

First Sunday in Advent and celebration of Holy Communion

Service Date: 3 December, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. David Stec who preached on the concept of 'if God was here the world would be a better place.' In the old testament there are examples of people feeling cut off from God and in our world, our country, our city, there are tensions, fear, inequality, cruelty and suffering. But God made a second covenant with His people and sent His Son to save and redeem the world. Jesus made it clear to his disciples that suffering and tribulation lay ahead but that the Son of Man would come again - but only God knew when. Therefore during Advent we need to be vigilant like the early church and, as we contemplate the state of the world, trust that God will come again and complete his work.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 130 Behold the mountain of the Lord

Rejoice and Sing 552 The King of love my Shepherd is

Rejoice and Sing 447 I come with joy to meet my Lord

Rejoice and Sing 638 Thy kingdom come, O God

Sermon:

Readings

Isaiah chapter 64 verses 1 - 12

Psalms 80 verses 1 - 7 and 17 - 19

First letter to the Corinthians chapter 1 verses 3 - 9

Mark chapter 13 verses 24 - 37

"God is in his heaven and all is well with the world".

This is a sentiment which has sometimes been expressed as a caricature of religious belief, particularly by those who do not have such a belief.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

All is not well with the world, and it never has been.

In recent years much blood has been shed in conflicts in the middle-east.

The war in Syria continues to cause immense suffering to those caught up in it, we continue to hear of bombings in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the fighting in Yemen causes great hardship to many.

Terrorism has brought tragedy to folk in communities all over the world including this land; and only a week or so ago there was the atrocity carried out at the mosque in the Sinai.

Elsewhere in the world, the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh give some appalling accounts of the events which caused them to flee from their home in Burma.

In the world as a whole there is little trust between east and west, and the tension between North and South Korea could so easily lead to war with unimaginable consequences.

In our own society there is a great disparity in the distribution of wealth, with some enjoying an enormous income while others are reduced to using food banks, and all too many are homeless.

These are just some of the respects in which all is far from well in today's world, and I am sure that you could list many more.

In every age there has been much wrong with the world.

This was certainly true of the time in which the writer of our OT lesson lived.

This passage is to be found in the third section of the Book of Isaiah.

The first section of Isaiah, consisting of chapters 1-39 is concerned with the ministry and message of the prophet Isaiah, who lived in Jerusalem during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah in the 8th century BC.

The second section, made up of chapters 40 to 55 are the work of a prophet who lived among the Judaeans exiles in Babylon.

The third section, consisting of chapters 56 to 66 has its location in Jerusalem, and is made up of some diverse material, much of it belonging to the time after these exiles had returned from Babylon.

It is possible that our OT lesson belongs to the time immediately after they had returned to Jerusalem, and before they had rebuilt the city.

But it is more likely that it originated among the small company of those who had been left behind in Jerusalem during the exile.

They had lived through the catastrophe that had befallen the city in 587 BC, when the Babylonians conquered it, devastated it, and burnt down the temple.

These traumatic events were still a fresh memory for them.

Our OT lesson is part of a psalm of lamentation which begins at Isa 63:7 and continues to the end of chapter 64.

It is written in the style of the psalms of lamentation found in the Book of Psalms, and would not be out of place there.

This psalm opens with the community recounting God's acts of redemption on behalf of his people in the past.

Then it moves on to an appeal to God for his help in their present pitiable condition.

The temple is in ruins, and the community prays:

“Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me.” (63:15).

“Your holy people took possession for a little while; but now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name.” (63:18-19).

The community then goes on to confess its sin, and at the end of chapter 64 makes a final plea for God’s help.

The whole psalm is really a lamentation over the present state of affairs, and an appeal for the intervention of God.

Nowhere is this more passionately expressed than in the words, “O that you would rend the heavens and come down!”

In the distress of the people, it seemed that they were cut off from God.

It seemed that somehow God was remote from them, and not listening to their cries.

He was in his dwelling place in heaven, and it was as though there an impenetrable barrier between him and his people.

It seemed either that he was not aware of how desperate their predicament was, or that he had abandoned them to it.

The idea that God might rend the heavens and come down involves the ancient Hebrew belief that there was a firmament above the heavens.

This was a solid vault, above which was water, and above that was the dwelling place of God.

The prayer here is that God would rend this firmament and come down from his remote habitation to the aid of his people.

Such a concept may be quite alien to a modern scientific mind, but the figurative language used to express it can be powerful and meaningful to the people of every age.

Throughout the centuries there have been people who in a time of great distress and tribulation have felt a profound sense of isolation from God, because of what has befallen them.

