

Christmas Day

Service Date:

25 December, 2016

A short service of celebration led by The Revd. Robert Beard. Children and adults were encouraged to bring an unopened gift to the service. The children presented a short playlette on the theme of bullying.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 181 of the Father's love begotten

Rejoice and Sing 169 Unto us a boy is born

Rejoice and Sing 170 What child is this

Rejoice and Sing 161 Good Christians all, rejoice

Rejoice and Sing 159 Hark! the herald angels sing

Sermon:

Readings

Isaiah chapter 9 verses 2 - 7

Luke chapter 2 verses 1 - 20

There was no sermon

Fourth Sunday in Advent. Service of lessons and carols

Service Date:

18 December, 2016

The service was planned by Organist and Choir Master Douglas Jones and the Choir. It consisted of traditional readings, carols and congregational hymns. There was no sermon.

Hymns:

Once in Royal David's city

God is working his purpose out

The angel Gabriel

O come all ye faithful

Sermon:

There was no sermon.

Third Sunday in Advent and Invitation Service.

Service Date:

11 December, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard and Deacon Tesfa Teferi. The Revd. Beard preached on John the Baptist.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 144 It came upon the midnight clear

Open my eyes, that I may see

Heralds of Christ

Rejoice and Sing 293 Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim

Sermon:

Readings

Isaiah chapter 35 verses 1 - 10

The Magnificat found at Rejoice and Sing 739

James chapter 5 verses 7 - 10

Matthew chapter 11 verses 2 - 11 read in Amharic

Is he the One?

His persistence in interviews, his refusal to be intimidated, his insistence on straight answers and his deep love of the English language, have all combined over the years to make me quite a fan of BBC Radio 4's *Today* presenter John Humphreys. So I wonder what he would have made of Jesus, who rarely gave straight Yes/No answers, but almost habitually responded to a question with a question, or with a story followed by a question, or – as in this morning's Gospel reading – a response that said something like, "Well, look at the evidence and make up your own minds."

Things had gone very badly for John, although he surely knew that publicly criticising King Herod Antipas (or Antipater) for marrying his own brother Herod II (or Herod Philip)'s wife was unlikely to lead him to fortune and glory; on the contrary, it led to his being incarcerated, pending all-but-inevitable execution. It's hardly surprising, then, that John should be wondering whether it had all been worth it: whether his kinsman Jesus, whom he had proclaimed as the Messiah, was in fact the 'real deal'. So, unable to meet Jesus himself, he sends his own disciples to ask him a very simple, straightforward question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Just a few of the questions asked in the gospels resonate down the ages: "What must I do to be saved?", "Who is my neighbour?", "What is truth?" ... and John's question here. Matthew records John's question, because in writing his gospel it's the question he himself seeks to answer for his readers, a question which still confronts anyone who takes a serious interest in Jesus. The way we answer it defines our own relationship with Jesus.

It's a question that Jesus might easily have answered with a simple "Yes" or "No", but he didn't; and had his interrogator been John Humphreys rather than John the Baptist, he might have been in for a rough ride. But much as I admire John Humphreys' dogged refusal to let politicians get away with evasive or woolly answers, in this instance a little discursiveness is entirely appropriate.

I said that our answer to John's question defines our relationship with Jesus; and I contend, therefore, that it's a massively important question, because it has the potential to affect everything about how we view the world and live our lives in it. A simple "Yes" or "No" answer from Jesus would have opened up a can of worms that makes the fallout from the EU referendum look like a squabble over who should eat the last Rolo!

No less a luminary than Sherlock Holmes once remarked, "It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data." The genius of Matthew, following Jesus, is to recognise that had Jesus simply said "Yes", he would have begged many more questions. Like John, like Matthew, we too need more data.

This is exactly what Jesus provides:

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Matthew 11.4-5

Once John has this sort of information, he can make up his own mind, because these kinds of phenomena are Messianic signs, as described in Isaiah 61.1:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,

because the Lord has anointed me;

he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed...

When the Messiah comes to bring in the kingdom, however, it is a matter of more than mere data. Sunday by Sunday we pray, "Thy kingdom come"; but, as Martin Luther reminds us, "God's kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us" (Luther's *Small Catechism*); and elsewhere he states that it is not enough to preach the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts; rather Christ needs to be preached so that he becomes Christ for you and me (Luther's *Freedom of the Christian*). In the end, it is Christ becoming Christ for us that enables us to answer John the Baptist's question in the affirmative.

I have long believed that implicit in Jesus' answer to John, and in all his seemingly (but not actually) evasive answers to other people's questions, is a call to grow up. Christians have habitually used child and parent imagery to describe our relationship with God, just as the Old Testament does and as Jesus himself taught his disciples to do.

But to be a child is not to be always an infant. I adored my children when they were babies and toddlers, but it would have grieved me beyond measure had they not developed the capacity to grow up and become the interesting, charming, compassionate and independent adults they are today. For our own – or anyone's children with whom we interact – part of our role in the nurturing process is knowing when to stop giving immediate and easy answers to every question they ask, and instead encouraging them to work out the answers for themselves, by weighing up the evidence and drawing their own conclusions. This is sometimes described as the transition from adult-child to adult-adult relationships. Of course, our children will always be our children; but surely we feel, as parents, guardians, carers, teachers and mentors, a sense of achievement and fulfilment on seeing them gradually take control of their own lives and start making their own decisions, even if their lives don't always follow the paths we might have anticipated or hoped for.

The purpose of our being disciples of Jesus the Messiah, then, is to seek our own answers to John's question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" To do this, we must choose whether to accept or reject Jesus' answer, with its call to seek out and consider the evidence, and to draw our own conclusions.

Revd Robert Beard BD

Second Sunday in Advent and celebration of Holy Communion

Service Date:

4 December, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Dr. David Stec. In his sermon the Revd. Stec explored what is distinctive about how St. Matthew presents John the Baptist in his Gospel. Significantly, Matthew states that Jesus is the longed-for ideal king described in the writings of the prophets; and Matthew believed the John shared with Jesus in the proclamation of the Gospel message.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 126 O come, O come, Immanuel
Rejoice and Sing 137 Hark, the glad sound! the Saviour comes
Rejoice and Sing 440 Author of life divine
Rejoice and Sing 605 Son of God, eternal Saviour

Sermon:

Readings

Isaiah chapter 11 verses 1 - 10

Psalm 72 found at Rejoice and Sing 700

Romans chapter 15 verses 4 - 13

Matthew chapter 3 verses 1 - 12

Matt 3:1-2: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' "

In all four of the Gospels John the Baptist paves the way for the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The first three Gospels give some account of John's preaching ministry, his practice of baptism and his baptism of Jesus. The fourth Gospel attaches much importance to John's testimony of Jesus at the outset of Jesus's ministry; and although this Gospel does not directly describe the baptism of Jesus, it strongly hints of it. Jesus greatly admired John, and his baptism by John meant a lot to him; and at a later date when John was put to death by Herod Antipas, Jesus was deeply affected by what had happened. John the Baptist was such an important figure in Judaeen society at that time that the Jewish historian Josephus has slightly more to say about John than he does about Jesus.

Today I would like to explore what is distinctive about how St Matthew presents John to us in his gospel. St Luke, being the careful historian that he was, opens his account of John's work by setting it in its precise historical context. He notes that this took place: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

St Matthew, however, begins simply with the words, "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea." Yet, few and simple though these words are, they are packed with significance. The phrase "in those days" is a common enough biblical formula, being found some 36 times in the OT, and a further 19 times in the NT. It immediately invites the reader to ask, "In what days?", and thus to look back at the preceding context. St Matthew has given his account of the nativity of Jesus, followed by the flight of Jesus's family into Egypt, and then their return and settlement in Galilee.

But in St Matthew's Gospel these events too have their setting in a still wider context. He opens his Gospel with the words, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." And then he traces the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham, through David, and down to Jesus via Joseph the husband of Mary. In other words, the whole history of the Jewish nation has led up to the point where "in those days" a particular descendant of David has been born and grown to adulthood; and this sets the scene for the work of John the Baptist.

In New Testament times the Jewish people were looking with eager expectation for a Messiah, who was above all to be a “son of David”. This hope is firmly rooted in the OT. One of the finest expressions of it is to be found in Isaiah 11:1-10, which opens with the words, “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” The prophet who wrote these words likened the state of his nation to the stump of a tree which had been felled. The reign of David the son of Jesse had been something of a golden age for the united kingdom of Israel, but at the time of the prophet Isaiah Northern Israel was conquered by the mighty Assyrian empire, and the smaller southern kingdom of Judah lived under the shadow of the same threat, and was in a sorry moral condition. Yet Isaiah could look forward to a time when a shoot could come from this stump of Jesse and a branch out of its roots.

He looked forward to a truly amazing future figure, about whom he could say, “And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.” He would act as judge who would promote justice for the poorer and weaker members of society, and slay the wicked. Righteousness would be the girdle of his waist, and faithfulness the girdle of his loins. Several other passages in the writings of the prophets also express a similar hope in a future ideal king, who would be a descendant of David. But the passage in Isaiah 11:1-10 is perhaps the finest expression of this hope. Isaiah and the other prophets may have had in mind someone in the near future, a figure who would arise in the historical circumstances in which they found themselves.

But by NT times the hope that they expressed had been developed into an expectation that in the fullness of time God would send his Messiah, a descendant of David who would deliver the Jewish nation from the occupation of the Romans, and would rule with justice and equity, and promote the laws of God. Matthew in his genealogy of Jesus and account of the nativity is telling us that just such a figure has come into the world and is waiting to be revealed. It is precisely “in those days” that John the Baptist begins his ministry, and sets in motion the process of introducing this Messiah to the world. In fact, the very appearance of John was of great significance in this respect.

In Jewish circles there was a belief that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by the return of Elijah, who would bring about the repentance of Israel, and restore things to the right order. This belief was based in part on the final words of the writings of the prophets, at the end of the Book of Malachi: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.”

Thus the Gospel writers present John the Baptist as Elijah, who has returned to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. Matthew (following Mark) tells us, “Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair, and a leather girdle around his waist”, which recalls the characteristic dress of Elijah, as described in 2 Kings 1:8. More importantly, John came preaching a message which required repentance, and thus fulfilled the role of Elijah in preparing the way for the Messiah. The baptism offered by John was an outward sign of this repentance.

Both Mark and Matthew record that those who went to him for baptism in the river Jordan were baptised confessing their sins. Matthew and Luke record some harsh words of John to those who came for baptism, but whose repentance was not sincere. Matthew says that these were Pharisees and Sadducees, but Luke simply refers to them as “the multitudes”. John was evidently a very popular figure, and numerous people from the area around Jerusalem, and even from wider afield in Judaea came to him for baptism. One can suppose that some would have been genuinely eager to hear John’s teaching and to learn from him. Others would have come simply out of curiosity to see who he was and why he was so popular. Very likely, some would have come only to find fault, without any real intention of making any changes to their lives. To all of these people John preached the same message of repentance.

Matthew alone records that John preached using words identical to those that Jesus would later use at the beginning of his ministry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (4:17). Thus Matthew suggests more directly than any of the other Gospel writers that John shared with Jesus in the proclamation of the Gospel. The phrase “kingdom of heaven” is found exclusively in St Matthew’s Gospel; it occurs 32 times, and in 31 of these it is on the lips of Jesus. The only other person to have used this phrase is John the Baptist. The other Gospels record that Jesus frequently spoke about the kingdom of God, but Matthew preferred to use the phrase “kingdom of heaven”, probably for reverential purposes, preferring to avoid the word “God”, though “kingdom of God” is found 4 times in his Gospel. Matthew alone of the of the Gospel writers quotes John’s words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”, and this gives an even greater significance to John. For John had not only come as an Elijah figure to prepare the Jewish people to receive their Messiah.

But, according to Matthew, right from the beginning John was sharing with Jesus in the proclamation of this Gospel message. Advent is a time when we prepare to receive our saviour. We can only be truly ready to receive him, when our hearts are in a right state. John calls upon us to repent, and promises that the very kingdom of heaven is at hand. Advent is the beginning of the Christian year. We have already put the old year behind us, with whatever failings and shortcoming we may have had in our Christian life. And we look forward to welcoming our saviour anew, and going forward on our Christian journey.

First Sunday in Advent and celebration of St. Andrew

Service Date:

27 November, 2016

Many friends from the Caledonian Society of Sheffield were present. Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. He preached on St. Triduana who is depicted in the stained glass window in the church depicting St Andrew and St Regulus. She is reputed to have accompanied St Regulus when he brought the bones of St. Andrew to St Andrews in Scotland. She took vows as a Holy Virgin and went to drastic lengths to resist the attentions of the Pictish king Nechtan. We were asked the question - how far would we go, what are we prepared to do, to avoid breaking vows and promises?

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 130 Behold the mountain of the Lord

Rejoice and Sing 727 I joy'd when to the house of God (setting of psalm 122)

Rejoice and Sing 370 Soldiers of Crist! Arise

Rejoice and Sing 58 Eternal Father strong to save

Rejoice and Sing 656 Lo! He comes with clouds descending

Sermon:

Readings

- Isaiah chapter 2 verses 1 - 5
- Romans chapter 13 verses 11 - 14
- Matthew chapter 24 verses 36 - 44 read from the Scottish Bible

Eyes on Stalks!

Vows: Baptismal vows, Confirmation vows, Marriage vows, Godparents' vows, Ordination vows, the Hippocratic Oath, oaths sworn in court, promises made to friends, promises made to children... What steps would you take, and to what lengths would you go, to avoid breaking them?

This time last year, as I trust those of you who were here will remember – in detail! – I preached on St Regulus, whom tradition tells us was a fourth century monk from Patras in Greece, best known for bringing the bones of St Andrew to St Andrews where a great cathedral was erected in the Apostle's honour which became one of the principal European centres of pilgrimage throughout the Middle Ages.

This morning, I have another saint with strong Scottish connections for you: Saint Triduana, also known as Trallen, Tredwell, Trodline and in Norse as Trøllhaena. All that historians are reasonably sure of is that she was an early Christian woman, associated with various places in Scotland, who lived at an unknown time probably between the fourth and fifth centuries AD.

As with Regulus, however, the traditional stories about how she came to be regarded as a saint are absolutely fascinating, and not unconnected with the church in which we are worshipping this morning.

In 1507, Edinburgh printers Walter Chepman and Androw Myllar produced a beautiful book containing all the liturgical texts for praying the Roman Catholic daily services or 'offices': the psalms, Bible readings, writings of the Church Fathers, hymns and prayers, many of them derived from much older texts developed during the early centuries of Christianity. Such books, known as 'breviaries', were in common use from the early fifteenth century onwards throughout western Christendom, and are still used today in the Roman Catholic Church and some Anglican traditions.

Chepman and Myllar's book is known as the *Aberdeen Breviary*, and in addition to the Holy Offices, it contained biographies – or, strictly speaking, hagiographies – of some of the Scottish saints, among which is an account of the life of St Triduana.

According to the *Aberdeen Breviary*, Triduana was born in the Greek city of Colossae, took vows as a Holy Virgin, and joined Regulus at Constantinople on his long, dangerous voyage to Scotland with the bones of Saint Andrew in the fourth century AD.

The Breviary, however, adds to this account a medieval tradition that places her in the eighth century. In this second story, set in 710 AD, Triduana is described as a pious woman, the companion of St Boniface of Jarrow who undertook a missionary journey to Pictland – now northern and eastern Scotland – at the invitation of the Pictish king Nechtan. Settling at Rescobie near Forfar in Angus, Triduana was distressed to find that her beauty had attracted the unwanted attentions of Nechtan. The king sent message after message to Triduana, telling her how awed he was by her beauty, especially her dazzling eyes, and imploring her to marry him. Unable in good conscience to break her vow of virginity, in a desperate attempt to put him off Triduana tore out her eyes, impaled them on twigs and sent them to the king.

Baptismal vows, Confirmation vows, Marriage vows, Godparents' vows, Ordination vows, the Hippocratic Oath, oaths sworn in court, promises made to friends, promises made to children... What steps would you take, and to what lengths would you go, to avoid breaking them?

At some point, it seems that Triduana took up residence in Restalrig, just outside Edinburgh, and eventually died there after a life devoted to fasting and prayer. The church at Restalrig housed her relics and her devotees flocked there, especially after King James III of Scotland made it a Chapel Royal in 1477. In 1545, a sacristan of the church noted that it had "a chamber and garden beside the church with the offerings made to the altar to maintain the lower aisle of the church, the altar of Saint Triduana therein situate, the books, wax candles, and other necessities."

The parish church at Restalrig has been rebuilt, but the lower storey of the fifteenth-century St Triduana's Aisle survives as a partly subterranean structure which often flooded in the past, and was at one time assumed to be an unusually large and elaborate holy well dedicated to Triduana. The exterior of the aisle was heavily restored by the architect Thomas Ross in 1907, though its interior (which has a remarkable echo) retains its original rib-vault, and is a refined example of Scottish 15th-century architecture. Not unnaturally, Triduana became closely associated with disorders of an ophthalmological nature, and, as you might anticipate, there are several accounts of miraculous healings taking place at her shrine.

According to the Norse saga known as the *Orkneyinga*, in the twelfth century the Norse Earl of Orkney, Harald Maddadsson, punished Bishop John of Caithness by having him blinded. John prayed to 'Trøllhaena', and later regained his sight when brought to her 'resting place'. Another such miracle is recorded in the seventeenth century *Acta Sanctorum*, or 'Acts of the Saints' and recounts the story of a blind Englishwoman experiencing a dream in which Triduana told her to visit the shrine, and being cured of blindness when she did so. Furthermore, the woman's daughter is also said to have been cured of blindness after praying to Triduana.

The Church minister and antiquarian John Brand, in his *Brief Description of Orkney* published in 1700, was fascinated by chapel dedicated to Triduana on Papa Westray, recording that people used to come to it from other isles, and that in front of the chapel door was a small cairn,

"into which the Superstitious People when they come, do cast a small stone or two for their offering, and some will cast in Money... [the loch is] held by the People as Medicinal... As a certain Gentleman's Sister upon the Isle, who was not able to go to this Loch without help yet returned without it, as likewise a Gentleman in the Countrey who was much distressed, with sore Eyes, went to this Loch and Washing there became sound and whole, tho' he had been at much pains and expence to cure them formerly... with both which persons he who was Minister of the place for many years was well acquainted and told us that he saw them both before and after the Cure: The present minister of Westra told me that such as are able to walk use to go so many times about the Loch as they think will perfect the cure before they make any use of the water, and that without speaking to any... not long since, he went to this Loch and found six so making their circuit... As for this Loch's appearing like Blood, before any disaster befal the Royal Family, as some do report, we could find no ground to believe any such thing."

In the nineteenth century, another Minister of Westray, John Armit, noted that "Such was the veneration entertained by the inhabitants for this ancient saint, that it was with difficulty that the first Presbyterian minister of the parish could restrain them, of a Sunday morning, from paying their devotions at this ruin, previous to their attendance on public worship in the reformed church. Wonders, in the way of cure of bodily disease, are said to have been wrought by this saint, whose fame is now passed away and name almost forgotten."

Other dedications to Triduana include chapels at Ballachly in Caithness and Loth in Sutherland. What, then is the connection between St Triduana and our own church building?

Well, those of you who are particularly familiar with the building will perhaps already be aware – and others may have noticed this morning – that our stained glass window in the south wall, which depicts St Andrew and St Regulus, also depicts a young woman with the inscription 'S. Triduana'. If you have, well done! What you may not have noticed, however – and certainly no one has ever pointed it out to me – is that Triduana is shown as blind and holds in her hand a branched twig... on which are impaled her beautiful eyes! Baptismal vows, Confirmation vows, Marriage vows, Godparents' vows, Ordination vows, the Hippocratic Oath, oaths sworn in court, promises made to friends, promises made to children... What steps would you take, and what lengths would you go to, to avoid breaking them?

