing ministry in Gannesaret. One of the two stories omitted was Mark's account of the feeding of the five thousand.

This week, we hear this story, not from Mark's Gospel but from John's. The account is very unusual, inasmuch as it occurs in all four Gospels. More unusually still, some of the details are identical. All four evangelists tell us

- that just five loaves and two fish are available (Matthew 14.17, Mark 6.38, Luke 9.13, John 6.9);
- that there are twelve baskets remaining after the people are fed (Matthew 12.20, Mark 6.43, Luke 9.17, John 6.13); and
- that five thousand men are fed (Matthew 12.21, Mark 6.44, Luke 9.14, John 6.10).
Moreover, Matthew, Mark and John all tell us

- that the feeding of the five thousand was followed that night by Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14.22-33, Mark 6.45-52, John 6.16-21). And both Mark and John record
- that the disciples would have needed two hundred denarii (about six months' wages) to buy enough food to feed the multitude (Mark 6.37, John 6.7).

Scholars continue to debate the significance these detailed parallels among the four canonical gospels as possible evidence of their historicity, of a common oral tradition, of their literary interdependence, or (according to a more sceptical view) their outright fabrication.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand makes two fundamental points. It asserts Jesus' miraculous power to provide food, a power attributed to God as Lord of rain and fertility and growth in the Hebrew Bible; and it highlights Jesus' compassion for the crowds, whom, as we heard last week, he saw as being "like sheep without a shepherd", as he provides for their practical daily needs. In the Lord's Prayer, which is not recorded by John, Jesus teaches the disciples to pray to the God the Father to "give us our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11; Luke 11:3). Here in John's gospel, Jesus, as God incarnate, miraculously provides it.

Having noted the details which occur in more than one gospel, let's now consider two details found only in this morning's reading from John, which shift the emphasis of his account.

First, John notes that "the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand" (6.4), a detail not mentioned in any of the Synoptic Gospels. If we are familiar enough with John, we will be aware that his gospel pays careful attention to Jewish feasts, so what point might he be making here?

Many of us, when we celebrated the Passover together on Maundy Thursday this year, were struck by the powerful and evocative traditions associated with the modern Jewish Passover Seder. Not all of the modern Passover traditions, however, date back as far as the time of Jesus, and some traditions current at that time have fallen into disuse among 21st century Jews. Both the practice and the meaning of Passover have been developed and modified over the past two millennia. Scholars have been able to piece together the basic meaning and practice of Passover in the first century, using evidence found in the Hebrew Bible (in Exodus 12-13, Leviticus 23.4-8; Deuteronomy 16.1-8, 2 Chronicles 30, 35.1-19), in the Book of Jubilees (which you'll not find in our Bible but which is included in the Bible used by our Ethiopian Orthodox brothers and sisters) and in the Mishnah Pesachim; the Mishnah are the written codification of the ancient Jewish oral traditions, compiled in the early third century A.D., and are the oldest rabbinical writings in existence.

From these sources, scholars have determined that at the time when Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Passover, it would have

- occurred on the 14th day of the month Nissan, and been followed by the Feast of the Unleavened Bread on 15-22 Nissan. (The Jewish observances, of course, follow the lunar calendar and their days begin in the evening rather than at midnight, but for reference 14 Nissan fell on Saturday 4 April this year.)
- required a pilgrimage to the Temple (Deuteronomy 16.5-8).
- required sacrificing a lamb at the Temple at twilight (Exodus 12.1-6, Deuteronomy 16.2, 6). It's important to note that Passover in the at the time of Jesus, when the Temple was still standing, was not primarily a family meal, but a a feast of blood-offering: a period of a few hours around sunset on the day of Passover when

hundreds of thousands of pilgrims brought tens of thousands of animals to the Temple to be sacrificed by thousands of priests. The blood, which was originally painted on the doorposts of the Israelites (Exodus 12.7), was instead poured on the altar at the Temple by the time of Jesus (Mishnah Pesachim 5.5-8).

- required eating only unleavened bread (Deuteronomy 16.3-4).

Passover, then, was a time when the Jews brought food – bread and lamb – and blood to God in the temple. Here in the feeding of the five thousand, and later, supremely, in his self-sacrificial Last Supper, Jesus, whom John presents to us as God incarnate, brings the Passover meal to God's people.

One detail of this story which John alone records, describes the reaction of the people to the miracle:

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

John 6:14

This gives us the clue to John's ultimate point; that this miracle is a sign that Jesus is the described by Moses when he said:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet...

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.

Deuteronomy 18.15, 18

John is emphasising that Jesus performed the same sort of miracles as Moses: specifically, he is drawing parallels with Moses' provision in the wilderness of miraculous bread from heaven, or manna, and meat from quails (Numbers 11, cf. 2 Kings 4.42-44). Here Jesus provides miraculous bread and fish. Step by step John is developing his case, not just that Jesus can perform miraculous signs, but that these signs precisely parallel the types of signs performed by Moses, who instituted the Passover: thus showing Jesus to be the long-awaited prophet whose coming Moses himself foretold.

One final detail recorded by John is that

When Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

John 6.15

This may strike us as strange, given that, elsewhere in John's gospel, Jesus proclaims himself to be the messianic king (John 1.49, 18.37), and that in chapter 12 he accepts the acclamation of the crowds that he is here avoiding, when they cry

'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!'

John 12.13

From a historical perspective, it may be that Jesus fled to avoid becoming the figurehead of a violent insurrection. From a theological point of view, it's possible that Jesus flees the crowd's acclamation after the feeding of the five thousand because, as John puts it elsewhere, "his hour had not yet come" (cf. John 7.30, 8.20); while his triumphal entry into Jerusalem marks the point at which his hour has come (John 12.23). Either way, Jesus has just convinced the crowd that

'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

John 16.14

This is John's conviction, also. But while John unequivocally presents Jesus as the true Messiah, God's Anointed, many of the people in the crowd, who with their forebears had suffered for so long in exile in foreign lands and under occupation by foreign powers, were desperately hoping for a different kind of Messiah. For John, the disjunction between Jesus' role as Messianic saviour of all people, and the widespread Jewish expectation of a Messiah who would lead them in revolt against Rome, forms part of the process that culminates in Jesus' execution, precisely on the charge of setting himself up as 'King of the Jews'.

While Jesus claims to be the Messiah, he fails in what was expected of the militant Messiah: the liberation of Israel and the reestablishment of the Davidic kingdom. When Jesus fails to fulfil this expectation, many who initially saw him as the anointed king ultimately reject him. This helps to explain the paradox of the people acclaiming him as Messianic King at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by the same people rejecting him just a few days later.

The challenge for all Christians throughout the ages since then has been to understand, not how Jesus failed, but how he succeeded; and, given that he succeeded, how are we to proclaim him as our Messianic King in our own age, by our thoughts, words and actions?
Revd Robert Beard B.D.

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

19 July, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the theme of shepherds and leadership. After the beheading of John the Baptist Jesus withdrew with his disciples to a quiet place where he taught them the implications of their mission. He also showed compassion to the crowds trying to follow him, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. (Mark's gospel) There are several references in the Old Testament which support this image. Will our elected shepherds have compassion on those who feel lost and vulnerable? Will the structures of leadership contribute to closing the gap between the fortunate and the less fortunate?

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 41 For the beauty of the earth

Rejoice and Sing 617 O thou not made with hands

Everything changes (not from our hymn books)

Rejoice and Sing 371 Take my life and let it be
Rejoice and Sing 521 Forth in Thy name O Lord I go

Sermon:

Readings

Second book of Samuel chapter 7 verses 1 - 14a

Psalms 89 verses 20 - 37

Ephesians chapter 2 verses 11 - 22

Mark chapter 6 verses 30 - 34 and 53 - 56

You will perhaps have heard over the past few days, that our MPs have been awarded a eleven per cent pay rise, a rate set by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) which MPs cannot simply refuse.

You may also have heard that the Scottish Nationalist MPs have been urged by their leadership to donate their extra income to charity. Labour leadership candidate Yvette Cooper has said that she will do the same, and Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron has also commented that the pay rise presents MPs with an opportunity for charitable giving. Each party's supporters hail the charitable proposal as indicative of generosity and solidarity with the poor, while their detractors dismiss it as a cynical political ploy. I don't suppose the charities and their beneficiaries will mind very much what the motivation behind their unexpected additional income is.

In the background, IPSA advises that the pay rise is part of a package that cuts pensions and resettlement packages, tightens MPs' business costs and expenses, and introduces a proposal that MPs should produce an annual account of their spending of public funds. So in real terms, says IPSA, the amount of money MPs get isn't rising by eleven per cent, and the new pay deal will cost tax payers not a penny more than MPs' previous package.

This morning's Gospel reading from Mark might well be understood as a lesson in leadership.

It follows on directly from the hideous account of the beheading of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas, at the behest of his wife and former sister-in-law Herodias, and with the connivance of her daughter Salome. John, you will recall, was arrested and imprisoned for objecting to the marriage, which was both illegal and immoral from the Jewish point of view, not only because Herod had abducted Herodias, his brother's wife, divorced his own wife and married her instead, but also because Herodias was the grand-daughter of Herod the Great, and both her husbands, Herod II (whom Mark calls Philip, for reasons that scholars are still arguing about) and Herod Antipas were his sons and therefore her uncles. Be all that as it may, on Herod's birthday, he "gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee", and it was on this occasion that the beheading took place. In Mark's narrative, Jesus' immediate response to hearing of his cousin's execution is to seek a place where he and his apostles can rest for a while in peace and privacy. The apostles were no doubt exhausted, if also exhilarated, after their missionary travels. It may have been his own earlier spiritual experience of forty days in the wilderness, the "deserted place", which Mark consistently portrays as offering rest and restoration, that led Jesus to return there with his closest friends. In any case, it's indicative of the increasing scale of his mission, that he and his apostles have no leisure even to eat, and no choice but to seek respite away from the centres of population.

Perhaps it was not only that Jesus needed time to grieve, but also that the time had come to teach his apostles about the implications of their mission: Do not expect to take on the rulers of this world and not suffer the consequences. The warning, of course, is issued not

only to the apostles, but also to the community for whom Mark was writing a generation later, and for all those who would later read his gospel, ourselves included.

Jesus' attempt to find solitude is, however, thwarted by the crowds who have seen him leave and are already waiting for him when he arrives, many having run along the shore faster than he and the apostles have travelled in their boat.

A lesser person than Jesus – for example, me – might well have felt aggrieved at finding his need for respite ruined by people who simply will not leave him alone, and Mark, perhaps tactfully, doesn't record the apostles' reaction on this occasion; he simply tells us that when Jesus saw the crowd, "he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." Although Mark goes on to say that Jesus "began to teach them many things," he doesn't record what the teachings were; at this moment he simply gives us that image to hold in our minds: Jesus, the compassionate shepherd of the leaderless, the lost and the vulnerable.

We should remember that the word translated "compassion" (*esplanchnisthe*), is the word for bowels or guts, which describes a feeling of empathy that starts in the deepest regions of a person's being.

All references to the phrase "sheep without a shepherd" in the Old Testament support this image presented by Mark. It's used in Ezekiel 34.2-6 and Zechariah 11.4-17, where God stands in contrast to abusive shepherds who no longer care for their sheep. In Numbers 27.17-18, Moses requests that the people not be left as "sheep without a shepherd", to which God responds by singling out Joshua "in whom is the spirit"; we might compare this with Jesus' own anointing with the Spirit at his baptism by John; the name "Jesus" or 'Iesous' is, of course, a Greek rendering of the Hebrew name "Joshua" (Yeshua or Yehoshuah).

Although not included in today's lectionary, it's at this point that the feeding of the five thousand is inserted. Mark's reason for placing the story at this point must surely be to point out the stark contrast between the banquet held by Herod for "his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee", and that provided by Jesus for five thousand ordinary men, undoubtedly with all their associated women and children. Herod is the shepherd appointed by human machination, while Jesus is the shepherd appointed by God. Nothing in the ancient world said more about a person than social relationships and food. Consequently, we may assess those appointed or elected to be shepherds of their people according to the two criteria presented here: With whom do they associate, and for whom do they provide food?

Another story is omitted here, in which Jesus walks on water, before further examples of his compassionate shepherding are recorded, as "people at once recognised him and... began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed."

The Greek word for "heal" (*sozo*) also means saved, from suffering and pain. This, too, may offer us a criterion for assessing the shepherding practices of other leaders.

I hope that our recently elected or re-elected shepherds will have compassion on those who feel leaderless, lost and vulnerable. Indeed, I hope that all who are more fortunate may have compassion on the less fortunate. Beyond that, I hope that the day may come when the very structures of leadership – whether political, financial or religious – will contribute towards the closing of the still widening gap between the fortunate and less fortunate.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

12 July, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Walter Houston. The theme of the service was obedience. The Revd. Houston told us about Hans and Sophie Scholl who spoke out against the atrocities being perpetuated by the Nazi regime. They paid with their lives. It made no difference to the conduct of the government but they did it because they had to. Similarly, Amos felt that he had to prophesy to Israel, driven by the calling of God; and John the Baptist challenged wrongdoing and called people to repent. Throughout history many people have paid the ultimate price for their faithfulness to God. What price are we prepared to pay for the sake of a fairer society, to protect God's creation? With the cost comes the joy of bringing about the kingdom of God.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 293 Ye servants of God

Rejoice and Sing 128 The Lord will come and not be slow

Rejoice and Sing 634 Pray for the church afflicted and oppressed

Rejoice and Sing 533 Lord of good life

Rejoice and Sing 586 All my hope on God is founded

Sermon:

Readings

Psalm 85, verses 8 - 13

Amos chapter 7, verses 1 - 15, in a translation by Walter Houston

This is what my Lord showed me. He was forming locusts, just at the time when the spring crops were beginning to sprout—that is, the crops that are sown after the royal mowing.

When they had finished eating up all the vegetation of the country, I said, 'Oh my Lord God, please forgive them. How can Jacob survive? They are such a small nation.' The Lord changed his mind about this. 'It will not happen', said the Lord.

This is what my Lord God showed me. My Lord God was summoning judgement by fire, and it ate up the great deep, and was eating up the fields. So I said, 'Oh my Lord God, please forgive them. How can Jacob survive? They are such a small nation.' The Lord changed his mind about this. 'This also will not happen', said the Lord God.

This is what he showed me. He was standing by a wall made of tin, and he had tin in his hand. The Lord said to me, 'What do you see, Amos?' I said, 'Tin'. And my Lord said, 'I am creating din among my people Israel. I will not overlook their sins any more. Isaac's shrines will be deserted, and Israel's temples will be ruined, and I will attack the royal family of Jeroboam with the sword.'

Amaziah, priest in charge of the temple of Bethel, sent a message to king Jeroboam of Israel. 'Amos is plotting treason against you at the heart of the nation. His speeches are insupportable for the country. This is what Amos says, "Jeroboam will fall by the sword, and the nation of Israel will be deported from their own country.'" Amaziah said to Amos, 'Get away with you to Judah, you seer of visions. You can get your living as a prophet there. But you may not prophesy any more at Bethel, because it is a royal sanctuary and a state temple.' Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am not a prophet, nor am I a member of a guild of prophets; I am a herdsman and a fig grower. But the Lord took me from my flock, and said to me, "Go and prophesy to my people Israel.'"'

Mark chapter 6, verses 14 - 29

Sermon

Two years ago Fleur and I paid a visit to the city of Munich. We were attending a conference there. The meeting was held in the main building of the University of Munich. On the pavement just in front of the building we came across a strange sort of memorial. Some white paving stones stand out against the surrounding granite cobbles. They are arranged in a rough sort of circle, overlapping each other. They look just as though someone has carelessly dropped a packet of leaflets on the pavement. And that is precisely what they are meant to look like. For this is a memorial to the White Rose. This was a group of students at the university of Munich who in 1942 and 1943, led by the brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl, opposed the Nazi regime in the only way open to them, by handing out leaflets. Some of them had had to fight on the Eastern front, and had seen with horror the brutal treatment handed out to the native Russian and Jewish civilian populations. Most of the group were inspired by their Christian faith: some Catholics, some Lutherans. The language in the leaflets stabs and scalds even today at the distance of more than 70 years.

Since the conquest of Poland, 300,000 Jews have been murdered in this country in the most bestial way... The German people slumber on in dull, stupid sleep and encourage the fascist criminals. Each wants to be exonerated of guilt, each one continues on his way with the most placid, calm conscience. But he cannot be exonerated; he is guilty, guilty, guilty!

They published six leaflets in all in thousands of copies secretly distributed to many cities of Germany. They left piles of the sixth leaflet in the university corridors for students to see when they came out of class. There were a few copies left, which they thought it would be a pity not to use. Hans and Sophie climbed to the top floor, and Sophie threw the remaining leaflets into the air, where they fell as the memorial shows them, scattered on the pavement. A maintenance man happened to see them, and they were arrested, swiftly followed by the rest of the 20-strong group. Hans and Sophie were tried first, along with Christoph Probst. Sophie in particular showed striking courage under interrogation, taking full responsibility in an attempt to shield the rest of the group. They were all sentenced to death by the guillotine, and Hans shouted 'Let freedom live' as the blade fell.

The siblings Scholl and their collaborators showed an active courage displayed by few others in Nazi Germany. Obviously they did not do it for the sake of glory: the leaflets were anonymous and they managed to keep themselves secret for seven months. Nor just because it was a good idea. You could say it was a silly idea: it made no difference at all to the conduct of the government or to the course of the war. The murder of the Jews was stepped up after this with the opening of the gas chambers. They did it because they had to. It was impossible for them to see these horrors being perpetrated and not to protest. It was a charge laid on them by God, as many of them would have believed. Theologians might well describe their action as prophetic.

In just the same way, Amos declares to the priest Amaziah that he has to prophesy to Israel. Whether he wants to or not, he has no alternative, because God himself has called him. In composing this chapter, the editor of the book of Amos has taken care to show us, before we get to that point, that it is not because he wanted to, not because he had a personal grudge, not because he was a fanatic who enjoyed condemning people and prophesying war and deportation and earthquakes and death. By putting Amos's accounts of his private visions first he makes it clear that Amos wanted to save the Israelites from what was coming. Twice, he tells us, he saw in a vision the terrible fate that God was preparing for them, and twice he interceded for them and was heard: 'Oh my Lord God, please forgive

them. How can Jacob survive? They are such a small nation.' He simply appeals to God's compassion—successfully. But there comes a moment when that won't work any more. Instead of letting Amos speak first, God asks him a question, and makes him speak the dreadful word.

Naturally, this message is seen to threaten the very existence of the state, like the leaflets of the White Rose. From his own point of view, Amaziah, a royal appointee, is entirely correct in warning the king that there is treason afoot. He may have thought he was being extraordinarily generous in giving Amos a chance to get away, rather than arresting him. He takes it for granted that Amos is a typical workaday prophet who charges fees for his consultations and can carry on his trade anywhere. What he doesn't realize is that Amos has been driven into his doom-laden prophecy by the calling of God. The story doesn't go on to relate what happened to Amos then. Later Jewish tradition said he was killed by Amaziah's son. Even if that particular story is made up, it does seem rather likely that if Amos insisted on staying where he was and carrying on prophesying, he faced an early death.

Amos is facing the cost of obedience. If he had not listened to that call from God as he tended his flock or slit his figs, he would still be there comfortably getting on with his life and looking to a peaceful old age with his children and grandchildren round him. It isn't like that any more. Instead, he has had to confront hostile crowds at the great festivals at the temple of Bethel, he's been detained by Amaziah's security guards, and now he is looking at paying the ultimate price. But only because of what Amaziah would have called his obstinacy. He's had the chance, hasn't he, to slip quietly away to Judah? The border's only an hour's walk away. But he hasn't taken it, and that decision has probably cost him his life. He hasn't taken it for the reason he tells Amaziah: he is not carrying on a profession, he is obeying the call of God, and he can only lay that down when he dies.

In a similar way John the Baptist, in Mark's story, is faithful to his commission to challenge wrongdoing and call on people to repent, even when he is in prison. The marriage of Herod Antipas to the wife of his brother, whether he had died or he had divorced her, was against divine law as given in the Bible (Lev. 18.16) and as John understood it. He had to rebuke him for it—and that incurred the bitter hostility of the woman herself. His fate was sealed.

We could add to these examples a long line of prophets or preachers who have paid the ultimate price for their faithfulness to the call of God. In Prague last weekend they were commemorating the 600th anniversary of the death of Jan Hus, burned at the stake as a heretic for attacking the corruption of the clergy and campaigning for quite modest reforms of the Catholic Church, such as giving lay people the cup as well as the bread at communion and having the service in the language of the people rather than in Latin: things which are taken for granted by Catholics today.

In our own day we can think of Martin Luther King, shot by an outraged racist, or Abp Oscar Romero, shot for defending the poor of El Salvador from the depredations of the rich.