They have felt that God was not there with them, but that if he was with them, somehow things would be very different.

And perhaps there have been times when in a moment of personal crisis, you have had the same feeling too.

It is important to remember that the prophets and psalmists who lamented over the present condition of their people could still look forward to the future with hope.

God's first covenant with his people had been a failure, but he would make a new covenant.

He might abandon his people in the short term, but ultimately he would return to them with a new act of redemption, and fulfil his loving purposes for them.

Of course, what the thinkers of the OT looked forward to came to pass only with the advent of Christ.

In the end, God gave his own son for the redemption of the world.

Far from abandoning the world to wallow in its distress, he sent his son into the middle of that distress.

And the world was in such a sorry state that God's son could redeem it only by sharing in its pain.

The fact that God gave his son to the world to suffer the indignity, cruelty and agony of the crucifixion, in order to redeem it, means that God is with us in the tribulations of our world.

The world in which we live is still in a far from perfect state, as I have already said.

But Christ has come, and because he has come we have hope.

The psalmist who wrote that lament in Isa 64 knew all about the importance of waiting for God to act, as he acknowledged in verse 4: "From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him."

When Jesus taught his disciples in Jerusalem during the last week before his crucifixion, he left them under no illusions about the tribulations which lay ahead for them.

He spoke of the persecutions which the early church was to face in terms of the events at the end of time.

In Mark 13 Jesus made use of a kind of Jewish literature known as apocalypse, from the Greek word meaning "revelation", to describe these events.

The culmination of these events is when a supernatural figure called the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory to gather his elect from the ends of the earth.

The early church identified this Son of Man with Jesus, and as they faced great persecutions, they looked forward to the time when Jesus would come for a second time, to perfect God's kingdom here on earth.

Jesus left his disciples with a message of the importance of watching and waiting: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come." (Mark 13:32-33).

At this season of Advent as we contemplate the state of the world, we share with the early church in their watching and waiting, and we also share with them in their hope that, through the coming of Christ, God's work will be made complete.

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 19 November, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Maggie Herbert who preached on the parable of the servants and the talents. We are given skills and talents needed to build the Kingdom of God. It is our responsibility to use these and to encourage and enable others to use theirs. We are not serving a cruel, ruthless master as in the parable but a loving God. We can put our confidence in Him.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 138 Come, thou long expected Jesus

Common Ground 16 Brother, sister, let me serve you

Common Ground 122 Take this moment, time and space

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

Sermon:

Readings

Judges chapter 4 verses 1 - 7

Psalm 123

First Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 1 - 11

Matthew chapter 25 verses 14 - 30

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost and Remembrance Sunday

Service Date: 12 November, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. Cornet player Gordon Truman contributed the Last Post and Reveille. Organist Douglas Jones arranged descants for the cornet and a closing voluntary for organ and cornet.

In his sermon the Revd. Beard asked why we remember the fallen of two wars when we are still sending women and men to fight and possibly die on our behalf when time and time again the bible instructs us to live peaceably, as far as we are able. He argued that believers and non believers alike feel strongly that at times war is a necessary evil while others of both persuasion are resolute pacifists. We need to respect both opinions.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 564 Jesus, Lord, we look to Thee

Rejoice and Sing 705 O God our help in ages past

Rejoice and Sing 762 National Anthem

Common Ground 141 What shall we pray for those who died?

Rejoice and Sing 613 Lord speak to me that I may speak

Rejoice and Sing 1540 O Lord, how shall I meet you?

Rejoice and Sing 433 O thou who camest from above

Sermon:

Readings

Joshua chapter 24 1 - 3a and 14 - 25

Psalms 78 verses 1 - 7

Matthew chapter 25 verses 1 - 13

All Saints Day and 22nd Day after Pentecost

Service Date: 5 November, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Adrian Alker who preached on the Beatitudes and how radical and uncompromising they are. They are turning the world upside down and the church to-day recognises contemporary women and men who show us how to live and love.

Twenty first Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 29 October, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on Martin Luther and his role in the Reformation. Luther believed that grace was achieved through faith in God, not through acts, and that the Bible is the ultimate word of authority. Everyone should have access to the Bible in their own language. Luther held some extreme views at the end of his life with which we would not identify but he does teach us the importance of being willing to discuss and debate with people who hold opposing views to our own.