Christ the King

Service Date:

20 November, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Walter Houston who preached on the role of leaders and kings and their responsibility to those whom they rule.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 292 When morning gilds the skies

Rejoice and Sing 638 Thy kingdom come, O God

Rejoice and Sing 257 The head that once was crowned with thorns

Rejoice and Sing 262 Crown him with many crowns

Sermon:

Readings

- Jeremiah chapter 23 verses 1 - 6
- Canticle: The Benedictus found at Rejoice and Sing 738. The Song of Zechariah taken from Luke chapter 1 verses 68 - 79.
- Luke chapter 23 verses 33 - 43

Sermon

Jeremiah 23:5: *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*

Politics have changed a lot since Jeremiah's day. In his day rulers were kings. He calls them 'shepherds'. Today we have democracy and elections. The American people have just elected a president after a bitterly-fought and rancorous campaign. At the same time they elected a Congress and many state officials including governors and legislators. Here a little earlier in the year we had a change of government without an election, but the government still depends on the support of a House of Commons elected by the people. The Queen is still the official head of state, yet as they say she reigns but does not rule. She approves laws and appoints governments, but only according to strict conventions which leave her with no choice and which she could not break without causing a constitutional crisis. Kings in Jeremiah's day were absolute monarchs who had no constitutional restrictions on their power, and could do exactly as they pleased.

Actually, in practice it wasn't quite true that they could do what they liked. Judah was under the thumb of much more powerful kingdoms, first Assyria, then Egypt and finally Babylon, and they couldn't do exactly what they wanted in the field of foreign affairs: they were tied by the treaties they had agreed to with those more powerful kings, and woe betide them if they tried to rebel. That is why eventually Jerusalem was destroyed and the kingdom came to an end. They had more freedom in internal matters, but every sensible king had a council of advisers and paid attention to them.

And there was another very important thing. We see from the Bible that prophets were ready to criticize kings. And much more broadly there was a sense in the population as a whole of what was expected of a king, of what, as they saw it, God expected of a king. Prophets might bring that to expression, speaking in the name of God. And that is what you get here in our reading from Jeremiah.

Yet, for all that has changed, the basic responsibilities of a head of state or government were the same then as they are now: to protect and defend his people (or hers), and to ensure justice in the country. That comes out in our reading from Jeremiah.

This passage begins by denouncing kings over the years who failed to take proper care of God's people, who in fact have failed in their fundamental responsibility as kings, to protect the people. It uses a very old image for kingship, the image of the shepherd, and denounces the shepherds who over the years have 'destroyed and scattered the flock'. That is a pretty serious accusation, but doesn't exaggerate very much. Besides not looking after basic social justice in the kingdom, they had had foreign policy ambitions which went way beyond what

a little kingdom like theirs was able to support. They rebelled again and again against their overlords, and that meant that time and again they suffered punitive expeditions from the great powers, which ended with Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem and annexation of the country. Ordinary people on an enormous scale suffered and died, through the destruction of war, famine and disease, and the deportation of many to Babylonia. In the previous chapter, you get detailed denunciations of individual kings.

But the object of this passage is more positive. Looking back probably on a grim period in the life of Israel and Judah and then looking forward, it assures them that even though their kings have done nothing for them, have left them to be the prey of invading armies and hauled off into exile, still God will see to them, bring them back to their own land and give them kings 'who will shepherd them'. These kings will do what is required of any government. They will shepherd them, they will take care of their needs, and enable them to live in peace, with no invading armies and no deportations: 'nor shall any be missing'. And following on that, we get another prophecy on the same theme, but expressed rather differently. Instead of speaking about a dynasty of kings, it speaks of one king. 'I will raise up for David a righteous branch.' Why a branch? Well, if you think of a family tree, a tree has branches. Often in an old cathedral, you will find in one of the stained glass windows what is called a 'Jesse tree'. It is the family tree of Jesus, essentially, beginning with Jesse the father of David. Unlike the family trees which we create today, it is the same way up as a real tree with its roots, the first ancestor, at the bottom, and its branches, the descendants, towards the top. So this prophecy promises a king who will be a descendant of David and will be 'righteous': he will behave as a king should behave, 'and he will execute justice and righteousness in the land'.

This phrase 'justice and righteousness' is a very important expression in the Old Testament. It occurs, with variations, about 60 times. Often it is something that kings ought to do, not just be, but do. About as often the words express how God rules the world. Again very often it expresses an ideal of society without saying who ought to maintain it. In one sense it is obvious what it means: it expresses the way in which a human community ought to be ordered, where those who are in power treat those under them kindly and humanely, where people who take advantage of others are punished, where people's work is rewarded, where everything that we might call just and right is done. But it also includes, besides the ordinary duty of ensuring justice is done in the courts, some quite specific measures which kings were expected to enforce from time to time, annulling debts, relieving people of heavy taxes, freeing slaves, ensuring that families could retain their own land and didn't become the victims of the rich and powerful. Most important, the biblical writers are constantly emphasizing that it is God's justice that kings are to enforce. 'God, give the king your justice, and your righteousness to a king's son' begins Psalm 72. Because God himself loves justice, as another psalm says.

So this promised king of David's line is to be given by God to the people, to do justice and righteousness in this sense, ensuring that the people he rules live together in harmony and peace, justice and blessedness.

For all the changes since those days, this ideal of kingship is not out of date. How could it be? It is a standard that every government and government of every kind should be

expected to meet. And to be absolutely fair, there are a great many more countries today than in biblical times which make a pretty fair fist of meeting it, even though few would claim to be inspired by God or implementing a religious standard. That doesn't matter. Governments are ordained by God whether or not they recognize it. They need to come up to God's standard whether or not they know it is God's. And if they don't, if their prisons are clogged with political prisoners, if they refuse to help the downtrodden, or protect exploited workers or welcome the refugee, if they have one law for the rich and another for the poor, or one law for one race or religious group and another for another, if they treat some people differently from others on the basis of where they come from or what religion they belong to, then they will have to account for it at the bar of the God who proclaims the coming of the righteous Branch. And at that tribunal they will not have the defence of saying, 'But I was the people's choice and that is what they wanted.' Right is right whether the people want it or not.

That particular prophecy, that promise and expectation and hope, was kept alive among the Jewish people for centuries. The song which Luke puts into the mouth of Zechariah at the birth of his son John the Baptist is a good expression of the hope: 'The Lord has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, born of the house of his servant David'. Christians have been convinced right from the start that Jesus fulfilled that centuries-old hope. That is why he was given the name 'Christ', the Greek Christos, a translation of the Hebrew Mashiah, Messiah, meaning 'anointed one', because the kings of Israel, and Christian kings since, have been anointed with oil. That is still the religious heart of our coronation ritual, for all that we call it a coronation rather than an anointing and centre the spectacle on the crown.

Yet in any ordinary sense you couldn't see Jesus fulfilling the hope expressed in the Jeremiah verse. He never filled a throne, was never literally anointed, never exercised political power, never ruled Israel and Judah with justice and right or in any other way. He was born, it appears, in a cowshed, was brought up a carpenter's son, spent a year or two as a wandering preacher and healer, and was then arrested, underwent a process of trial, and was executed. So far as the world knew, that was the end of him.

But that account doesn't tell the whole truth, even in its own worldly terms. For the charge on which he was condemned was one of claiming to be 'king of the Jews'. Those are the terms the Roman governor used in writing out the charge sheet over his head: he himself would have expressed it slightly differently, but he never denied making that claim. How could he? He had entered Jerusalem on a donkey and to the ringing cheers of his supporters in fulfilment of the prophecy in Zechariah: 'Rejoice, Zion, for your king comes to you, humble and riding on an ass.' But that led, as he knew all along that it would, to his arrest and execution.

What kind of king decides to claim his kingship by running straight into the power of his enemies, and even forbids his followers to resist his arrest? One who knows that by his death he will achieve more for justice and righteousness, or as he himself put it, for the kingdom of God, more than by anything he could do in his life, when in any case he was hemmed in by the power of the Roman empire, a set-up as fundamentally opposed to genuine justice and right as empires generally are. One who knows, also, that his God and Father can intervene on his behalf at the time and in the manner that he thinks best. That

intervention we know as his resurrection. So it is by the route of his death that Jesus enters on his kingship. And his death is the price gladly paid for his offer to all of a new start in the kingdom of God, leaving their sins and failures behind: in that sense, as Christians said from the start, 'he died for our sins.'

When the robber asks him 'Remember me when you begin your kingly reign', Jesus answers, 'Today you will be with me in paradise'. Is that a politician's answer, not really answering the question, saying something about 'today' rather than the distant day when all will acknowledge him as king, or is it a straightforward answer, in that Jesus' death leads straight to his resurrection in glory? I think Luke means us to understand the latter. Jesus submits to death here on earth to be enthroned in glory in heaven. Or to strip the idea of the mythical trappings of the three-decker universe, he loses his earthly life and any chance of political power to take up risen life, and power over the hearts and minds of his people. And that realm is potentially universal, which is why Christians have always hoped for the future fulfilment of his reign, often expressing it in the symbol of his coming again.

But all this is result of his submission to death by crucifixion. This was a criminal's execution, but more than that, it was a mode of execution reserved by the Romans for slaves and people they regarded as no better than slaves, such as lower-class provincials. It was the ultimate humiliation. The New Testament never says anything about the pain of his death, though it must have been excruciating, but often underlines its shame and humiliation. As Paul expresses it, 'he emptied himself and took the form of a slave... he humbled himself, being obedient even to death, death on a cross (and those who heard Paul's letter read, as soon as they heard 'cross', would have associated this idea with it: the punishment of slaves). Therefore God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'

And it is now this path through humiliation that is the proper model for anyone who aspires to power, be it on whatever a scale, from prime minister down to someone who runs a workshop with two assistants: the first law is to remember that you are no better than those you rule, and your power is given you for them and not for you. Only so can you truly rule 'in justice and right'. But I fear this is a message for which many powerful people are not ready.

Let us hope that Donald Trump is.

Remembrance Sunday

Service Date:

13 November, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. Our organist and Choir Master Douglas Jones wrote special trumpet descants for the hymns. Gordon Truman, trumpeter, enhanced the service by his playing of The Last Post, Reveille, the descants to the hymns and a wonderful closing voluntary with Douglas for organ and trumpet.

For his sermon the Revd. Beard shared the story of a young man who chose to be a conscientious objector in the war. However, his mother reported him and he was sent to Cyprus as a radio engineer. He witnessed appalling atrocities fuelled by the inability to see others as equal humans.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 132 Wake, o wake
Rejoice and Sing 705 O God, our help in ages past
Common Ground 141 What shall we pray for those who died
Rejoice and Sing 620 For the healing of the nations
Rejoice and Sing 546 March on, my soul, with strength

Sermon:

Readings

Isaiah chapter 65 verses 17 - 25

Second letter to the Thessalonians chapter 3 verses 6 - 13

Luke chapter 21 verses 5 - 19

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

6 November, 2016

Worship was led by Mrs. Jenny Carpenter who preached on two topics - suffering and difficulties in life are not a case of 'what we deserve' and 'what are heaven and the afterlife like? (or rather, not like !)

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 589 How firm a foundation
Rejoice and Sing 278 I know that my Redeemer lives
Rejoice and Sing 408 My God how wonderful Thou art
Rejoice and Sing 195 Lord of the Dance

Sermon:

People of the Resurrection I

"I know that my Redeemer liveth and that he shall stand at the last day upon the earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God"

Opening of the 3rd part of Handel's Messiah.

Perhaps the best known personal statement of faith in the saving love of God through Jesus Christ. It chimes with Paul's teaching on the Resurrection especially in I Corinthians 15 on which The Messiah also draws. Yet it is from a strange and difficult book in the Old Testament, the book of Job. This book is difficult to date and we have no idea who wrote it. Parts are wonderful poetry – I learned "And where shall wisdom be found, and where is the place of understanding?" for a Choral Speaking competition in my teens.

In the passage we heard read, Job is claiming to have a "go'el" or a powerful advocate, who will present his case to God. A go'el might avenge the blood of a relative or redeem property or recover stolen property, ransom a relative sold into slavery or marry a childless widow and raise children for her deceased husband cf Boaz and Ruth. So in the hope of eventually finding someone able to present his case to God better than he himself can, Job is sure that he will be found not to be a sinner, that the extremities of his suffering will eventually be over and he will be restored to life and health.

The point of the story is that **suffering is not an automatic punishment for sin**. The Psalmist seems to think it should be! Job doesn't get to the bottom of why human suffering exists, but recognises that God's plan for his creation allows it and yet transcends it. Many people today cry "Why is this happening to me?" to which the answer, at least some of the time must be "Why not? Things happen! That's life!

*" The rain it raineth every day upon the just and unjust fella
But chiefly on the just because the unjust's nicked the just's umbrella"*

In the long discourse in St. John's gospel about the healing of the man born blind the disciples ask "*Did this man sin or was it his parents?*" and Jesus says — "*neither is the case, you've got it wrong, but the good news is that this is an opportunity to see the saving power of God at work and give him the glory.*"

People of the Resurrection II

What's your idea of heaven? Eating pate de fois gras to the sound of trumpets?
Swing low sweet chariot *Sydney Smith*
Coming for to carry me home!

*I got shoes, You got shoes
All God's children got shoes!
When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes
And walk all over God's heaven!*

The Sadducees who did not believe in life after death, asked a stupid hypothetical question about which wife a man who had serially had several wives would be married to in heaven. Jesus shows quite clearly his own belief in an after life, but says its not like that, "no marrying" and a completely different kind of loving relationship.

In medieval times it was the usual practice to bury people with their feet to the east so that they would be as it were facing towards the rising sun and be ready to arise at the Day of Judgement! I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.

*My Lord, what a morning, X3
When de stars begin to fall.
You'll hear de trumpet sound
To wake de nations underground
My Lord, what a morning
When de stars begin to fall.*

The Christians in Thessalonica were expecting the imminent return of Jesus and the end of the world. In this second letter they are told that there will be rebellion against God led by "the lawless one" who will put himself in the place of God.

But they, as brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord have been saved and are being sanctified by the Spirit and by faith. This knowledge is a source of eternal comfort, so stand firm, whatever trials may come your way. (Echoes of Job, here). *The American personality*, Felicia Manning says "*You won't know when you have made it to heaven unless you have walked through hell first.*"

Because God has raised Jesus, we have the expectation of sharing in his risen life now and in eternity. We are a resurrection people, but we are living in the "in-between times". Eternal

life is more a quality than a quantity. I am convinced that God doesn't want us to know much about heaven I came across this quote from a contemporary American poet called Walterrean Salley " *So little is known about heaven; it is the one surprise God has purposely hidden from those who would go there!*"

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

30 October, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 376 This is the day the Lord has made

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

Rejoice and Sing 433 O thou who camest from above

Rejoice and Sing 650 God with humanity made one

Sermon:

Criminals and Sinners

Luke 19.1-10

Where did it all go wrong for Christianity? There were debates and quarrels even in the Apostolic Church about the use of personal property (Acts 2.44-45, 5.1-11), about who was allowed to heal and who wasn't (Acts 19.13-17) and – most importantly for most of us – about the acceptability of Gentiles as Christians (Acts 15.1-33); but these and other issues were thrashed out and decisions reached, and all continued more or less well.

It has been suggested, however, not least on occasion by me, that the first really fundamental catastrophe to befall the Christian Church was the much vaunted 'conversion' of Constantine and the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Why? Well, let's trace the story and see.

The spread of Christianity was hugely facilitated by the efficient and, above all, relatively safe transport infrastructure that had developed throughout most of the Roman Empire. It's estimated that St Paul travelled some 10,000 miles in 30 years of missionary journeys, which would have been impossible without well-paved roads and well-established international land and sea trade routes. Paul preached in some of the empire's most important cities, but although places like Athens, Colossae, Corinth, Ephesus and Philippi would looked eye-poppingly magnificent even to 21st-century eyes, they were also home to tens of thousands of desperately poor people who were the ideal audience for a message of "good news to the poor". Like Jesus, Paul spoke to people in their homes and synagogues; but he went beyond Jesus, who had preached almost exclusively to Jews, convinced that his message was for Gentiles too.

This meant Paul's taking a more relaxed approach than Jesus had towards his own inherited traditions about food and circumcision. Although this initially drew anger from his Jewish Christian colleagues, it was also a central reason for the rapid spread of Christianity, and as the Gentile membership of the Church increased, so its teaching moved further and further

away from the strict rules imposed on Jews, and gradually Christianity became a new and separate religion.

Despite its growing popularity, to be, or be suspected of being, a Christian could bring enormous risks. Although the followers of Jesus were working hard to spread the message, by the second half of the first century there were still very few Christians in Rome itself, and they were regarded with suspicion. Modern tabloids would have had a field day with important Christian rituals which were portrayed, whether mistakenly or deliberately, as cannibalism; to this day, words concerning “eating the body” and “drinking blood” are still counter-cultural, to put it mildly. I once worked with a young boy who asked to be confirmed because he wanted to drink blood!

Following the great fire of Rome in 64 AD, the Emperor Nero tried to divert his critics' attention away from his own failings by pointing to the Christians as obvious scapegoats; a popular political stratagem then as now. He arrested and tortured all the Christians his security forces could identify and executed them in lavish public spectacles. Some were crucified, some thrown to wild animals and others covered with pitch and burned alive to light the streets. But Nero's persecution of the new Christian sect was brief and, in the first century at least, was not repeated in other parts of the empire. When Pliny the Younger, governor of Bythnia in Asia Minor, wrote to the Emperor Trajan, whose reign (98-117 AD) straddled the end of the first and beginning of the second centuries, asking how he should deal with Christians, Trajan replied that they should not be actively pursued, but that they could be legitimately punished if they were publicly criticised and still refused to abandon their beliefs.

Now let's wind the clock forward a century and a half, to the time of Constantine, 57th Emperor of Rome, who was born c. 272 AD, made ruler of the western empire in 305, and reigned as Emperor of both east and west from 324 until his death in 337. 24 years before his death, in 313 AD, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which gave Christianity legal status and ended its persecution. Constantine's patronage of the Church created precedents for a number of previously unimaginable ideas: the relationship between a Christian political ruler and the Church, the recognition of a geographical area as “Christendom”, the concept of Christian orthodoxy, and the gathering of Church representatives from across the Roman empire in ecumenical councils. Christianity was finally declared to be the official state religion of the Roman empire in 380 by Emperor Theodosius I (born, 347, reigned 392-395), but only in the form defined in the Nicene Creed of 381 AD.

Why am I, and many others, tempted to see this so-called ‘triumph of the Church’ as a catastrophe?

Because with the merging of Church and State, there comes also a merging of religious law with secular law. To be a ‘sinner’ is increasingly perceived as the same as being a ‘criminal’, with the obvious and dangerous consequence that those who do not see themselves as criminals may also stop seeing themselves as sinners. While the Church is separate from the State, a Christian may obey state law to the very letter, but still know him or herself to be a sinner under the law of God, but once state law and religious law are yoked together, a Christian may fool him or herself with the notion that to fulfil the first is also to fulfil the

latter. This attitude still permeates our own social and political life today. How often have we heard, in recent months, politicians and business leaders, many of them Churchgoing Christians, attempt to justify greed and cruelty with the words, "I've done nothing illegal": as though doing nothing illegal were the same as doing nothing wrong? The marriage of Church and State, of religious law with secular law, has given birth to a self-righteousness among many of the most wealthy and powerful people in the western world that has no place in Christianity.

The story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus drops like acid upon this conflation of what is legal with what is righteous.

The narrative is found only in the gospel of St Luke, a physician whose writings concern the health – or wholeness – not only of the body, but also of the soul. In addition, Luke, more than any other evangelist, is consistently concerned about the use of wealth and the concomitant treatment of the poor. In the previous chapter a rich man, when asked to give away all he had, departs from Jesus in sadness (Luke 18.18-23). When Jesus declares that it is impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom without God, the disciples – who, like most their contemporaries, believe wealth a sign of God's favour – are incredulous (Luke 18.24-26). Now, by way of contrast, we meet another rich man, but this time one who receives Jesus with joy, promising to give half of his wealth to the poor, and to restore fourfold any amount he may have taken by fraud. So the story closes with Jesus' pronouncement that the impossible has happened: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19.9).

In describing Zacchaeus as "a son of Abraham", Jesus reminds everyone of the little man's spiritual heritage. Zacchaeus had relied for his comfort and security on the accumulation of great wealth and the power that it gave him. Jesus points out that it is his acceptance of God's saving promises that have now given him true comfort and security.

And what does Jesus mean by the statement of his own mission: "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost"? Jesus does what the nation state had failed to do in the past, and always fails to do: to become a shepherd to lost sheep. Luke has not forgotten, and we must not forget, that Jesus, the Son of David, fulfils the messianic hope that a Davidic king would be restored to Israel, a king called from the sheepfold, a Good Shepherd (cf. Ezekiel 34.2, 4, 16, 22-23, John 10.1-18). In order to find the lost, Jesus must seek the lost and, in cases like Zacchaeus, even the repentant rich find a place among his flock.