But what about us? Living as we do in a relatively liberal and tolerant society, we are thankfully able to worship as we believe we ought to, and to engage in protest against injustice and corruption without fear of arrest or persecution, let alone death. Obedience for us appears to carry relatively little cost. But who knows whether this is a permanent state of affairs? It is already the case that if your protest is more than words, but extends to direct action, even though non-violent, it may get you arrested and perhaps fined or sent to jail. It is already the case that to go abroad to fight for a cause that you believe in, as so many from this country did in the Spanish Civil War in the 30s, has been made illegal: yes, it's in a Terrorism Act, but the terms are drawn that broadly.

But this isn't even the most important point. The really important point is not about the struggle with political and other forces outside ourselves. It is about our struggle with ourselves against our own lazy and self-indulgent ways. What price are we prepared to pay for our loyalty to Christ, for the sake of a fair society or for the integrity of God's creation? This used to be a standard preachers' topic, but we don't hear it so much these days, which may tell us quite a bit about us. What price are we prepared to pay for our own health, let alone to prepare ourselves for heaven? I'm not talking about some essentially cost-free demonstration of piety like giving up chocolate for Lent, but something permanent and painful. If we can't give up luxuries—and so much of our lives nowadays are luxuries—are we likely to be able to give up our life if called on to do so? If we can't give up holiday destinations only accessible by long-haul jet flights, are we to be believed when we say we are against global warming? If we support Commitment for Life, are we not being asked for a genuine sacrifice?

More than anything else it matters that our Lord Jesus Christ paid the ultimate price of his obedience. Like Amos, he could have got away: but the gospels tell us that he set his face to go to Jerusalem, knowing that Jerusalem was the place where prophets get murdered. He did this not for fun, not for his own self-indulgence, but in obedience to the call of God, to confront the corruption of the authorities, and to lay down his life for our sake. The Epistle to the Hebrews says that 'he learned obedience by the things that he suffered.' That doesn't mean that he didn't know what obedience was before; and it certainly doesn't mean that he wasn't obedient before. What it does mean is that in suffering he actually experienced what obedience meant. My revered tutor George Caird in his lectures on Hebrews put it like this: 'The person who knows the strength of a Cumbrian gale is not the one who turns back at the garden gate, but the one who struggles to the summit.' And in struggling to obey, he took us with him, and reconciled us to God in him. And so we praise God because he was ready to pay the cost of obedience, the cost of our salvation.

In living in obedience to Christ we may perhaps pay the cost that he paid; but we also experience the joy that he knew in doing his Father's will. We may die with him, in one sense or another, but we are also raised with him. We go with him to the cross, but onwards to the empty tomb. The object of obedience is to co-operate with Christ in the project of the kingdom of God, and for that no price is too high to pay.

Service of Holy Communion

Service Date:

5 July, 2015

The service was led by The Revd. Dr. David Stec who preached on the the challenges facing prophets in the modern world. Ezekiel, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, knew that his task would be hard. But they were recognised as prophets; Jesus was not, but this did not stop him continuing to preach and teach. Although church membership is declining we must still have the confidence and faith to share the good news and bring about the transformation of the world which God intends.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 96 Great is thy faithfulness

Rejoice and Sing 365 Rock of ages

Rejoice and Sing 389 Jesus thou joy of loving hearts

Rejoice and Sing 320 The heavens declare thy glory, Lord

Sermon:

Readings

Ezekiel chapter 2 verses 1 - 7

Second letter to the Corinthians chapter 12 verses 2 - 10

Mark chapter 6 verses 1 - 13

Ezekiel 2:4b-5

I send you to them; and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that there has been a prophet among them.

Today I would like to reflect upon what a hard task it is to be a prophet.

By the word "prophet", I mean someone who is called by God to proclaim the word of God to contemporary society.

We see how hard it is to fulfil this calling time and time again in the Old Testament.

We have accounts of the commissioning of all three of the major prophets.

In each case the prophet sees an inaugural vision, and this is followed by a message from God commissioning him as a prophet, a message which leaves him in no uncertain terms about what a hard task lies ahead of him.

Isaiah saw a grand vision of God high and lifted up in the temple; and his sense of guilt and inadequacy were symbolically removed by having his lips touched by a burning coal.

He was told:

Go, and say to this people: 'Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

Jeremiah saw a vision of an almond rod and a boiling pot, and he was told that he was being sent with a message of impending judgment and disaster for the land.

And he too was warned about how his message would be received, though he was given some reassurance:

But you, gird up your loins; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you.

Ezekiel was given the task of preaching to the Judaeans after this disaster had befallen them.

He was among the exiles living in Babylon.

His inaugural vision was a very strange one beside the river Chebar, where he saw four living creatures and four wheels which moved about, and which in some rather obscure way seem to have represented the presence and enthronement of God.

Following this, he hears the voice of God saying to him, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels, who have rebelled against me; they and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. The people also are impudent and stubborn: I

send you to them; and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that there has been a prophet among them."

So Ezekiel, like Isaiah and Jeremiah before him, was from the outset left in no uncertain terms of the difficulty of the task before him.

Nevertheless, he was being sent to the people of Israel with a message, which he was to deliver, whatever the outcome.

He was to go to them and say, "Thus says the Lord GOD."

The words "Thus says the Lord" were the standard formula used by the prophets of the OT to introduce their oracles, and this formula is to be found some 293 times in the OT.

The outcome of Ezekiel's prophetic work remains uncertain, but one thing is certain.

Ezekiel is told that whether the people hear or refuse to hear, they will know there has been a prophet among them.

It seems that as soon as they hear those introductory words, "Thus says the Lord," they will instantly recognise that what follows is a prophetic oracle, and they will know that there has been a prophet among them.

Of course, being the "rebellious house" that they were, they might not want to listen to his message or accept it, but at the very least they would not dispute that they had heard the words of a prophet.

In this respect, Ezekiel is assured of something of an easier time of things than what Jesus experienced when he preached in the synagogue of Nazareth.

Those present were greatly impressed by what they heard, and they asked, "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him?"

Likewise, they acknowledged the miraculous deeds that Jesus had already performed in Galilee, as they responded with the words, "What mighty works are wrought by his hands!" This was an entirely right and fitting reaction to the teaching and work of Jesus.

But then, instead of seeking to answer their own question about the origin of all this wisdom and power, and instead of responding with faith, they dismiss Jesus with cynicism, by saying:

"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"

Thus they remind themselves that Jesus has been a tradesman in their town, whose family and early career are well known to them.

If he came from such a humble family in their midst, he could not come from God.

His family were just ordinary folk, and he had not been trained in a rabbinic academy.

So his words cannot really be as wise as they seem to be, and maybe his great works are not all that they are cracked up to be either.

Jesus replies with the observation, "A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house."

A prophet's task is never an easy one, but at least Ezekiel was to be acknowledged as a prophet, even if his message was not heeded whereas when Jesus preached on his home turf, he was not even given the honour of being recognised as a prophet.

The Church has a calling to be a prophetic voice in today's world.

Jesus has entrusted to us the Gospel of the kingdom and commissioned us to make disciples of all nations, but with the passing of each year this task becomes ever more difficult, at least in this part of the world.

For one thing, our numbers in the main-stream churches are ever diminishing.

This is part of a process which has been going on over many years, and it is certainly something which I have seen throughout all the time that I have belonged to the church. But in recent years the pace of that trend has rapidly increased.

In fact the United Reformed Church has produced a study guide on this subject, with the title: "What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?", and the subtitle: "The future of the United Reformed Church".

This booklet has been circulated for discussion and comment, and I know that some of you have read it.

It looks at various options for the church, and considers possible scenarios by the year 2030, such as union with other denominations or a reduction in the number of Synods and the creation pastorates of 10–15 congregations.

Another option would be to make no major changes and to continue much as we are and manage our continual decline.

In this case, the writers of the booklet envisage that the membership of the URC would fall from 68,000 in 2013 to 23,000 in the year 2030.

Of course, none of us knows exactly what the church will look like in 15 years time, but all of us can look around and see how small in number the church has already become in today's world.

And we are getting into something of a vicious circle which makes it ever more difficult for the prophetic voice of the church to be heard.

This church declines in number, which makes it lose more and more of its influence over our national life, which makes the culture of our nation less and less Christian in its general ethos, and more and more secular.

This in turn means that as each generation of children grows up it has an ever smaller knowledge of Christianity and a diminishing appreciation of Christian values.

And this in turn makes Christian culture ever more alien and incomprehensible to ever more people, which makes the task of proclaiming the Gospel ever more difficult.

But we must not lose heart!

The task of prophecy has never been an easy one.

Nevertheless the prophet is always aware that ultimately God is in control of human history, and that he is working towards the fulfilment of his loving purpose.

Thus, although Ezekiel was told from the very outset that he was being sent to a nation of rebels and an impudent and stubborn people, he still prophesied to them, and went about saying, "Thus says the Lord ... "

Although Jesus met a cold and negative response to his preaching in the synagogue, he still went about preaching in Galilee, and he sent his disciples out two by two preaching a message of repentance.

And he told them that whenever they came to a place that refused to listen to them, they should shake of the dust from their feet as a testimony against them, and presumably carry on with their work elsewhere.

Although St Paul had his fair share of difficulties, including the "thorn" in his flesh (whatever that was), he was still able to carry on and to say, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor 12:10).

So, likewise, however hard our task becomes, we in the churches continue to preach the Gospel, using whatever resources God has given us.

And we do this cheerfully in the faith that we are doing the work of God, and in the confidence that God's purpose of salvation will prevail.

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

28 June, 2015

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard who shared two recent contrasting experiences with us. Last week-end he undertook a challenging bike ride for charity. The weather was dreadful, despite the date of mid June! The final length of the ride was particularly gruelling - tiring, cold and wet. He coped by focussing his concentration narrowly on the wheel of the bike in front, his brain thinking only of the next push on the pedal. This was the only way to shut out his physical discomfort and get to the finish.

In contrast, the previous evening he had attended a performance of Monteverdi's Vespers. It was a superb performance and he found himself opening completely to the music, carried along on the sheer richness and beauty of the sound. Such moments, he suggests, are a glimpse of the divine, beyond rational thinking and analysis of the structure of the music, the skills of the performers. Perhaps this is when the church is at its best - through its rituals, buildings and music it can give people such an experience and be a place where everyone is welcome and can lay aside their pain, guilt and worries and glimpse the divine and be healed.

Readings.

Second book of Samuel chapter 1, verses 17 - 27

Second letter to the Corinthians chapter 8 verses 7 - 15

Mark chapter 5 verses 21 - 43

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 26 Father we praise you

Rejoice and Sing 626 Judge eternal, throned in splendour

Rejoice and Sing 644 At evening when the sun was set

Rejoice and Sing 685 Through all the changing scenes of life

Sermon:

There is no written sermon to attach.

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

Service Date:

21 June, 2015

Worship was led by the Revd. Fleur Houston who preached on the story of David and Goliath. The young shepherdboy David defeated the Philistine leader, using skilled strategies to overpower a bullying and threatening force. There are echoes of the Duke of Wellington's success at the Battle of Waterloo - but David trusted in the power and help of God. People to-day are subjected to the cruelty and inhumanity of ruthless tyrants, compelling them to risk their lives as they flee to other countries. As Christians we must challenge this inhumanity, bringing peace and order as Christ did when he calmed the stormy seas. God's power can reign supreme.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 657 Rejoice the Lord is King

Rejoice and Sing 557 Who would true valour see

Common Ground 12 Be still for the presence of the Lord, the Holy one, is here

Rejoice and Sing 293 Ye servants of God your Master proclaim

Sermon:

Readings

Samuel chapter 17 verses 32 - 49

Mark chapter 4 verses 35 - 41

On 18 June, 1815, almost exactly 200 years ago, the French forces under the emperor Napoleon were pitted against an allied army led by the Duke of Wellington. This was at Waterloo, in Belgium. The slaughter was terrible; the sky rained cannon and grape-shot. Both sides repeatedly charged with heavy cavalry and advanced with walls of infantry who poured musket-fire into each other at nearly point-blank range. Around 47,000 men died that day. Only the arrival of the Prussian troops finally tipped the balance - and Napoleon's army was routed. Waterloo mania swept Britain. People spoke of the battle as a struggle between two military champions; and the destruction of Napoleon, who was seen by the British as an ogre, was said to be due to the pluck, dash and strategic genius of the Duke of Wellington, who was lionized as a hero.

Now of course, the battle of Waterloo is thousands of years away from the battle scene described in the book of Samuel. The two scenarios just don't stand comparison. Except for one thing. Here too the battle between two opposing forces - in this case the Philistines and the Israelites - is described in terms of their two champions; and the ultimate rout of the Philistines is attributed to the pluck, dash and strategic genius of the boy David.

The story of David and Goliath is the stuff that legend is made of - it is a literary classic. The plot is uncomplicated. The two armies are drawn up for battle. The champion of the Philistines, a mighty warrior, stands between the armies and taunts the Israelites. He is truly terrifying. The Israelites and their king, Saul, are disarmed by fear. Then David a young shepherd boy, offers to fight the Philistine warrior. Goliath may be professionally trained and battle seasoned but David is uniquely well qualified to rise to the challenge. Is he not accustomed to killing lions and bears who are a danger to his flock? God has protected him in the past, God will do so again. King Saul is initially dubious - wouldn't you be? - but finally gives consent and offers David his royal armour - but the armour is just too large, too heavy, too cumbersome. David tries it on. It's laughable - he can't even walk in it, let alone fight. He's better off without. So he takes it all off and, armed only with a handful of smooth stones and a shepherd's sling, goes out to meet the Philistine. Goliath is in full battle gear, armed with sword and javelin. He taunts the boy who appears before him, pours scorn on his youthful appearance, curses him by his gods. And so the champions of their people prepare for a show-down.

If that were all, the story would be dramatic enough. But this is more than a tale of derring-do, the story of a lumbering giant crying Fee fi fo fum as he shakes his mailed fist at his plucky unarmed opponent. In the dialogue between the two that follows, the real purpose of the story becomes clear. With a display of brute force, the Philistine is defying the living God. But God has a grand strategy. David knows he is God's instrument against the Philistine. "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin" says David, "but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied". And so David, with absolute confidence in the power of God, outmanoeuvres Goliath. The domineering Philistine is killed by a stone from the shepherd's sling. The conventional power of the mighty warrior is defeated by the unconventional power of God at work in the shepherd.

Are there ways in which we might see this at work in our world today? Can this struggle be translated in terms of the 21 century? Are there instances in our world of people being threatened by naked force and arbitrary power? We don't have to look very far. Yesterday was World Refugee Day. Every day, it seems, we hear of people fleeing for their lives, from the power of oppressive regimes, and often losing their lives in the process. Thousands are dying in the Mediterranean. Little boats crammed with people are lurching in the waves, out of fuel, out of control. The passengers lose track of time and place; they have no food, no water. They scream for help. And some of the shouts are in Arabic. They come from across Africa and the Middle East - and in ever increasing numbers from Eritrea and Syria. The threats to Syrians are well documented. As for Eritrea, a recent UN inquiry into human rights describes torture, arbitrary detentions, indefinite military conscription and forced labour. It describes how the president of Eritrea rules through fear. In the face of the systematic inhumanity of such regimes, who is to champion the refugees? A recent article in a popular UK newspaper carries this advice. Europe needs "balls of steel, can-do brains, tiny hearts and whacking great gun-ships". And it concludes: "Bring on the gunships, force migrants back on to their shores, burn the boats". It would appear that brute force is alive and all is not well.

But the gods of Empire cannot give life. We follow a God who has power in Jesus Christ to quell the forces of evil, not by gun-boat diplomacy but in the power of his name.

We get a glimpse of what that may mean in the reading we heard from the gospel of Mark. The story is found in all four gospels, so it is clearly important. On Jesus' suggestion, the disciples are crossing to the other side of the sea of Galilee. He is a passenger in one boat, others are bobbing along side. Jesus falls asleep. Suddenly they hit a huge squall. It's frightful. The little fishing boat is tossed about in the sea, quite out of control. The waves crash against it; it is on the point of sinking, the situation is desperate. The disciples wake Jesus up in a panic. They are staring death in the eye. And Jesus responds immediately. He "rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'peace, be still'. Then the wind ceased, and there was a deadly calm". "Who is this, the disciples ask in amazement, that even the winds and the seas obey him?" The question is directed to us. And we know the answer. That is Jesus, the messiah, the saviour, Jesus, son of David. In rebuking the chaotic forces of the sea, this good shepherd of his sheep is demonstrating the power of God to rescue them from fear and disorder.

The story recognises that there are times in our lives too when we, who are followers of Jesus, are threatened by chaos and confusion. We may feel overwhelmed by the desperateness of it all. We see death and despair all around. But we are reminded today not just that Jesus shares our predicament in the storms of life but of the power of God in Jesus to do something about the storms. In Jesus, the giants of cruelty, injustice and inhumanity are finally overcome and the oppressed set free. For God reigns over all. And Jesus is God's champion.

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

14 June, 2015

Worship was led by Professor Derek Collins and members of St. Andrew's Worship Group. The theme was Growth and Abundance. The prescribed readings for the day are strong on botanical metaphors, all emphasising growth. God gives us abundance in the natural world -

and encourages us to have faith in spiritual growth and in the belief that God's kingdom will grow and flourish - even from small beginnings.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 74 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation

Rejoice and Sing 42 For the fruits of all creation

Rejoice and Sing 572 Colours of day dawn into the mind

Rejoice and Sing 200 The kingdom of God is justice and joy

Common Ground 130 There's a spirit in the air

Sermon:

Readings

Ezekiel chapter 17 verses 22 - 24

Psalm 92 verses 1 - 4 and 12 - 15

Second letter to the Corinthians chapter 5 verses 6 - 10 and 14 - 17

Mark chapter 4 verses 26 - 34

COMMENT 1

One of the joys of spring for me is to see trees begin to bud then sprout new leaves until they are a mass of fresh green. A week or two ago the trees along Manchester Road where I live were especially lovely in their new garb.

The tree shedding leaves in winter to sprout new growth in the spring, the tree rooted in the earth with its crown dancing in the sky, the tree bearing fruit, providing nesting for birds, these have become powerful symbols throughout the ages for life, resurrection and protection. Trees are important throughout the Bible beginning with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden Of Eden.

Two of our Lectionary readings today, the one we've just heard and the Gospel reading as well as the Psalm bring in trees. In Psalm 92 a cedar symbolises the righteous whose life is rooted in worship and for whom God is the rock.

The reading from Ezekiel relates to a time when the Israelites were in exile in Babylon, Ezekiel he being a priest in the exile. The chapter from which our reading comes consists of two nature parables, the second of which is we've heard. In the first a great eagle breaks off the top of a cedar of Lebanon and transports it to another land. It then takes some seed and waters it until it grows into a vine. Ezekiel's original hearers would understand the eagle as Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon responsible for the exile and identify the sprig of cedar broken and transplanted with Jehoiachin, the Jewish king taken into exile in 597BC. His uncle, Zedekiah, the puppet king put in his place, would be identified as the little vine. Zedekiah made overtures to the Egyptian pharaoh in breach of an agreement he had made with Nebuchadnezzar and before God. The vine, Ezekiel implies, will not survive replanting. The second cedar sprig, the one in our reading, will be planted directly by God. Though to his hearers it must have seemed as if the great Davidic line of kings was finished he tells them that God has the power to take a small sprig and plant it on the top of a mountain for all to see where it will grow and flourish and be a blessing for all those who find shelter in its branches. The tree expresses the fullness of God and knowledge of who he is. God's word is powerful and accomplishes its purposes. It is only he who gives growth.

COMMENT 2

Our Gospel reading comes from Mark, Chapter 4, and is two parables on the kingdom of God plus a comment on Jesus' teaching by parables. The two parables follow the parable of the sower earlier in the chapter. The image of the kingdom of God pervades Mark's gospel

and is seen as evoking a new future breaking over the horizon in which our communal living is grounded in the life of God.

The first of the parables is not one of the better known ones. Nothing much happens in it. A man throws some seed on the ground, carries on with life and the seed grows without him having any idea of what's going on underground. All the while though the earth is producing of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain on the head and then with the harvest ready the man comes in with his sickle. He sows and then he rears but mostly he just gets up and goes to bed. Something amazing and life-giving and miraculous happens - like a gift from nowhere.

For the disciples and his followers Jesus is calling them, his new family, the people of the kingdom, to wait patiently, trusting even when they cannot see. The things of God are taking effect; slowly but surely God is Building a new reality.

In the light of experience this parable seems extraordinary. Isn't it contradicting our urge to do something, do more than just get up each day and get on with life? No, I don't think it means we can just go back to bed and be lazy. Does it though say we need humility about what any of us can achieve and a thankfulness for what happens when we're doing nothing in particular. Some things happen in ways other than through our actions, thank God.