Hymns:

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

Rejoice and Sing 44 Lord of the boundless curves of space

Rejoice and Sing 550 Put thou thy trust in God

Rejoice and Sing 566 The Church's one foundation

Sermon:

Readings

Deuteronomy chapter 34 verses 1 – 12

Psalm 90 verses 1 – 6

Thessalonians chapter 2 verses 1 – 8

Matthew chapter 22 verses 34 – 46

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 22 October, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 269 Jesus shall reign

Rejoice and Sing 293 Ye servants of God

Rejoice and Sing 391 Stand up and bless the Lord

Rejoice and Sing 262 Crown him with many crowns

Sermon:

Readings

Exodus chapter 33 verses 12 – 23

Psalm 99

First letter to the Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 1 – 10

Matthew chapter 22 verses 15 – 22

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 15 October, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Walter Houston who preached on the theme of leadership and its features and give examples of a bad leader in Aaron who simply gave the people what they wanted and Moses, a good leader who was prepared to stand up for his people and if necessary die for them .Later, Jesus and Paul led by example. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for his people and that requires us to imitate his love and forever offer our grateful praise.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 94 Give to our God immortal praise

Rejoice and Sing 717 Give praise and thanks unto the Lord (setting of psalm 106 verses 1 – 4)

Rejoice and Sing 567 Thy hand, O God has guided

Rejoice and Sing 532 Lord of creation, to you be all praise

Readings

Exodus chapter 32 verses 1 – 14

Psalms 106 verses 6, 7 and 19 – 23

Philippians chapter 4 verses 1 – 9

Matthew chapter 22 verses 1 – 10

Sermon:

Leadership is a quality we are constantly in search of, or to put it another way, we tend not to be satisfied with the leaders we've got. In this democratic age we talk about ruling ourselves, but we are always looking out for leaders. Football clubs turn over managers the way fashionable ladies change their wardrobe. In politics we are confronted with it just now more obviously than ever in this period of party conferences: a personality cult develops round Jeremy Corbyn, while Theresa May's leadership is under threat and seemingly the more so because of a series of mishaps during her closing speech that were hardly her own fault.

What are the qualities that we should look for in a leader? There are quite a number. Vision, charisma, steadfastness, rapport with the people he or she leads... all these, at least, and you can probably think of others. I am going to pick out some important points in the leaders who feature in our first two Bible readings this morning, which may make us think about the meaning of leadership.

The story of the golden calf is one of the masterpieces of the biblical storyteller's art. The first people who appear in the story are the followers, the people of Israel, who become discontented because their leader, Moses, has been away for a long time, and they've no idea when he's going to be back. Fearful and superstitious, they turn on his second in command, Aaron, and suggest that a good substitute would be a concrete symbol to act as a focus of loyalty: 'gods who will go before us'.

Now this is direct disobedience to the first of the Lord's commandments that they accepted before Moses went up the mountain and disappeared: 'You shall have no other gods before me; do not make for yourself an image of anything in heaven above or in the earth below or in the waters under the earth.' Aaron's obvious responsibility was to talk them out of it. Instead, he just gives in to them, asks them to give him all the gold they've got, and makes of it the golden image of a calf, and says 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought

you up out of the land of Egypt.’ The plural ‘gods’ seems odd as there is only one calf, but it is put that way because the storyteller wants to remind us of the action of king Jeroboam of Israel, told in 1 Kings chapter 12. He sets up bull-images in the two border temples of the kingdom, Bethel in the south and Dan in the north, and according to the Kings story says the same words: ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Israel.’

Aaron could have said that he was not enticing Israel to worship another god. Everyone knew that it was the Lord, the God of Israel, who brought them out of Egypt, so that in saying ‘this brought you out of Egypt’ he was identifying the calf image as an image of the Lord himself, and in fact the celebration that he calls for is ‘a festival to the Lord’. But what we call the second commandment clearly forbids the worship of images, regardless of who they are intended to represent. Is God like an ‘ox that eats grass’? When Moses confronts Aaron later in the story he makes two pathetic excuses, first, that the people were out of control—so he didn’t know how to control them or didn’t have the strength to do so, and secondly, that after collecting their gold and putting it in the fire, ‘this calf came out’, as if it made itself and wasn’t anything to do with him.

So much for Aaron, a very bad example of someone who is not a leader, but just gives the followers what they want.

But what about Moses? In the part of the story we have heard we don’t see him interacting with the people, but when he comes down from the mountain he shows his strength of character when he subdues and severely punishes the people whom Aaron was unable to control. Here he is only in dialogue with God. Yet this dialogue shows better than anything else in the story just how good a leader he is.