Revd Robert Beard BD

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

23 October, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Fleur Houston who preached on the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee praying in the temple. Is it rather unfair that the sinful tax collector is justified?

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 703 How lovely is thy dwelling place

Rejoice and Sing 557 Who would true valour see

Rejoice and Sing 364 Just as I am

Rejoice and Sing 92 Amazing grace

Rejoice and Sing 345 Guide me, O thou great Jehova

Sermon:

Luke 18: 9-14; Jeremiah 14: 7-10

The other day I was browsing through the Macclesfield Express. Like the Sheffield Star it specialises in stories of local boys made good – or more often, local boys made bad! On October 2nd, for instance, a man, who appeared very intoxicated, punched a porter and a security guard while on a visit to Macclesfield hospital. The court learned that he has already 23 convictions for 43 offences, including assault, and some of these were serious. He told the court that he had no idea why he had turned up at A&E; he thought he was looking for help and said he was very sorry for all the trouble he had caused.

Now let's just suppose that this man, still seeking help, still feeling very sorry, creeps into church the following Sunday, he sits at the back, where he won't draw attention to himself, where he hopes nobody will notice him. But one long-standing member comes into the church at about the same time. This man is the very soul of respectability, a pillar of the church, a magistrate, and he recognises our disreputable friend instantly. He is appalled. What is he doing here? What business has someone like him in church? Should he tell the duty elder what he is? But the organ has stopped playing, the Bible is being brought in and the service is about to begin. So he goes to his place at the front of the church. That's where he always sits. And then he starts to pray with a red flush creeping up his neck. He is angry. And his prayer goes something like this: "Lord, you know that this is a decent church, this is a place for honest, good-living men and women. Look at me. I've never cheated on my wife all our married years, I never miss a Sunday service, I support the work of the church most generously and I make regular donations to Commitment for Life, Freedom from Torture and Christian Aid. Not like others who shall remain anonymous and especially not like the fellow at the back of the church". In the meantime, the man at the back of the church is also speaking to God. He is bowed down in misery. He doesn't use fine language or well crafted prayers – what he says is simple and to the point: "God be merciful to me, a sinner".

And suddenly we hear in our minds Jesus's comment: "I tell you, this man went home justified rather than the other".

This is of course the conclusion to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Like most of Jesus's parables it has lasted well – it is as challenging today as it was 2000 + years ago. It is hard to miss the point! We know what the gospels say about Pharisees and tax collectors! We can even anticipate who is going to be the good guy and who the bad! We are not going to be disappointed!

And so the story begins: "Two men went up to the temple to pray". One a Pharisee and yes, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee is 'standing by himself' as he prays. He stands aloof. He is arrogant. He prays to God in a free and easy, confident way, assuming that God

is in absolute agreement with him, confirming what he has already decided. In his own eyes he is morally superior, he is not like other people. He keeps himself apart from riff-raff like the tax collector, he observes rigorous piety, regular fasting and tithing that go beyond what the law requires. The tax collector, in contrast, stands at a distance, adopts a posture of contrition and remorse, cannot bring himself to look up to heaven, but beats his breast in deep anguish. He is clearly aware of the gap that exists between himself and God and throws himself upon God's mercy. And Jesus comments that it is this man rather than the other, who goes home, right with God.

But is this perhaps more than a little unfair? Tax collectors after all, were pretty unsavoury characters at the time of Jesus – seen as traitors by many Jews. The taxes they collected were on property. They exploited their own people to serve the Romans who occupied the land and they inflated their assessment to increase their own profit. Only greedy, corrupt, ruthless people would ever get a job as a tax collector – if you were an honest person, you wouldn't be a tax collector. Tax collectors were swine – that's the plain truth of the matter. This particular tax collector would have been hated by everyone. God have mercy? We sincerely hope not! That's how everyone would react when they heard Jesus's story.

As for the Pharisee, what he says here about himself rings true. Pharisees at the time were committed! They were scrupulous in their dealings with God and their neighbours. They made huge efforts to be holy. This Pharisee fasts as a religious exercise beyond the one day a year that is required. He is a good man and it is right that he should thank God for that – like any good, solid, self-respecting Christian.

And yet – it is the tax collector rather than the Pharisee who is judged to be right with God. Why should this be?

Let's look again at the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee is entirely self-righteous. Consider the way he stands in full view of other worshippers; he intends to be admired by everyone especially God. He is well aware of his own goodness. Wrapped up in a sense of moral superiority. He sees himself as a pinnacle of virtue, he assumes that is also how God sees him, in his own eyes he has no need of God. So how can the incalculable goodness of God enter his life? The tax collector on the other hand is quite the opposite. He knows that he can make absolutely no claim to goodness. None at all. In his own opinion, he is the lowest of the low. Driven by a sense of sin, he throws himself on God's mercy. No pretence, no excuses – just a heart-felt plea for mercy. All he can think of is to ask God to have pity – and he knows full well that he is an evil man who has no right to expect it. And here there is hope. For this is a man whom God can work with, and because God is pitiful God does show him mercy. There are no conditions attached - but at the moment he begins to open himself to God, his life begins to be transformed.

What matters then is a person's relationship with God. It applies as much to us today. Through God's great goodness we are offered what we don't deserve – are we open to God's grace, to God's power to remake us in the image of Christ? We are all of us brothers and sisters before God, equals before the throne of grace – are we prepared for God to act in our lives? Are we open to God's goodness and joy?

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost and service of Harvest Thanksgiving.

Service Date:

16 October, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. Harvest donations of food items were shared between the Broomhall Breakfast, the Open Kitchen and the Jesus Centre.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 40 Come, ye thankful people, come

Rejoice and Sing 124 We plough the fields and scatter

Rejoice and Sing 42 For the fruits of all creation

Rejoice and Sing 86 God, who stretched the spangled heavens

Sermon:

Readings

Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 1 - 14

Corinthians 2 chapter 9 verses 6 - 15

John chapter 6 verses 25 - 35

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

9 October, 2016

Worship was led by the Very Revd. Peter Bradley, Dean of Sheffield, who preached on how we might understand life after death.

The sermon is not available to upload.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 253 God is gone up on high

Rejoice and Sing 689 As pants the hart for cooling streams

Rejoice and Sing 428 I'm not ashamed to own my Lord

Rejoice and Sing 257 The head that once was crowned with thorns

Sermon:

Readings

Romans chapter 8 verses 18 - 25

Matthew chapter 6 verses 25 - 34

Proverbs chapter 8 verses 1 and 22 - 31

The sermon is not available to upload.

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost and celebration of Holy Communion

Service Date:

2 October, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard.

The theme of his sermon was Equality at the Lord's Table. While it is right that we conduct communion 'decently and in order' the order itself does not and must not matter.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 74 Praise to the Lord

Rejoice and Sing 497 Give to me Lord a thankful heart

Rejoice and Sing 433 O Thou who camest from above

Rejoice and Sing 559 verses 2 - 5 Christ is made the sure foundation

Sermon:

Equality at the Lord's Table

1 Corinthians 11.23-33

In 1945, just as the Second World War was ending, a Benedictine monk of the Church of England called Dom Gregory Dix, wrote a pioneering study of the Eucharist and its history called *The Shape of the Liturgy*. Over the succeeding seventy years scholars have disputed some of Dix's arguments, but one particular passage has been repeatedly cited by Christians because they have found it strengthening and moving:

Men [*sic.*] have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetish because the yams have failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so, wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonisation of S. Joan of Arc – one could fill many pages with reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta Dei – the holy common people of God.

Dix continues,

... Each of them once believed and prayed as I believe and pray, and found it hard and grew slack and sinned and repented and fell again. Each of them worshipped at the eucharist, and found their thoughts wandering and tried again, and felt heavy and unresponsive and yet knew – just as really and pathetically as I do – these things. There is a little ill-spelled ill-carved rustic epitaph of the fourth century from Asia Minor: 'Here sleeps the blessed Chione, who has found Jerusalem for she prayed much'. Not another word is known of Chione, some peasant woman who lived in that vanished world of Christian Anatolia. But how lovely if all that should survive after sixteen centuries were that one had prayed much, so that the neighbours who saw all one's life were sure one must have found Jerusalem! What did the Sunday eucharist in her village church every week for a life-time mean to the blessed Chione – and to the millions like her then, and every year since? The sheer stupendous quantity of the love of God which this ever repeated action has drawn from the obscure Christian multitudes through the centuries is in itself an overwhelming thought.

In stark contrast to Dix's vision, in First Letter to the Church in Corinth, St Paul addresses the selfish and self-serving attitudes of members of the Corinthian congregation to the observance of the Lord's Supper, confronting them – not consoling them – with the gospel of Jesus' self-giving on behalf of others. This is the gospel which he calls on the Corinthians to proclaim, and to have their identity and behaviour shaped by it. So far from using the

Eucharist as an opportunity for asserting rank or status at the Lord's table, they are first to recognise and acknowledge their worthlessness before God, in order that they may then experience God's forgiveness and redemption, and so come to follow Christ's own pattern of life by giving themselves for others.

The more fully and deeply they understand and accept their identity as members of the Body of Jesus Christ – the Man for Others – the more their celebration of the Lord's Supper will become an authentic proclamation of the gospel, calling others to accept the same divine mercy and be grafted into the same Body.

In the Lord's Supper, we are proclaiming the Lord's death, as Paul insists. When we say that Jesus died for our sins, some Christians may mean that his death atoned for every person's individual sins, others that he died because that is what human sinfulness does when confronted with a person who challenges us with unconditional love. But be that as it may, Jesus' death reveals our own sin to us as nothing else does. As Christians, when we look at the children falling prey to sex traffickers in the Calais 'Jungle', or being dragged, screaming, out of the rubble in Aleppo, do we see 'a price worth paying' or 'collateral damage'; or do we see in their faces the face of the infant Christ? Do we see in these actions, undertaken in our name, 'a necessary evil', or just plain 'evil'?

The gospel of Christ is the ultimate leveller. It places everyone – the multi-billionaire, the refugee child, and the righteous (or self-righteous!) Church-goer – on an equal footing at the Lord's Table, telling us that neither our wealth, nor our status, nor even our suffering can buy us our place there, but only the mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ. It's this power of the gospel to strip away our pride and pomposity, and to evoke our gratitude and humility, which then enables us to proclaim the Lord's death as we live out the self-giving love for others that Jesus modelled, even unto death.

Just as the kind of idolatry that Paul urged the Corinthian Christians to flee was normal behaviour in the wider culture of Roman Corinth, so idolatry pervades contemporary culture, especially around wealth: Just 1% of the world's population now owns half the world's total wealth. The top 10% of the world's adults own 85% of its wealth. The bottom 90% of adults own just 15% of the wealth. And it's calculated that there are now 28,400,000 slaves in the world who have nothing at all – zero wealth. And just as the Corinthians loved to make themselves feel special by identifying with the people they perceived as successful in society, so celebrity culture permeates every facet of western popular culture today.

Now as then, there are no favourites at the Lord's Table. Our inward examination, which is a proper preparation for coming to Holy Communion, should be undertaken in the light of the life lived and laid down by Jesus Christ; and, if conducted properly, it will reveal to us on each occasion that it is by Christ's own invitation – and only by Christ's invitation – that we are present to be united with him in the sacrament. Taking part in Holy Communion – literally, taking a part of it – must be understood as signifying our commitment to live as members of Christ's body, and this understanding can only turn us outwards, to live lives that confront evil and call others to join us in building a new and better world.

I understand why, in many Churches, respect for the offices held by those ordained and appointed to particular ministries is expressed by their being the first to receive Communion. I understand also the counter-hierarchical practice of serving the congregation first, the Elders next and the Minister last. But at the Lord's Table there is no hierarchy, we are all equal, and while it is right and proper that we do things 'decently and in order', the order itself does not – and must not – matter.

Revd Robert Beard BD

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

25 September, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard and included the celebration of a baptism. He spoke of the significance of water with reference to Noah and the flood and to baptism and the importance of God's promise.

Hymns:

All things bright and beautiful

Rejoice and Sing 549 One more step along the world I go

Rejoice and Sing 509 O Jesus I have promised

Rejoice and Sing 195 I danced in the morning

Sermon:

Readings

Genesis chapter 7 verse 11 to chapter 8 verse 19

Romans chapter 6 verses 3 - 11

Luke chapter 18 verses 15 - 17

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

18 September, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Keith Albans.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 47 O worship the King

Rejoice and Sing 107 The love of God comes close

Rejoice and Sing 689 As pants the hart (setting of psalm 42)

Common Ground 143 We lay our broken world

Rejoice and Sing 366 And can it be

Sermon:

The News Quiz – returning after the summer break. Miles Jupp “That was an uneventful summer!”

Political slogans... “Britain isn't working” (1979) to “Broken Britain” (2015). 2014/16 – Referenda in Scotland and Britain... and the aftermath! BREXIT mean BREXIT! Well no, it has meant a rise in xenophobia and has left many feeling unsure of their welcome.

Last year - Methodist Conference – the most powerful image was a series of collages made of broken biscuits! Link to the Past Cases Review and those recognised as victims (plus Complaints & Discipline process feelings...)

Powerful and emotive image 'Broken' is that kind of word. We talk about 'our broken world' and see many examples...

And yet... there are other ideas which spring from the word 'broken' – e.g. free and shared... This morning let's explore the place of 'brokenness' in the life of faith - looking at the aspects of hurt/need to be changed, and then the idea of broken into freedom and sharing.

1 – Surveying Brokenness Toddler's Christmas - it's broken! Words synonymous with 'ruined', 'useless' etc. Or perhaps for the enterprising parent - the thought of 'possibility'? God's feelings back at the beginning? Creation and Fall stories - the idyll of creation - the covenant of creation - broken in Genesis 3 & 4 - the command to love God is broken by Adam and Eve and the command to love neighbour as self is broken by Cain and Abel. The stories were written after the giving of the commandments - to explain why it had all gone wrong! Broken promises - relationships breakdown? PCR - involves abuses of power – often at heart of brokenness. Broken responsibilities - cf Amos etc - the strong for the weak, the rich for the poor. Nb Football season - only a few clubs will vie for honours - unlike NFL. The idea of Jubilee was God's way of adjusting to what goes wrong - equalization? Ephesians passage - lists all sorts of behaviour and attitudes that should not be present for those in Christ - and the writer knows that even where the behaviour is not present, the attitude often is. - Racism / Sexism / Ageism, or Envy / Greed etc. A hymn that we'll sing a bit later begins "We lay our broken world" - broken in the sense of hurt, useless and the need to be changed. And of course that change has a cost. If you take anything in to be repaired, it costs! And the broken bread at the heart of a communion service reminds us of the cost of mending the world. The death of Jesus illustrates the cost of human pride and brokenness to the loving heart of God - it is a symbol of the grief that God feels. Ephesians 5 begins "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Imitators of God - our role to share in the grief? Certainly we should be those who remind the world of the grief of God, as well as those who demonstrate the love of God known in Jesus.

2 – Accepting Brokenness The great Wesley hymn with which we will end this service - "And can it be" reaches its climax with the line "My chains fell off, my heart was free." And so we cannot contemplate the idea of brokenness in just a negative way. Indeed, that was the genius of Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper. Taking the bread and giving thanks was perfectly normal, as was breaking it and sharing it - usual Passover practice. But Jesus drew the link between the action and his own body. Yes, he would be broken, but by being broken, he would be shared... "Christ is alive, no longer bound to distant years in Palestine - he comes to claim the here and now and conquer every place and time." The broken seal - broken into usefulness - release of inhibition, release of gift and potential The broken chain - broken into freedom - from what? For what? The broken bread - broken into sharing - with whom? For what? In the passage from John 6, we are getting further away from the feeding of the 5K, and more into John's reflection on it. It's quite an anti-Jewish passage (be careful!) But the point at issue in Jesus' debate is in trying to open the eyes of the religious leaders to see that God's desire was not for a one-party state, but that all may eat at the feast of life. Breaking the mind-set that says "we are special therefore everyone else is second-class" is a hard one - it cost Jesus his life! But where it is broken, chains do fall off, potential is released, good news is shared. And that mind-set still exists. In the Churches, in Society, in the world at large. (e.g. Nigel Farage's rather strange comment that the Archbishop of Canterbury should resign for failing to uphold Christian values!!) The broken bread in the

Eucharist symbolizes the call to share and be shared, the call to be free. (4 and 20 blackbirds!).

What then is our calling / our role as a Church?

-PCR – confronting the truth and seeking forgiveness – and putting in place the processes which may guard against it happening again

-Seek healing for all who have been broken by the Church – and even in a litigious society that may mean going further than mere liability demands

-Taking on board our brokenness as a Church – as a gift? Christendom to Christlikeness

-Recognize the things that bind us. The commentator Peter Mullen writing 20 years ago: “Of course religious experience should include transports of delight and ecstasies, but these must not be everyday expectations as if they were that hallmark and the essence of the faith. The essence of religion is the sanctification of the everyday – not to want to escape it.”

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

11 September, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard and was a commemoration of James Montgomery.

Valerie Monti-Holland spoke about the work of the Montgomery Centre.

In place of a sermon or reflection on the life of Montgomery, the Revd. Beard read Montgomery's letter of resignation from the Sheffield Iris, which reflects Montgomery's values and philosophies.

Hymns:

The words of all the hymns in the service were written by James Montgomery.

Rejoice and Sing 667 Songs of praise the angels sang

Rejoice and Sing 577 O Spirit of the living God

Rejoice and Sing 684 God is my strong salvation

Rejoice and Sing 666 Sing we the song of those who stand

Sermon:

As stated in the introduction there is no traditional sermon.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

4 September, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Canon Adrian Alker who preached on the theme of a radical Christianity.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 382 Come let us join our cheerful songs

Rejoice and Sing 405 Angel voices ever singing

Rejoice and Sing 433 O Thou who camest from above

Rejoice and Sing 509 O Jesus I have promised

Sermon:

SERMON AT ST ANDREWS URC HANOVER ST SHEFFIELD

4 Sept 2016 Year C Proper 18

Readings: Deut 30. 15-20, Philemon 1-21, Luke 14.25-33

In the year 2003, with others, I helped to found the St Marks Centre for Radical Christianity at St Marks Broomhill, which has been hosting conferences for over 13 years and, I am pleased to observe, seems as strong and challenging in its work as we hoped it would be. Reflecting upon my years in ministry and especially the twenty years in Broomhill I wrote this book, published in March of this year, entitled 'Is A Radical Church Possible?' Since its publication and being chair of the Progressive Christianity Network, I have had the privilege over the last few months of visiting groups and some churches across the country. Interestingly what people often want to discuss is this word, radical, especially in relationship to Christian faith.

We know the etymology of the word radical – getting to the roots of something – and so often the word radical has come to be understood as a complete change, often meaning returning to those roots, a strong and decisive move in a certain direction.

Well today's three readings from scripture in some ways are illustrative of a radical challenge to the listener or reader or disciple. In the closing chapter of Deuteronomy here Moses sets out before the people a stark choice – love the God of Abraham, obey his commandments and you will live, be blessed and prosper in the land you are entering. But if you are led astray, obey other Gods and serve them, you shall perish. Choose life or death, blessing or curse. Its as stark as that. We understand today the context in which the writers of the Hebrew bible saw themselves as a chosen people surrounded by larger idolatrous nations and much of this is of course played out in the books of the Old Testament. Today those who name Isis as a radical form of Islam are in a sense repeating what has been the ugly and dangerous side of religion for millennia - my God is bigger and truer than your God and you will perish.

When we began the Centre for Radical Christianity some folk didn't like this word radical, it sounded too confrontational, even aping the violent attitude of extremism to be found in some forms of religion.

But lets move on to the New Testament reading from Paul's letter to Philemon. At first glance the letters of Paul seem a mixed blessing to liberals, with some Pauline passages, for example, seemingly none too generous to women. But much recent scholarship on Paul reminds us that as with Jesus, we have to distinguish as far as possible between the historical figure, authentic Paul, if you like, and the later glosses put on Paul by the emerging church. This short letter to Philemon is important : a genuine Pauline letter, the only one to an individual (his convert Philemon) about an individual, that is Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave. Paul, when he wrote this letter was getting a bit long in the tooth and he had worked hard to establish house churches across a great region, in the homes of converts like Philemon.