The second parable, that of the mustard seed, suggests what God's new reality might look like. It echoes the Ezekiel reading but here growth is from a tiny mustard seed into a mighty tree. The parable is a bit like the proverb 'From tiny acorns mighty oaks grow' or even the fairy tale of Jack and the Beanstalk in which Jack acquires some magic beans which grow into a mighty beanstalk, reaching up into an enchanted land in the sky.

In the parable the mustard seed too grows into a giant tree, the smallness of the seed contrasting with the astonishing size to which it grows. Mustard plants can apparently grow up six feet or so in height but here it's become the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches so that birds can make nests in its shade.

The people of the kingdom may feel small and weak but they can trust that God is at work, steadily growing them into a new community in which all sorts of people can find a home.

The image of birds nesting in the tree is full of meaning, conveying as it does a sense of hospitality, caring, protection, creativity and freedom in safety. The kingdom is clearly a realm in which everyone is invited to flourish individually and together.

A pair of peregrine falcons have been nesting high up in St. George's Church at the University for a season or two now. The University installed a nesting box for them and has set up a camera to continuously film what's happening in the nest without the falcons being aware. You can log into the University's web site to see what's happening in the nest at any time. One of my neighbours, a keen bird watcher, logs in every day as I gather do quite a few other people. The a parable calls up for me this picture of the falcons finding shelter and safety in the church, symbol of God's kingdom, watched over and cherished by people in Sheffield.

In these parables the character of the kingdom of God seems chaotic. Someone scatters seed on the ground, the seed sprouts and grows the sower knows not how and illogically the smallest of the seeds becomes the greatest of the shrubs. The author of the Roots material on these parables draws a comparison with the fields of mathematics known as 'Chaos Theory', which suggests that systems that exhibit mathematical chaos are in fact deterministic and ordered. There's a half-joking mathematical parable in this theory called the butterfly effect which says that a butterfly stirring the air one day in an Amazon rain forest can transform storm systems the next month in New York. Predicting the weather is

very important and the further ahead it can be convincingly predicted the better. The weather can show patterns of storms and heat waves always obeying physical laws but never repeating themselves. The advent of powerful computers enabled meteorologists to simulate the weather over lengthy periods using mathematical models they felt captured the essence of the real atmosphere. The models required data such as pressure, temperature, wind speed, at a particular time to get them going. One of the pioneers in this use of computers, an American meteorologist, Edward Lorenz, discovered almost by accident that if he changed this starting ever so slightly the weather patterns produced were wildly different. In predicting eclipses in the solar system or the rise and fall of tides small changes in any data used produces only small changes in results. Since weather data can never be measured all that accurately, Lorenz's results caused quite a stir in the meteorological community. If tiny differences in input can produce overwhelming differences in output, long range weather forecasting was in deep trouble. The butterfly effect parable is one way of illustrating this.

The parable of the mustard seed is like the butterfly effect, reflecting great things growing from small beginnings chaotically perhaps yet with order and pattern. For the small and newly emergent Christian community for whom Mark was writing this parable would have been an affirmation of their destiny. Surrounded by the mighty pagan Roman Empire and existing in the shadow of the vast Jewish temple in Jerusalem the small band of followers of Christ may have felt vulnerable and insignificant. Jesus gives them a vision of how the kingdom will expand, flourish and open its doors to all comers.

To those like us in small fellowships today the parable of the mustard seed says do not lose heart, hold on to what it says and believe that God can do incredible things with very little. Let's remember the tiny mustard seed, hold in our imaginations the image of the sturdy tree filled with life, vitality and birdsong and have faith that God's kingdom will continue to grow and flourish.

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

7 June, 2015

Worship was led by Mrs. Val Morrison who preached on Mark chapter 3, vv 20 - 35. The key message is that any divided structure cannot stand. We can apply this to the world, to any one country, or city, or church, or family. Is it fear that causes division - fear of losing possessions, lifestyle, status, power? Can we stand up in a divided world and show what God can do?

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 46 O praise him!

Rejoice and Sing 334 Walking in the garden

Rejoice and Sing 367 I want to walk with Jesus Christ

Rejoice and Sing 635 Put peace into each other's hands

Rejoice and Sing 566 The Church's one foundation

Sermon:

Readings

Genesis chapter 3 verses 8 - 15

Second letter to the Corinthians chapter 4 verse 13 to chapter 5 verse 1

Mark chapter 3 verses 20 - 35

A man in a hurry, is Mark. As I read his gospel there are times when I want to say 'stop – did you really mean?'. He gives us a few words and then moves on to the next thing.

Sometimes the connections are obvious and sometimes they are not. In today's passage there are a number of strands, there are phrases we know as popular sayings and there are certainly some things which bring us up short and cause us to question, who is this person, Jesus of Nazareth. Did I really hear him saying that?

So, let's begin at the beginning as they say, though in this case the beginning needs to be a few verses before the ones we read, when we find an account of a healing on the Sabbath and many healings of diseases, the cause of which, for Mark, were 'unclean spirits'. We are told that a great multitude followed him, sufficient for him to ask his disciples to have a boat ready so that the crowds would not crush him.

Even with this brief information we can imagine that the authorities were at least wary and possibly deeply concerned. Here was a rebel, upsetting the 'way things should be done' and there were crowds of people who obviously thought he was right.

Having done all of that, he then gathered to him a special band of people, whom he called apostles, to be sent out to proclaim the message and to have authority to cast out demons. To any onlooker a pretty rosy group of people they were too. Not people whom the authorities would have had any confidence in but who the crowds, at least at this stage, were ready to believe just because Jesus had selected them.

All of this activity had probably taken place within a quite small distance from his home and it is to his home we are told he returned. You can imagine that the constant requests from the crowds, the noise, the crush, the bustle and activity which is inevitable even without those who wished to get to the front to be healed. You can probably imagine Jesus just wanting a bit of peace and quiet, time to talk to his disciples, to brief them on their task and just to have a bit of supper!

But that wasn't to be, the crowds followed him even here. Houses were more open in those days and there are other instances of people interrupting or joining in Jesus' meals with friends. This seems to be different and more intrusive and brings us to the beginning of open questioning and even hostility to Jesus and his activity.

First up, his family. It's not difficult to imagine events as they would have looked to them. This wasn't the son/brother they knew. He'd been a good carpenter, a hard worker in the shop, always pleasant with people and ready to go the extra mile for customers, knowledgeable too, because he spent time with the teachers in the synagogue. Even though he had started traveling around and they had recently seen some quite extraordinary events like his baptism and all these crowds following him, he still attended the Synagogue on the Sabbath and he still came home when he wanted some peace and quiet.

But he was their son and brother and no-one likes to see someone they love get hurt or be a laughing stock. Their instinct was to protect him. Had the pressure got to him? There had been rumours of mental instability. Had he become a bit of a religious freak or was it just the adoration of the crowd or bravado in front of them? Any of those can lead people to make wrong judgments.

Jesus' family seem to have felt that something needed to be done. Maybe take him away from the crowds, wait for the fuss to die down, things to go back to normal.

Secondly, there were the Scribes. Experts in the Law and deeply offended by such cavalier treatments of its contents as healing on the Sabbath. They came all the way from Jerusalem, important men not merely local people. They came, knowing that they were dealing with a mad man. After all hadn't he shown himself to be in league with the devil? In their view he

was dangerous and had to be stopped. They were the 'proper' theologians, authorized and trained and yet he had the nerve to call them blasphemers and sinners. Something must be done before the Romans got wind of it and then everyone would be in trouble!

In response to those two groups of people, Jesus says some seemingly strange things but looked at another way, he offers us profound thoughts which help us to link his life to ours and helps us to see matters from Jesus' point of view rather than our own.

As far as his family are concerned, his response seems frankly, quite harsh and unkind seemingly denying their relationship. How cruel to respond to caring relatives that they are not really relatives at all, no special relationship there. We can only imagine what his mother (particularly) felt at that time.

Our instinct is to want to somehow make this statement softer, kinder, more acceptable, more the sort of statement which we might expect Jesus to make. But possibly it is actually just how it is meant to be if we take it in the light of the things Jesus said to the Scribes. Yes, his relationship with his mother, brothers and sisters was special, close and loving. By asking the question 'who are my mother and my brothers?', he was not making a negative statement about that relationship but extending that positive relationship to embrace, potentially, the whole of humanity. He was offering hope and transformation to all.

Jesus' response to the Scribes was much more robust. Here he was dealing with a group of people who were powerful and showing open opposition to him, not as a sign of care for him but as a sign of people who felt threatened and could see the status quo being overturned.

First he pointed out the illogicality of their argument. Their accusation was that he was working for Satan, his response was to ask the question, 'how can Satan cast out Satan'? He then went on to talk about the consequences of such a move with the illustrations of divided kingdoms and divided houses, pointing out that any division results in the structure being unable to stand. Whatever else we take from this passage I wonder whether this is not the most crucial in today's world.

When Jesus says 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister and mother', as I said he was referring to the whole human family. In his day the known world was smaller than it is today and knowledge of what was happening in other places more limited and immediate. But today we know about poverty and war, about injustice and misuse of power. The world divided against itself is unable to stand.

We watch and feel helpless in the face of migrants stranded on boats or landing on the shores of Europe. We read of acts of extreme brutality and ask 'what is the world coming to?' A world divided against itself is unable to stand.

Closer to home, we see the rise in the number of people using Food Banks and the relative luxury of the lifestyles of bankers and highly paid executives and others. We hear of companies who fail to pay their employees a living wage yet make huge profits and fail to pay their taxes. We see politicians making promises about putting money into the NHS but at the same time threatening to take money from the welfare budget. A country divided against itself is unable to stand.

Even closer to home, we see churches in conflict with themselves over theology, doctrine or ministry and sometimes over use of buildings, finances and mission. The history of the church throughout the world shows a story of division and reinvention but more concerning are those individual churches where conflict and division go unacknowledged and undealt with. A church divided against itself is unable to stand

And right at home many of us have experience of divisions in families, couples who split up, children out of contact with parents, grandparents estranged from grandchildren or not allowed to have contact. A family divided against itself is unable to stand

But why is division so seemingly easy and harmony so seemingly difficult?

As I pondered this question, I wondered whether the answer lay simply in one word and that word is fear. Think back to Adam in the garden, 'I was afraid'. Afraid because he was naked, afraid because he had disobeyed God and wanted to hide from him, afraid of the consequences of his actions.

And then think about Jesus' family. Afraid that he may be making a fool of himself, afraid that he might be sick, afraid that he would bring the family into disrepute

And the scribes. Afraid of the Romans, afraid that their status was being challenged, afraid of the crowds.

And what about our 21st century global and economic lives? A world divided because the rich are afraid of losing what they have, money, lifestyle, security. Politicians afraid of losing their power and status.

And then there are our church lives. And I suggest that the fear here which leads to conflict is often about losing traditions, maybe losing power and status and in some cases fear that examining our beliefs, will result in the whole thing coming tumbling down.

And then as I thought about all of that I realised that the fear was more insidious amongst the powerful. Yes of course the oppressed are afraid of not having enough to eat, of torture and violence but that is a responsive fear. Whereas the powerful and the wealthy have a fear which leads to division.

And here the Genesis story helps us to understand something of what is going on. Both Adam and Eve are controlled by their fear. Their fear leads them to lose trust and to seek knowledge. If, after all, we can overcome all mystery we will be in a powerful position and that power leads to both the freedom to act and the capacity to control.

Adam and Eve try to deal with the situation by hiding from God but in reality it is only God, who looks for us, permits us and prohibits us, who can deal with our fear. He does that, not by hiding our failings and our fears but by helping us to face the reality of our situation.

When we forget God as we make decisions because we find it easier to be free from the constraints which he puts on our lives, we ignore the boundaries which being a part of his creation sets for each one of us and we become divided amongst ourselves and unable to stand.

It seems to me that there are lessons here for every part of our lives, thoughts which should inform our decisions about how we vote in elections, what we continue to say to those in power, how we conduct our personal lives, our church lives and our community lives.

A (fill in the blank) divided against itself cannot stand

But, if we remember Adam and Eve. God, the good shepherd came searching for them in their fear. And if we remember those few verses from Mark's gospel, we are taken on a journey which ends with a promise of what we may become. Mothers, brothers, sisters of God himself standing up in a divided world and showing what God can do.

Trinity Sunday

Service Date:

31 May, 2015

The service was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. In his comment he considered how impossible it is to depict or represent God, however hard we try through poetry, painting,

sculpture or music. Revd. Beard's sermon started with a dialogue with the congregation, asking us 'what is the most important thing in your life.' The response was unanimous - relationships and people - spouses, partners, children, friends.

The Trinity is a complex subject but the relationship between God, Jesus and the Spirit is vital and dynamic. If we create mutually supportive and loving relationships we come close to depicting God.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 405 Angel voices ever singing

Rejoice and Sing 34 Holy, Holy, Holy

Rejoice and Sing 121 The God of Abraham praise

Rejoice and Sing 661 How shall I sing that majesty

Sermon:

There is no written sermon to insert

Readings

Isaiah chapter 6 verses 1 - 8

Romans chapter 8 verses 12 - 17

Psalms 29

John chapter 3 verses 1 - 17

Pentecost

Service Date:

24 May, 2015

This morning St. Andrew's and St. Mark's churches took part in a joint service of celebration at the Beacon Church, Broomhill. Two St. Andrew's members opened the church to welcome anyone who came. We held a short service, reading and discussing the bible passages set for the day.

Our discussion focussed on what was happening at Pentecost, what do we understand by the Holy Spirit, and what are the implications for how we live our lives as Christians. [No sermon.]

Lectionary readings: John 15: 26-27; 16: 4b-15; Acts 2: 1 - 21; Psalm 104: 24-34; Romans 8: 22-27.

Hymns:

There were no hymns.

Sermon:

There was no sermon.

Seventh Sunday after Easter

Service Date:

17 May, 2015

The service was our annual Friendship Service, led by the Worship Group and friends and users of the church building. The opening welcome included a history of the Broomhall Community.

In place of a sermon was an extended comment on the nature of community, which related the activities and life of St. Andrew's to the themes in the morning's readings - the commandments, good news, the different gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit and serving God through helping and caring for others.

After the service fellowship continued over lunch.

Lectionary readings: Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11; Matthew 25: 31-40; John 17: 6-19.

Hymns:

CG4 Let us build a house where love can dwell

Jesus loves me

RS619 We meet you, O Christ, in many a guise

RS107 The love of God comes close

RS260 Christ is alive! Let Christians sing

Sermon:

COMMUNITY

Broomhall has changed since it was shown on a map of 1808. It was named after Broom Hall, an historic house in Sheffield, built around 1498 for the de Wickersley family, originally from Wickersley, about 3 miles from the centre of what is now Rotherham. On the map it was shown between Clarkehouse Road and the Porter Brook, a river arising in the Peak District on Burbage Moor near Ringinglow, passing through the Mayfield Valley, through Endcliffe Park to Hunter's Bar, near Ecclesall Road, ultimately reaching the subterranean River Sheaf, now under Sheffield Station. It was called Porter because of its brown water, from passing over iron ore deposits on its way. Broomhall was rural countryside, part of the Broom Hall estate. It was approached from the east along a tree lined drive from the Porter Brook, that drive is today's Hanover Street, the dual carriageway outside our main door. The district of Broomhall now contains a more recent, major Conservation area, extending over Clarkehouse Road, Collegiate Crescent, Broomhall Road and Victoria Road, designated by Sheffield City Council in 1970 and extended to include Broomgrove Road in 1989. It has 23 listed buildings, all Victorian residences, now covered by a Conservation Management Plan developed in 2007. But Broomhall extends beyond the more limited conservation area, and it represents our geographical community.

So, the word "community" can refer to a locality, as I have described, but it can also be a social, religious or other group sharing common characteristics or interests and perceiving itself as distinct in some respect from the larger community in which it exists. Certainly, the saltire and the blue railings outside our church clearly denote a Scottish connection, some might say exclusivity, a barrier, but we don't see ourselves in that light.

In our church community we reflect on the readings each week, taken systematically from a 3 year cycle to cover the whole bible. Today, our reading of the first Psalm says "blessed is the man whose delight is in the law." That refers to the law of Moses, the Ten Commandments as laid down in Exodus.

Last week I visited the Church of St John the Baptist in Tideswell, known as "the Cathedral of the Peak", because of its size and beauty, not because it's a cathedral. It was built in the 14th century from the profits of lead mining. On one wall the Ten Commandments are painted in two large panels, clearly a reminder to members, every week, of the standards to which they should aspire, ones that we try to uphold as well.

The Gospel reading by Julia, was from John, the fourth Gospel of the New Testament. The word "Gospel" comes from the Old English, 'god' and 'spel', meaning "good news". The good news is the coming of the Kingdom of God and of Jesus' death and resurrection to allow people to restore their relationship with God, a reconciliation. We share the good news of the Gospel in our services, as today, to help us develop as persons and as Rev. Dr. Sarah Hall, our previous Minister, was fond of saying, "to help us become what we were meant to be". In that reading, Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, prays for the disciples,

for four things: that they may be as one, a unity, another aspect of community, that they may have eternal life, and John describes this as knowing God now, not just in the future, that they may be protected from the influence of evil, and that they may fulfil their mission in the world, in spite of being simple folk.

The Good News also includes the coming of the Holy Spirit. I am afraid that you needed to be able to understand the Scots dialect in Sheila's reading from 1 Corinthians 12, to pick up the verses that say that the Holy Spirit gives different gifts to different people. All people are given their particular gifts to be able to carry out various tasks or services, their mission. The sum total of those gifts and their activities creates the environment in which we meet together.

The Matthew reading (25: 35) by Deacon Tesfa, said: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me." We give thanks for the Broomhall Breakfast every Friday for the homeless and for the Open Kitchen lunch for failed asylum seekers every Monday.

But the meaning of community is not limited to what we have already described. If we go back to the Latin, "communitas" means "fellowship, courtesy, affability" and the adjective, "communis" means "shared by many".

Recently, I had cause to look at our church's Trust Deed leasing the land and buildings, and dated 1st March, 1861. It states that the buildings are to be used 'for religious worship ... and other purposes...', and it is the combination of those ideas that joins us all today.

We share our space willingly and gladly, our church in which we meet today, our hall, our Committee and Garden rooms, our kitchen and our patio. We also hope that we can share fellowship with you, too. Fellowship can be a membership of an organisation, but it is also participation, sharing, having a community of interest. We can share our space and our fellowship. Many groups meeting here have common interests and meet together for mutual support, to create a protected environment for others, to encourage learning, to enjoy common activities, to manage their organisations, to plan for the future.

And so our Friendship Service is to recognise those with whom we share our building, as well as our time, as we develop those friendships that help to make us one community, yet we remain distinct communities. We all have our own identities, but these overlap, like a Venn diagram, as we all share some aspects. Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "the only way to have a friend is to be one". We want to work together, to interact, to benefit from the experiences of each other, to enrich one another and improve our environment. After all, we were encouraged, in the words of John in the English Standard version (13: 34-5):

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

We thank you all for coming today to celebrate our joint activities, our sharing of facilities, and our common objectives of developing our caring communities, of supporting the individuals within them and of helping to fulfil the potential of all.

[Comment by Prof. Ian Cooke.]

Sixth Sunday after Easter

Service Date:

10 May, 2015

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the nature of love. Does the fragile state of our planet require a deeper understanding of Christian love? We need to ask - how did the Father love Jesus? How did Jesus love his disciples? How can disciples of Jesus abide in the Love of the Father as seen in Jesus?

Lectionary readings: Acts 10: 44-48; 1 John chapter 5: 1-6; Psalm 98 (RS 710); John 15: 9-17.

Sermon: The Nature of Love

Hymns:

RS447 I come with joy to meet my Lord

When I needed a neighbour

RS371 Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee

RS294 Come down, O Love Divine

Sermon:

The Nature of Love

I've called this sermon, The Nature of Love, but before I draw on today's Gospel reading to explore that subject directly, I'm going to put it in a particular context, because, as we know, the word 'love' in the sense that Christians use it – when we're thinking properly, anyway – has very little to do with what passes for 'love' in the popular culture of pop songs, romcoms or Mills and Boon novels. We may sometimes hear, or even say, things like, "I love my iPad," or "I love my car", or "I love that film," or "I love your hat," which is fine in the context of small talk. For us, however, when we want to talk seriously about love, the word can properly be considered only with reference to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Joh

n 3.16

I, and – I venture to suggest – some of you, too, sometimes find myself feeling jaded to the point of despair when I encounter incidences of people who style themselves 'Christian' using texts from the Bible to justify discrimination, oppression, violence and even slaughter directed against other people, including other Christians, with whom they happen to disagree, especially when they assert that these actions are motivated by their love for God. I don't live, or want to live, in some happy fantasy world full of rainbows and unicorns, but I do want to see this world transformed; from childhood, I've never understood why people can't just be kind to each other, seeking each other's happiness as well as their own, and helping each other out in time of need.