This letter to Philemon is about slavery but not as an abstract theory or an academic article. This is a response to the real plight of one slave in particular who has gone back to Paul, presumably because of a problem with his master Philemon. Remember that Paul and Philemon are living in the real world of masters and slaves in the Roman Empire. Under Roman law, a slave, if he felt maltreated, could fly to a god's temple and seek refuge or take flight to an owner's friend, which is what presumably Onesimus did.

Paul is quite clear to his convert, that Onesimus the slave should, without any doubt, be treated with mercy. But more than that, the slave was to be treated as a slave no more but as a fellow brother in Christ. To be a convert to Christianity, to Christ, means for Paul that it is intolerable for a Christian master to own a Christian slave. Paul could have said to

Philemon, treat your slave justly, stop threatening him for you have a Master in heaven and with the Lord there is no partiality. Instead Paul, appealing on the basis of their Love in Christ, is asking how Philemon and Onesimus can be equal in Christ but unequal in society? Paul here speaks of only one case but his implicit principle extends across all of Christianity. Under God and in Christ all Christians are equal with one another as children in that divine family. And Paul in a sense is going one better than the secular world around him; his conversion to Christ sets a new standard of what love, liberty and equality are about. Paul, whose life had been turned around by the experience of the presence of the risen Christ in his life, that passion for God which had transformed him, now seeks urgently to proclaim in letter and in deed, that in Christ all people are to be treated equally as God's children. Now if that isn't a radical piece of social reform I don't know what is. If I had shown pictures of say William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, we might all have agreed that they wanted to radically change their societies so that all people whatever the colour of their skin or their race would be equal and free. They were part of radical movement for change. And in a way so is Paul here in writing to Philemon. Which brings us to the Gospel and to the life and teachings of Jesus, the founder of our faith, the one who discloses to us in human terms what God is like. This passage, with its characteristic strong Lucan language is a radical call to discipleship. Radical in that for Jesus being dedicated to the cause of building the kingdom of God on earth demands that this alone must be our highest priority, even more than the love of family. It's a typical Semitic exaggeration here to use the word hate and nothing about the life of Jesus suggests anything other than his love for his mother and family. I think Matthew in chapter 10 expresses it more clearly when he says: 'Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me'. Jesus goes on to remind his followers that his way will involve sacrifice – the carrying of a cross because the cause of God's kingdom will be opposed by the domination powers of this world with their weapons of destruction, in the Roman case, of crucifixion. And being part of a radical movement to change the world and challenge those unjust powers will also need a fair amount of intelligence and planning – who would begin to build a tower and not be able to finish it? And don't underestimate the opposition with its resources.

Three readings revealing the potential radical nature of religion. The Church over its two thousand years of history has at times been a shameful tool of the oppressor, crusading against the infidel, allowing Protestant and Catholic to kill each other over centuries across Europe. The Church has at times condoned slavery, oppressed women and gay and lesbian people.

But the Church has also been a blessing to its communities, a source of care and compassion, whose leaders have so often spoken up for the underprivileged, the alien in our midst, the migrant, the asylum seeker. The Church can be a force for radical good when it chooses to be.

And Jesus – was he a radical? Of course he was. He wanted a return to the roots of his own Jewish faith – he urged his fellow Jews to recall the fundamentals of loving God and loving neighbor. He challenged the corruption and the falsity of a faith built upon excessive regulation. He touched the leper clean, his table companions were from all sections of society; he upheld the dignity of women. And he dared to declare to the Roman occupiers that the God of Israel was the only God in town, not the Emperor in Rome, Caesar Augustus hailed as divine.

So I am content to use the word radical, I long for a more radical and braver church, a more honest church seeking to return to the roots of its faith, the man from Nazareth who showed us how to live and how to love. Is a radical church possible?

Yes of course it is.

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

28 August, 2016

Worship was led by Mr. Neil Carter

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 292 When morning gilds the skies

Rejoice and Sing 90 O Lord, all the world belongs to you

Rejoice and Sing 274 God is love, his the care

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

Rejoice and Sing 373 Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us

Sermon:

Readings

Luke chapter 14 verses 1 and 7 - 14

Proverbs chapter 25 verses 6 - 7

Hebrews chapter 12 verses 18 – 29

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

21 August, 2016

Worship was planned by the Worship Group and led by David Stec. The theme was Rejoicing in the Sabbath.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 376 This is the day the Lord has made

Rejoice and Sing 377 This is the day

Rejoice and Sing 198 A stranger once did bless the earth

Rejoice and Sing 580 Lord, you give the great commission

Sermon:

Readings

Psalms 103 verses 1 - 10

Isaiah chapter 58 verses 3 - 9a

Luke chapter 13 verses 10 - 17

There was no sermon but a comment on the readings which reflected on how the importance of the Sabbath is stressed in Genesis when God rested on the seventh day and in the commandments given to Moses.

It was a tradition which was part of Jesus' culture and which he respected but he turned things on their head by healing on the Sabbath. His healing liberated people from infirmity and disease - surely a very appropriate way to delight in the Sabbath.

Later in the sermon two people of different generations reflected on how spending the Sabbath has changed.

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

14 August, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 378 Awake, my soul, and with the sun

Rejoice and Sing 496 Fight the good fight

Rejoice and Sing 257 The head that once was crowned with thorns

Rejoice and Sing 125 Ye holy angels bright

Sermon:

Readings

Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 - 7

Psalm 80 verses 1 - 2 and 8 - 19

Hebrews chapter 11 verse 29 to chapter 12 verse 2

Luke chapter 12 verses 49 - 56

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

7 August, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Dr. Keith Albans

Hymns:

Sermon:

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

31 July, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 589 How firm a foundation

Rejoice and Sing 532 Lord of Creation

Rejoice and Sing 96 Great is thy faithfulness

Rejoice and Sing 550 Put thou thy trust in God

Sermon:

Readings

Hosea chapter 11 verses 1 - 11

Psalm 107 verses 1 - 9 and 43

Colossians chapter 3 verses 1 - 11

Luke chapter 12 verses 13 - 21

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

24 July, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. James Grayson

Hymns:

R&S 141 Make way, make way

R&S 629 Make me a channel of your peace

R&S 200 The kingdom of God is justice and joy

R&S 620 For the healing of the nations

Sermon:

Readings

Psalm 138

Colossians chapter 2 verses 6 - 15

Luke chapter 11 verses 1 - 13

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

17 July, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard

Hymns:

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

R&S 59 God moves in a mysterious way

R&S 613 Lord, speak to me

R&S 723 From all that dwell below the skies

Sermon:

Justice and Mercy

Amos 8.1-12

Well, I hardly know what to say! I'm away from the pulpit for just three Sundays, and look what happens to the country! Where should I even begin to reflect on the political turmoil of the past few weeks, and the situation in which we now find ourselves?

On the other hand, when in its history has our nation not been in chaos, if not openly then just beneath the surface of our common life? When have there not been stark divisions between the haves and the have-nots? When has there not been bullying, discrimination and violence, if not openly on our streets, then covertly in people's homes and schools and workplaces? When, in our society or any other, has there not been the need for prophetic voices to be raised above the clamour, condemning inequality and injustice, and holding out the hope of a better life for those crushed beneath burdens of poverty and misery?

Amos, perhaps, felt much the same righteous outrage as you and I may do, when confronted with the social evils of his day. His day was "in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake" (Amos 1.1). Jeroboam II ruled the northern kingdom of Israel c. 785-745 BC. This was the period between the end of Solomon's reign (c. 930 BC) and the fall of the northern kingdom (c. 721 BC), and scholars believe that Amos had a relatively short ministry in the middle of Jeroboam II's reign, around 760-755 BC. Jeroboam was successful militarily, but "he did that which was evil in the sight of Yahweh: he didn't depart from all the sins of Jeroboam (I) the son of Nebat, with which he made Israel to sin" (2 Kings 14.24).

Amos identifies himself as a herdsman from Tekoa (1.1) which lay a few miles south of Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah, and his prophecy addresses both "those who are at ease in Zion" (the capital of the southern kingdom) and "those who are secure on the mountain of Samaria" (the capital of the northern kingdom). It's been suggested that, because he was a country-dweller, perhaps poorly educated, perhaps more at home among the hills with his animals than on city streets jostling with his fellow human beings, this background explains the stridency of his crying out against urban decadence.

But this is to ignore the nature prophecy in general, and Old Testament prophecy in particular. So far as Amos was concerned, it wasn't resentment towards urban sophistication that motivated him to speak out, but his God-given vocation. He became a prophet, not because he found urban ways objectionable, but because Yahweh called him. It was Yahweh who took Amos from his flocks. It was Yahweh who said, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel" (7.15), and consequently Amos frequently prefaces his prophecy by saying, not "I tell you...", but "Thus says Yahweh" (1.3, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2.1, etc.).

As I've indicated, during the eighth century BC, the Jews were divided into the ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel, and the two tribes of the southern kingdom of Judah. Only a few years after Amos' prophecies, the Assyrians forced the ten tribes of Israel into exile in Assyria. Unlike the two tribes of Judah after their exile, however, the ten tribes never returned home in any organised way, but were assimilated and effectively disappeared as a people. Even today, they are often referred to as "the ten lost tribes".

Amos spoke against "social injustice and religious arrogance". He warned the people of an upcoming military disaster that would reflect God's judgment. Earlier in his book, Amos has interceded on behalf of Israel, but in the midst of this vision the Lord demands silence as words of judgment thunder down upon Israel.

In today's reading, we hear part of Amos' report of his fourth vision.

In the introduction of the vision, there is a play on words in the Hebrew that does not translate well. The object of the fourth vision is "a basket of summer fruit". In Hebrew, the word translated as "summer fruit" is very similar to the word for "the end", and the thrust of the word play is that the fruit in the basket has reached its peak and is left only to spoil and rot, and that so it is with Israel.

The spoliation and rottenness of Israel is such that songs of worship become howlings of grief as corpses litter the land. It is a brutal picture accompanied by a deafening noise. Amidst the howling, Amos intones the judgment against Israel. "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land..." How terrifying it is when the Lord declares, "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds."

Continuing with a force unmatched outside the first person, Amos becomes the voice of God: "On that day... I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight." The cosmic order will be ruptured, so much so that even the sure workings of the heavens, of the sun, of light and dark, are broken apart.

The Lord's judgment brings not only a great reversal of time, but an overturning of the calendar, too. Feasts become mourning. Songs become lamentations. All are to put on the clothes of the mourner and tear out their hair. And the Lord's words ring out, "I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day."

Such an unleashing of judgment leaves in its wake an empty silence, a terrifying void, a famine of the word of the Lord. This silence from the Lord is deafening and will leave the people confused, running about like fools in search of and grasping for something – anything – to steady themselves in their disequilibrium.

The passage ends abruptly with the Lord saying that in their frantic search they shall find nothing. The end is ruin and spoilage and silence.

You may possibly have noticed by now that this reading doesn't offer us much hope; but this is just one more example of why it's so important always to understand the words of Scripture in their proper context. If we look to the context of this passage within the whole of Amos' prophecy, we find in the book's final verses clear grounds for hope of relief and restoration.

So what are we to make of what of the apparent contradiction between overwhelming judgments, exemplified by today's reading, and the hope that brings Amos to conclusion? The Polish American rabbi Abraham Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th century, offers wisdom on this point. After quoting Amos 9:14-15, he writes:

What hidden bond exists between the word of wrath and the word of compassion, between 'consuming fire and 'everlasting love?'

We will have to look for prophetic coherence, not in what the prophet says but of Whom he speaks. Indeed, not even the word of God is the ultimate object and theme of his consciousness. The ultimate object and theme of his consciousness is God, of Whom the prophet knows that above His judgment and above His anger stands His mercy.

With all of this judgment, which one has to assume is rightly earned by those who trample the needy and bring ruin to the poor, where is the Lord's mercy? Upon Heschel's advice and the witness of the whole of Amos' text, we cannot assume that this judgment is more powerful than the Lord's mercy.

Along these lines and extending the horizon of our reading beyond the bounds of Amos' book to include the whole of Scripture, for the Christian it also seems reasonable and faithful to understand that God's mercy converges with and triumphs over God's judgment in the cross of Christ. With echoes of Amos 8:9, Luke's description of the moment of Jesus' death: "It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two." In this moment, when the sins of the world are fully ripened, Yahweh's mercy triumphs over Yahweh's judgment.

Revd Robert Beard B.D.

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

10 July, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Margaret Herbert who preached on being tested against the standards God sets and the requirement to obey the law of love.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 47 O worship the King

Common Ground 67 Jesus Christ is waiting

Rejoice and Sing 646 Help us accept each other

Rejoice and Sing 615 O God of mercy, God of might

Sermon:

Readings

Amos chapter 7 verses 7 - 17

Colossians chapter 1 verses 1 - 14

Psalm 82

Luke chapter 10 verses 25 - 37

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost and Celebration of Holy Communion

Service Date:

3 July, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Dr. David Stec

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 187 Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

Rejoice and Sing 685 Through all the changing scenes of life

Rejoice and Sing 434 Jesus invites his saints

Rejoice and Sing 663 Love divine, all loves excelling

Sermon:

Readings

Second book of Kings chapter 5 verses 1 - 14

Psalm 30

Luke chapter 10 verses 1 – 20

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost**Service Date:**

26 June, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Walter Houston

Hymns:

Rejoice and sing 104 Praise, my soul, the king of heaven

Rejoice and Sing 192 Thou didst leave thy throne

Rejoice and Sing 200 The Kingdom of God

Rejoice and Sing 533 Lord of good life

Sermon:

Readings

Luke chapter 9 verses 57 - 62

Psalm 16

First book of Kings chapter 19 verses 15,16 and 19 - 21

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**Service Date:**

19 June, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard

Hymns:

Awake, awake fly off the night

Rejoice and Sing 492 Dear Lord and Father of mankind

Rejoice and Sing 689 As pants the hart for cooling streams (setting of psalm 42)

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

Rejoice and Sing 200 The Kingdom of God

Sermon:

Readings

First book of Kings chapter 19 verses 1 - 15

Galatians chapter 3 verses 23 - 29

Luke chapter 8 verses 26 - 39

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**Service Date:**

12 June, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Margaret Herbert who preached on readings from Kings 1 and Luke 7.

Hymns:

Common Ground 38 Here in this place new light is streaming

Rejoice and Sing 648 Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love

Rejoice and Sing 92 Amazing Grace

Rejoice and Sing 530 Living God your joyful spirit

Sermon:

Readings

First book of Kings chapter 21 verses 1 - 21

Galatians chapter 2 verses 15 - 21

Luke chapter 7 verses 36 - 50 and chapter 8 verses 1 – 3

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

5 June, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard. His sermon opened with the observation that many of the incidents in the life and ministry of Jesus echoed incidents in the lives of the prophets. The story in Kings 1 of Elijah raising a widow's son to life is echoed in Luke 7 where Jesus raises a widow's son to life.

Widows have a special status in the scriptures, entitled to respect and care. Jesus did not ask about the widow's faith but responded to her need out of compassion. So too should we respond with compassion to people who we see to be in need.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 319 Thanks to God whose word was spoken

Rejoice and Sing 363 Lord Jesus think on me

Rejoice and Sing 620 For the healing of the nations

Rejoice and Sing 104 Praise my soul the king of heaven

Sermon:

Readings

First book of Kings chapter 17 verses 8 - 24

Galatians chapter 1 verses 11 - 24

Luke chapter 7 verses 11 - 17

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date:

29 May, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Sue Hammersley, Vicar of St. Mark's Church, Broomhill.

In her sermon The Revd. Hammersley described how many people struggle with feelings of inadequacy and guilt that we are not serving God as well as we might. We can lose sight of the fact that God loves us as we are. Being so loved allows us to love.

The story in Luke of Jesus healing the centurion's servant raises questions about authority.

The centurion was a man of status yet he regards himself as unworthy to have Jesus in his house. However, believing that God's authority works through Jesus, and that Jesus can heal from afar, he reaches out to Jesus for help.

We can reach out with the message of God's love and bring a kind of healing and wholeness to those who need it.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 536 New every morning is the love

Rejoice and Sing 92 Amazing Grace

Rejoice and Sing 712 All people that on earth do dwell (Psalm 100)

Rejoice and Sing 653 We cannot measure how you heal

Rejoice and Sing 558 Will you come and follow me

Sermon:

Readings

First book of Kings chapter 8 verses 22 - 23 and 41 - 43

Galatians chapter 1 verses 1 - 12

Luke chapter 7 verses 1 - 10

Trinity Sunday

Service Date:

22 May, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the subject of the Trinity and helped us explore helpful ways of thinking about the Trinity.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 34 Holy, holy, holy

Rejoice and Sing 670 - a setting of psalm 8

Rejoice and Sing 38 Thou whose almighty word

Rejoice and Sing 37 We give immortal praise

Father Lord of all creation

Sermon:

Readings

Proverbs chapter 8 verses 1 - 4 and 22 - 31

Romans chapter 5 verses 1 - 5

John chapter 16 verses 12 - 15

There is no written sermon to put on the web site. The concept of the Trinity evolved to reconcile the Judean concept of one God with the fact the people had experienced God in 3 different ways - God, the life and ministry of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Even if we struggle with the concept of the Trinity what is important is that we recognise the importance of loving relationships in our lives, reflecting our relationship with God.

Pentecost

Service Date:

15 May, 2016

This morning a joint service for Pentecost was held at St. Mark's Church Broomhill.

However, St. Andrew's was open and a short service of readings, prayer and discussion was enjoyed by nine people.

We considered the Pentecost story and its foretelling by the Prophets and by Jesus. We considered the parallels and contrasts with God giving Moses the commandments. While

Pentecost is seen as the birth of the Church, reminding ourselves of the words of the Prophets shows the continuity. We cited Christian Aid as an example of the Spirit of God at work to-day and prayed for its fundraisers, supporters, planners and practitioners. The sermon preached by The Revd. Robert Beard at St. Mark's Church is also attached.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 310 Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost (not sung but spoken together)

Sermon:

Readings

Exodus chapter 19 verses 16 - 19

Joel chapter 2 verses 28 - 32

Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 33

Acts chapter 2 verses 1 - 21

John chapter 14 verses 12 - 17 and 25 - 27

Comment. Pentecost originally celebrated the barley harvest, 50 days after Passover. By the time of Jesus Pentecost celebrated God descending on Mount Sinai to give the Law to Moses as he was leading the Israelites out of Egypt. God appeared in a cloud and gave Moses laws on tablets of stone on how to worship; how to treat slaves; about refraining from violence; about property and justice.

Jesus' ascending into heaven was a second loss to his disciples, soon after they had lost him at the crucifixion and found him again at the resurrection. However, Jesus sent them another companion or comforter in the form of the power of the Holy Spirit which would enable them to continue Jesus' work in the wider world.

Seventh Sunday of Easter. Invitation Service.

Service Date:

8 May, 2016

Worship was planned and led by members of the Worship Group. Representatives of churches which worship in St. Andrew's took part in the service by reading and or singing -
The St. Michael Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

The Jesus for All Nations Church

The Believers Love World Society

The Sheffield Grace Reformed Christian Church

Representatives of other organisations who use the premises were present in the congregation.

The theme was unity and our different roles in serving God. After the service we enjoyed fellowship over a delicious buffet lunch.

Hymns:

Christians joining hand to hand

Rejoice and Sing 679 The Lord's my Shepherd

Rejoice and Sing 92 Amazing grace

Rejoice and Sing 567 Thy hand, O God, has guided

Sermon:

Readings

Psalms 150

Psalms 23 with comment

Romans chapter 12 verse 11 with comment

Corinthians 1 chapter 12 verses 4 - 13

John chapter 17 verses 20 - 26

Commentary on John 17: 20-26 for Sunday 8 May at the Invitation Service

The words from today's reading from John are those that Jesus prayed at the last supper before he went across to the Garden of Gethsemane, from where he was taken for trial and subsequent execution.

Jesus knows that his work has finished. Judas has already left to go to the high priest to betray him. Jesus prays that the remaining disciples, who had been arguing with one another, should be of one mind. He prays also for all the other people who believe in him through the words of the disciples, as he sends them out into the world, and that these other people should also be one, united, unified.

Unity, having a common purpose, achieves much more than discord, where group members are all pulling in different directions.

The wonderful story of last week was that Leicester City won the football League, a group of players without the highly paid superstars of other clubs, but footballers who enjoyed playing together, were united in their purpose, had a common goal, and wanted the team to win, rather than thinking only about themselves. They really tried hard to help their teammates. In the weeks running up to the last match, the papers often commented on how they played so well together, wanting the team to win.