More recently, however, I been considering love in the context of a much bigger –indeed, a global – picture, and considering this bigger picture has led me to wonder whether kindness would be enough, or whether what's needed is a far deeper and fuller understanding of Christian love.

The early Christian writer Tertullian wrote, around 200 AD,

We are burdensome to the world, the resources are scarcely adequate for us...Truly, pestilence and hunger and war and flood must be considered as a remedy for nations, like a pruning of the human race becoming excessive in numbers.

That was when the population of the whole planet was maybe a hundred million or so.

In the late 18th century, the philosopher Thomas Malthus declared that,

The power of population is so superior to the power of the Earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race.

Humans' unquenchable urge to reproduce, Malthus argued, would ultimately lead us to overpopulate the planet, eat up all its resources and die in a mass famine. That was when the population of the earth was still less than a billion.

The human race reached the first billion mark by about 1850. By 1950, just a century later, it was about two and a half billion. In less than one short lifetime, this figure doubled, and it passed six billion in the late 1990s. It now stands at something over seven billion.

Note that humans took a hundred and fifty thousand years to get to the first billion, while the most recent billion arrived in less than ten years.

Nobody knows for certain how many people the planet could sustain. The United Nations predicted in 2004 that fertility would decline and longevity would increase, until the global population stabilised at nine billion in 2300. Some optimists have argued that the planet could support 1,000 billion; others look at what is happening right now and wish that it had stayed at the level of Tertullian's time!

Several recent studies show that Earth's resources are enough to sustain only about two billion people at a European standard of living. An average European consumes far more resources than any of the poorest two billion people in the world. However, an average European uses only about half the resources of an average American. The important word, here, is average; even a cursory consideration of the levels of poverty now prevalent among many US citizens makes us begin to realise how much the wealthiest Americans must be consuming.

Currently, we are consuming about fifty per cent more resources than Earth is producing. For example, in the past twelve months we have consumed the resources that it took the planet about eighteen months to produce. We are consuming our resource base.

The eminent Harvard University sociobiologist Edward O Wilson pointed out in his 2002 book *The Future of Life* that, "The constraints of the biosphere are fixed." Aside from the limited availability of fresh water, he said, there are constraints on the amount of food that Earth can produce, just as Malthus argued more than two hundred years ago. Even if we went for the situation of maximum efficiency, in which all the grains grown were dedicated to feeding humans (instead of livestock, which is an inefficient way to convert plant energy into food energy), there's still a limit to how far the available quantities could stretch. Wilson wrote,

If everyone agreed to become vegetarian, leaving little or nothing for livestock, the present 1.4 billion hectares of arable land (3.5 billion acres) would support about ten billion people.

He explained that those 3.5 billion acres would produce approximately enough grain to feed ten and a half billion vegetarians, but would only feed two and a half billion American omnivores, because so much vegetation is dedicated to livestock and poultry in the United States. So ten billion people is the uppermost population limit where food is concerned. Because it's extremely unlikely that everyone will agree to stop eating meat, Wilson thinks the maximum carrying capacity of the Earth based on food resources will most likely fall short of ten billion.

Joel Cohen, the Rockefeller University population biologist, argues in his 1995 book *How Many People can the Earth Support?* that it isn't a question like "How old are you?" which only has one answer at any one time. Cohen argues that you could fit one billion people each a metre apart, into a field of 3,200 hectares. So everybody in the world would fit very easily into the city of Sheffield's 377,000 hectares, with plenty of room to spare, assuming we took down all the buildings. But it takes 900 metric tonnes of water to grow a tonne of wheat, and there is only so much water, so much land and so much sunshine. Human action has its own ecological footprint; there has to be so much land to provide food, clothing, shelter, medicines, building material, fresh air and clean water for any one human. It takes, according to some calculations, 2.1 hectares of land and water to provide for one average human. The average American footprint is about ten hectares, so if all humans enjoyed the average American standard of living, we'd need another four Earths.

I don't think kindness is enough to address the issues raised by consideration of third bigger picture.

Returning now to the Gospel, Jesus' assertions in this passage from St John are neatly book-ended by the repeated injunction to love one another as the Father has loved him and as he has loved us. So the questions we must consider, if we seek to understand the nature of Christian love, are these:

- How had the Father had loved Jesus?
- How had Jesus loved his disciples as the Father had loved him?
- What is the image of the Father's love seen in Jesus, in which his disciples – his friends – were called to "dwell" or "abide"?
- What must the disciples of Jesus do in order to abide in that love?

We might also ask,

- What will be the consequence for the disciples of abiding in Jesus' love?

The Father's love towards Jesus is full of presence and promise, and rich in public displays of power. It directs his life, informs his prayers and shapes his ministry. It both supports and challenges him in his ministry. Ultimately, it requires of him all that he has to give, up to and including his very life.

Jesus had loved his disciples in exactly the same way. He had directed their life, informed their prayers and shaped their ministry, supporting and challenging them in their ministry. He also made it clear that it his love would demand much of them, even their lives in some cases.

This is the Father's love, revealed in Jesus, in which his disciples were invited and urged and encouraged to abide, and Jesus emphatically says that the way of abiding consists in keeping his commandments. Again, he again urges his disciples to keep his commandments because they have seen him keep the Father's commandments, and the results of such obedience were observable in all he did. Because Jesus has obeyed the Father's commandments and dwelled or abided in the Father's love, he is able to use himself as the model for love and for commandment keeping: a model that is anchored in daily life. His message is not, "Because I have done this, you don't need to do it," but, "You can do this because I have done this, and shown you how to do it."

What, then, is the consequence for the disciples of keeping Jesus' commandments? Joy: not just any joy, but the joy of Jesus Christ, a complete fulfilment, a joy in faith that nothing can destroy. It means a deep-seated sense of happiness that is not merely an emotion alone, but also a lively, active delight in the things of God.

Foremost among the commandments that Jesus urges his disciples to keep, and the only one that he discusses in this passage, is “that you love one another, as I have loved you”. How has he loved them? “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” While we recognise, of course, that most of us as individuals may not be called by love to die for others, we are most certainly called to live for others. Also, although Jesus here speaks only of loving “one’s friends”, we know that elsewhere the Gospel writers record Jesus commandment to “love your enemies”, so we must of course widen our understanding of this commandment to embrace everyone, without exception or exclusion. One of the most striking statements in this passage is Jesus’ assertion that the choice of disciples is his; he has chosen the disciples to do the work of God, to bear fruit. He is clear about this: “You did not choose me but I chose you.” At first glance, there is perhaps something unsettling and even disempowering about this statement. We like to think of ourselves as autonomous human beings who make our own choices about what to opt into and what to opt out of. We like to think that we chose to come to Church this morning, or even that we chose to become or to remain Christians. But there is also something wonderful and amazing in this verse, something to do with free giftedness. The disciples of Jesus have received something that we did not create, work or go searching for, or earn on our own. It resembles the feeling of being asked to be someone’s spouse or life-partner, best friend or companion, of being asked to be there by someone in his or her time of need: of being the chosen-above-all-others.

But there is also responsibility attached to this election of the works of fruit bearing.

Not only are we to do it, but we are to bear “fruit that will last.” Obviously, and as we know only too well, some ‘fruit’ does not last. Short-sightedness, impetuosity and selfish interests masked as the work of the Church, raw ambition disguised as false humility in the service of God; the list is long and we can all add to it from our own experience of fruits that rot rather than last.

Bearing fruit that will last, however, means making wise choices and decisions for the work of God. It means acting thoughtfully over a life time, discerning what thoughts, words and actions best serve the intentions of a loving God in this sinful world: intentions most clearly seen in the figure of the Risen Christ.

Now, let’s bring that to bear on the bigger picture!

Fifth Sunday after Easter

Service Date:

3 May, 2015

Worship was led by the Revd. Canon Mike West. His theme was the source and history of our current democratic processes and the importance of voting in the forthcoming elections. Voting thoughtfully is one way in which we can make God's kingdom come.

Lectionary readings: 1 John 4: 7-21; John 15: 1-8; Psalms 95 and 96 (RS 736).

Hymns:

RS 663 Love divine all loves excelling

RS 253 Now the green blade rises

RS 626 Judge eternal, throned in splendour

RS 310 Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost

RS 247 Thine be the Glory

Sermon:

I have been a member of a political party almost all my adult life, and often an active member. But for the 3 years I was in a pastoral appointment, recently ordained, I took no active part, thinking that the two roles were incompatible. When I left the parish team and became a full time non-parochial minister, an Industrial Chaplain, I felt under no obligation to keep my membership private, and in many areas an actual advantage.

Soon after that change there was a General Election – very hard fought in our part of Hertfordshire, with the outcome not at all certain until the votes were counted. Perhaps you can imagine the tension in the hall where the count took place; active members of each of the parties (the two tribes) gathering in groups. Across the room I saw someone I knew: the wife of a local councillor in the opposite party. She and her husband were members of the Deanery Synod. I looked the other way.

And then she came across to me, from her party to mine, and said, “I’m so pleased to see you here tonight. There are many people at St John’s who don’t understand or value Tony’s work for the party and the Council. Surely we Christians should be where the hard decisions are made, even if they are just shades of grey.” And she went back to her party group.

My first point is hers – we Christians should be engaged in the political process, with all its imperfections. And we may be in different parties, but with the same goal – to enact our prayer “your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as in heaven”. Perhaps there are parties in which I find it hard to understand how a Christian could be a member - BNP?

I want first to look back to identify the Christian roots of the democratic process. The first example of a proper election comes in the 6th century: St Benedict writing the rules for the governance of the monasteries in his name, large institutions for those times with large scale economic and practical issues. The Abbot was not to be nominated by his predecessor, or the local Baron who may have financed the Abbey. No; Benedict insisted that “All the monks shall elect the Abbot”. And that process for selecting leaders became widespread in the church – in principle at least, though history has too many examples of shall we say external influences, not to say threats determining the outcome. Popes do not appoint their successors: an election takes place. Albeit by a very small section of the whole Roman church, all of whom were selected by the Pope.

A similar pattern of choosing leaders takes place in most Anglican and Lutheran dioceses: a section of the membership of the Diocese - it may be all the priests, or the members of the Diocesan Synod - vote for one of a panel of candidates. Somewhat embarrassing for me in this Reformed church, with democratic processes embedded in every level of church life, to have to confess that the exception to this universal democratic principle, to this normal practice, is the Church of England – but one day that may change?

To return to my historical survey. The big leap forward in developing democratic government came in the medieval period with the Doctrine of Just Revolution. This is the less well known younger brother of the Doctrine of Just War. In the medieval period, as wars became more and more bloody with the growing power of armaments, with wars between different Christian countries in Europe, theologians developed the theory of the Just War. This stated that Christians should only support a war if

- It was in a just cause
- It was a last resort when diplomacy has failed
- The force used was proportionate to the problem
- And that only armies, not civilians were to be attacked.

In the second world war, Bishop George Bell of Chichester made himself very unpopular - ensuring that he was never going to be Archbishop of Canterbury - by using those principles to criticise the blanket bombing of German cities

In parallel with the debate about War, people also asked when would it be right and just to get rid of a tyrant; and how much force would be justified? And they began to use the same kind of rules which became known as the Theory of the Just Revolution. The last resort, after negotiations have failed; the force must be proportionate. You can imagine such ideas being brought into the discussions, no heated debates being held around the English Civil War, leading up to the execution of King Charles. Could there be ways in which a King could be removed without resorting to a civil war? Could there be ways of making it less likely that a tyrant could become King or other kind of ruler? Gradually, processes were developed for choosing people to exercise power over us, and removing them when they lost our trust.

All this developed on the understanding that God's will for a nation or community would come through the Holy Spirit leading all the people. So in monarchies like ours we do not believe in the Divine Right of Kings (or Queens). And as the 17th and 18th centuries moved on, more and more countries decided that they would become republics – a process that is still a live issue in Australia for example.

So when we have an election for a Member of Parliament, or for a City Councillor, or we choose the Chair of the School Governors, we draw upon all that Christian tradition, forged through some difficult and sometimes bloody conflicts, that democratic elections embody our prayer that God's will be done on earth and in heaven; and our belief that we are all of equal status in God's eyes. It must be almost unthinkable for you to conceive any other way of choosing church leaders, and in almost every province of my Anglican communion Bishops are elected – but not in England—yet!

The great American theologian of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr, summed it up like this:

- Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible
- Man's inclination for justice makes democracy necessary.

If you remember nothing of what I have to say today, remember that.

This election, like every other democratic process, is part of our Christian duty. Reform puts it like this:

Show Up: You can do more than put a tick in a box

There is a Christian duty to show up and vote, of course after having given the matter much thought and prayer.

Christ Church Endcliffe, our sister congregation who share the St Augustine's building, produced a very useful guide for their growth groups in March. I want to share one section of it:

There are three ways in which Christians can prayerfully get involved in the world of politics and public life:

1. From outside the system by campaigning and lobbying
2. From inside the system, by joining a political party
3. In a professional or voluntary capacity through the work they do.

Notice there is not a fourth one which says 'Shut your ears and hope that it will all go away'.

Neither is there one which says that, to keep yourself pure as a Christian, keep well away

from the mucky world of politics. On the contrary, our belief that Jesus came into this world, incarnated into the fallen world, is sufficient to encourage to engage in the political sphere. Remember that the Jews were told to pray for the peace and prosperity of the city: At that time not for the City of Jerusalem, for which of course they would pray, but for the City of Babylon, where they were in exile, in captivity. I have never known a time when there was so much material to help us Christians make up our minds:

The Joint URC Methodist Public Affairs group published their document early this year, as did the Bishops of the Church of England. Why not a joint report? The Report and its circulation caused some controversy on the right, who feared that the Bishops were suggesting that we should vote Labour! The very suggestion!!

They do say: "The Gospel is enormously relevant to the questions thrown up by the General Election campaign".

They also say "their experience of politicians is that all are trying their best to improve the lives of their fellow men and women". I don't think I would have said 'all' - most perhaps. Or perhaps you might say that some are going a very strange way about it.

I'm going to suggest a few of the Christian criteria for judging the parties proposals and programmes.

First, the idea that any society and therefore any party which seeks to lead our society, should be judged by the way that it treats the poorest. I discovered only recently in a book edited by John Sentamu that the phrase 'the Welfare State' was coined not by a politician of right or left, but by a previous Archbishop of York and later Canterbury, William Temple. I hear some politicians and even more some newspapers stigmatising the poor, or the unemployed, or the migrant workers, as if our economic problems had been caused by them. I also heard someone on the radio complaining that the rich were being stigmatised, as if being rich were wicked.

Both ways of speaking and judging indicate that we have become two nations – to use Disraeli's words.

As Christians I believe we should be looking for ways in which each and every citizen is valued and their needs accounted for. We need to pursue the common good, noting that the nation's wealth is created by a complex web of activities. These include not only the work of commerce and industry, but also education, medicine and not least in families and communities where those values of equality and respect have their roots.

I hope you are not hearing this as a party political broadcast – as if one party were right on these matters and the others wrong. That is not my intention, for I know that inside all (well most) parties there are Christians and others of good will seeking ways in which these values can be put into practice. That still leaves each of us with the decision as to which of the parties on offer is more likely to make this happen. Politics is not an exact science, it can sometimes be dull and tedious, and it is often difficult to understand.

But how else can we put into action our prayer ?

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven?

Let me finish with this story from *Reform*: April 2015, p.10. Here is a summary of the minutes of the very first meeting of a campaign group:

- They decided that the current law was bad and that the committee's main aim was to persuade other people of that fact, mostly by producing publications.

- They decided who could be on the committee and that the quorum would be three members.
- They chose a treasurer but said he couldn't spend any money unless the whole committee agreed.
- They agreed to announce what they had decided, then ask other people to join and send money.

It didn't feel like a dramatic start, but this was the first meeting, on 22 May 1787, of what would become the London Abolition Committee, whose aim was to make the slave trade illegal. You can sit in the British Library reading those minutes, in the original record book. The meetings sound quite dull. But year by year, through the leadership of folks like William Wilberforce, Olaudah Equiano and Thomas Clarkson, the campaign gathered steam, until eventually, on 1 May 1807, the law outlawing the slave trade took effect.

I think we can agree that even though it took 20 years, it was worth showing up at that first meeting.

Putting our prayer into action will require not only "Showing Up", but also "You can do more than put an X in a box".

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Third Sunday after Easter

Service Date:

26 April, 2015

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the 23rd. psalm. There are several versions and many references and allusions to it in poetry, contemporary music and film. The Revd. Beard spoke about the two distinct parts of the psalm - the part which acknowledges the care which God gives us and the part where the psalmist addresses God directly. The whole psalm celebrates the care and protection which God gives his people. But - with this goes responsibility. We are given care and gifts by God but we must use the strength which these give us to help and care for others. And ultimately, even physical death cannot exclude us from the place in God's house which we are promised.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 104 Praise my soul, the King of heaven

Rejoice and Sing 589 How firm a foundation

Rejoice and Sing 238 Good Christians all, rejoice and sing

Rejoice and Sing 559 Blessed city, heavenly Salem

Sermon:

Readings

Acts chapter 4 verses 5 - 12

Psalm 23

First letter of John chapter 3 verses 16 - 24

John chapter 10 verses 11 - 18

The Sheep One

"What are you going to preach on?" asked a friend of mine, on Friday morning.

"The twenty-third Psalm," I answered; "it's one of the set readings for the day, and St Andrew's people like learning about the Bible."

"Which one is that?" enquired her boyfriend.

"Oh, come on!" she replied; "you've got it written on a mug."

"Ah, the sheep one," said he.

Here is a sermon on The Sheep One:

The best known of all the hundred and fifty psalms in the Bible, Psalm 23 is regularly said, sung and chanted throughout the Christian world. Its best-known version in this country is, of course, *The Lord's my Shepherd*, a metrical rendering by the prominent Puritan Francis Rous (1579-1659), set to the tune *Crimond*; but we know it also as *The God of love my Shepherd is* by George Herbert (1593-1633), *The Lord my pasture shall prepare* by Joseph Addison (1672–1719, first published in 1712 in *The Spectator*), *The King of love my Shepherd is* by Henry W Baker (1821-1877), and the First World War setting of Rous' words called *Brother James' Air* by James Leith Macbeth Bain (1860–1925). It's also cited or referenced in hundreds of other hymns and songs. In contemporary Church culture, there's a Christian band called simply 23rd Psalm.

Looking further afield, it was recited at singer and actor Whitney Houston's funeral, and quoted by George W Bush when addressing the American people in 2001. There are also allusions to it in popular music, including *Ripple* by The Grateful Dead, *Shadow of Deth* (sic.) by Megadeth, *Jesus Walks* by Kanye West, and a satirical version in *Sheep* by Pink Floyd. Further quotations and references occur in films such as *Full Metal Jacket*, *Titanic*, the 1953 version of *The War of the Worlds* and *The Wicker Man*.

When we return to the Biblical text, whichever translation we may use in the modern English-speaking Church, it's still the Authorised (or King James) Version that evokes the strongest echoes in the popular mind:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

In particular, that haunting, rhythmic phrase, "the valley of the shadow of death" has never lost its hold, even when quoted only in part. Think of Tennyson's 1854 poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, with its repeated

All in the valley of death rode the six hundred...

Into the valley of death rode the six hundred...

'the Valley of Death' being the name given by British soldiers to a battlefield where, as Robert Fenton, who later photographed the scene, observed, "round shot and shell lay like a stream at the bottom of the hollow all the way down, you could not walk without treading upon them."

And for trivia fans among us, there was an episode of the American television series *The Twilight Zone* entitled 'Valley of the Shadows'.

Before the publication of the Authorised Version, John Wycliffe had rendered the phrase "in the midst of the shadow of death"; while, somehow, the New Revised Standard Version's

translation, “the darkest valley”, for instance, doesn’t convey quite the same depth of solemnity.

Ancient tradition ascribes authorship of this and no fewer than 72 other psalms to David, whose life is usually dated *circa* 1040-970 BC, and his reign as chieftain over the southern kingdom of Judah from 1010 to 970 BC. Although he was portrayed by later writers of the seventh century BC as a devout worshiper of Yahweh, a mighty warrior and a (mostly) wise and benevolent ruler of both kingdoms, in fact archaeology has found that both Israel and Judah still worshiped many gods at the time, there is no evidence for his military campaigns, and Jerusalem itself was a very under-developed settlement compared with Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. Nonetheless, Jews, Christians and Muslims alike have traditionally regarded him as symbolising religious monotheism and political unity, as an aspirational example for later generations.

The contemporary scholarly consensus is that the Psalms were written over a period of some five centuries, and that the phrase “a psalm of David”, as well as “of Asaph” (12 psalms) “of the sons of Korah” (11 psalms) and “of Solomon” (2 psalms), are as likely to be dedications, or to refer to different collections of texts, as to indicate authorship.

Be all that as it may, it’s interesting to note that Psalm 23, “the sheep one”, short as it is, falls naturally into two contrasting sections.

The first section, down to the end of verse 4, describes the relationship between the psalmist and Yahweh in pastoral terms, with God portrayed as the itinerant shepherd who meets all the needs of the sheep, feeding, watering and guiding it safely. Being familiar with sheep farming among the hills and valleys of our own country, we are perhaps in danger of forgetting that an ancient Hebrew shepherd’s role included locating pasture and water, and quite possibly fighting off thieves and predatory animals. It’s not so much of a stretch then, for the psalmist to move from the image of “green pastures” to “the valley of the shadow of death”, because death was a risk to which both sheep and shepherd were habitually exposed. The reality of this risk then lends significant weight to the psalmist’s faith in Yahweh’s guidance. Continuing the same line of thought, the psalmist alludes to the shepherd’s “rod” (Hebrew: *sebet*) which was used to count the sheep, and “staff” (Hebrew: *mishena*) the shepherd’s support and, where necessary, a defensive weapon, to symbolise God’s care and protection. In verse 4, there is an abrupt shift from the third person to the second person, so that the psalmist is no longer describing a relationship with Yahweh, but addressing God directly.

From verse 5, the imagery is no longer pastoral but political, marking the shift to the second section of the psalm. It might be that our Psalm 23 is made up of two texts, or parts of texts, put together, in the tradition of rabbinic teaching where disparate passages from the Jewish scriptures are considered together to see whether they can be made to cast light on each other. In these last two verses, Yahweh is addressed both as the host at a banquet, and perhaps – in the reference to “enemies” as a political or military leader or diplomat.

Certainly we find ourselves suddenly in the presence of a most exalted sheep! And yet, it’s possible to infer a progression from green pastures and still waters, through “the valley of the shadow of death”, to a celebration of homecoming, whether in terms of our earthly life (as in the parable of the Prodigal Son), or even in terms of life after death. In the final verse, we are given the response of the Psalmist to this brief but densely packed meditation on God’s “goodness and mercy”: “I shall dwell in the house of the Yahweh all the days of my life,” which seems not so much a simple statement of fact as an act of commitment,

remembering of course that “house” refers to the community of the faithful, the “household” if you like, as well as to the physical Temple.

I do not, personally, subscribe to the theory that “Goodness” and “Mercy” are the names of sheepdogs.

And now comes the all-important question that no preacher or theologian – or, indeed, Christian – should be allowed to evade indefinitely: “So what?”

Last week on the island of Rhodes, war, repression, dictatorship in distant Eritrea were far from the mind of army sergeant Antonis Deligiorgis... Stationed in Rhodes, the burly soldier accompanied his wife, Theodora, on the school run. “Then we thought we’d grab a coffee,” he told the Observer in an exclusive interview recounting what would soon ensue. “We stopped by a cafe on the seafront.”

Deligiorgis had his back to the sea when the vessel... struck the jagged rocks fishermen on Rhodes grow up learning to avoid... “The boat disintegrated in a matter of minutes,” the father-of-two recalled. “It was as if it was made of paper... Without really giving it a second’s thought, I did what I had to do. By 10:15 I had taken off my shirt and was in the water.”

Deligiorgis brought 20 of the 93 migrants to shore singlehandedly... [He] says he was helped by the survival skills and techniques learned in the army... All week there have been stories of acts of kindness, great and small, by islanders who rushed to help the émigrés... “They are souls, like us,” said Babis Manias, a fisherman, breaking down as he recalled saving a child.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/25/migrant-boat-crisis-the-sergeant-who-did-his-duty-towards-people-struggling-for-their-lives>

This story was published in yesterday’s Guardian.

Now, one way of looking at Psalm 23 is to see it as describing the position of safety and security enjoyed by the faithful community under the care and protection of God. It’s a good place to be in, and, although it doesn’t guarantee us total immunity from the vicissitudes of human life, “the house of Yahweh” provides us with a context in which we can feel cared for and nurtured as we enjoy our fellowship and explore our faith. We might equate this to the café in which Antonis Deligiorgis and his wife were sitting enjoying their morning coffee.

But we know that God does not provide us with any gift solely for our own benefit, but in order to equip us for our vocation to serve others. If we have received a measure at least of physical, emotional and spiritual security people who live in the house, or household, of Yahweh, it is in order that we might use them to bring the Gospel of love to others through practical action. We are no more called to sit in our comfort when others are in need, than our brother Antonis felt called to remain sitting on his café chair while the people whose boat had broken apart were struggling and drowning.

We are called to give up our lives for the God who is Love, in the service of others. Some of us may even be called to die for Love in the service of others; Antonis, after all, is a soldier, and so in other ways are we. But it’s still Eastertide, and because we are still here in the community called together by Jesus, who died two thousand years ago but whose message and ministry remain fresh and alive, we know that even our physical death cannot take away from us our place in the household of God.

Second Sunday after Easter

Service Date:

12 April, 2015

Worship was led by The Revd. Margaret Herbert. Her sermon said that doubt is a natural part of faith. The Disciples doubted - Jesus himself experienced self doubt. Yet the resurrection changed the Disciples and their world radically. The power of the Holy Spirit strengthened them in their task of preaching God's forgiveness. It is up to us to continue their task to create a radically different world. God is constantly renewing the world.

Hymns:

Common Ground 21 Christ be our light

Rejoice and Sing 237 God came in Jesus

Common Gound 145 When our confidence is shaken

Rejoice and Sing 224 In the cross of Christ I glory

Sermon:

Readings

John chapter 20 verses 19 - 30

First letter of John chapter 1 verses 3 - 10 and chapter 2 verses 1 - 2

Psalm 111 found at Rejoice and Sing 719

Easter Day and service of Holy Communion

Service Date:

5 April, 2015

The service was lead by the Revd. Robert Beard. Instead of presenting a written sermon Revd. Beard shared thoughts prompted by the recent tragic plane crash in the Alps. Some tabloid papers had published very negative and stigmatising comments on mental illness. People suffering from mental illness can experience a strong sense of failure and unworthiness. The Disciples probably experienced similar feelings after the death of Jesus - the person on whom they had pinned so much hope had died a cruel, painful and humiliating death. The resurrection turns all this on its head. Everyone is loved and valued by God, whatever their circumstances and we as Christians must show the same care, compassion and welcome.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 246 The day of resurrection

Rejoice and Sing 241 Led like a Lamb to the slaughter

Rejoice and Sing 236 Come ye faithful

Rejoice and Sing 432 Now is eternal life

Sermon:

Readings

Acts chapter 10, verses 34 - 43

Psalm 118 verses 1 - 2 and 14 - 24

First letter to the Corinthians chapter 15, verses 1 - 11

John chapter 20, verses 1 - 18

There is no sermon to reproduce - please see the Theme introduction.

Sixth Sunday in Lent and Palm Sunday

Service Date:

29 March, 2015

The service was led by the Worship Group. Three of the group's members commented on aspects of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem: it was one example of Jesus needing assistance

from his Disciples; it displayed another kind of kingship and authority; how did Jesus feel, knowing it was the first step in the irrevocable chain of events leading to his crucifixion.

During the first hymn the children gave out palm crosses.

Bobbie Walker of Streetpastors spoke about the service she and her colleagues give on the streets of Sheffield on Friday and Saturday nights, looking out for revellers in need of care and help. This is an example of people carrying out God's work on earth.

Readings: Mark 11:1-11; Psalm 118: 1-4, 19-29; Isaiah 50:4-9a.

Hymns:

RS208 All glory, laud and honour

RS 523 Give me joy in my heart

RS103 Praise to the holiest in the height

RS209 Ride on! ride on in majesty

Sermon:

Comment 1: Palm Sunday

(Derek Collins)

On Thursday the Queen is coming to Sheffield Cathedral to present Maundy Money to elderly people in recognition of their Christian service. There will be a procession from the Cutler's Hall to the Cathedral and no doubt there will be a crowd of people watching. Perhaps some of us will be there.

Palm Sunday too is about a procession and a crowd. In Jesus' early ministry in Galilee crowds come to hear him, to seek healing. At the end of his ministry Jesus leaves the peasant villages of Galilee and comes to Jerusalem, the only city he visits. Our reading from Mark describes how he enters the city from the Mount of Olives riding on a donkey. People spread their cloaks before him on the road, others leafy branches, shouting 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'

Jesus' entry is planned in advance. Two of the disciples are told to go to a nearby village where they will find a colt, one never ridden before. Mark implicitly makes the meaning of this clear. In the Hebrew Bible Zechariah speaks of a king who would come to Jerusalem, humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Matthew's parallel account makes the reference to Zechariah explicit.. Further Zechariah makes clear what kind of king this will be, a king who shall command peace to the nations.

Another procession is likely to have been entering Jerusalem at about the same time as Jesus. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, comes up from his headquarters in Caesarea for the Jewish Passover to ensure order in the city during the time of the Festival. He enters the city at the head of an imperial procession of cavalry and foot soldiers, proclaiming both Roman power and imperial theology for the Romans saw their ruler as divine, one of the gods.

Jesus' procession thus strongly contrasts to Pilate's procession and the crowds following him are ordinary people, some his followers from Galilee, peasants and fishermen. Pilate's procession embodies the power, glory and violence of the empire ruling the world. Jesus' procession embodies an alternative vision, the kingdom of God, a kingdom of love, peace and justice, very different from the worldly dominating kingdoms those who followed him lived under, a kingdom that turns the world upside down.

Right at the beginning of his gospel Mark records the first words of Jesus as 'the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news', a theme which remains central to Jesus' ministry. The contrast between the kingdom of God

and the worldly realms of the Romans and the temple authorities runs throughout Holy Week.

Several crowds feature in the story of Holy Week. At one of the Lent Study Groups we discussed Jesus' cleansing of the temple, in which the kingdom of God clashes with that of the high priests and scribes, who then look for ways to kill Jesus for, as Mark says, 'they were afraid of him for the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching'. Later in the week a large crowd listens to him with great delight whilst Jesus' comments on the widow's mite are prompted by a crowd putting money into the treasury. But then crowds appear antagonistic to Jesus. One with swords and clubs comes from the chief priests and scribes when he is arrested. Later a crowd comes to ask Pilate to release a prisoner to them as is the custom and are then stirred up by the chief priests to demand the robber Barabbas be released not Jesus.

Perhaps this later crowd does include some people who had been part of the Palm Sunday procession and who had listened to Jesus teaching but who now swayed by rabble rousers switch sides and join the procession of the kingdoms of the world, the Romans and the temple authorities. Mark doesn't tell us.

Yet this choice between the two kingdoms, which procession to join, has faced Christians throughout the centuries since Holy Week. Yes, the choice must be to follow Jesus and work for the kingdom of God. Yet three hundred years after Holy Week the Roman Emperor Constantine ended the persecution of Christians so leading to Christianity becoming the official religion of the Empire and bringing the church into the imperial order. In the centuries that followed the tension between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world plays out in the church, at times tempted by secular power and wealth yet always called back to seek the kingdom of God, a tension that has surely played out in the lives of individual Christians through the ages.

The last week culminates in the Good Friday procession to Calvary, part imperial soldiers, part followers, and the events of Easter Sunday. As today we begin our journey through Holy Week we still face the challenge of belonging not to the imperial procession but to the Palm Sunday procession and seeking the kingdom of God as we follow Jesus.

Comment 2:

(Elizabeth Draper)

Comment 3: Palm Sunday and the Passion of Jesus

(David Stec)

Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Triumphal it certainly was, at least to all appearances, as he rode upon the ass through streets strewn with scattered palm-branches and garments, amid shouts of: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!" Yet his triumphal entry is inextricably linked with his passion, and we cannot help but think of this as we read the Gospel accounts of Palm Sunday. This is, of course, because as readers we know what lies ahead for Jesus.

We know that he is entering Jerusalem for the last time, that those same crowds who gave him who received him into the city with such an enthusiastic greeting will soon be shouting for his crucifixion, and that his passion and death are a matter of days away. But actually, as Jesus entered the city that day his passion had already begun. The turning point came after Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi, when for the first time Jesus began to speak about his impending suffering and death at the hands of the religious leaders. Mark tells us

that three times he made such predictions of his passion. Jesus's disciples could not comprehend what he was saying, or perhaps it was just so unthinkable that they refused to believe it.

But whether they believed it or not, right from the moment that Jesus spoke for the first time about his passion, that passion had already begun for Jesus, as he set his sights towards Jerusalem and started his journey from Galilee.

Jesus already felt a deep inner pain, which is something perhaps most appreciated by Luke, out of all the Gospel writers. He devotes a large part of his Gospel to that last long journey. He records that in the course of that journey Jesus was warned that Herod wanted to kill him, and he replied, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.' "

And Jesus added a heart-felt lament: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' " (13:33-35). This lament might well have expressed Jesus's inner emotion as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and heard the crowds greet him with those very same words from Psalm 118, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!".

As the ass on which he rode made each step along the street a chain of events was already underway which would lead to the cross on Good Friday.

Outwardly, Palm Sunday was perhaps one of the finest moments of Jesus's life, but inwardly, how hard his pain must have been to bear!

He had been to Jerusalem many times before, to celebrate the great religious festivals. Now as he entered the city to celebrate the Passover for the last time, he knew that he himself was to become the passover lamb.

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

22 March, 2015

The Revd. Robert Beard developed the theme of the Ten Commandments from his service two weeks ago. Jesus has given us a new covenant, written on the hearts of his people.

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33.

Hymns:

RS585 Our God stands like fortress rock

RS228 Here proclaim the glorious battle

RS509 O Jesus I have promised

RS207 My song is love unknown

Sermon:

The New Covenant in Jeremiah

Those of you who were here a fortnight ago will, of course, recall – in detail, I trust! – my sermon on the Ten Commandments, their possible origins in Hittite treaties and the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and their role in the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant was understood by the ancient Israelites to have been written on stone tablets, and to have laid down God's conditions for their security and prosperity in the Promised Land. I

suggested that it was the fulfilment of these conditions – along with the rest of ‘the Law and the Prophets’ – in Jesus Christ, that made the Old Covenant obsolete as St Paul argues. For Christians, the meaning of the Old Covenant Law must be interpreted in the light of Jesus’ presence and the profound insights that he brought. The New Covenant that Jesus established lays down not God’s conditions for material safety and success, but principles for universal forgiveness and reconciliation. Consequently, Jesus got rid of some parts of the old Law, while modifying, intensifying or changing others.

In this morning’s reading from Jeremiah, we heard a prophecy that Christians have traditionally interpreted in terms of this New Covenant established by Jesus. Jeremiah lived during the reign of Josiah, the king of Judah who succeeded to the throne of Judah aged just eight and reigned from about 641 to 609 BCE. He undertook large-scale religious reforms (which I talked about four weeks ago), closing down the shrines and ‘high places’ dedicated to Baal and gods other than Yahweh, and terminating their priests’ employment with what is these days called “extreme prejudice”. By extending this activity into areas beyond his own borders, he was also able to cut off the flow of tribute from Judah to the declining neo-Assyrian empire.

Jeremiah first felt called to be a prophet around 626, thirteen years into Josiah’s reign, and accepted his vocation reluctantly, pointing out that he was only a child and didn’t know how to speak in public. (I wonder if I might have offered him voice coaching...?) He gained in confidence, however, supporting the king’s reforms by warning the people of Judah of the terrible consequences that would result from their having built the high places and worshipped there.

Sure enough, after the death of Josiah in 609, it all started to go horribly wrong for the kingdom of Judah, with the Egyptians and Babylonians manoeuvring to fill the power vacuum being created as the neo-Assyrian empire collapsed. King Josiah’s successor Jehoahaz was taken into exile by the Egyptians after just three months on the throne, and replaced by the Egyptians’ puppet ruler Jehoiakim. Much to Jeremiah’s distress, Jehoiakim quickly allowed the Josiah’s reforms to lapse, and wasted the kingdom’s resources on building a new palace for himself. In 605, just four years after Josiah’s death, the Egyptians were thoroughly beaten at Carcamesh by the Babylonians, who then moved into the Philistine – or Palestinian – plain. Under the command of King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem, demanding tribute from King Jehoiakim.

Recognising that the political situation was desperate, Jeremiah preached his so-called ‘Temple Sermon’ (recorded in Jeremiah 26), which urged the people of Judah to make a decision against the kingdom of Jehoiakim and for the kingdom of God. As you might expect, this did not go down well with the state authorities.

Four years after the siege, Jehoiakim refused to pay the Babylonian tribute, and Nebuchadnezzar ordered another siege which ended with Jehoiakim’s death. As punishment for Jerusalem’s defiance, in 597 the new king Jeconiah and his whole court were taken into exile. Ten years later, around 587, Jeconiah’s successor Zedekiah and many others were also exiled, and a third deportation to Babylon occurred around 582.

Jeremiah lived and worked as a prophet throughout these events, witnessing the ending of the hope that had seemed to have dawned with Josiah’s reforms, followed by a succession of devastating attacks on his home, Jerusalem, and the destruction of the Temple, and then personally experiencing the trauma of being forcibly carried off into exile. In modern history, we might think of some sort of parallel in the treatment of Jews, Gypsies, Gay and Lesbian people, and disabled people by the Nazis, so many of whom found themselves torn

from their homes and transported across Europe in cattle trucks to imprisonment in distant lands.

The words we heard in this morning's Old Testament reading, then, were addressed to the first generation of exiles from Judah: people far from home and without hope: people coming to terms with the understanding that they had broken the Covenant with God that Moses had delivered at Sinai, and having to accept that consequently God had not protected them from invasion, conquest, occupation and exile. Having warned them while the Temple still stood of the consequences of their behaviour, Jeremiah now felt called to offer words of promise and comfort, offered in terms of a new Covenant relationship. As I indicated last time, when talking about the fulfilment of the Old Covenant that created the opportunity for the New Covenant, there is in Jeremiah's vision both continuity and discontinuity with what had gone before.

The continuity lies in the character of God and the love God continues to have for a wayward people. God will not abandon the people forever and will not forget the promises made at Sinai:

"I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God" (Exodus 29.45; cf. Exodus 6.7)

"I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Leviticus 26.12). So similarly, in Josiah's vision of a new covenant, God promises,

"I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31.33).

For the Chosen People, the relationship was not new; they knew this God, and God knew this people. The promises Jeremiah spoke of built on the long, shared history between God and the people: a history marked by wavering and betrayal on the part of the people, but by faithfulness on the part of God. Still, Jeremiah's message was that God continued to love this wayward people; they continued to be God's treasured possession. In the face of humiliating defeat and exile, this new covenant there would offer continuity with what had gone before.

The discontinuity is, of course, implied in the description of this Covenant as "new." This is a new covenant between God and the people, and to the extent that it is new, it is not like the covenant at Sinai,

"a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband," says Yahweh (Jeremiah 31.32). And what is new about this covenant, in Jeremiah's vision, is not so much its content, but the means by which God will bring it about.

"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says Yahweh: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know Yahweh,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says Yahweh; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

According to the history of the people's relationship with God (compiled by the Redactor 'R' from the various sources known as 'E', 'J' and 'P', which I described last time), the first set of

stone tablets containing the Old Covenant was broken (Exodus 32.19), the second set with its revisions(Exodus 34.1) hidden away in the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 10.5), and the terms of the Old Covenant largely ignored and forgotten until the Book of the Law mysteriously appeared – or reappeared – in the Temple and was rigorously applied by King Josiah (2 Kings 22), just as Jeremiah himself was emerging onto the public scene as a very young prophet.

Well, tablets of stone can be broken and scrolls can be lost, and so in Jeremiah's vision, the New Covenant was to be written on the very hearts that beat within the people themselves; everyone would know God intimately. There's even a disturbing suggestion that the people would be able to manage without preachers!

What else is new? Well, as Jeremiah had pointed out to them in the years before the exile, the people had not demonstrated much of an aptitude for faithfulness since the establishment of the Old Covenant, so this time God would do it differently. This New Covenant would not be based on the people's obedience, which had proven so very fallible. This would be all God's doing, based solely on God's mercy:

"I will forgive their iniquity, and will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31.34).

In other words, no matter how disobedient the people might be, God would always forgive them and call them back into relationship with him.

If this seems like a cop-out for the people, as though they could behave as wickedly as they felt like, confident in the assurance that God would not punish them, just recall the situation in which Jeremiah was delivering this message. His hearers were living in the utter misery of exile, which the prophet had told them in no uncertain terms was their own fault; not a punishment from God, but simply the inevitable consequence of abandoning God's ways. To those people, the temptation to sin must have seemed less than enticing.

I'd like to leave us with two questions to ponder as a bit of an exercise in self-examination, as we approach the end of Lent and move inexorably towards our commemoration of the events of Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter:

First, looking at the consequences of present-day corruption and cruelty around the world, in commerce and politics, and in the streets and homes of our own country, how enticing do we find the temptation to break even the smallest of the laws of love?