The Christian church itself does not give a good example of unity, split in the 5th and 11th centuries into what are the Eastern Orthodox and the western, the Roman Catholic branch and again in the 16th century at the Reformation; then the protesting churches gradually split into further smaller groupings. This separation has often led to discrimination and to violence. From early times there have been attempts to rebuild solidarity by holding ecumenical councils to resolve disagreements that set groups apart from one another. The more recent example is of Pope John XXIII's Second Vatican Council in 1962, lasting three years and leading to a call for ecumenism, the building of dialogue with other religions. Of course Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism also have had multiple interpretations and followings, discord and often violence, that continues today.

Jesus wants the love that passes between himself and God, his Father, to be the same as the love the disciples share. Earlier (John 13: 34) Jesus gave the disciples a new commandment "that they should love one another". Although the word love conjures up images of sexual attraction, it also means to appreciate, to cherish, it can mean attachment, liking, enjoyment, delight, appreciation as well as attraction. It can mean sharing and being altruistic, which means benevolent, generous, open-handed, public spirited, charitable, thinking of others. Now these are concepts that we can all understand and act out. Today's Invitation Service is a reflection of these words. We are delighted to share our building, our church. But church means more than just a building, it is a group of people with a common goal, our own unity. We are defined by our actions, and if we think of others, we happily share our facilities, and today we celebrate that.

This service is also a way of recognising the events that follow today's reading, Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection to restore people's relationship with God - what is called "the good news". The message from this gospel reading is to pull together and to reach out to help one another, to work together in an harmonious whole, to pursue our various objectives but co-ordinate them for the greater good. Treat others and their property with respect and encourage and support those with fewer resources, in other words: "love one another".

Seventh Sunday of Easter. Invitation Service.

Service Date:

8 May, 2016

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Sixth Sunday of Easter

Service Date:

1 May, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Margaret Herbert.

The theme of her sermon was healing. Margaret described some encounters between people who wished to be healed and Jesus and spoke of the importance of faith alongside the techniques and technologies which we enjoy to-day.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 339 Great God your love has called us here

Rejoice and Sing 592 Dear Lord and Father of mankind

Rejoice and Sing 558 Will you come and follow me

Common Ground 51 I the Lord of sea and sky

Sermon:

Readings

John chapter 5 verses 1 - 9

Revelation chapter 21 verses 10, 22, 23

Psalm 67

Acts chapter 16 verses 9 - 15

Margret Herbert's Sermon

In the name of Almighty God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

There are two situations in the readings we heard earlier that strike chords for me. They may well have been written about situations in this day and age.

In Saint John's Gospel we heard read "In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralysed. One man was there who had been ill for 38 years. Jesus asks the man "Do you want to be made well?" The man's plea is very plaintive – he explains that, although he has been coming to these springs of healing water for a very long time – as the springs rise there are always others who push him aside. He is never given a chance to be healed – others who are stronger get there ahead of him.

This is a complicated issue – firstly about being physically healed – secondly about the attitude of others who are selfish. The chance to be healed is not given to the person who is worse than anyone else – or by merit i.e. the good go first. The Jews believed that one's illness was caused because one had been sinful – therefore being the last in the queue meant to them that you had been truly sinful.

The word 'sinner' in the gospels is a Pharisee word - Jesus rarely uses it except in debate with them. Even the title 'friend of sinners' was given to Jesus by the Pharisees. It meant something like 'outcasts' or 'God's rejects'. That included the sick, the mentally unwell, prostitutes, traitors and tax collectors, and heretic Sabbath breakers like Jesus himself. Jesus rejected no-one, not even the Pharisees, though in fact they rejected themselves by their refusal to accept his invitation to his community of love and acceptance.

At the Sheep Gate, under the five arches - it was the person who had the most friends or had big elbows who got to the front of the queue! It could be well said about the situation folk find themselves in today. Money talks – the richest folk can afford to be seen. We all need to be set free from that which harms us – whether physical – emotional or spiritual. Jesus first asks "Do you want to be made well? An interesting question – for how many hide behind their infirmities – being healed would mean taking on more responsibilities – being fit would entail extra duties. Being healed one would become a different person –perhaps more loving – more understanding of other folk's problems. A healing encounter with Jesus – wow! How might that change us? All we are told that the man was obedient – he did what Jesus told him -- -- no water was involved – no waiting for years behind selfish people at the back of the queue. A simple order. Take up your mat and walk – and he did. Made whole and commissioned. Fit for purpose. Jesus – the sabbath breaker knew a thing or two about God – no deed was so unimportant that it could not be done on the sabbath if it meant that folk – by their healing, grew closer to God. Love and hope are more important than laws when people are healed – when joy is known – when justice and faith join hands. The kingdom of God was among them – in the person of the Son of God.

On the 12th of April – my friend the Reverend Zam Walker died. She was a Member of the Iona Community. She served- with her husband Reverend David Coleman- as a United Reformed Church Minister in Greenock. She was diagnosed with breast cancer 10 years ago and last summer developed a bad cough. It had spread to her lungs. After undergoing yet more surgery and chemotherapy, at Christmas she decided to stop all treatments – except the necessary draining of fluid from her lungs - and to carry on doing her job until she became unable to work any longer. She took part in the Easter Services – then went back into the hospital --- she was asked to write on her whiteboard what mattered to her the most. I think I would have written something more trivial – or not have been able to write anything at all. Yet this amazing woman wrote: -

Kindness and compassion are more important than being seen to be right. Forgiveness.

The importance of healthcare being available at the point of need supplied by the NHS and the Hospice movement.

To rejoice in the New Life that Easter brings; love is stronger than death – justice is central to the new vision of God.

Peace in a family of nations – putting bitterness aside; a welcome for those in need; the priority of joy over profits.

On the 10th of April, with her family she visited Lindisfarne – made the crossing on her mobility scooter – with her oxygen cylinder on board – she zoomed up to the castle. She collapsed that evening and was taken back to Glasgow to a Hospice. She died peacefully two days later with her family beside her.

What mattered to her most? We know - it was written – on her whiteboard. Zam was a witness for Christ – both in her living and her dying.

When preparing this sermon – I thought of her. Her calling – her courage – her faithfulness to the Gospel. Her determination to stand up and be counted – to speak out for people who were suffering – even when she was dying; she took part in a phone-in to “Any Answers” a week earlier: protesting for people in her congregation who had had their benefits cut.

In the Acts of the Apostles Paul- formally Saul of Tarsus has a vision – he sees a man of Macedonia and hears him pleading “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” This about being set free – from hopelessness - from spiritual ignorance. Then, as now there was a world of inequality. There Lydia was enabled to become a servant of her Lord by Paul’s obedience to the vision. She and her household were baptised. Made whole and fit for purpose. Lydia the faithful one of Macedonia – Zam the faithful one of Scotland. It is no mistake that Zam’s daughter’s middle name is Lydia!

Both witnessing to what the Lord had done for them. Faith and love in action.

With all the medicine and technology at our disposal – we are lost without faith. It is by faith that we hear and understand Christ’s call – answer and are made whole. Then – like Paul we too will be enabled to hear the call of others – the sick, needy, lost, abused and homeless.

How will you answer when God calls you? When he enables you to change direction? What will you write on your whiteboard? What is really important to you?

Will your answer be “Here I am Lord – is it I Lord – I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord if you lead me – I will hold your people in my heart.” Amen

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Service Date:

24 April, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. His sermon considered different interpretations of the Book of Revelation but went on to stress that our prime role is not to ponder interpretations of the Bible but to heed the message of Jesus which instructs us to

love one another and act accordingly, showing love, compassion and action to our sisters and brothers in need.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 98 Mighty God, while angels bless Thee

God is our strength and refuge

Rejoice and Sing 628 O Holy City, seen of John

Rejoice and Sing 559 Blessed city, heavenly Salem

Sermon:

Readings

Acts chapter 11 verses 1 - 18

Psalm 148

Revelation chapter 21 verses 1 - 6

John chapter 13 verses 31 - 35

Getting On with the Job

During the completely fantastic Second Advent delusion that swept like wild fire through the so-called Bible Belt of America in 1844 there were almost incredible scenes of mass hysteria and public credulity. Inspired by the rabble-rousing and hell-fire preaching of an illiterate and deranged farmer styling himself Father William Miller, millions of otherwise respectable men and women were persuaded that Gabriel was going to blow his trumpet on the afternoon of 22nd October that year, probably just after tea. Thousands sold their worldly goods to swell the funds, and hundreds went mad with fear and had to be detained in lunatic asylums. Others committed suicide or murdered their families. As the day approached the fever mounted to unprecedented heights of unbridled lunacy, and when the morning at last dawned great crowds surged out into the countryside clad only in their special Ascension robes, which the movement's leaders thoughtfully provided at a modest charge with a discount for bulk orders. One middle aged man, wearing his white robe as instructed, calmly stepped from a third-story balcony in order to fly straight to heaven without bothering to wait for Gabriel to raise the trumpet to his lips. In another place several would-be astronauts donned turkey wings, climbed a tall tree and made their intrepid attempt from the topmost branch. Many waiting to be lifted crouched in laundry-baskets and washtubs as being the most suitable vehicles for their ascent through the stars. And one careful young matron packed a complete wardrobe in a stout trunk, and strapped herself firmly to this so that both should enter the Pearly Gates simultaneously. But such is the absolute blindness of the human mind, that even after Gabriel failed to draw breath many still believed that it was only an overlooked error in calculations, and they carefully packed away their white Ascension Robes against the next time and went back to their complicated studies in Daniel and the Book of Revelation, always the happy hunting-ground of the crank or the insane...

Quoted in *How to be a Lousy Christian in 12 Easy Lessons*

Colin James Isbister 2009 Xulon Press

The Book of Revelation, also known as The Apocalypse of John or simply as Revelation, occupies a central place in Christian eschatology: that is, the study of death, resurrection, judgment, and heaven and hell. Its title is derived from the first word of the Greek text, *apokalypsis*, meaning "unveiling" or "revelation". It is the only apocalyptic document in the collection that forms our New Testament canon, although there are short apocalyptic passages in various places in the Gospels and the Epistles.

The author names himself in the text as “John”, but his precise identity remains a point of academic debate. Second century Christian writers, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria, identify John the Apostle as the “John” of Revelation. Modern scholarship, however, generally takes a different view, and many consider that nothing can be known about the author except that he was a Christian prophet, sometimes referred to as St John the Divine to distinguish him from St John the Evangelist, sometimes simply as John of Patmos. The date traditionally assigned to the book is during the reign of the eleventh Roman emperor Domitian who ruled between 81 and 96 AD, and contemporary scholarship tends to confirm this.

I said that Revelation is an apocalyptic document, but on closer inspection, we find that it opens in epistolary style, with a letter from John to the “seven Churches of Asia”. Only after this does the writer begin to describe his series of prophetic visions, which feature figures such as “the Whore of Babylon” and “the Beast”, and culminate in the second coming of Jesus Christ.

It would take a lengthy series of sermons or lectures to open out and explore the four main kinds of interpretations to which John’s obscure and extravagant imagery has given rise. There are historical interpretations, which present Revelation as describing symbolically the broad sweep of human history. There are what scholars call “preterist” interpretations, which treat Revelation as referring mostly to events that were taking place during the writer’s own time or, at the latest, culminating in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire during the fifth century. Then there are futurist interpretations, which suggest that Revelation describes events that are yet to occur. And, finally, there are symbolic interpretations, suggesting that Revelation refers not to actual people or events, but is rather an allegory of humanity’s spiritual journey and the continuing cosmic and earthly struggle between good and evil.

In some Churches, it might matter very much which of these understandings each of us identifies with; it might even be a matter for shunning or exclusion if we were deemed to have the wrong beliefs. In this Church, however, we each draw our own prayerful and thoughtful conclusions, and continue to explore these things in loving and often playful Christian companionship.

Be all this as it may, interpretation of Biblical texts is not the primary concern of members of Christ’s Church, not even its ordained ministers... not even, I venture to say, of Christian scholars. For any and every Christian, our overriding concern must always be to play our part in the mission and ministry of the Church: that is, to reveal the love of God to all whose lives we can affect for good or ill, day by day, whether directly or indirectly.

As we heard in this morning’s gospel reading, according to St John the Evangelist, Jesus did not simply “suggest” that we love one another, or “encourage” us to love one another; he commanded us to love one another: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13.34). As for trying to calculate the date of the Second Coming or the so-called “Rapture”, St Luke has Jesus addressing this point, too, when his disciples ask about the restoration of Israel: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1.7-8). Could the vocation to which we are called be made any clearer? We are to get on with the job and not worry about the eschatology and the apocalyptic. When we study the Scriptures, it should not be in order to second-guess God about the divine schedule of

events, but to seek inspiration and guidance for our mission and ministry to those whom God has entrusted to our love and care.

You don't need me to tell you that the life of the world is in chaos, and that most, if not all, of its people live pretty chaotic lives too: sometimes through their own incapacity to make sensible decisions, more often because other people with more power and influence have reduced their lives to chaos through war and greed and injustice and inequality. Can we doubt our need of what John of Patmos calls "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21.1)?

And yet, over and above and in and through all the chaos comes the message, for those who will hear it, "See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21.5). This message is uttered by the one who is seated on the throne. We need to look around us at the signs of Spring. See the trees bursting into leaf. See the flower buds popping open. See the ferns lifting their heads from the soil and uncoiling. See the birds building nests and hatching their young. See the lambs bouncing in the fields. Can we doubt that God is once again making all things new?

We are surrounded by people who need, who yearn for, renewal in their lives: in Broomhall, in Sheffield, in Britain and across God's world. We are commanded to love them. Let's finish our service, enjoy our coffee and cake, have our Church meeting... and then get out there and get on with the job.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Service Date:

17 April, 2016

Worship was planned by the Worship Group and Fiona Walton of Christians and Sheffield Schools.

The theme of Christ the Good Shepherd ran throughout the service.

Fiona spoke of the work of CaSS and the need for support for teachers and students in the stressful world of education. We are called to be shepherds to anyone in our community who needs rescuing and care, including this and the next generation of pupils in our schools.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 292 When morning guilds the skies

Rejoice and Sing 274 God is love, his the care

Rejoice and Sing 679 The Lord's my Shepherd

Rejoice and Sing 566 The Church's one Foundation

Sermon:

Readings

Psalm 23 found at Rejoice and Sing 679

John chapter 10 verses 22 - 30

John chapter 21 verses 4 - 17

Acts chapter 9 verses 36 - 43

As a church you have been kind enough to support CaSS over the years. We want to say thank you for that support, interest and for your prayers. We are very grateful.

CaSS is an interdenominational charity that has been working in Sheffield for 30 years. We aim to encourage churches/Christians to connect with and to serve schools. We offer resources, ideas, training, information & advice to help do this. There are a lot of schools in Sheffield and many churches, so we try to make the most of our time and resources to make the maximum impact.

We do believe CaSS is needed more than ever, each generation has its challenges and here are some of today's challenges -

- Teachers feel stressed. It is reported that 4000 teachers leave the profession each month and that an estimated two fifths of new teachers leave the profession within five years. Rapid and frequent changes in the curriculum, the pressures of Ofsted, a results driven environment with targets, tests, tick boxes and paper work all contribute to this stress and many teachers are working very long hours.
- Among almost 900 teachers embarking on their classroom careers who were questioned by the ATL teaching union, 73 per cent admitted having thought about quitting The NAS/UWT report that 68% of its members are 'seriously considering' leaving the profession entirely.
- Young people, the so called Generation Z, are also facing many pressures, as indicated by the rise in the use of food banks, poverty, exam pressures, self-harming, family breakdown, eating disorders, depression, mental health issues, bullying via social media, abuse, alcohol/drug misuse and the rising use of pornography. Schools really need us all to prayer for them, to offer our support, encouragement and thanks and to serve them where we can.
- These statistics stand alongside the fact that there are fewer under-eighteens in many of our churches and a rise in Biblical illiteracy amongst their generation.

But there are many opportunities to serve schools today -

- Schools are required to teach RE, to have a service of Collective Worship of a broadly Christian nature and the Spiritual Moral Social and Cultural Development of pupils is something Ofsted look out for particularly. Visiting a place of worship or the delivery of British values may offer another opportunities to churches. Schools are often are grateful to have help in delivering these outcomes and may feel ill equipped to do so themselves.
- There are many other types of opportunities to serve – such as hearing boys read, being a school governor, helping on trips etc.
- Prayer – could I encourage you as a church to regularly pray for your nearest school – Springfield, for the Head Teacher Mrs Linda Joseph, for the Chair of Governors Mr Mike Patterson, for all the staff, for the pupils.

So what does CaSS do? My job is very varied! Perhaps the best way for you to get a picture of our work is if I give you a few examples of our recent initiatives

- Held three conferences with well-known keynote speakers and 15 -18 workshops at each (around 430 people attending in total);
- Run 'Open the Book' training sessions in Beauchief & Woodseats, Porter Croft & Ecclesall, Mosborough, Bents Green, Crosspool, Grenoside and Deepcar - resulting in 17 'Open the Book' teams visiting schools;
- Invited Phil Togwell, the National Leader of Prayer Spaces in Schools to run workshops (60 people attended from across the city);
- Delivered James Montgomery themed-activities for children as part of the 'Off the Shelf' festival with Sheffield Cathedral;
- Published a 'Code of Good Practice' to support and promote safeguarding and professionalism in church/Christian links with schools;
- Spoken about 'Godly Play', 'Open the Book' and 'Prayer Spaces in Schools' to all Diocesan Head Teachers;
- Hold an annual 'Pray Day for Sheffield Schools' and encouraged local prayer groups;

- Produced lesson plans & ideas for national charity SGMLifewords to help schools reflect on WW1 centenary;
- Hosted Scripture Union training events alongside local churches ('Transforming Lives' at Meadowhead Christian Fellowship and '3-D Faith' at Wesley Hall in Crookes);
- Published termly CaSS prayer diaries and newsletters
- Created a primary & secondary box of bereavement/grief materials to loan to schools and loanable boxes of RE resources;
- Written 12 RE lesson ideas available at (<http://www.cass-su.org.uk/>)
- Distributed 5000 Scripture Union Christmas story comics (2015) and 3600 Easter (2016) comics to schools and churches;
- Contributed lesson ideas for Project Paddington Day, 'What would you take? (January 2016)' - helping schools to reflect on the lives of refugees;
- Spoken on ways to serve/connect with schools on Aurora children's work course run by Diocese, YMCA & Cliff College (2016).

The Bible frequently compares God's relationship with us with the relationship of a shepherd to his sheep.

Amanda Owen was a school girl living in a semi in industrial Huddersfield, an unlikely shepherdess, but her dream became a reality. She and her husband have 900 sheep. Being a shepherd is hard work both in Biblical times and for Amanda now.

Shepherds often rescue and restore their sheep – those who get into difficulties, walk through the valley of the shadow of death or wander off. They often have to protect their sheep from danger & harm. It can require courage. Shepherds nurture, tend and guide their sheep by finding them green meadows and taking them to clean water.

God's love, grace, mercy and forgiveness were expressed to Peter. Jesus has shepherding work for Peter to do, despite his previous failures.

The love, mercy, grace and forgiveness of God are offered to us as well, despite any previous failures. The Good Shepherd calls us, like Peter, to 'feed His lambs' and 'take care of his sheep.'

Even if we often feel unlikely shepherd's like Amanda Owen, Jesus calls us to be shepherds and to take care of the next generation of pupils, our schools, our own generation and those who are part of our community any who need rescuing or restoring or when they get into difficulties. We are called to be shepherd's protecting others from harm or danger and to nurture and tend them. They are His lambs, His sheep. They need tending. For we are all greatly cared for by The Good Shepherd.

Third Sunday of Easter

Service Date:

10 April, 2016

Worship was led by the Worship Group. The sermon was provided by the Revd. Robert Beard and asked the question 'how do we realise that something we're doing is wrong?' By measuring ourselves against the standards which Jesus set. Through Jesus our shortcomings are revealed and we are not punished but freed to realise our potential in the image of God. Peter and Paul had their shortcomings revealed and their lives transformed in very different ways but both through encountering Christ in their lives.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 382 Come let us join our cheerful songs

Rejoice and Sing 59 God moves in a mysterious way

Rejoice and sing 542 Lead us, heavenly father, lead us
Rejoice and Sing 293 Ye servants of God

Sermon:

Readings

Psalms 30

Acts chapter 9 verses 1 - 20

John chapter 21 verses 1 - 19

Seeing the Light

Acts 9.1-20; John 21:1-19

How do we realise that something we're doing is wrong?