And secondly, if the New Covenant of forgiveness and reconciliation is indeed written on the hearts of the people, what else is there in our own hearts that is still obscuring any part of it, and making it hard for us to live it in our relationships with other people – and by that I mean any other people?

Think on't!

[Preacher: Revd Robert Beard B.D.]

Fourth Sunday in Lent and Mothering Sunday

Service Date:

15 March, 2015

The service was led by Mrs. Val Morrison who preached on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus as documented in John's gospel (3:9-21). Introducing the reading, Val explained:

A Pharisee, Nicodemus by name, had come to Jesus significantly, under cover of darkness, Some say he came to trip Jesus up by asking questions, others that he came with a

genuine desire to understand what Jesus was about. Either way he got answers to his questions which didn't really throw much light on anything.

Today we join the conversation with questions from both Nicodemus and Jesus and a response from Jesus which includes some key indicators of John's message about Jesus and his purpose.

Readings: Ephesians 2: 1-10; Genesis 18: 16-33; John 3: 9-21.

Hymns:

RS94 Give to our God immortal praise

RS522 From heaven you came, helpless babe

RS495 Father hear the prayer we offer

RS225 Here hangs a man discarded

RS33 Eternal God, your love's tremendous glory

Sermon:

So what are the key indicators in the verses we read from John's gospel?

Well there is that reference to the serpent. The serpent, a symbol of all sorts of things, in many cultures it is seen as positive and powerful even if dangerous. In others including Jewish and Christian cultures, it is seen as a strong negative force, symbolizing evil in the world and in all of us. The question of what to do about the serpent could be a question of what to do about evil.

But is that the question here?

To answer that we need to understand the bit about Moses. The incident to which it refers comes from the time when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, grumbling about Moses and even about God who punished them by sending poisonous snakes which killed many of them. God then gave Moses the remedy, to make a serpent out of bronze put it on a pole for the people to look at and anyone who looked on the serpent would live. The serpent, entwined around a pole, now a sign of healing used by medical organizations to this day.

So here was the symbolism for the reference in John's writings and key to understanding what Jesus was about. The serpent lifted up in the wilderness for all to see, healing their physical ailment but also we might say 'healing' their lack of faith. Linking them back to the God who cared for them, who had made a covenant with them and Jesus, 'lifted up' on a cross and subsequently lifted up to heaven, offering the possibility of healing for the world and its dis-ease and in John's words, linking heaven and earth.

For the ancient people, the promise that looking on a bronze serpent held high could cure their disease, more crucially reminded them of their God and his promises and his care. In reality the cure was not about the serpent but about the saving power of God. All of which is now translated into our need to look at the image of Jesus held high to remind ourselves of God's love and the second key indicator in the passage we read.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... It's a mystery isn't it? How can the crucifixion of Jesus deal with the dis-ease of the world as we know it? To some extent it remains a mystery, which is of course where faith comes in.

God saw the evil in the world. In his Son, who John reminds us earlier in his gospel, has been the Word, with him from the beginning the evil in the world took out its full force on Jesus. I think it is important to remind ourselves that this evil is not purely about the evil that was around in the 1st century, historic evil, but also about the evil which is still around even in each of us today.

And what we see through Jesus' death on the cross is the full and dramatic display of what God's love means. It was not a messy accident. God letting the worst happen to someone else. No, this is John giving us an amazing new picture of who God is, God both Father and Son and the cross, the ultimate ladder between heaven and earth.

But a third key indicator in this passage is the reminder that evil is not automatically healed as a result of that once and for all death. Evil is deep within us. So for the healing to take place we must be involved in the process and we do that by believing, by looking and trusting, by coming to the light of God's new creation, by condemning the darkness which is destroying and defacing the world and preventing people from coming to God's new world. In the final sentence of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus he says 'those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God'. And that is a theme picked up by Paul in that passage we read from his letter to the Ephesians where he talks about them having been dead through the misdeeds of the world, rescued by God's grace through Christ's death and now 'we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life'.

I suspect that there is no-one here who would want to argue with the notion that the 21st century world is full of evil with too many dark places, dark places which drive us to despair or into which we would rather not look. And the news on any day is full of them.

There is the ongoing problem of violent extremists like Boko Haram in Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria

or what is being called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. There is the war going on in Ukraine and Christians being tortured and killed for their faith in the Middle East. Then there are the issues in this country of the treatment of asylum seekers in places like Yarl's Wood. Families where people feel unsafe, remember the dreadful murder of Becky Watts a couple of weeks ago, to say nothing of the apparently increasing incidence of child sexual exploitation from the past and in the present.

And lest we think that the dark places are far away. Last Friday, doing my fortnightly stint at our local food bank I spoke with a young woman whose husband had been arrested and was now in prison. In the previous week she had had to move out of her accommodation and had found her benefits stopped because these things were in her partner's name. If anyone doubted her need and that of her daughter for food, they just needed to see how they tackled the sandwiches they were given while they waited for their food parcel.

I could go on – dark places are not difficult to find and it is easy to despair. But John tells us that the light has come into the world and Jesus referred to himself as a 'light to the world'. Bearing in mind Paul's words about our being created for good works, I want to pick up on that reading from Genesis.

Abraham and his family were nomadic and at this point in the story he and his nephew Lot had decided that their best course of action was to divide and follow different paths, Lot choosing to go to Sodom and Gomorrah. These were cities which, because of their wickedness, God planned to destroy. They were clearly dark places and it is usual to emphasise the darkness of these places but perhaps we should think about it in a different way, Abraham certainly did.

I'm sure you all know a variation on the 'how many (whatevers) does it take to change a light bulb?' theme. Well how about another variation? How many people does it take to be a light in a community? How much righteousness makes a real difference to the atmosphere of a place? Is there a 'critical mass', a basic input of godliness, morality, decency that can so

effect the character of a town or a neighbourhood or a community that the whole place looks different to everyone, God included.

Abraham really pushed this concept in his discussion with God. What would it take for God to deal with these cities not by ruinous judgment but with patience and constructive purpose? The answer eventually was 'ten righteous people'. Of course we have no means of knowing about appropriate percentages and no precise calculations will suffice for matters of mercy and justice. But what we do know is that this story urges us to practical faithfulness and persistent prayer.

It tells us a few can make a difference however ugly the problems and evil. The patient witness of a small group of committed people can bring out the goodness which is present and limit the effects of the evil and decay.

The supreme example of this is Jesus himself. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans 'by one man's obedience many will be made righteous'

Just as Jesus was and is the 'light of the world', so we are called to follow his example as lights in our own community. Of course many of those people and places I listed earlier as dark places in the world are dark places at a distance and we would be ill advised to try to get any nearer.

It is for this reason that we should think carefully about the example of Abraham as he turned to prayer when he found himself in a place of pain and sorrow.

Abraham's prayer was specific and tenacious. I think it tells us that if we are to be light in dark places across the world we need to try to understand something of the situation we are praying about, difficult as that may be, so we, too, can be specific in our prayers.

But of course not all the dark places are miles away. Many are in our own communities, maybe next door to us and then it does only take the patient witness to have an effect.

Each of us does this all the time. From my own experience as a Street Pastor. Three Street Pastors out on duty on a Saturday night are known by the police and door staff to have a calming influence not just in the centre of town but throughout the area as people return to their homes. At Food Banks 4 or 5 people listening to the stories, a couple offering tea or coffee and sandwiches and another couple packing bags of food and light comes into the dark places for individuals and families.

As individuals in this congregation you are involved in a number of initiatives supporting your local community and each of you support friends, neighbours and families on a daily basis. And I have no doubt that however well you know each other there will be some of you involved in things which bring light to dark corners which no-one else knows about.

And whilst none of this should be a cause for complacency, it should remind us of the truth of Abraham's assertion that it takes only a few righteous people to spread light in a dark world. As we journey through Lent, we read of the pain and sorrow of Jesus' final days. Days when it must all have seemed pretty pointless, much as sometimes our efforts seem to be too few, too small and the darkness too deep. But as our next hymn reminds us that was not the whole story. The final verse reads:

Lord, if you now are risen
help all who long for light
to hold the hand of promise
and walk into the night

May you continue to be amongst those who hold the hand of promise and walk into the night.

Third Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

8 March, 2015

The service was led by the Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the Ten Commandments, and the questions raised when we approach 'Old Testament Law' as Christians.

Readings: Exodus 20: 1-17; Psalm 19 (RS673); 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25; John 2: 13-22

Hymns:

RS586 All my hope on God is founded

RS317 Lord, thy word abideth

RS229 We sing the praise of him who died

RS422 Lift high the Cross

Sermon:

The Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses

I'm very fond of this anonymous email:

Concerning the Ten Commandments in courthouses and legislatures: You cannot post 'Thou Shalt Not Steal,' 'Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery,' and 'Thou Shall Not Lie' in a building full of lawyers, judges and politicians... It creates a hostile work environment.

There are three basic beliefs about the origin of the Ten Commandments:

- They were written and/or dictated by God at Mount Sinai, circa 1450 BCE. This is the literalist view.
- They were written by three Jewish authors (or groups of authors) between 922 and 622 BCE based upon ancient Hebrew myths and legends. This is the view taken by many scholars since Biblical criticism became a serious academic study.
- Their original source was in Pagan documents written by Hittites or Egyptians which were known and added to by ancient Jewish writers. This asserts that the first five books of the Old Testament, known as the Pentateuch, were written independently over a period of centuries by a group of four authors, (or groups of authors) from various locations in Israel and Judah, each writing to promoting his own community's religious convictions and practices.

Scholars have detected within the Pentateuch four strands of text distinguished by particular individual characteristics:

J: a writer who used 'Yahweh' ('Jehovah' in Greek) to refer to God. In most English translations this is rendered "the LORD", using capital letters.

E: a writer who used 'Elohim' the Hebrew word for 'god' (or more accurately the plural 'gods') to refer to God.

D: the author of the Deuteronomy, the book discovered, or more probably written or compiled, during the reign of King Josiah, which I discussed in my previous sermon.

P: a writer who added material of particular interest to the priesthood.

These writings were later shaped and assembled into a unified text by an unknown redactor, referred to unsurprisingly as 'R'. R did a minimum of editing and deleting, leaving intact multiple identical or near identical descriptions of the same events by different authors throughout the Pentateuch.

This theory is given significant credibility by the fact that the Pentateuch presents us with three different versions of the Ten Commandments: in Exodus 20, Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 5. The most logical explanation for these multiple versions is that three different authors were retelling the same story of God giving the Ten Commandments to the Israelites. Each wrote his version from a particular point in history.

Although in the Exodus narrative the second set of the Ten Commandments, given in Exodus 34, was a replacement for the first set that Moses broke in his rage at the Israelites' worship of the golden calf. This seems extremely unlikely, both in terms of the story – because why would the unchanging God change the wording of his Commandments in a 'second edition'? – and in terms of the text, because the wording of the first set is there in Exodus 20, so why would a single author record a second, different set as well? And then there is the set in Deuteronomy 5, which is different again. No, three different versions of the Ten Commandments clearly indicates three different authors.

The language used in Exodus 20, then, indicates that this is author E's version of the story. He inserted the text into the middle of his description of God's descent onto Mount Sinai. Significantly, according to E, the Ten Commandments were engraved by God himself on the tablets. Also, he gives the commemoration of God's day of rest after the six days of creation as the reason for keeping the Sabbath day holy.

Exodus 34:10-28 is J's version. J writes that the Ten Commandments were written down by Moses, not God himself, and gives no specific reason for the Israelites to observe the Sabbath.

Deuteronomy 5 is, obviously, D's version. Deuteronomy was written around 622 BCE by an author who was probably a Levitical priest in King Josiah's kingdom of Judah. He wrote the book during the time of the exile to Babylon, but used pre-exile material. In his version of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath was to be observed in memory of the Israelites' slavery in Egypt, and as in the Exodus 20 version, the commandments were written on the tablets by God himself.

Many scholars now believe that, in all three cases, the thinking that underlies the Ten Commandments goes back even further than E, J and D, to ancient Hittite and Egyptian texts.

Treaties imposed by Hittite kings on their vassals in the 14th-13th centuries BCE appear to be both divided into the same six sections as the Ten Commandments, stating the name of the ruler, his status, the benefits he can confer on his people, and a detailed description of their obligations to him. In these treaties, heaven and earth and a variety of natural features are invoked as witnesses, and there are clear sanctions for non-compliance with the terms. Part of the Egyptian religion's well-known Book of the Dead (also known as the Papyrus of Ani) bears an amazing resemblance to the Ten Commandments. Like the Commandments' "You shall not...", it consists of a series of negative statements:

"I have done away sin for thee and not acted fraudulently or deceitfully. I have not belittled God. I have not inflicted pain or caused another to weep. I have not murdered or given such an order. I have not used false balances or scales. I have not purloined or held back the offerings to the gods. I have not stolen. I have not uttered lies or curses."

One major difference between the two documents is that statues of the gods and goddesses formed a major part of the ancient Egyptian religion, while the religious laws of the ancient Jews forbade any image or statue of Yahweh. Another difference was the Decalogue's

emphasis on the Sabbath -- one day of rest each week. It is not found in the Book of the Dead or in ancient Egyptian culture.

How, then, are we to understand and, more importantly, conform with the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Old Testament law today?

Traditionally, Christians have tried to divide the Law into three types: civil, ceremonial and moral, suggesting that the civil and ceremonial laws were specific to the society and religious culture of ancient Israel, while the laws identified as dealing with morality are binding for all time. This is to make a false distinction.

The Old Testament law is not presented in isolation, as though it were a freestanding moral code for all eternity. In fact, it is firmly embedded in the theological narrative with which the Israelites identified, and which describes how God delivered them from Egypt and established them as his Covenant people in the Promised Land. In other words, the Law has come down to us as part of the story, and our approach to the Law must take this into account. Connecting text to context is a basic principle of proper interpretation.

This idea raises two important questions: Do the stories in the Bible have the same authority as its laws? Should Christians understand themselves as subject to the Law in order to comply with Biblical teaching?

If we think that the Law of Moses has more authority over Christians than other parts of the Old Testament, we are effectively creating a canon within a canon. When the disciples picked grain on the Sabbath, as we heard in the Gospel reading two weeks ago (Mark 2:23–28), and the Pharisees accused them of contravening the specific law against harvesting on the Sabbath (Exodus 34.21), Jesus justified their behaviour, not by quoting another part of the Law, but by citing the narrative of King David and his followers eating the consecrated bread in the Temple (1 Samuel 21.1–9). So Jesus is portrayed as giving the story as much authority as the law, if not more.

If we look at the place of the giving of the Law in the overall story of the Israelites, we see that the Covenant God made with them through Moses was intimately bound up with Israel's invasion and occupation of Canaan. The Covenant provided the framework by which Israel was to occupy and live prosperously with God in what they believed was their Promised Land. The close connection between the Covenant and the land is stressed repeatedly in Deuteronomy, and it cuts across any distinction between so-called civil, ceremonial and moral laws.

The Law defined the terms under which Israel might expect to receive blessings in the Promised Land; for instance, "Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20.12).

In other words, the promised blessings arising out of the Mosaic Covenant were conditional. In Deuteronomy, God informed Israel that obedience to the Covenant would bring blessing, but that disobedience to the Covenant would bring punishment and curses. Deuteronomy 28 is particularly explicit regarding the conditional nature of the Law. Verses 1 to 14 list the blessings for Israel if they obeyed the terms of the Covenant (the Mosaic Law), and verses 15 to 28 (a much longer passage!) spell out the terrible consequences for them if they did not obey the terms of the Covenant. Also, the association of the covenant with the land and the conditional aspect of the covenant blessings are often linked (Deuteronomy 30.15–18). Therefore, Israel's loss of the land in 587 BCE to the invading Babylonians has profound implications for the way we should view the Law.

Furthermore, the Israelites believed that, under the Mosaic Covenant, God actually descended and lived among his people: first, in the tent that housed the Ark of the

Covenant (Exodus 40.34–38), and then in the temple (1 Kings 8.9–10 and 2 Chronicles 7.1–2). When the Israelites were taken into exile in Babylon, they lost the presence of the Lord in the temple (Ezekiel 10), and the experience both of exile itself and of their return from exile had a profound effect on their beliefs. It is a matter of history that the blessings described in Deuteronomy 28 were never again realized in any significant way; Israel's political independence, and regional economic and military domination were lost forever. But it is a matter of religious belief that there is no suggestion anywhere in the later books of the Old Testament that God ever returned to dwell in the temple among his people. Moving on, and looking at the Law from the Christian perspective, we see that the Covenant with Moses is no longer functional. The New Testament affirms the fact that the Mosaic Covenant has ceased to be valid because, as Hebrews 8–9 makes clear, Jesus came as the mediator of a new covenant – or “New Testament”, to use the more familiar word – that replaced the old one: “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete” (Hebrews 8.13). This has important implications for our understanding of the Law. The Old Testament Law specified the terms by which Israel could receive blessings in the land under the Old (Mosaic) Covenant. If the Old Covenant is obsolete in the presence of the New Covenant, how can the laws that define it still be valid?

St Paul stated repeatedly that Christians are not under the Old Testament Law; for example, in Galatians 2.15-16 he wrote, “A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.” In Romans 7.4 he stated, “You also died to the law through the body of Christ.” In Galatians 3.25 he declared, “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.” Paul argued vigorously against Christians returning to the Old Testament Law, not least in the matter of circumcision. If there were any distinction to be made between civil, ceremonial and moral laws, Paul, a self-proclaimed Pharisee himself, could not possibly have ignored it. Furthermore, if the moral laws were to be understood as universally applicable, one would expect Paul at least to have used them as the basis for Christian moral behaviour. Paul, however did not base his moral teaching on the Old Testament Law, but instead on the Good News of Jesus Christ, on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and on the practices of the emerging Churches.

What about Matthew 5.17, where Jesus is recorded as having said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them”? Did St Paul and St Matthew contradict each other? Not at all. First, the phrase “the Law and the Prophets” refers to the entire Old Testament, so in this verse Jesus was not speaking of the Mosaic Law alone. Also, the contrast is not between abolishing the Law and observing it, but between abolishing it and fulfilling it. Jesus did not come either to observe the Law or to abolish it, but to fulfil it. The word translated “fulfil” occurs numerous times in Matthew, and it normally means, “to bring to its intended meaning.” If Jesus had been stating that the Mosaic Law is eternally binding on New Testament believers, Christians today would still be required to keep the sacrificial and ceremonial laws, as well as the moral ones, which would be clear contradiction to other parts of the New Testament. So Jesus was not saying that came to sweep away the righteous demands of the Old Testament Law, but that he came to fulfil them. As the climax of salvation history, as Christians understand it, Jesus fulfilled all the righteous demands of the Law and all the foreshadowing of the Prophets. Jesus is to be understood as the final interpreter of, and authority over, the Law, as other passages in Matthew indicate. Some of the Old Testament laws he restated (Matthew 19.18-19), some he modified (5.31-32), some he intensified (5.21-22, 27-28), some he changed (5.33-37, 38-42, 43-47) and some he got rid of (Mark

7.15-19). Jesus did not advocate the traditional Jewish requirement to try to obey the Law, but neither did he advocate that it be dismissed altogether. He proclaimed that the meaning of the Law must be interpreted in the light of his presence and the profound changes introduced by the New Covenant.

The Law is inextricably bound up with the Mosaic Covenant, which is about the Israelites' life in the Promised Land and promises of blessing contingent on living there obediently. Christians are not related to the Promised Land, nor to the conditions for being blessed in that land. In any case, the Mosaic Covenant is obsolete because it has been replaced by the New Covenant. Therefore the Mosaic Law, a critical component of the Old Covenant, is not valid as law over believers under the New Covenant.

Consequently, the traditional approach to the Mosaic Law, which divides it into moral, civil and ceremonial categories, is arbitrary; it has no foundation in the text, it ignores the context of the Law within Israel's salvation story, and it fails to take into account the change from the Old Covenant mediated via Moses to the New Covenant mediated via Jesus.

How, then, should we as Christians approach the Old Testament Law, avoiding these issues? I suggest the following four principles, all of them challenging, which we might explore together at some future date:

1. We must try to understand what a particular law would have meant to the people who first heard it delivered
2. We must try to understand how we, as 21st century Christians, differ from that ancient Jewish audience
3. We must try to follow the example of Jesus by seeking the spirit of the Law, the universal principle, that underlies the letter of the Law
4. We must try to apply that universal principle in our own lives and the life of our Church.

Second Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

1 March, 2015

Our service was led by The Revd. Margaret Herbert who spoke about trusting in God as we enter new and possibly difficult phases of our lives. We have the examples of Abraham and Sarah who, in old age, moved to a new land and became parents and Jesus himself, who submitted to the will of God.