Look back over our lives, what has helped us to realise that something we had done, or were doing, was wrong? What might help us now to know if something we are doing is wrong?

For Christians, the standard against which we are called to measure ourselves is nothing less than that set by Jesus. One of the reasons for thinking of him as "the Light of the world" is that, when we measure ourselves by his standard, all the shadows and the dark places in our lives are illuminated; we can no longer hide them from ourselves.

But allowing the Christ-light to penetrate the darkness inside us, although disquieting to our consciences, and perhaps temporarily embarrassing when we have to admit to others that we've been wrong, is not threatening. Christ's illumination of our lives is not about revealing our misdeeds and punishing us for them, like the 'Thought Police' in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Unlike 'Big Brother', Christ seeks not to restrict our liberty but to enhance it. Christ seeks to reveal to us, and then to free us from, all that prevents us realising the full potential of the image of God, in which each one of us is made. His words earlier in St John's gospel assure us of this:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

(John

10.10)

There has been widespread news coverage this week of the leaked 'Panama papers' – more than eleven million documents belonging to the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca, which show how its clients have been able to launder money, dodge sanctions and avoid paying tax on their earnings. In what has been dubbed history's biggest data leak, the clients named include twelve former and current heads of state and government leaders, including dictators accused of looting their own countries, and more than sixty relatives and associates of heads of state and senior politicians.

Although tax avoidance is technically legal, unlike tax evasion, many of us would doubtless agree with Prime Minister David Cameron's statement in January 2012 that such schemes are 'morally wrong'. As Anders Dahlbeck, tax justice adviser at the aid and development charity Action Aid, has said,

The poorest people are hit hardest by corporate tax avoidance: the IMF estimates that developing countries lose out on 200 billion dollars a year in avoided corporate tax.

And in the UK, it is reported that Jeremy Corbyn, Leader of the Opposition, has stated that,

The avoidance of tax by wealthy firms and individuals is [starving public services of vital funding](#).

But if tax avoidance is immoral, as politicians on both sides of the House of Commons believe, how long must it take for those involved to realise that what they're doing is wrong, and – more importantly – to change their ways? Do some of them just not care? Or do they live by a different moral code in which 'what is right' means 'what I can get away with', which is definitely not the Christian view.

For Christians, 'what is right' means, ultimately, 'what Jesus would do', and Jesus certainly never sought to amass wealth for himself at the expense of those less fortunate. On the contrary, he deliberately sought out those in need and continually drew their plight to the attention of the rich.

As we heard in this morning's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Saul, later Paul, was filled with hatred against the Church, and when the light of Christ burst into his life and he heard Jesus' call, it left him blinded for three days: three days that gave the persecutor of the Church a new life as an apostle and evangelist, a reminder, surely, of the three days from Jesus' crucifixion to his resurrection. Paul had never known Jesus during his earthly ministry; he had not been a witness to the events of Holy Week and Easter, and he only ever encounters Jesus as the risen and ascended Lord. But he has his own experience of death and resurrection, as his former self is struck down on the road to Damascus, and three days later he is raised from the darkness to a new life bearing the imprint of his encounter with the risen Christ. What, I wonder, was going through his mind during those three days?

Peter, by contrast, eagerly embraces Jesus, the Light of the world, right from the beginning; but he repeatedly loses his way, often because he becomes over-enthusiastic. Then, in a terrible moment of fear, he denies Jesus, leaving him to die. As we heard, however, in the morning's gospel reading from St John, after the resurrection Peter is forgiven and reinstated. But Christianity doesn't come easily to Peter, although he has been there all the way through Holy Week and Easter; for even then, as one of the leaders of the early Church, he questions and searches. One of the most telling – and human – moments in his later ministry is the vision of a sailcloth full of animals, which he received on the rooftop of Simon the tanner's house, in Acts chapter 10. Perhaps Paul would have been quicker off the mark, but the vision leaves Peter baffled, even after God's third attempt to get the message across.

Pretty much the whole of Paul's life was wrong, even though – and this is very important – even though he believed that what he was doing was not only right but the will of God. His conversion required that his whole life be turned around and pointed in a completely different direction. By contrast, Peter's life involved a continual series of 'mini-conversions', to call him back and keep him on the straight and narrow. But for both Peter and Paul, it was the presence in their lives of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, that revealed to them where and when they were going wrong, and revealed the way forward.

As Christians, we must continually open our own lives to the Christ-light and not try to hide any part of ourselves from its illumination. Only so will we too be shown where we are going wrong, and which is the way forward. Only so will we die to our former lives and be raised to new lives, bearing the imprint of our encounter with the risen Christ.

What is right? Well, what would Jesus do?

Second Sunday of Easter

Service Date:

3 April, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Canon Adrian Alker who drew the metaphor of faith as a journey from despair to hope. The disciples experienced this after meeting the resurrected Jesus. Jesus invites us to a radical journey into human life and to care, to forgive, to be people of compassion and mercy. This is what matters, not the structures and rituals of the church.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 376 This is the day the Lord has made

Common Ground 16 Brother, Sister, let me serve you

Rejoice and Sing 261 At the name of Jesus

Rejoice and Sing 289 To God be the Glory

Sermon:

Readings

Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 24 - 28

Psalms 150

John chapter 20 verses 19 - 31

Yesterday I was up at the crack of dawn to catch a 7am train to Cleethorpes, a place I have never been to. I went on the invitation of a Progressive Christianity Group in north Lincolnshire which meets monthly. They wanted me to speak about a book I have just had published entitled *Is a Radical Church Possible?*

It was cold and misty, then it began to rain. The train took me past Scunthorpe, through to Grimsby and on to Cleethorpes. There was little as I looked out on to the landscape to lift my spirit, especially seeing the dominant Tata steel works in Scunthorpe and thinking of all those workers now fearful of their jobs. However by the afternoon the sun was shining, I had been treated to a fish and chip lunch on the promenade and the journey home felt so different; families were on the beach, the talk had gone well, I had sold some books and people were crowding on to the train bound for Manchester Airport with luggage in hand, no doubt in anticipation of a holiday in some warm, exotic place.

It's a simple reminder of how we can think metaphorically about life and faith's journey, not least in this Easter season. When all seemed to be doom and gloom for the followers of Jesus, there was a turnaround, a feeling of new beginnings, a new sense of empowerment and a determination to carry on the work of Jesus in the world. The dangers and the challenges remained for them. The Tata steel works, now bathed in sunshine still housed workers fearful of the future.

Perhaps a rather crude or simplistic analogy but on these Sundays in the Easter season the gospel passages from St John have been chosen because they emphasise the fact that the disciples experienced in some mysterious ways a great change of heart. Their hearts which had been turned to stone at the death of their leader were somehow beating afresh, experiencing the presence of Jesus after his death and were commissioned by Jesus to do his work in the world. So in today's gospel Jesus breathes the Spirit upon the followers gathered in that locked room; next Sunday there is the allusion to making as many followers as one could catch fish in a full fishing net; later in this season comes the giving of a new commandment, to love one another.

And to give special emphasis to the importance of faithful discipleship we also have today the story of Thomas, doubting Jesus' resurrection until he sees for himself the marks of his passion. From this comes the famous words, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe".

In this Easter season let us reflect upon what it means to be the 'Easter people', about what it means to say we are followers of Jesus the Christ. Is discipleship about **coming to believe**? And what might this mean? Do we disdain Thomas because he dared to doubt? Is the opposite of doubt some kind of certainty, some unquestioning obedience? Is discipleship about standing up every Sunday and reciting a creed? Is this correct belief? Is Right believing about bearing down on others with a belief that we are right, we have the answers?

Well not surprisingly perhaps I don't think that being a follower of Jesus has very much to do with correct beliefs, rather like getting a low score on Pointless. Since the Council of Nicea the church has tried to enforce beliefs upon people, has tried to straitjacket such beliefs and attempted to call anyone who holds to other views on God as a heretic, as unorthodox. Christian history is littered with the stories of religious wars, in which millions have died, fighting over doctrines and dogmas. There is nothing new or newly barbaric about Islamic fundamentalism, Christianity in the Middle ages has been there before. No, the whole thrust of the gospel stories about Jesus of Nazareth was that he invited people on a radical journey, perhaps not on the Trans Pennine express, but a journey of descension, not ascension, a journey downwards into the full messiness of human life, which had at its core the Jewish call to love God and to love neighbour as oneself. The journey was one of action, of healings, of shared meals with vulnerable and marginalized people; it was a pathway of radical challenge to the powers and principalities of the world which oppressed people unjustly and unfairly. That was what Palm Sunday was all about. The alternative procession to the Roman entry into Jerusalem, symbolizing authority and military might, was the entry of Jesus riding a humble beast of burden. Jesus then closed down the Temple temporarily because its religious dignitaries had colluded with the pagan overlords. That secular power then executed him but the power of God's love and justice could not be killed off.

And so here we are, on this side of Easter, declaring ourselves to be the followers of this Jesus.

So as Christians what are we giving our whole heart to, keeping this symbol of the heart from our Ezekiel reading? What will Christ bless us for? Is it that we have been good believers? Or is that we have tried our best to bring the love of God, experienced in Jesus and now through the Spirit into the lives of those in our communities, in our sorrowing world? I don't think we will be blessed because we ascribe to a right set of doctrines and dogmas. I think we are blessed through being passionate about what God, in Jesus, asks us to be passionate about, to love what God loves. And what does God love? In the well known parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, we are given glimpses of the kind of followers we are asked to be – to cross over the road and to care for those in need, not to walk by on the other side. We are called to be forgiving, to be people of mercy and compassion and justice as the father was to the prodigal son.

A radical Church means that we go back as closely as possible to the roots of our faith, that is to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who showed us in his life and in his death how to live and how to love. God love and justice incarnated in Jesus compels us to be the kind of followers who work tirelessly for the good of others, be they migrants fleeing from war,

steel workers fighting for their jobs, people in this city living in dire poverty. I love the Church when it remembers the person whom we follow and try to emulate his humanitarian ethics. I despair for the Church when it seeks to impose and enforce systems of belief and a set of requirements which seem so remote from the life of its founder. I love the church when it is encouraging us to follow Jesus in his care and concern for the vulnerable and the marginalized. Look at the churches' work in establishing foodbanks, in calling for fairer treatment for asylum seekers, in opening its doors to the poor, the homeless and the unloved. I love the church when it challenges those in power to do more to reduce inequality and show more compassion for the plight of refugees.

And yet at times the church seems so often more concerned about its own survival, about its structures, about its ceremonies, its management, about growth agendas.

Those first disciples, convinced in their hearts that the spirit of Jesus not only lived on but compelled them to action, formed themselves into communities of radical inclusiveness, voluntarily distributing wealth, rejecting violence as tool of injustice, being joyfully egalitarian. They were totally countercultural living under a hierarchical, unjust and violent Empire. The time has surely come to make as a priority once more the humanitarian ethics of Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth. And we can do this alongside people of other faiths, other traditions, other ideologies and together this ethic of love and compassion can make a difference in our world. I believe that we will be blessed by the spirit of Christ if indeed we act out that greatest of all commandments, to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Easter Day and celebration of Holy Communion

Service Date:

27 March, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the nature of the resurrection.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 246 the day of resurrection

Rejoice and Sing 239 Jesus lives!

Rejoice and Sing 432 Now is eternal life

Rejoice and Sing 234 Alleluia, alleluia, give thanks to the risen Lord

Sermon:

Readings

First letter to the Corinthians chapter 15 verses 19 - 26

John chapter 20 verses 1 - 18

There is no scripted sermon to reproduce. The Revd. Beard captured our attention by stating that he would not have documented the resurrection as the Gospels do - i.e. people who had known Jesus well not recognising him; people afraid; people running away. But yet, the fact that people did not readily recognise Jesus adds credibility to the truth of the resurrection; Jesus was raised yet changed.

Jesus is in the people we see around us every day. We must share the message that sadness and suffering may be part of human experience but they do not have the last word.

Love will prevail.

Sixth Sunday in Lent and Palm Sunday

Service Date:

20 March, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Fleur Houston who preached on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and how the people turned against him.

One of our younger members distributed palm crosses to the congregation

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 208 All glory, laud and honour

Rejoice and Sing 271 You are the King of Glory

Rejoice and Sing 207 My song is love unknown

Rejoice and Sing 209 Ride on! Ride on in majesty

Sermon:

Readings

Psalm 118 verses 1 and 19 - 29

Luke chapter 19 verses 28 – 40

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

13 March, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the anointing of Jesus. The raising of Lazarus brought Jesus under close scrutiny by his enemies and eating at the home of Lazarus was a very dangerous act. Mary's act of anointing Jesus prefigures Jesus' act of love towards his disciples and his ultimate act of love for all. Mary's extravagant act is justified - we are to seek Jesus after he is gone in the poor and love them generously.

Hymns:

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

Rejoice and Sing 522 From heaven you came

Rejoice and Sing 217 When I survey the wondrous cross

Rejoice and Sing 422 Lift high the cross

Sermon:

Readings

Isaiah chapter 43 verses 16 - 21

Psalm 126

Philippeans chapter 3 verses 4b - 14

John chapter 12 verses 1 – 8

Fouth Sunday in Lent and Mothering Sunday

Service Date:

6 March, 2016

Worship was led by Mrs. Val Morrison who explained some of the possible origins of Mothering Sunday. It had been the Sunday when people returned to their Mother church, then the Sunday when people in service were given the day off to visit their families and mothers. This sense of a spiritual home is echoed in the account in Joshua Chapter 5 of the Israelites being led from slavery in Egypt to a new land and that of a physical home in the parable of the Prodigal son returning to his father. If we return to God he shows us infinite grace and comes to meet us.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 339 Great God, your love has called us here

Rejoice and Sing 90 O Lord, all the world belongs to you

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

Rejoice and Sing 107 The love of God comes close

Rejoice and Sing 265 I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship

Sermon:

Readings

Second Corinthians Chapter 5 verses 16 - 21

Joshua Chapter 5 verses 9 - 12

Luke Chapter 15 verses 1 - 3 and 11b - 32

Here we are, half way through Lent. That time of the year when we try to spend some time in quiet contemplation, when we 'give things up' and when itinerant preachers of sermons know (that whatever is their normal practice) they have to have a different sermon for each Sunday because each of the Sundays has a very specific meaning on the journey of preparation for the great festival of Easter.

This, the fourth Sunday, is designated Mothering Sunday and like much of the Easter (and indeed Christmas) traditions has a somewhat confused history. There are those who would trace its history back to Roman times and the feast of Hilaria dedicated to the mother goddess Cybele. Others talk of a 16th century beginning when people returned to their mother church and later the day became one in which domestic servants were given the day off to visit their families. There are sunny pictures of the people picking flowers along the paths they walked to get 'home' as gifts for their mothers.

The tradition lapsed early in the 20th century but was revived in 1914 and grew during the second World War under the influence of American and Canadian soldiers serving abroad. The American influence turned it into Mother's Day and ushered in the more elaborate giving of cards and gifts which we often see today.

Despite all of this confusion there are some aspects of the current marking of the day which have their roots very firmly in the Biblical story of Easter and the message which that story conveys.

There are three words which I want to concentrate on this morning, words which come from our readings and words which, I think, are significant for all our lives, whether we are mothers or not, whether we have joyful or sad memories of mothers and motherhood. Let's then turn to our reading from Joshua and first let's remind ourselves of the context. 40 years previously this group of people or at least their immediate ancestors, had left slavery and hardship in Egypt. They had followed Moses with more or less conviction about the wisdom of what they were doing depending on the circumstances of the day. They knew about the fact that Moses was merely their human leader and that God had made a promise to them. Holding on to that promise had not been easy and they had not always been faithful.

Just before reaching the land which God had promised to them Moses died. I always think this is one of the saddest stories in the Bible. Moses, acknowledged to be the greatest prophet, led the people through all the hardship of 40 years and just as he was about to reach his goal, he died. Another extraordinary thing to our 21st century Western eyes is that there appears to have been very little ceremony or distress and the leadership mantle was passed on to Joshua. Who then had the job of transforming this wandering tribe into a cohesive nation, tying up loose ends and starting afresh.

As part of this exercise Joshua was charged by God to ground this new phase of their lives in a knowledge of him. That he was a living God, God of all the earth and that his hand was mighty. With this knowledge Joshua was charged with leading the people across the Jordan on the final phase of their 40 year journey and into the land they had been promised.

The crossing of the Jordan became as significant for them as the crossing of the Red Sea, not just because it got them to the place they had been heading to all those years but it gave them a point of reference for their lives and their future, the purpose of which was to make the truths about their God known to the nations.

In the words we read earlier there is a sense of relief, of leaving the past behind, the disgrace and humiliation of slavery, the discomfort and fear of the journey and the possibility of a new beginning.

They were home! Interestingly not at a place they had previously lived in but in the place which God had given them, so not their physical home but their spiritual home.

And what did they do? They celebrated, remembering the story of their escape, the joy of their new home and the goodness of their God.

From this story, so significant in the history of the Jewish people, to a parable of Jesus. An Oh so familiar parable. We call it the parable of the Prodigal Son. It could be called the parable of the Disgruntled Son but both those titles give a negative take on the story. The thread which runs through the whole story is that of the loving father.

From the beginning of the story, this was a father prepared to go against the cultural norms of his day to help his son. Much is often made of the fact that in Jewish families, inheritance only came on the death of the father but another way to think about it is to say, here was a father prepared to ignore the tradition and give his son freedom to make his own mistakes. Was that weakness or strength?

I guess many of us have examples of allowing the loving action of letting go lead to more solid relationships in the long run. And once the son had gone, completely out of contact, no phones, mobile or otherwise, no emails, no regular post. The father spent much time watching for his son returning. Did he, like any good parent, know his son well enough to know that this enterprise on which he had embarked was likely to fail?

And when the son did eventually come into view, the father did a most undignified thing for a middle aged, Middle Eastern head of the family – he ran to meet him!

He openly hugged him and kissed him, also not what might be called normal behaviour for fathers and sons in that context.

And what a welcome, the best robe, the ring, the sandals, and the celebration. The fatted calf, the music and dancing, an impromptu party, no doubt including friends and neighbours from all around, All eager to welcome the young man who had gone away and returned safe and sound (if a little wiser).

So what were they celebrating? The return home, yes. The return to a right relationship between father and son, certainly for the close family.

And into all this joy and noise and celebration comes the elder brother. Well, actually he doesn't come into it. From a distance he couldn't help but hear the noise and he was naturally curious. Weary from working all day in the hot fields, ready for whatever was his normal routine at that time of day, perhaps the equivalent of a cup of tea and a quiet sit down, he called someone to ask 'what's going on?'

Aware that this younger brother had insulted his father, had taken his share of the inheritance, resulting in there being less money to plough back into the farm, that he, the elder brother, had had to work harder in the absence of his younger sibling and miffed that he had never been offered a party, he stayed outside.

But if this is the parable of the loving father, here he is again, leaving the fun and celebration, seeing the hurt of the older son, reaching out to him, building bridges and

showing understanding. Reminding him of his place in his father's heart and household, 'you are always with me, all that is mine is yours'.

I said earlier on that there were three words which were significant as we travel the Lenten journey towards Easter and which came from our readings today.

All those years ago on Mothering Sunday people return home, first to their home church and later to their family home.

The Israelites and the Prodigal son returned home one to a physical home the other to a spiritual home.

The concept of home is a complex one. We talk about feeling secure in our familiar surroundings. Many people feel emotional ties to a church building and some of us who have moved from place to place, will nevertheless maintain ties both physical and emotional to that place from which we originally came. Home in all those manifestations is precious and the sight of homeless people on our own streets or of migrants in makeshift camps in Greece or Calais, challenge our thinking in profound ways.

I think what our readings today illustrate, is that there is a 'home' beyond any of those. A home which is our relationship with God, encapsulated in that phrase from the loving father, 'you are always with me, all that is mine is yours'.

The second concept which I wanted to highlight was that of return. Again fundamental to the traditions of Mothering Sunday but central to both the Israelites journey and the parable which Jesus told.

But returning to what?

To a new relationship with God, with a new understanding of the living God of all the earth with his mighty hand and a new purpose to share that knowledge with all nations.

Initially for the Prodigal Son, it was returning to the comfort of home life, three meals a day and a comfortable bed. But the actions of his loving father turned that into a new relationship in which his past was put behind him and his future assured.

Returning can be hard, there is a saying that you can never go back and in many ways I think that is true. But this is a story which tells us that actually we can, though it requires some careful thought on our part. The lack of faith which the Israelites demonstrated had to be left behind. The pride which the Prodigal Son had felt, had to be left behind. For him it was the recognition that he could have a better life by returning, which helped him to make the move.

But imagine how different that return could have been. With a father who was himself resentful of what his son had done, an older brother who disliked even hated the younger one and no-one prepared to make any moves to show love and forgiveness, to say nothing of the prodigal coming back unprepared to recognize what he had done.

We don't know about the ongoing relationship between the two brothers but we can be confident about the relationship between father and youngest son. A relationship which depended on unconditional love, love against all the odds and here we need a fourth word, the word grace.

It's a word we use and I suspect that we often do so without quite grasping the enormity of its meaning.

It is grace which is the reason that God, creator of the universe freely gifts us that universe, to care for and live in or to squander and defile. It is grace which causes God to spend his days looking out for us and it is grace which causes him to run to meet us, to hug and kiss us and to welcome us back, when we have acted badly, treated others unkindly or acted

without generosity and justice. We only have to be returning for him to act, he doesn't wait for us to get there he comes out and gathers us up and instigates a celebration.

And when we are more like the elder brother or the grumbling Pharisees, he loves us too, showing patience and understanding and, if we will let him, loving us into better relationships with him and with those around us.

So there are three words from this morning's readings. 'home', 'return' and 'relationship' and important as those are, we can forget all of them and, as we begin the fourth week in Lent, remember the one word 'grace' and the greatest gift of grace, freely given. The sacrifice of Jesus.

Maybe our task for the coming week is to ponder on this amazing gift and the fact that there is absolutely nothing which we can do to make God love us more nor is there anything we can do to make him love us less.

His love knows no bounds and that is the relationship we have on offer. Have we the humility and the courage to take up the offer?

Third Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

28 February, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Keith Albans. The theme of his sermon was 'It's a scandal.' The word scandal originally means an obstacle to faith.

Can seeing Jesus behaving angrily be an obstacle to faith - or can anger be an expression of love, as when he ejected the traders from the Temple? The cross can be a scandal unless we see it as a symbol of the angry, self sacrificing Jesus. It can also disillusion us - but disillusion means to see reality. Which SCANDAL do we follow - Steer Clear And Not Do Anything Love or Suffering, Confronting and Never Dodging Love.

Hymns:

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

Rejoice and Sing 638 Thy kingdom come, O God

Common Ground 106 Safe in the shadow of the Lord (based on Psalm 91)

Rejoice and Sing 224 In the cross of Christ I glory

Common Ground 63 Inspired by love and anger (verses 1,2,5 and 6.)

Sermon:

Readings

John Chapter 2 verses 13 - 22

Exodus Chapter 20 verses 1 - 17

First Corinthians Chapter 1 verses 18 - 25

It's a scandal - which is?

- Tabloid headline - "Local Councillor found in possession of child pornography"
- Church Times headline - "American Theologian claims that Jesus was a Gentile"
- New Internationalist headline - "Figures show that poorer countries are trapped in impossible debt."

It's not the tabloid headline - definition of scandal

- a stumbling-block to faith
- anything that brings discredit upon religion
- false imputation
- a disgraceful thing!

It's a religious word. 1 Cor 1:23 "A stumbling-block to the Jews - literally a skandalon.

So many things can be an obstacle to faith, in particular perhaps things that we haven't examined recently? For example the angry Jesus that we came across in today's reading? So here look at the anger of love.

Anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring.

Beverley

Harrison

Three AM: A mother waits

*Nuns keep vigil with psalm and measured voice;
nurses manoeuvre amidst moans and snores.*

*Racked against the long-drawn, ticking night,
dry-mouthed, driven from sleep, I wait;*

imagine in each bang and engine noise

the overdue return, the rasping key;

get up, grope for his empty bed, and pray

no less devoutly than devoted soeurs -

as anxiously as nurses watch for day.

Morning is now four short hours away.

The wind blows litter over silent streets.

Dossers and drunks find huddled brief respite,

and junkies dream gaunt nightmares. My fears

fuse with relief and fury: the boy appears.

Jenny Robertson, 'A Touch

of Flame', Lion

The love and the anger fuse in that powerful story of Jesus in the Temple...

- no place of story different in John - in synoptics it is the cause of the plot against Jesus. John makes the raising of Lazarus that - so this stands differently - as a statement of intent/purpose?

The action of Jesus flows from love and a sense of injustice. That is a stumbling block to the poor - it is a scandal, and therefore love must act.

The mark of a good action is that it appears inevitable in retrospect.

-Robert Louis Stevenson

- How good are we at recognising the scandals? The real stumbling blocks?
- Church views – External v Internal?

O.T Reading - The 10 Commandments

- It's a scandal - everyone ignores them!
- It's a scandal - why everyone ignores them! We take them out of context, and forget what really lies behind them. Jesus was angry despite the fact that people were being 'helped' to keep the Law - because of the way they were being 'helped'!
- The Covenant lies behind the 10 Commandments - a relationship in which God, not us, takes the initiative. If you have to ask the question to define what's required, you have missed the point. If you're playing the rules in order to gain an advantage you

have missed the point. Perhaps the scandal is the way in which we, the custodians of the covenant, have made these basic rules of community seem so impossible or so irrelevant - c.f. rules on Sunday Trading!

- The 10 Commandments are a scandal - a stumbling block, because we dare not imagine what life would be like if the ideas they encapsulate were followed.

Epistle - 1 Cor 1:23 - The Cross - a Scandal

- A crucified person was deemed beyond the reach of God's mercy. "We proclaim a crucified Christ" - a scandal to Jews, folly to Greeks etc.
- A scandal to today's value-system?
- A scandal to us? In Lent does the Cross attract or repel, does it offer an understanding of life and faith which attracts or repels? How do we present the Cross – simply as something that Jesus did, or something we are called to do? No short cut to glory - that's the gospel - good news? Scandal?

SCANDAL - Love's anger into action. Jesus confronts the bending of the law to oppress the poor, God is described in Exodus as jealous - an anger born of love towards those who miss the point and make other things into gods. Paul confronts us with the Cross, the ultimate scandal - something that should equate with damnation being instead the instrument of salvation - the crucified Christ, and the cross demands our response - Love does.

SCANDAL - acronyms - "Steer clear and not do anything love"

An illustration of the constructive use that anger can be put to! A boy called Craig Kielburger aged 12 who lives in Toronto, Canada, happened to see one day in his newspaper a headline 'Boy, 12 years old, speaks out and is murdered.' Craig says: 'I was 12, and it intrigued me, so I read on. It was about a Pakistani boy who, at the age of four, was sold into bondage to work for a carpet weaver. He worked 12 hours a day, six days a week, weaving tiny knots for a carpet. At the age of 10 he'd escaped and begun speaking out - he believed in rights for children, and he fought. Then he was murdered. 'I asked my parents, "Does child labour really exist? Is this article true?" I'd been taught that a civil war was fought in the United States to eliminate slavery, and that all around the world it had been abolished. But here was this article contradicting everything I'd learnt. So I began to look through old articles at the library and my parents suggested organisations I could write to. One of the most shocking statistics I learnt was that there are an estimated 250 million child labourers around the world between the ages of 5 and 14, half of them working full time. That blew me away. That's the same as the population of the United States. So one day I asked my teacher if I could speak to the class. I passed round the article and some of my research, and I said I wanted to do something and that I had one question, "Who's with me?" A bunch of us went to my house that day and sat around with pop and pizza and talked about it. Free the Children was born. 'At first we wrote letters, then we did more complex things, like petitions and raising funds. Nowadays we're organising marches and conferences around the world. All the money we raise through donations or school dance-a-thons and rock-a-thons - that's sitting in a rocking chair for hours - goes on our projects. Projects such as buying cows for poor families in India. The children can milk them in the evening and sell the surplus, and that extra money means they can go to school in the day instead of having to work full time.' (Sunday Times, 1998)

It's a scandal - not the Newspaper Headlines, or the Vicar and Organist stories, but love that does nothing, that fails to be passionate in the face of injustice and evil. And such scandals are far more common aren't they. And they involve you and me and people like us.

I began with one word - SCANDAL. I want to end with another - DISILLUSIONED. Barbara Brown Taylor reflecting on walking around closed churches in Turkey. "God has given us good news in human form and has given us the grace to proclaim it, but part of our terrible freedom is the freedom to lose our voices, to forget where we are going and why." From this she reflects on the reality of living in a post-Christian era and why. She traces the ways in which people lost touch with organised religion - late 60's Vietnam into antiwar movements and ecological pressure groups. "Faith in God is no longer the rule; it is the exception to the rule, one option among many." And she traces the reason as being people becoming disillusioned with God, the Church and the teachings of the Church. Sunday school faith doesn't work - people feel let down... "These are grim times, in which the God of our fondest dreams is nowhere to be found."

Then she writes this. "But down in the darkness below those dreams - in the place where all our notions about God have come to naught - there is still reason to hope. Because disillusionment is not so bad. Disillusionment is the loss of illusion - about ourselves, our world and about God. Disillusioned, we come to realise that God doesn't fit our expectations."

She concludes: "Our job is to stand with one foot on earth and one in heaven, with the double vision that is the gift of faith, and to say out of own experience that reality is not flat but deep, not opaque but transparent, not meaningless but shot full of grace for those with the least willingness to believe it to be so."

The scandal of the cross disillusion us. It reminds us of a jealous God, an angry Jesus and a crucified Christ. And nothing that we offer by way of the gospel can be truly good news unless it includes those scandals. "Steer clear and not do anything love" is not part of our calling. Instead we have to walk the way of the cross - the scandal - "Suffering, Confronting and never dodging away love." Let us pray:

Give us, O Lord, churches

that will be more courageous than cautious;

that will not merely 'comfort the afflicted'

but 'afflict the comfortable';

that will not only love the world but will also judge the world;

that will not only pursue peace but also demand justice;

that will not remain silent when people are calling for a voice;

that will not pass by on the other side

when wounded humanity is waiting to be healed;

that will not only call us to worship

but also send us out to witness;

that will follow Christ even when the way points to a cross.

To this end we offer ourselves in the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us.

Amen.

Second Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

21 February, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. His sermon began with an account of the monk Dionysius who around 525 AD attempted to map the events in Jesus life on to dates in

history. Moving to the gospel reading we were reminded that despite the warnings of the Pharisees to leave the region for his own safety, Jesus was determined to fulfill his ministry through his death and continued his unwavering journey. How do events in our lives relate to the events in Jesus' life? Our challenge is to make something meaningful of his suffering and death by continuing his ministry.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 586 All my hope on God is founded

Rejoice and Sing 553 To Abraham and Sarah

Rejoice and Sing 601 Christ is the world's true light

Rejoice and Sing 121 The God of Abraham praise

Sermon:

Readings

Genesis Chapter 15 verses 1 - 12 and 17 - 18

Psalm 27

Philippians Chapter 3 verse 17 to Chapter 4 verse 1

Luke Chapter 13 verses 31 - 35

A Date with Death

In 525 A.D., Dionysius Exiguus (*exiguus* is Latin for 'little' or possibly 'humble'), a monk from Scythia Minor (part of modern Romania and Bulgaria) was working as a scholar and translator in the Papal Curia (the administration) in Rome. Among his works were Latin translations of the *Life of St Pachomius*, the *Instruction of St Proclus of Constantinople*, *On the Making of Man* by St Gregory of Nyssa, and the history of the discovery of the head of St John the Baptist.

On one occasion, Dionysius was preparing new tables for determining the date of Easter, and he took the bold decision to abandon the pagan calendar in use at the time, based on the first year of the reign of Emperor Diocletian (from 29 August 284), and instead began to develop a calendar based on his own calculation of the year of Jesus'.

Among the biblical data Dionysius used were the statements in Luke's gospel that Jesus was baptized in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius (Luke 3.1), and that he was about thirty years old at the start of his ministry (Luke 3.23). Dionysius calculated the probable year of Jesus' birth as the 753rd since the founding of the Roman Empire. This he re-designated as the year 1, and, although not generally accepted for hundreds of years, his calendar, with later adjustments to take leap-years into account, has become the global standard, even where other local and religious calendars are used alongside it.

But there's more: Many modern Evangelical scholars like to use a famous prophecy from the book of Daniel which runs thus:

Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. Know therefore and understand: from the time that the word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the time of an anointed prince, there shall be seven weeks; and for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with streets and moat, but in a troubled time. After the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing, and the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. He shall make a strong covenant with many for one week,

and for half of the week he shall make sacrifice and offering cease; and in their place shall be an abomination that desolates, until the decreed end is poured out upon the desolator.'

Daniel 9.24-27

Not to trouble you with the calculations this morning, I'll simply state that this reckoning places the baptism of Jesus in 27 AD, which would place his birth about, or before, 3 BC, in other words three or more years earlier than Dionysius's date.

We can be even more precise still, because Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, was born in 21 B.C. and, following the intervention of the Emperor Augustus, succeeded to a part of the territory ruled by his father in 4 BC. These are well-established historical dates and place the birth of Jesus in or before the year 4 BC. If, however, the two-year age limit decreed by Herod the Great in Matthew's account of the slaughter of the Innocents is correct, then we can push the date of Jesus' birth back as far as 5 or 6 BC.

It's probably a good thing that Dionysius isn't around any longer to argue the toss.

What does all this have to do with this morning's gospel reading?

A group of Pharisees come to Jesus as he journeys to Jerusalem, and urge him to "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." Why would they do this? Were they unusually friendly Pharisees, motivated by genuine concern for Jesus' safety? Or was their story concocted to intimidate a known trouble-maker into leaving their neighbourhood alone? Or were they sent by Herod to threaten Jesus and keep him away from Jerusalem? It's possible that the message was prompted by the route Jesus took from Galilee through Judea towards Jerusalem, which may have taken him close to near Machærus, the location of John's imprisonment and, according to the historian Josephus, famous for its healing herbs and hot springs, where Herod had one of finest palaces. As a physician, Luke himself might have taken an interest in the place.

After Jesus is arrested and brought before Herod, Luke tells us that Herod "was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign" (Luke 23.8). This seems contrary to the death threat brought by the Pharisees, so it's tempting to speculate that their message may even have come from Herod's wife, Herodias, at whose behest John the Baptist was beheaded, and that it was she who was threatening Jesus' life. From a scriptural perspective, this has echoes of the death threat sent by Queen Jezebel to the prophet Elijah after he killed her priests (1 Kings 19.1-2).

Be all that as it may, the nature of Jesus' response suggests that he understands the Pharisees to be royal emissaries, for he has a message for them to take back to Herod: "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'"

The fox symbolises all that is sly and destructive: attributes that certainly sit comfortably on the person of Herod as Luke presents him. One commentator, Ellicott, notes that the Greek word for "fox", *alopez*, is feminine, so Luke may even be suggesting that Herod had become so enslaved to Herodias as to have effectively lost his manhood.

Instead of backing down, Jesus sets out his current programme in clear terms. Jesus' whole ministry of preaching and healing is characterised by his fearlessness in the face of challenge. It's as though he follows each statement and story and action by saying, "There's the truth. Now what are you going to do about it?"

The challenge is reinforced as Jesus reasserts his determination to pursue his course to Jerusalem, whether despite or because of the fact that he knows that that is where he shall

be killed. There is an ironic undertone in the Greek where Jesus says, “it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem,” suggesting that the city has a monopoly on murdering prophets, so where else would a prophet go to die?

The irony continues, albeit more in anguish than in anger, as Jesus utters his heartbreaking lament over the city, the city blessed above all others by God, the city whose very name means “Vision of Peace”, and yet the city who murders God’s messengers and is now, in Luke’s understanding, about to murder God himself.

Whatever the motives of the Pharisees, or Herod, or Herodias, for wanting Jesus out of the way, Jesus himself sees his death not as the end of his ministry, but as part of it: as its culmination, in fact.

The image of Jesus gathering the city’s children together “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” is one of the Bible’s rare feminine images for God; the same image occurs in three different Psalms (17.8, 57.1, 91.4). These texts mark moments when even the patriarchal culture of ancient times could understand God as both father and mother. But the Bible’s avian imagery is not only of protection, but also of fledging and flying. God is not only a mother hen to Israel but also, in Deuteronomy, a mother eagle, urging her children to leave the nest, to mature in faith, to grow up and take responsibility for themselves:

As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young;

*as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions,
Yahweh alone guided [Israel]...*

Deuteronomy 11.12a

To learn to fly alone is the test of adulthood. Jesus’ death on the Cross will be the ultimate test of his disciples’ faith. Jesus’ death on the cross is also the ultimate test of our own faith. I began this sermon with a discussion about how Dionysius Exiguus tried, with all the scholarship at his command, to map the events of Jesus’ life onto dates in history. I’m ending it by opening a discussion about how our own lives map onto the events in Jesus’ life. As we make our way through Lent, we contemplate Jesus’ unwavering journey towards Jerusalem, where he would confront all the fear and hatred that the world could throw at him. I invite us all to consider the relationships between our own experiences and Jesus’ experiences, how events in our own lives relate to the events of Jesus’ life: how our suffering can be mapped onto his suffering. What do our experiences and his have to say to each other?

We may – and I’m sure we do – believe that Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing sets us an example worth following our whole lives through, even simply as a pattern of truly human behaviour. The challenge is to make something of his suffering and death, to see his giving up of life also as an example worth following: if not in literal fact, then in giving up the lives we might have had, or might have longed for, to pick up and continue his ministry in the power of his resurrection.

First Sunday in Lent

Service Date:

14 February, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard.

Hymns:

Rejoice and sing 348 Hark, my soul! It is the Lord

Rejoice and Sing 509 O Jesus I have promised
Rejoice and Sing 485 Almighty Father of all thngs that be
Rejoice and Sing 332 Jesus lover of my soul

Sermon:

Readings

Joel Chapter 2 verses 1 - 2 and 12 - 17

Psalm 51 as set at Rejoice and Sing 694

Second Corinthians Chapter 5 verse 20b to Chapter 6 verse 10

Matthew Chapter 6 verses 1 - 6 and 16 - 21

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany and Sunday before Lent. Holy Communion.

Service Date:

7 February, 2016

Worship was led by the Revd. Dr. David Stec who preached on Luke's account of the Transfiguration. Jesus experienced the transformative effect of prayer, and in talking with Moses and Elijah was in accord with all they represented and foretold. The Disciples accompanying him were given a glimpse of the future glory of Christ.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 67 Immortal invisible God only wise

Rejoice and Sing 592 Jesus these eyes have never seen

Rejoice and Sing 451 Lamb of God unblemished

Rejoice and Sing 602 Forth in the peace of Christ we go

Sermon:

Readings

Exodus chapter 34 verses 29- 35

Psalm 99

Second letter to the Corinthians chapter 3 verses 12 - 18

Luke chapter 9 verses 28 - 36

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Luke 9:29

Over the years I have preached several times on the transfiguration, but never on St Luke's version of it.

And when I began to prepare for this service, and looked closely at St Luke's account, I could not help thinking that he had a more profound appreciation of what was happening on this occasion than did Mark and Matthew.

So today I would like to explore what insights we can gain from how Luke's sets out the transfiguration.

To begin with, each of the Gospel writers notes that this took place just a few days after Peter's confession of faith on the way to Caesarea Philippi followed by Jesus speaking for the first time of his impending passion ...

But whereas Mark and Matthew say simply "after six days", Luke says "about eight days after these sayings", thus making more explicit the connection between what he is about to relate and Jesus' words about his suffering and death which lay ahead.

More importantly, Luke then adds, "Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray."

Luke is the only Gospel to state the purpose of his going up the mountain as being “to pray”. We might surmise some such sacred purpose lay behind that trip in the company of those three of the most prominent of his disciples.

Why else might he have gone up the mountain with them?

In the modern world walking up mountains just for the sheer enjoyment of it is a very popular activity.

It is something that I enjoy very much myself, and each year my wife and I spend some time walking in the Tatra Mountains of Poland.

Did people in the ancient world go walking up mountains for purely recreational reasons?

Perhaps they sometimes did, but I suspect that in daily life most people had to work so hard to earn a living that they had little time or concern for such pursuits.