Lectionary readings: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38; Romans 4:13-25

Hymns:

CG4 Let us build a house

RS553 To Abraham and Sarah

RS558 Will you come and follow me

RS217 When I survey the wondrous cross

CG49 Heaven shall not wait

Sermon:

The story we heard read in the Jewish Scriptures is amazing. It tells of God calling Abram – a man, born into a polytheistic Aramaean clan settled in Ur, in Lower Mesopotamia, to up stumps and go to an unknown land – Canaan – there he and his wife will be blessed with a son and he will become the father of a great nation. This is ridiculous as Abram and his wife Sarah are past the age to have children – nowadays they would be in sheltered housing drawing their old age pension! We are told that when Sarah heard this she

laughed!

The emphasis is on God achieving the impossible through the obedience of his people. All things are possible for God. The link between the folk and nation in this story is one of DNA – not bound by land – but by common ancestry. By faith not by distrust. Bound by a Covenant to God.

Abram's name is changed to Abraham – meaning "father of a multitude of Nations".

Yahweh will be their God and they will be his people.

In his letter to the church at Rome that he founded Paul, the lawyer, reminds them of this story – he says "The promise to Abraham did not come to them through the law but through the righteousness of faith."

It is by faith that they and we are saved to become the children and inheritors of God. Not by sticking to the letter of the law – trying to be good in order to please God and win his favour, nor by prayer and fasting: but by having the faith that Abraham and Sarah had when they achieved the impossible for God. As Paul writes "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."

Neither then nor now does anyone have an easy life. We are subject to diseases both of the body and the mind. We are concerned for the health and wellbeing of our friends and relatives - We are disturbed by what we see on our televisions and what we read in our newspapers. It all seems too hard. Worry grinds us down. Many believe that they are too old to help – after all charity begins at home and there is little left to give away. Look after our families and friends other folk must look after themselves. We are wearied by responsibility after a long working life. It's time to retire and put our feet up!

Yet still we come here each week and listen to the Gospel of Christ read. Do we always listen as intently as we should? We often think we have heard it all before (if I were a member of the Congregation I think I would nod off!) familiarity breeds contempt but rather more inattention. Yet each week there is a different reading – and they could be a more significant word spoken – a different interpretation given for the "Here and now"!

Each morning when I wake up I feel quite fit – then I get out of bed – and begin to creak and moan! I feel my age. A friend of mine who lives in New York decided that as she was snowed in not to get out of bed until spring came! I'm not sure about this as one would be missing such a lot. A warm shower and then breakfast makes me feel whole again – such little forms of comfort – such blessings like hot water and decent food – sets me on my way. These things that we all take for granted; things that the people of Syria, Iraq and Palestine have to live without. A roof over our heads, good food, a comfortable bed, hot water - we are free from fear they are very frightened – we have hope but they have little.

We are challenged by the news that we hear each morning. We are also challenged to see the day's happenings through the eyes of Christ. Christ, who calls us to take up our cross

and follow him.

Mark makes Christ's teaching plain. Jesus is in a very bad situation – rejected by the scribes and Pharisees, the Elders and Priests – he knows that he will suffer and be killed. And, as our friends would have tried to stop us from doing something that they thought stupid – so Peter tries to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem. Jesus will have none of this – he tells Peter that he has the mind of a human being – he does not think like God. His mind must be set on divine things. He not only calls his disciples – but - and this is very significant – he calls the crowd and says “If you would be my followers you will have to stop being selfish and take up your cross”.

Surely, this is what we are called to do in Lent?

First, each day, read our bibles – then contemplate the reading – and in the silence of our homes pray. It is not difficult – clear your mind of everything else – listen for the still small voice of God. He comes in many different guises. Through other people – through different situations when we are enabled to see something more clearly than before.

I think that we, as Peter, often think that we know better than God does. After all we have not seen him. Who and where is he? He perhaps is hiding from us.

We are often discouraged by circumstances beyond our control. Like Thomas we only believe in what we can touch and what we know to be true.

The leap of faith is enormous. It is a leap into the unknown. Would we like Abraham and Sarah travel into an unknown country? Yet this is what we are called to do: not actually – but metaphorically. Into the unknown territory of illness and disease; the threat of war and terrorism - meeting and trusting strangers – folk who are not like us – and even the unknown territory of death.

Do we really believe the promises of God? Are we dispirited feeling that our little efforts are futile and our voices of protest will go unheard?

Have we the faith of Abraham, Sarah and Saint Paul and the rest of Jesus' disciples? Will we be capable of rising to the challenge? Can we sing aloud of God's glory and his promise to all his people, putting our trust in God to keep his promises? That is an awful lot of questions to answer.

This is not about how human we are – but how truly human God will make us. If only we put our trust in him.

Lent – a time both of challenge and of opportunity – the opportunity to put our hands in the hand of God – be led by him – learn from him – be guided by him – strengthened by him – trusting in him like a little child trusts in its parents.

God is the God of all his people – by whatever name they call him – he has been revealed to us by Jesus Christ his only Son. He only has one rule – not of perfection – but to take up our

cross and follow him – love others, as we ourselves would have others love us – through all the changing scenes and circumstances of life. Love is like a blood transfusion – those who are fit give to those who are ill – when circumstances change, as they often do, and fortunes are reversed then the help is reciprocated.

We are bound together as a nation under God – not by national identity but by being brothers and sisters of the Son of God. The extent of humanity’s wrongdoing doesn’t affect God’s loving action on our behalf. Everyone is touched by Jesus - God’s gift of love. Despite a great deal of wrongdoing God’s gift amounts to a verdict of “Not guilty”. Up ‘til now our link with one another as humans meant we shared the consequences of our common failure. That consequence was death, but now we also have a link with Jesus who is human too. This means that God’s love is being freely given to us in a new relationship – a covenant, a new life. Rules produce a sense of failure. No matter how many rules were broken God was always one step ahead. Death made it look as if failure had the upper hand, but God’s goodness has won through to put things right. Trust and pray – then act on the results of those prayers and, trusting him, walk into the future with your hand in the hand of God.

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Service Date:

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Yet still we come here each week and listen to the Gospel of Christ read. Do we always listen as intently as we should? We often think we have heard it all before (if I were a member of the Congregation I think I would nod off!) familiarity breeds contempt but rather more inattention. Yet each week there is a different reading – and they could be a more significant word spoken – a different interpretation given for the “Here and now”!

Each morning when I wake up I feel quite fit – then I get out of bed – and begin to creak and moan! I feel my age. A friend of mine who lives in New York decided that as she was snowed in not to get out of bed until spring came! I'm not sure about this as one would be missing such a lot. A warm shower and then breakfast makes me feel whole again – such little forms of comfort – such blessings like hot water and decent food – sets me on my way. These things that we all take for granted; things that the people of Syria, Iraq and Palestine have to live without. A roof over our heads, good food, a comfortable bed, hot water - we are free from fear they are very frightened – we have hope but they have little.

We are challenged by the news that we hear each morning. We are also challenged to see the day's happenings through the eyes of Christ. Christ, who calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

Mark makes Christ's teaching plain. Jesus is in a very bad situation – rejected by the scribes and Pharisees, the Elders and Priests – he knows that he will suffer and be killed. And, as our friends would have tried to stop us from doing something that they thought stupid – so Peter tries to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem. Jesus will have none of this – he tells Peter that he has the mind of a human being – he does not think like God. His mind must be set on divine things. He not only calls his disciples – but - and this is very significant – he calls

the crowd and says “If you would be my followers you will have to stop being selfish and take up your cross”.

Surely, this is what we are called to do in Lent?

First, each day, read our bibles – then contemplate the reading – and in the silence of our homes pray. It is not difficult – clear your mind of everything else – listen for the still small voice of God. He comes in many different guises. Through other people – through different situations when we are enabled to see something more clearly than before.

I think that we, as Peter, often think that we know better than God does. After all we have not seen him. Who and where is he? He perhaps is hiding from us.

We are often discouraged by circumstances beyond our control. Like Thomas we only believe in what we can touch and what we know to be true.

The leap of faith is enormous. It is a leap into the unknown. Would we like Abraham and Sarah travel into an unknown country? Yet this is what we are called to do: not actually – but metaphorically. Into the unknown territory of illness and disease; the threat of war and terrorism - meeting and trusting strangers – folk who are not like us – and even the unknown territory of death.

Do we really believe the promises of God? Are we dispirited feeling that our little efforts are futile and our voices of protest will go unheard?

Have we the faith of Abraham, Sarah and Saint Paul and the rest of Jesus’ disciples? Will we be capable of rising to the challenge? Can we sing aloud of God’s glory and his promise to all his people, putting our trust in God to keep his promises? That is an awful lot of questions to answer.

This is not about how human we are – but how truly human God will make us. If only we put our trust in him.

Lent – a time both of challenge and of opportunity – the opportunity to put our hands in the hand of God – be led by him – learn from him – be guided by him – strengthened by him – trusting in him like a little child trusts in its parents.

God is the God of all his people – by whatever name they call him – he has been revealed to us by Jesus Christ his only Son. He only has one rule – not of perfection – but to take up our cross and follow him – love others, as we ourselves would have others love us – through all the changing scenes and circumstances of life. Love is like a blood transfusion – those who are fit give to those who are ill – when circumstances change, as they often do, and fortunes are reversed then the help is reciprocated.

We are bound together as a nation under God – not by national identity but by being brothers and sisters of the Son of God. The extent of humanity’s wrongdoing doesn’t affect God’s loving action on our behalf. Everyone is touched by Jesus - God’s gift of love. Despite

a great deal of wrongdoing God's gift amounts to a verdict of "Not guilty". Up 'til now our link with one another as humans meant we shared the consequences of our common failure. That consequence was death, but now we also have a link with Jesus who is human too. This means that God's love is being freely given to us in a new relationship – a covenant, a new life. Rules produce a sense of failure. No matter how many rules were broken God was always one step ahead. Death made it look as if failure had the upper hand, but God's goodness has won through to put things right. Trust and pray – then act on the results of those prayers and, trusting him, walk into the future with your hand in the hand of God.

First Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

22 February, 2015

The service was led by The Very Revd. Peter Bradley, Dean of Sheffield. He preached on Christ's temptations in the wilderness and how he resisted the power offered by the devil. We were asked to consider how we may be tempted to abuse our power and talents 'to put things right' and the examples of Christ and Abraham Lincoln who acted in humanity and justice.

Readings: Genesis 9: 8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15.

Hymns:

RS543 Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us

RS363 Lord Jesus, think on me

RS364 Just as I am

RS495 Father hear the prayer we offer

Sermon:

When I visited Washington DC eight years ago to work at Washington National Cathedral, like any tourist I visited the Lincoln Memorial. This is the great memorial to President Lincoln on the National Mall, right in the centre of Washington. At the centre of the Memorial, is an absolutely vast, white, marble statue of the President sitting, confidently gripping the arms of a throne-like chair, and staring towards Congress, some miles away. On the walls of the Memorial are carved two of the President's greatest speeches: the Gettysburg Address, given at the dedication of a new graveyard for soldiers, and his Second Inaugural Address, given in March 1865 when he became President for a second time, and just before his assassination.

When he delivered his Second Inaugural Address, President Lincoln was winning the American Civil War, just about to complete his victory over those who supported slavery, and he stops to reflect on the terrible experience that his country has been through. Most politicians would know exactly what to say here. We would probably say that God has been on our side, and has blessed us with victory. We would identify what we have been doing with God's clear will. After all, we had won, hadn't we?

Today we are brought with Jesus to stand on the giddy heights of the roof above us. We stand looking at all of Sheffield and South Yorkshire, perhaps even catching a glimpse of the North Sea on a particularly clear day, or at least the silvery River Don flowing towards Goole. Jesus was shown all the kingdoms of the earth. All this could be ours, if only we turn aside from the claims of justice and truth for a minute or so, just to get things sorted.

Let's just think through this devil's bargain for a minute. O the good we could do; the reforms we could make; even the devil, perhaps, is not all bad. We could reach some form

of accommodation, perhaps, and reclaim the devil if not for good, at least for a sensible accommodation, which would suit everyone just fine, get things sorted.

Isn't this the sort of argument that a few of our bankers made to themselves? They knew that they were taking extreme risks with our money, but if the market allowed them to act in this manner, who were they to step back from the parapet? After all, for many years their speculation and double dealing did seem to make us, and these bankers themselves, more prosperous. They weren't worshipping the devil exactly, just weighing up the options, getting things sorted.

President Putin too seems to be able to threaten and bully whole nations. No doubt he would argue that all this is happening to build peace and security in the long term. He is not worshipping the devil, just weighing up the options, getting things sorted.

The difficult with the beautiful view from the parapet is that it is a false view. The devil's bargain gives us the illusion of clarity, of certainty, and it removes us from the complexity of discerning God's will for us. We think that we can see God's will and our will in the same picture; we think that we can determine justice and truth and peace; other people are reduced to ants in the perspective from the parapet.

This is where President Lincoln showed his greatness. At the very moment of victory over slavery, he turned away from claiming victory from himself. He turned away from the devil's bargain, where all things serve our needs alone, to God. Lincoln stated his discernment, that slavery was an injustice against God and which had to be opposed, but noted that all sides in the battles had been praying to God. Lincoln continues,

Let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both [sides] could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes.

Lincoln sees clearly that's God's purposes are greater even than victory in the war against human slavery--a war which even yet has not been won, by the way. Lincoln acknowledges both the sinful nature of the war in which many died terribly, and the justice of opposing wrong and human subjugation; he leaves the judgement up to God.

The temptation which the devil puts before Jesus returns to us as a nation, as the Church, and as Christians. It is the temptation to sort things out by turning away from the demands of justice and truth, bracketing out the purposes of God. So, we fool ourselves that it doesn't matter if we are cruel to our spouse or friends, if we need to sort things out; we fool ourselves it doesn't matter if we are reckless and grasping in our business life, provided we come to Church on Sunday.

Jesus calls us back down to earth. The remedy for this temptation to power is to worship God and serve God alone. No human action which sweeps aside the claims of justice and truth is securely based; only by honouring God can we live together in peace. God cannot be controlled by our narrow interests. As Lincoln knew so well, "The Almighty has his own purposes." Let us worship God, and serve only him, for this alone will bring us truth and peace.

Transfiguration Sunday

Service Date:

15 February, 2015

The Service was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who led a discussion on the theme of poverty and related our help with alleviating poverty to the transfiguration of Jesus.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 203 How good, Lord, to be here
Rejoice and Sing 373 Lord Jesus Christ
Rejoice and Sing 489 Be thou my vision
Rejoice and Sing 366 And can it be

Sermon:

Readings

Second book of Kings chapter 2 verses 1 - 12

Psalm 60 verses 1 - 6

Second letter to the Corinthians chapter 4 verses 3 - 6

Mark chapter 9 verses 2 - 9

Instead of a conventional sermon The Revd. Beard led a discussion on poverty. Poverty is often seen as a blessed state - but the words of Jesus 'the poor are always with you' have been misinterpreted. Jesus is calling us to solidarity with the poor. A staggering number of people in the UK live at or below the official definition of poverty - and many of these are in employment. The discussion considered the structural causes of poverty and other problems that go with it - lack of opportunity, poor health, lack of access to facilities and services. In his transfiguration Jesus shows us what it can mean to be truly whole - it is our duty to help people living in poverty achieve some of this wholeness.

Fifth Sunday in Epiphany**Service Date:**

8 February, 2015

The service was led by The Revd. Dr. Walter Houston. "If we are downhearted and doubt whether the church has any future—either our own church or the Church in general—we have in effect lost faith in God, and our complaints will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. . .

. [T]he Church can be reborn, revitalized, renewed. How this might work out in any particular place we can't say, but we are assured that 'those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength'."

Lectionary readings: Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39.

Hymns:

RS49 Sing praise to the Lord
RS79 This day God gives me strength of high heaven
RS589 How firm a foundation
RS574 Go forth and tell

Sermon:

Morale and demoralization are strange things. Last July the Iraqi army fled in terror before the less numerous and not so well equipped fighters of ISIS, leaving half the country, and half their military equipment, to be taken over, and ISIS to become the terror of the world. Why? Poor leadership was one reason, another was the reputation of the Islamist fighters for dedication and ruthlessness.

Or on the other side, see how the Greek people, beaten down and demoralized by three years of brutal austerity, have found hope reborn in the election of a government determined to reject the policy—even those who did not vote for Syriza seem to be happy for them to have a go. Regardless of whether their policy is wise or will work, the mere self-assertion of the people at the polls has transformed their mood.

Morale is also enormously significant for churches. I lead worship in quite a number of churches, and I can think of two churches of much the same size. One is flourishing and confident and clear in its mission, while the other seems to be waiting for death, talking of themselves as 'an ageing congregation', closing projects down rather than opening them up, no longer expecting God to accomplish anything through them.

The words in our OT reading from Isaiah are manifestly addressed to an utterly demoralized people. 'Why do you say... "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God?"' They have ceased to believe that God is either able or willing to do anything to help them. The task of the prophet is to give them back their morale. Later on he will point to concrete events in the political world that ought to give them hope: the rise of Cyrus king of Persia, who is well on the way to defeating their enemy Babylon, which has destroyed Jerusalem and is keeping them in exile far away in Babylonia.

But at this point, right at the beginning of his work, he lays the foundation for all that he is going to go on to say by speaking to them of God. Not in the prosaic words of a theological treatise, or even a creed, but in the resounding and evocative words of poetry. He is not telling them anything new. 'Have you not known? Have you not heard?' 'Has it not been told you from the beginning?' This is their faith. And yet they don't really believe it, not in a way which would make a difference.

He speaks of God as creator. 'It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in.' He speaks of God as one active in the political world: 'who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.' Even those tyrants who seem most well entrenched in their power may fall when you least expect it. We in our world have got used to Western governments deciding to get rid of dictators in safely un-nuclear-armed countries. But think of the power of this message to a people absolutely devoid of any military power whatever.

God is the incomparable. There is no one like him, certainly not the so-called gods that the Babylonians worship. ' "To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal", says the Holy One.'

And again the poet comes back to God's power in creation, as we were talking about earlier. 'Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.' He compares the stars to an army under its commander, disciplined and obedient.

And he moves towards the climax of his address. First of all he quotes the people's complaint 'Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God?"' In answer, he first sums up what he has been saying. 'Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.'

And then he comes to the point, which is implied in all he has said up to now. 'He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; BUT those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' The message that the prophet hopes the people will accept is not only that the power of Babylon is not as well founded as they think, and that the power of God is far greater; but that their own strength can be renewed by the power of God to enable them to

sustain the hardships of the present and to be ready to embrace the deliverance of the future.

For us Christians the delivering and transforming power of God is summed up in Jesus Christ, and our Gospel reading gives us a picture of God at work in Jesus' earthly ministry. Peter's mother-in-law may not have been seriously ill, but then again her illness may have been potentially fatal—we don't know what it was, and neither, of course, would they have done. At all events, at Jesus' touch the fever leaves her and she is able to leave her bed and work. The news gets about and the same evening, after sunset [not 'at sunset' as the NRSV says], because it was the Sabbath day up to sunset, when carrying anything was forbidden, the people of the town bring all their sick relatives for Jesus to heal them, and so he does. Obviously things are not described in the way that modern medicine would. Mark's narrative is full of people possessed by demons or unclean spirits. We might describe them as mentally ill, but we also know that mental illness takes different forms in different cultures, so that in that culture it might well be that people appeared to be taken over by a personality that was not their own, and believed themselves to be possessed. The healing power of God in Jesus displays itself in being able to relieve these people of whatever it was that was burdening them, which manifests itself in what is seen as the 'coming out' of the demon.

The last part of Mark's account is the most significant, for it is clear from this that Jesus' healing power is not something that he possesses on his own, as part of his human nature. It comes from his communion with God his Father in prayer. Without that, he is nothing. And it also shows that his healing ministry is part of his whole message about the coming of the kingdom of God. ' "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns", he says, "so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."' The healing is a sign that the power of God spoken of by the prophet is at work. And this good news of the coming of the kingdom of God in Christ, Paul understood, was not just for Israel, but also for the whole world, and that is what he felt a responsibility that he could not shake off to preach wherever he could.

The powerful poetry of the prophet, the scene-painting of the Gospel writer, the passionate rhetoric of the apostle, all these combine to assure us of what the people in exile had begun to doubt: that God is both willing and able to save his people. If we are downhearted and doubt whether the church has any future—either our own church or the Church in general—we have in effect lost faith in God, and our complaints will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. What the prophet had to convince his people to do was to trust God rather than their own gloomy feelings, to trust what they did know and had heard rather than what they could immediately see and feel. And the same with us. We know that 'Jesus saves', to put it ever so simply. We can therefore believe that through his power the Church can be reborn, revitalized, renewed. How this might work out in any particular place we can't say, but we are assured that 'those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength'. It is in the waiting, waiting in faith, waiting in prayer, like Jesus in the deserted place, that the renewal comes and our morale is reborn.