In any case, we have to remember that the Gospels were written not to give us a biography of Jesus, but to present us with the good news of Jesus as our saviour.

They would not have told us about that venture up the mountain — most likely Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in the area — unless it had some sacred purpose, but Luke alone tells us that it was in order “to pray”.

And this is important for what follows.

Luke continues, “And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

Notice these words, “the appearance of his face changed”.

Mark says, “And he was transfigured before them” (and the Greek verb for “transfigured” is the one from which we get the word metamorphosis, a change of form).

Matthew repeats Mark and adds, “and his face shone as the sun”.

Luke omits any mention of Jesus being “transfigured”, and concentrates upon the appearance of Jesus’ face being changed.

This recalls what happened to Moses in that passage which we read from Exodus 34 as our OT lesson.

And Luke makes this connection particularly clear.

We are told that when Moses came down the mountain with the tablets of the Ten Commandments in his hand “his face shone because he had been talking with God”.

Thereafter Moses covered his face with a veil.

Whenever he went into the tabernacle to speak with God he removed the veil.

Then when he came out, his face would shine, and he would again cover it with the veil.

These two passages have something to say to us about just how transformative the experience of prayer can be.

Moses’ face shone because he had been talking to God, and the appearance of Jesus’ face changed while he was praying.

The encounter with God, which prayer at its most intimate makes possible, has a transformative effect upon the individual who prays.

It has sometimes been observed that the intense devotions of the saint and mystic are accompanied by something of a physical transformation and luminous glow visible upon the face.

This may not be exactly as we would envisage what happened to Moses and Jesus, but it is very real nonetheless.

Moses and Elijah, the two figures who appeared talking to Jesus were very important in the history of Israel.

Moses might be said to represent the Law, and Elijah the prophets; the Law and the Prophets being the two most authoritative portions of the Hebrew scriptures. Though actually Moses was also reckoned as a prophet, and indeed the greatest of the prophets.

Jesus is seen talking to them, and is thus seen to be in accord with all that they represented and to be the fulfilment of all that they looked forward to.

Again, St Luke has a profound insight into what was happening at that meeting between Jesus and these two great Israelite figures.

Mark and Matthew simply and tersely report that Moses and Elijah appeared and were talking to Jesus.

Luke, however, expresses it in more detail, like this: "And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem."

Here Luke uses a very interesting word to refer to Jesus's death.

He speaks of it as his "departure", and the Greek word for this is *exodos*, literally a "way out", a word which is familiar to all of us from the title of the biblical book Exodus and the event in Israel's history.

Indeed this word is used in the Greek version of the OT at Exodus 19:1, which speaks of "the departure (*exodos*) of the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt".

Thus Luke uses a word with some obvious associations with divine deliverance in the OT.

The death of Jesus at Jerusalem was to be his *exodus*, his departure, which was to be in victory and triumph just as was that of the Israelites from the land of Egypt.

For on the cross he would achieve victory over sin, and three days later he would rise triumphant over death, and would then ascend to the throne of God.

It is not without significance that Luke twice uses the word "glory" in this account of the transfiguration.

Not only does he say that Moses and Elijah appeared in glory, but he also speaks about the glory of Jesus.

He says that the three disciples were heavy with sleep, and that when they awoke they saw his glory and the two men who were with him.

Luke's is the only account of the transfiguration which refers explicitly to Jesus' glory.

But this event was for all of the Gospel writers in some measure a vision of the glory which Jesus was to have after his resurrection.

Indeed some scholars have actually thought that the transfiguration is in some way a misplaced account of an appearance of Jesus after his resurrection.

That is certainly not a view that I would hold, but I think that Jesus was giving Peter, James and John a glimpse of his future glory, before he set out on the road to Jerusalem and all that lay ahead of him there.

Peter's wish to make three booths is entirely understandable.

He saw Jesus speaking with Moses, the one whose face shone because he had spoken directly with God as a man speaks to his friend, and Elijah who had stood alone as the champion of God's people.

Both of these had made such an impression that they were believed to have been translated bodily into heaven.

In a moment of elation Peter saw three men, each of them a manifestation of the divine glory, and wanted to capture that fleeting moment by providing for each one a booth.

But what he did not realise was that Moses and Elijah belonged to the old order that was passing away.

In just a moment a cloud would overshadow them, and they would hear a voice out of the cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Then these two figures from Israelite history would vanish, leaving Jesus alone.

In that passage which we read from 2 Corinthians 3, St Paul goes as far as to suggest that Moses himself knew the transitoriness of his reflected glory and put the veil over his face to prevent the Israelites seeing that glory fade.

St Paul also speaks of the Jews of his day having their minds veiled as they continue to read the old covenant; the knowledge that Christ has outdated the Law is veiled from them.

But they have only to turn to Christ for the veil to be removed.

He adds, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Cor 3:18)

Mark and Matthew tell us that as Jesus and the disciples came down from the mountain, he commanded the disciples to tell no one of what they had seen until after his resurrection

But without referring to any command of Jesus, Luke tells us that they "kept silence and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen".

Doubtless this was because it did not make much sense to them at the time.

They had been given a glimpse of the future glory of Christ, and this would make sense to them only after his resurrection.

And today, just before we enter the season of Lent, St Luke grants us a vision of the glorified Christ which we shall only properly be able to appreciate and to celebrate, when we later look back at it in the light and joy of Easter.

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date:

31 January, 2016

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Keith Albans who preached on First Corinthians chapter 13 verse 12 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face.' The theme of half knowledge ran through his sermon - Jeremiah not knowing what to say; the crowd in the Temple thinking they knew Jesus; Paul reminding the church at Corinth that they must admit that their knowledge is incomplete. We need to admit that we may not have all the facts when facing the big issues in our world - for example migration, tax evasion.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 560 Glorious things of Thee are spoken

Rejoice and Sing 198 A stranger once did bless the earth

Rejoice and Sing 72 Now thank we all our God

Common Ground 69 Jesus Christ is waiting

Rejoice and Sing 663 Love divine all loves excelling

Sermon:

Readings

Luke chapter 4 verses 21 - 30

Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 4 - 10

First letter to the Corinthians chapter 13 verses 1 - 13

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

1 Cor 13:12

Epiphany to Lent – the lectionary is a little odd? Got to get Jesus from being a baby to the later part of his active ministry in a very short time – especially if Easter is early!

This week it is even more confusing – the Revised Common Lectionary is not very common! 3 different possibilities – post-Epiphany, Ordinary Time or the 2nd Sunday before Lent! – Take your pick. My text seems rather appropriate – partial knowledge rules, OK!

Reading the three set passages at the beginning of the week, I was struck both by some of their similarities, and also by the ways in which their differences fitted together.

Jeremiah We read the account of the prophet's call – very similar to the experience of many a prophet in the Bible.

- The primary focus is on the action of God – it is God who calls...
- The testimony of the prophet is the feeling of total inadequacy – 'I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy'
- God's response is pretty direct – for it is God who directs and equips – fear is forbidden and God's presence is promised
- Jeremiah's task is to obey... and had we read onto the next few verses, he is up and away prophesying

But it is the tenor of his initial response which to me seems to human and honest – 'truly I do not know how to speak...' Or as Paul would have it, "now we only know in part..."

Jesus Turning to our gospel reading – as I said earlier this is in effect half a reading, for the first part of the Chapter sees Jesus in the wilderness – tempted by the Devil, and then he goes preaching and teaching and ends up reading a bit of Isaiah's prophecy at his home synagogue. And you can hear a pin drop... And everyone is looking at him... And he speaks... "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

- And again, we go into a discussion of knowledge and ignorance. The crowd know him... or they think they know him... well, they know his father!
- And Jesus apparently knows what they are thinking – and he tells them! But he quickly disabuses them of any idea that he is here as the 'local boy done good!'
- Jesus in effect casts doubt on their supposed knowledge of him – he criticises their attitude, he claims the status of prophet in the line of Elijah and Elisha, and he exposes their nationalism and fear that God might be at work beyond their boundaries!
- 'Now we know only in part...' And in a foreshadowing of Jesus' eventual fate, they make to do away with him, and in a foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection appearances, he walks through them and went on his way!

1 Corinthians When I was training for the ministry 30 years ago, as part of my BD degree we studied 1 Corinthians in Greek. It was useful and interesting, but the two things which stick in my memory are not to do with the text, but with the place Corinth. The first is that it gave its name to the fruits we know as Currants – they were originally known as raisins de Corinth – and the second is that amongst the trades of Corinth was a trade in mirrors – but not particularly good ones! I wonder if Paul possessed one and regretted the purchase?

- The metaphor of the ‘poorly silvered mirror’ is used by Paul at the end of one of the most famous chapters in the whole Bible – a Chapter which does not mention God, and which is widely believed to have been based on something someone else wrote.
- It is a passage written to a Christian community in chaos; one which has lost sight of the values of the gospel. It is a Church which is so certain of itself and of what matters that it chases after the latest fad, the shiniest gimmick and ends up bigging some people up and looking down on others.
- So Paul brings them back to the primacy of love – which persists and has the power to change things – and to the realisation that we need to practice the humility which comes from recognising and admitting what we do not yet know. Now we know only in part...

Having read these passages at the beginning of what has been a very busy and stressful week work-wise, I have certainly been aware of my ‘not knowing’ as one news story has followed another:

- Two major historical stories in the week. The centenary of the law which brought in conscription in the midst of the 1st World War – and alongside it the legislation which recognised the right to conscientious objection. Controversial – and laws which have divided opinion over the last 100 years.
- The other historical story – Holocaust Memorial Day – not in itself something around not knowing – but which carries the on-going questions of who knew what and when – Pope Pius XII – and the on-going issues of anti-Semitism and Zionism... Methodist Church controversy over investment and West Bank activities...
- Two current stories have also challenged my ‘Not Knowing’ this week. Google’s tax affairs was one – exposing as it does the difference between something being legal and something being right, and the on-going issues around migration was the other. Some aspects are straightforward – wristbands and door colours and the inflammatory language of ‘bunches and swarms’ should have no place in our debating... Daily Mail front page – ‘No to 5,000 migrant children’ next to a picture of Johanna Konta – born in Australia to Hungarian parents, but British and proud of it!
- But as far as the bigger issues of migration and how they can be best managed – I am well aware of what I do not know, for there are so many factors and so many different motivations... Start the Week – R4 last Monday...

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” How do we live in this era of partial knowledge? I said earlier that I was struck not just by the similarities between the passages but also by their differences, for at first reading they do seem to demonstrate different approaches.

- Jeremiah – the ‘don’t ask me, I’m too young’ approach. “I know nothing!”
- Jesus – the ‘confrontational argumentative ‘hoist them on their own petard’ approach?
- Paul – could be dismissed as the ‘love changes everything’ approach – but it is really the ‘have a good look at yourself’ approach.

Different, yes, but beyond that they each claim to be and demonstrate themselves to be speaking on behalf of and inspired by God. It seems to me that too much of our public debate, in society as a whole as well as within the Church, has followed the Corinthian logic of ‘he who shouts loudest wins!’ Recognising that often we are seeing

something which is the result of a reflection in a poorly silvered mirror surely demands a different approach?

With Jeremiah – the call is to be open – not reliant on our own knowledge or limited by the lack of it – open to God’s prompting and urging. With Jesus – the call is to be discerning – recognising the motives and the self-interest of so many aspects of the things which confuse us. And with Paul – be humble, in love, but also be dogged in the same love.

Respect – Tennis finals yesterday – demonstrated so well. Respect – originally means ‘look again’.

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

First Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date:

10 January, 2016

Worship was led by Professor Clyde Binfield.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 26 Father, we praise you

Rejoice and Sing 47 O worship the King, all glorious above

Rejoice and Sing 190 Let earth and heaven combine

Rejoice and Sing 294 Come down, O Love divine

Rejoice and Sing 262 Crown him with many crowns

Sermon:

Readings

Psalm 29

Luke chapter 2 verses 39 - 52

Luke chapter 3 verses 15 - 22

The sermon is not available to load on to the web site.

Second Sunday after Christmas and celebration of Epiphany

Service Date:

3 January, 2016

The service was planned and led by St. Andrew's Worship Group. The themes were journeys and light -not just the light of stars and the sun but light in the sense of understanding and revelation. At Epiphany we celebrate the nature of Jesus being revealed to the Magi who had travelled long and far from a distant land.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 183 Brightest and best of the Sons of the Morning

Rejoice and Sing 184 As with gladness men of old

Rejoice and Sing 187 Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

Rejoice and Sing 191 Songs of thankfulness and praise

Sermon:

Readings

Isaiah chapter 60 verses 1 - 6

Psalm 72 (version at Rejoice and Sing 700)

Matthew chapter 2 verses 1 - 12

Ephesians chapter 3 verses 1 - 12

There was no sermon but three comments - one on 'what is epiphany?' one on the Isaiah reading and one on journeys.

What is Epiphany

Over the last few days I've asked a random selection of friends and acquaintances what they understand by Epiphany. There was some variety in their responses – a few linked it to the 12 days of Christmas – two said 'it's when the Christmas decorations come down.' But everyone connected Epiphany with the wise men or Magi who travelled a great distance to find Jesus and give him their special gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And yes, at Epiphany, we are remembering that event.

In Rejoice & Sing there are 10 hymns designated as Epiphany hymns. Only 5 of those refer to Magi or wise men. This seems strange until you explore what Epiphany actually means. It comes from the Greek word for 'appearance' and means revelation or insight into the true essence or meaning of something. So what we are remembering to-day is that the true nature of Jesus was revealed to the Magi, strangers from a distant land.

Jesus' true nature was, of course, revealed on many more occasions and our final hymn this morning refers to some of them. As I've been thinking about this and coming to a better understanding of what Epiphany means, thanks mainly to a very helpful conversation with David Stec, a thought occurred to me which I would like to share with you. If you could pretend that you don't know the special circumstances surrounding the conception of Jesus-pretend you don't know about the angels who appeared to the shepherds at his birth and pretend that you don't know about the Resurrection. What event or events in Jesus' life would you say reveal his true nature to you?

Comments on Isaiah 60:1-6

The Book of Isaiah is broadly made up of three sections which span many years and some momentous events in the history of the people of God.

Chapters 1-39 are centred around the oracles of Isaiah the son of Amoz, who proclaimed the judgment of God upon a sinful people, and who exercised his prophetic ministry at a time of great crisis for his nation as it was threatened by the menace of the Assyrian empire. Chapters 40-55 are the work of prophet who lived many years later in Babylon among the exiles from Judah and Jerusalem, and who preached to them a wonderful message of hope of a return to their own land.

Chapters 56-66 belong to the time after the return of the exiles to the Jerusalem, as they endured some hard times while the city was still in ruins, the people were far from prosperous, and they felt as though they were still abandoned by God.

These chapters are probably the work of more than one person, but the kernel at the heart of this section is made up of chapters 60-62, which are probably the work of a single author. This section opens with that passage which we listened to just a few moments ago.

It begins with the words, "Arise, shine".

These two words are both imperatives in the feminine singular, addressed to Jerusalem or Zion, which is thought of here in personal terms as a woman lying on the ground, and she represents the whole of the community of God's people.

It is still night, the darkness of the nation's sin remains; and those who have endured the darkness of God's judgment in the exile are still in darkness.

But as Zion lies upon the ground, she hears the cry “Arise”, and this is no mere cry, but a word of power which puts new life into her limbs.

The Hebrew word qumi is exactly the same as that once used by Jesus when he raised a child who appeared to be dead with the Aramaic words reported by Mark talitha cumi “little girl arise” (Mark 5:41).

And Zion is given a further command: she is commanded to “shine”; and she hears it said, “for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you”, — the word “risen” being the one used of the sun rising at dawn.

God’s glory has risen just like the sun upon Zion.

But there is much more to it than this.

This darkness endured by Zion is one that has been shared by the nations too.

Perhaps their darkness is a more profound one — not merely the darkness of sin, but the darkness of ignorance too; and perhaps it even recalls the darkness at the creation when God’s creative work had only just begun, was not yet complete.

But now something truly amazing is about to happen.

Not only does the glory of the Lord rise upon Zion, but Zion herself becomes a source of light for the nations around her.

“And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising”.

Not only will the nations come to this light which emanates from Zion, but they will come bringing Zion’s sons and daughters back home to her from their dispersal in the exile.

And they will come bearing tribute to increase her wealth and for the adornment of the temple and its sacrifices.

A multitude of camels will come, converging upon Jerusalem, camels from Midian and Ephah in the North Arabian desert east of the Gulf of Aqabah, and camels from Sheba in South Arabia, whose queen once famously visited king Solomon.

We are told, “They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.”

This mention of gold and frankincense is suggestive to us of the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus, as we read of it in Matthew 2.

Indeed, this passage in Isaiah 60 has influenced how we envisage that event.

We traditionally think of the Magi as kings, doubtless because of the mention of kings in this passage, even though Matthew says nothing about their being kings.

And if you look at how the journey of the Magi is portrayed on Christmas cards, there is a fair chance that they are riding camels, even though camels are not mentioned in Matthew 2.

And yet Isaiah 60 is a very appropriate passage to be read at Epiphany, because of what it says about the nations coming to the light which arises upon Zion.

For Epiphany is a celebration of the first meeting of Gentiles with the one who came to be the Light of the Word.

David Stec

Comments on Epiphany

There are two threads or themes running through today’s readings: one is journeys, the other is light. How do they go together?

The Isaiah passage is about God’s light drawing all the nations of the world towards it.

The Matthew reading is the familiar story of the Magi, who had journeyed for the better part of two years in pursuit of a particular religious and intellectual goal.

Our travels also may have been a quest of some kind, following some stars to further our studies, to achieve professional goals, to visit places of pilgrimage, or simply to follow a loved one. Some of those reasons probably brought us to live in Sheffield. But they all have in common the desire, the curiosity, to know more about the wider world beyond our usual horizons. Even if we just journey on holiday, all travel can bring new insights, understanding, a change of view, as we learn about other people's history and culture.

I'm sure we have all memories of amazing and beautiful sights we've seen, either of natural wonders or human creativity; and of meeting people we shall always remember for some insight they gave us. Tennyson's Ulysses says: "I am a part of all that I have met" - a truism that I'm sure we can only agree with.

So journeys bring light to the mind - as the magi came to see the manifestation of God in the Infant Jesus; as Paul received his revelation from God when he was on a journey. And when we are overcome with wonder at the beauty of some pastoral landscape, or majestic mountains, or deserts, or sea or sunset, or the star-studded night sky - we are having our little epiphanies: the manifestation of the glory of God in the natural world. It's the same when we experience some act of human creation which gives us intellectual or emotional insights, bringing light to the mind. Whether conveyed through art, or music, or written words - or our loving families and friendships - these are all aspects of God's revelation of himself to us.

The magi were foreigners, the first non-Jews to see Jesus - the first indication that God's message is for all the world. Paul takes up this aspect in our Ephesians reading and says in verse 6: 'the Gentiles are joint heirs with the Jews, part of the same body, sharers together in the promise made in Christ Jesus.' And that promise, which we repeat every time we say the Lord's Prayer, is that God's Kingdom - of peace and love and hope - will come on earth. The Jewish people had previously seen themselves as different, special, in their relationship with God. Extending the message to non-Jews meant acknowledging the common humanity that we all share. I spoke earlier about how travel brings revelations when we meet new people and places, and I'm sure we all have memories of particular moments when this has happened to us. (One dictionary gives a subsidiary definition of the word 'epiphany' as 'a sudden realisation or perception'.) One of my earliest such moments, that opened my eyes and my mind, was when hitch-hiking as a student in the mid-fifties. We were given a lift by a lorry-driver in North Yorkshire. He was a kindly family man, who shared his cigarettes with us - as you did in those days! He had fought in the war (which had ended just about ten years before), and had been taken prisoner in a German POW camp. But now, he and one of the German soldiers who had been his guard wrote to each other and had visited each other, as friends. I was very struck by this as an example of reconciliation, but also the realisation of their common humanity; they could see that they had more in common with each other than the labels of nationality or uniform which separated them,

We have many different groups of people coming into our church - some for religious reasons, others simply to use the building to meet in. They come from different countries, speak different languages, some have a different faith (or no faith). We look beyond St Andrew's and see a very diverse community round about. We look across Sheffield and see very disparate social areas, some of them with many needs. Let us remember the common humanity that we all share, that we are all God's people. Let us get to know them, learn about them, and so expand our understanding. Let us show them what we understand by 'the kingdom of God'.