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany and service of Holy Communion

Service Date:

1 February, 2015

The service was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the theme of prophecy and prophets.

Lectionary readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28.

Hymns:

RS285 O for a thousand tongues to sing

RS261 At the name of Jesus

RS97 King of Glory, King of Peace

RS280 Join all the glorious name

Sermon:

This morning's sermon is about prophets and prophecy, so I thought I'd include my favourite prophet joke: How do we know that Pharaoh's daughter was a shrewd business woman? If you don't know, I'll tell you at the end.

Even before King Josiah came to the throne in 641 BC, at the tender age of eight, following his father King Amon's assassination, the nation of Judah had been reduced to the city-state of Jerusalem; the great powers of the time, Egypt and Babylon, treated Judah as a vassal state or as a no-man's land. With Jerusalem endangered of being conquered, there was a push to record the nation's religious traditions, in a book which preserved not only the Mosaic Law and the customs of the temple priests, but also the religious ethic of compassion and the collective wisdom of the nation's rulers.

According to the story in 2 Kings 22, Hilkiah the High Priest found the Book of the Law while carrying out major renovations to the Temple, which Josiah had ordered. He brought it to Josiah's attention, and the king was greatly alarmed lest the calamities threatened in the book for non-observance of its commands should come upon him and his people. He sent to consult the prophetess Huldah, who assured him that the evil foretold would indeed come to pass, but not in his day. An assembly of the elders of Judah and Jerusalem and of all the people was called, and the ancient covenant with Yahweh was renewed.

We have no reason to doubt that the book of Deuteronomy emerged during Josiah's reign, but when I say "emerged", I'm alluding to the fact that, while the text claims that it was "discovered" in the Temple by Hilkiah the High Priest, the scholarly consensus is that Josiah himself had it compiled as a kind of manifesto, with which to reassert Yahweh's authority over his drifting people, and of course his own authority as Yahweh's anointed king. Using this "second law", which is what the Greek name "Deuteronomy" means, Josiah instituted sweeping religious and political reforms.

He set himself the mammoth task of cleansing the land from idolatry, encouraging the exclusive worship of Yahweh and outlawing all other forms of worship. The Temple in Jerusalem was purged by the removal of the instruments and emblems of the worship of Baal and "the host of heaven" introduced by King Manasseh. Then the corrupt local sanctuaries or "high places" were destroyed, from Beer-sheba in the south to Beth-el and the cities of Samaria in the north. Josiah had the living pagan priests of Bethel executed and the bones of the dead priests exhumed from their graves and burned on their altars, which was viewed as an extreme act of desecration. Josiah also reinstated the Passover observances.

According to the later account in 2 Chronicles, Josiah destroyed altars and images of pagan deities in cities of the tribes of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, as far as Naphtali, which were actually outside his kingdom of Judah. He also had the Ark of the Covenant returned to the Temple in Jerusalem.

The verses we've heard this morning are part of a longer consideration of prophecy in Deuteronomy that runs from verse 9 to verse 22.

In the verses that immediately precede our lectionary reading (vv. 9-14) Yahweh (usually rendered "the LORD") says, "When you have come into the land which Yahweh your God gives you, you shall not learn to do after the abominations of those nations" (v. 9). Yahweh specifically prohibits the practice of "passing children through the fire" (child sacrifice) along with divination, soothsaying, sorcery, casting spells, inquiring of spirits, seeking oracles from the dead and prophesying by dreams, omens or portents.

These are important prohibitions because they strike at the heart of practices that look for spiritual guidance to sources other than Yahweh. To practice divination or sorcery or inquiring of spirits would be an abomination to Yahweh because they constitute a spiritual alternative, and therefore disloyalty, to Yahweh.

All the assorted persons condemned in these verses had one thing in common; they all attempted to predict the future by various means (reading the liver of sacrificed animals, consulting the spirits of the dead, or "familiars," etc.). They therefore serve as a foil for the description of the true prophet and the proper medium for revelation that follows.

The true prophet is like Moses (vv. 15-19). This portrait of the true prophet has traditionally been interpreted in two ways: eschatologically, as an individual who will come in the future (Jesus Christ for Christians, Muhammad for Muslims); or historically, as a succession of prophets, that is, as a guarantee to the people of Israel that God will not leave them without leaders once Moses is no longer with them. This second interpretation is almost certainly the message Josiah intended his people to understand at the time.

The text makes the case that only true prophets can communicate the will of Yahweh to his people. And while a prophet "like" Moses cannot mean "equal to" Moses in light of Deuteronomy 34:10, nonetheless, the coming succession of prophets will function as mediators and interpreters of the Covenant just as Moses had done.

So Deuteronomy describes the "true" prophet, who probably symbolises the tradition of prophetic leadership whom the people of Judah had historically experienced, both before the establishment of the monarchy and during the reigns of successive kings.

What is very interesting, then, is the fact that there follow two warnings, which seem to discourage the prophetic tradition. The first is against the revolutionary prophet, depicted as a disobedient person who does not obey Yahweh's Word found in the Law, nor heed the words of contemporary divine revelation, but speaks against the duly anointed king. This person is an outlaw, an anarchist, and should therefore die.

The second warning is against the false prophet, who claims to speak in Yahweh's name, or in the name of other gods, but speaks against the religious leadership. If the religious leaders speak for Yahweh, then this prophet chooses a place outside the religious institution, and is no better than the anarchist; he, too, should die.

The reason for these two warnings seems blatantly political. Prophets were traditionally lower class, self-appointed critics of the religious hierarchy, whose words always earned them the wrath of the ruling authorities. As Jesus commented, the religious leaders of his own time erected monuments to prophets whom their own ancestors had killed.

Deuteronomy recognises the power of the prophetic tradition, but raises the stakes by justifying the murder of the unpopular prophet (see 18:20).

What sort of great prophetic leader, then, does Josiah's book of the Law foretell, if not a prophet of the traditional kind? If the scholars are right, and the authors of Deuteronomy were indeed the equivalent of modern-day civil servants, their vote would naturally be for the king who employed them. The king is understood not only as the civil ruler, but also as a leader appointed by God to speak for God. The prophet-king tradition had started with King

David, whom even Jesus later called a prophet. During the Babylonian exile and afterwards, people desired the charismatic leader who had aspects of king and prophet.

And what kind of prophecy does such a prophet-king offer, if criticism of the civil and religious leadership automatically disqualifies it? Two criteria are presented: First, prophecy must be authorised by Yahweh when uttered in his name; prophecy in the name of foreign gods is not allowed. Secondly, that which is proclaimed must occur (vv. 21-22): a somewhat ambiguous criterion, probably addressed to Deuteronomy's seventh-century audience, who had experienced the fulfilment in exile of dire prophecies by Amos, Hosea and Isaiah.

Another point that the text makes clear is that Yahweh will raise up this prophet-king from among the Covenant people, the Israelites, rather than going outside the covenant community for this purpose. Again, the political importance of this requirement is obvious. For Christians, of course, this whole description came to be interpreted as applying to Jesus Christ, so that when the people heard Jesus speak, they said, "This is truly the prophet who comes into the world" (John 6:14) and "This is truly the prophet" (John 7:40). Shortly after Pentecost, Peter quoted this verse in a sermon in the temple (Acts 3:22), saying, "God, having raised up his servant, Jesus, sent him to you first, to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your wickedness" (Acts 3:26).

And this, ultimately, is how the true prophet may be discerned: by the way he – or she – turns people away from their wickedness and towards whatever is loving and good, whether this means supporting or challenging the civil and religious authorities in any particular time or place.

How do we know that Pharaoh's daughter was a shrewd business woman? Because she got a handsome prophet from the rushes on the bank.

Revd Robert Beard B.D.

Homelessness Sunday and Church Poverty Sunday

Service Date:

25 January, 2015

The service was led by the Revd. Robert Beard. In initial reflections on a lectionary reading from Jonah, he brought us to consider Jonah as a homeless man.

In place of a sermon, he then led us in a discussion of the issues surrounding homelessness and poverty. He began by paraphrasing an extract from Guardian writer, Lucy Mangan.

Lectionary readings: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Hymns:

RS447 I come with joy to meet my Lord

CG67 Jesus Christ is waiting

RS492 Dear Lord and Father of mankind

RS454 Let all mortal flesh keep silence

Sermon:

In place of a traditional sermon, Rev Robert Beard led us in a discussion of homelessness and poverty. He began by paraphrasing the following passage from Guardian writer, Lucy Mangan:

Listen, I always want to say, if you're genuinely mystified, answer me this: have you never had a really bad day and really wanted – nay, needed – an extra glass of Montrachet on the roof terrace in the evening? Or such a chaotic, miserable week that you've ended up with a

takeaway five nights out of seven instead of delving into Nigella's latest?

You have? Why, splendid. Now imagine if your whole life were not just like that one bad day, but even worse. All the time. No let-up. No end in sight. No, you can't go on holiday. No, you can't cash anything in and retire. No. How would you react? No, you've not got a marketable skills set. You don't know anyone who can give you a job. No. No.

Extract from "If you don't understand how people fall into poverty, you're probably a sociopath", an article by Lucy Mangan published in the Comment is Free section of *The Guardian* website on 24 Jan 2015.

[Read the original version in full on the Guardian website.](#)

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date:

18 January, 2015

The service was led by The Revd Dr David Stec who preached on the passage in John 1 where Nathanael asked if anything good could come from Nazareth. We are challenged to face up to our prejudices - Nathanael does finally recognise Jesus as the son of God.

Lectionary readings: 1 Sam 3:1-10; 1 Cor 6:12-20; Psalm 139; John 1:43-51.

Hymns:

RS 382 Come, let us join our cheerful songs

RS 265 I cannot tell

RS 558 Will you come and follow me

RS 125 Ye holy angels bright

Sermon:

John 1:46

Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

During the Second World War my father spent some time in Palestine as a part of his army service.

From my childhood one of the very few things that I can remember him saying about it is that Nazareth was a dirty and smelly place.

Some years later I visited Nazareth for myself, and I was immediately reminded of his words. The town struck me as something of a chaotic sprawl, which was indeed rather dirty and somewhat smelly, and as I walked along one of the streets and saw a man urinating into a gutter, that really set the seal on my impression of the place.

Nazareth's only real claim to fame is that it was the home town of Jesus.

It is not mentioned in the Old Testament or in the collection of Jewish tradition in the Talmud, and was evidently little more than a village when Jesus grew up there.

According to one estimate based on archaeological excavations, it would have had a population of about 480 at the beginning of the 1st century AD.

Within Judaism it was certainly not a cultural centre of any particular note at the time of Jesus.

In chapter 1 of his Gospel, John gives an account of Jesus calling some of his disciples.

As a result of the testimony of John the Baptist — “Behold, the Lamb of God” — two of John’s disciples followed Jesus.

One of them was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, who went and told his brother, “We have found the Messiah.”

Andrew then takes Simon to Jesus, who says, “So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas” (Cephas being the Aramaic equivalent of the name Peter in Greek, names which each recall words meaning “rock” in respective languages).

The next day, Jesus calls Philip with the words, “Follow me.”

Philip then goes and finds Nathanael, and tells him about Jesus.

Very little is known about Nathanael. Outside this passage in John 1, he is mentioned only once in connection with one of the appearances of the risen Jesus.

He was evidently one of the disciples of Jesus, and some think that he might be identified with Bartholomew, mentioned in the other Gospels, though this is only really speculation.

Philip tells Nathanael, “We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

This is probably an allusion to Deut 18:15, 18, where it is said that God will raise up a prophet like Moses, who will deliver God’s word to his people.

Philip is certainly making a claim that they had found the Messiah, since the Old Testament as a whole – particularly in the Law and the Prophets – was considered to bear witness to the Messiah.

According to Philip this Messiah is to be identified with a certain Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

It is interesting that the writer of John’s Gospel here allows Jesus to be described as “the son of Joseph”.

John probably did believe in the virgin birth, but he never explicitly refers to it.

At John 6:42 the disbelieving Jews say, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’ ”

In Philip’s conversation with Nathanael, John probably allows the reference to Jesus as the “son of Joseph”,

— partly because Philip as a new disciple is assumed to be speaking out of ignorance,

— partly because he was speaking to a Jewish scholar, and any suggestion of a virgin birth would have created an unnecessary obstacle to convincing him of what he was saying about Jesus.

— and partly because he wanted to identify the Messiah with a particular person who came from a particular local family.

Nathanael responds with the words, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Some have thought that this might have been a popular proverb, though there is no evidence of such a proverb.

Nathanael’s response suggests a certain prejudice on his part.

It might be that Nazareth was a notorious place and had a bad reputation for some reason that is totally unknown to us.

It might have been simply a matter of being unable to believe that such an important person could come from a very ordinary and unremarkable town like Nazareth, with no historical importance as far as Judaism was concerned.

But I would like to suggest that Nathanael’s prejudice goes deeper than this.

Nathanael seems to have been a serious student of the scriptures, as Jesus seems to assume this in his later conversation with him.

As someone with a familiarity with the scriptures, and doubtless also with a good knowledge of rabbinic teaching, he would have known that the Messiah was expected to have his origins elsewhere, and not in Galilee.

The prophet Micah (5:2) prophesied that a future ruler would come from Bethlehem, doubtless because this was the home town of Israel's greatest king, David.

This was taken to refer to the Messiah, as a descendant of David.

And this provides the background to another passage in John (7:40-44), which follows some controversial teaching given by Jesus.

We read: "When they heard these words, some of the people said, 'This is really the prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Christ.' But some said, 'Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the scripture said that the Christ is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?' So there was a division among the people over him."

It is for this reason that when Nathanael heard that Jesus came from Nazareth, he was immediately prejudiced against any notion that he might be the one to fulfil the OT prophecies of a prophet and ruler.

But Philip encourages him to have an open mind. He says, "Come and see."

And this is precisely what Nathanael does.

When Jesus sees him coming, he demonstrates a supernatural knowledge of Nathanael's character, and greets him with the words, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!"

Nathanael is puzzled by this knowledge, and asks "How do you know me?"

Jesus replies that before Philip called him, while he was sitting under the fig tree, Jesus saw him.

At this, the man who not long earlier had asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?," responds with an acknowledgement of Jesus as Messiah:

"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Just like Nathanael with his prejudice against Nazareth, all of us have our prejudices.

This is inevitable, because what we are and what we believe is shaped by our background and our experience in life.

Prejudices can extend to almost any area of life.

For example, we probably all have our own political prejudices.

It can be all too easy to be so carried away by one's support for an ideology or a party that one begins to think that everything promoted by that ideology or party is right and good, and that everything espoused by another party is wrong and evil.

But this can be a slippery slope, and one can all too easily end up justifying all sorts of evils, merely because they are carried out by followers of the party or movement that one supports.

Then there are religious prejudices. We live in an age of great tolerance to those who follow different Christian traditions, but we may still find it difficult to show tolerance to those whose beliefs and practices are very different from our own.

And this can all too easily be the case with regard to the followers of other religions.

In the present climate, following recent acts of terrorism, it might be easy to feel some prejudice against Muslims, even though rationally we know that most Muslims are decent people who would be very much opposed to such acts of violence.

It is also quite possible to feel prejudice against anyone who is different from oneself, whether because of racial or ethnic differences, or differences in social background or way of life.

Or else, one can be prejudiced against an idea or a new way of doing things, rather against a person.

Prejudice in its worst form is an evil, because it can blind us to the true qualities of others, and lead us to treat them unfairly.

Ultimately, the dividing line between prejudice and persecution can be a very thin one.

Yet all of us have some prejudices, and the important thing is that we recognise what these are, and at the very least try to be fair in our assessment and treatment of others.

We should try to be more like Philip than Nathanael in the first instance.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”, asked Nathanael.

“Come and see,” said Philip.

In the event, Nathanael was prepared, after he had met Jesus, to set aside his previous prejudices against him because of his origin.

Indeed, he could not have spoke more highly in his acclamation of Jesus: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

First Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date:

11 January, 2015

The service was led by The Revd. Dr. Keith Albans who focussed on the significance of Jesus' baptism.

It reminds us of the continuity of the power and presence of God while marking a new stage in the life of Christ. The three readings together can be seen as a representation of the Trinity.

Lectionary readings: Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7.

Hymns:

RS 187 Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness

RS 134 On Jordan's bank

CG 29 when I receive the Peace of Christ

CG 32 She sits like a bird

RS 131 The voice of God goes out

Sermon:

The Baptism of Jesus

(This sermon was delivered from notes rather than a full script:)

Occasions when the Church year seems to move too quickly? Because we have so few details of Jesus' childhood, we're forced to grapple with his adult life almost immediately... So Tuesday was Epiphany – the baby Jesus welcomes the Magi – now he's grown up and ready to be baptised. What's more, 44 days from today is Ash Wednesday – so we've got quite a lot to pack in!

As a Methodist, our tradition of a Covenant Service in New Year, made for a dislocation between the infancy bit of Epiphany and the baptism... But for the Eastern Orthodox they belong together – and that is significant. (Iconography...)

Feast of Epiphany – Feast of Lights... Blessing of waters and Baptism of believers. (NB Anglicans Online – Australian tradition of eating seafood at Epiphany parties, having swimming races culminating in the traditional Greek contest of the recovery of the cross.) European Catholic tradition of the blessing of the Chalks and inscribing above the lintels: 20+C+M+B+15

So the story of Jesus' Baptism is a kind of buffer story, combining the spiritualised Manifestation (Theophany / Epiphany) with the physical beginning of the earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is also an amazing Short Story – only a few verses long, and yet it contains so much.

- John is baptising... (setting is different in each of the synoptic gospels)
- The baptism itself
- Heavens opened
- Dove descends
- Voice affirms – the 3-point sermon is born!

I don't want to preach that one! Instead I want us to think about that story for clues about Jesus, clues about God and clues about ourselves.

FOR JESUS

Gospels see it as key – placed at the beginning of Ministry of Jesus – indeed many argue it was the beginning of the original corpus of the Jesus material

The heavens open – he is shown the context in which he lives. God is saying, 'you are here.'

This is the starting point, and the finishing point. Know where you are.

A dove descends – a symbol of purity as given by the poor – c.f. Mary and Joseph at the Presentation in the Temple. Therefore a symbol of both humility and power. Know what you are.

A voice affirms – God claims Jesus his own and affirms him. The divine seal of approval is given to someone ready to be counted among the sinful human race, demonstrating humility. Know who you are.

WHAT ABOUT THE GOD OF JESUS?

The most influential quotation I've ever known – Michael Ramsey – "God is Christlike, and in him no unchristlikeness is known." It is I believe key to understanding God as known and revealed in Jesus.

Taken together with the other Lectionary readings – there is a real elemental feeling, of events stripped to their bare bones...

Trinitarian issues... The introduction of the three persons of God acting in one event? Father speaks, Spirit descends, Son is ready to act... Unity / Diversity / Continuity....

God of new beginnings – Genesis 1 – Spirit & Water; Paul in Ephesus – they have been baptized but not received the Spirit – so Paul prays and lays hands on them and they do...

There is a humility in the telling of the story of the baptism... c.f. Jesus receiving the Dove symbol. After the hype of Christmas, this is so important for us to remember...

In baptism then, as God identifies with Jesus, so Jesus identifies with the way of God.

PARADOX – Heaven's opened – 'Rain'. The Dove descending – could have been a pigeon!

Hearing voices – delusion. There remains at the core of our understanding of God, as revealed by Jesus, a paradox. The ordinary is placed in the context of the eternal. There is paradox in each part of the story:

Heaven is opened – but Jesus is being washed of his sins in humility and obedience

God's power is given – but is shown by a dove, a symbol of gentleness and poverty

Jesus is affirmed by God – who accepts baptism and humility, and chooses the way of the cross.

SO WHAT ABOUT US?

For Jesus it is a beginning, and for God is another act of self-revelation, but what of us?

Called into being – co-creators with God, stewards of creation, bearers of the word, members of the Body of Christ – Covenant Service

I want to make three affirmations based on all that I've said so far – they are, if you like, the ground of our being – c.f. New Year's Resolutions.

- Our faith is grounded in the Christlike God. (nb w.r.t recent world events)
- The way of Jesus is the hard way, but the right way because it is God's way and therefore must be our way
- In our calling, we have all been called God's children – claim your inheritance!

Theophany / Epiphany – Light / Voice. Not once, but every day – in us and through us.

Epiphany Sunday

Service Date:

4 January, 2015

The service was led by St. Andrew's Worship Group and reflected on the significance of the visit of the Magi.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 187 Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

We three kings of Orient are

Rejoice and Sing 182 How brightly beams the morning star

Rejoice and Sing 183 Brightest and best of the sons of the morning

Sermon:

There was no sermon but a series of comments on the bible readings.

Matthew Chapter 2 verses 1 - 12

Isaiah Chapter 60 verses 1 - 6

Second book of Corinthians Chapter 5 verses 11 - 17

Psalms 72 verses 1 - 7 and 10 - 14