We see God telling Moses about what is going on down there, and he goes on: ‘I see this people, and it is a stiff-necked people: obstinately disobedient. Now let me alone, let me alone, that I may consume them, and make of you a great people.’ He is proposing to destroy the people of Israel as a whole and call a new one into being among Moses’ descendants, the same way he had with Abraham before, just as in Jesus’ parable he destroys the city of the people first invited to the wedding and calls together a new people from the byways.

Just to digress for a minute about the parable. This version in Matthew is rather different from the better known version in Luke, particularly because of this strange interlude in which the king sends his army to destroy a city while the dinner is waiting on the hotplate. Obviously this doesn’t make a lot of sense. Probably Matthew has put in this episode to allude to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. This whole block of teaching by Jesus is addressed to the religious and political leaders of the Jews, and the parable tells them that if they fail to listen to what Jesus is saying, they will be replaced by others, like the prostitutes and tax collectors whom we heard about two weeks ago in the reading from Matthew. But Matthew is writing after the war with the Romans that ended with Jerusalem’s destruction, and he has put it into the parable. According to Matthew, Jesus had warned the leaders long before that their city, Jerusalem, could be destroyed if they did not listen to his call.

Anyway, it is this kind of revolutionary upset, replacing one chosen people by another, that God is proposing in the Exodus story. But first, remarkably, he says 'let me alone'. This is extraordinary. How can Moses stop God doing what he wants to do? We shall see.

But what a temptation for Moses! To become the ancestor of a chosen people, another Abraham! In place of a people who have shown themselves unworthy of it. But he resists this temptation. He sets himself to plead for this unworthy people, to save them from destruction. Why? Because he is responsible for them, because he has been commissioned by God to lead them out of Egypt and into the promised land. Because they are his people, and he must defend them from all dangers, even from God. This is what leadership means for Moses. Only someone who is totally committed to the people and ready to die for them, as maybe Moses might have to, is a proper leader: even if it means standing up against God. As someone has finely said, 'Aaron could not restrain the people: Moses could restrain even God.' He 'stood in the breach', as the Psalm expresses it, to turn away God's wrath.

Cleverly, Moses appeals to all the reasons which ought to make God change his mind. 'Why does your anger burn against your people (God had called them 'this people') whom you brought out of Egypt'. They are God's people, not just any people, and it will have been wasted effort if he now destroys them. 'Why should the Egyptians say, "He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?"' It's a matter of God's reputation: does he want the Egyptians sniggering that he chose this people and then turned round and destroyed them? But he leaves the most important reason to last. 'Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob your servants, to whom you swore by yourself and said, "I shall make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and all this land of which I said I would give it to your descendants they shall inherit for ever."' In other words: you promised, and you cannot go back on your word. And if the other reasons aren't enough for God, this one finally makes him change his mind.

But may be this is what God meant to do all along, and when he makes his dreadful threat he is counting on Moses to respond in the way that he does. But is it the reasons that Moses offers that count, or is it the respect that God has for Moses as a leader utterly dedicated to his people? Moses has gone out on a limb for the people he leads, and has come away triumphantly successful.

Now look at the completely different aspect of leadership which we can see in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. He loves them and is proud of them, 'my joy and my crown', he calls them. But that doesn't prevent him seeing where they are falling short, and calling on them to make things better. His women colleagues Euodia and Syntyche have evidently had a bad falling out, and this concerns him: he says they 'have struggled with me in the work of the gospel', and he is sad to hear they are not seeing eye to eye.

Then, after he has told them to 'rejoice in the Lord always', and given them various other final words of advice, and blessed them with the peace of God, he thinks of a few more things he could say, beginning with the famous command 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable (or 'serious') and so on, think of these things', and he goes on: 'whatever you have learned and received and heard in me, keep on doing those things.'

Any teacher or leader might say, 'whatever you have learnt or heard from me'. But Paul says 'whatever you have seen in me' is to be imitated. He is not just saying 'do what I say',

he is saying 'do what I do'. The best sort of leaders are those who don't just sit aloft and tell people what to do, but act in the way they expect others to act. In another place, he reminds his mostly poor converts that he worked hard (as a tent-maker according to Luke) so as not to be a burden on them, and says 'you do the same, work hard and don't expect other people to feed you.' He would have no credibility at all in telling them that if he didn't offer a model for imitation himself.

So there you have two striking but very different models of leadership. Our leader is Jesus Christ, setting aside all political and other secular leaders, and in him we can see both these aspects of leadership very plainly.

I'm not one of those who would say of any dilemma in life 'What would Jesus do?', because Jesus had his own unique mission which none of us are called to. But in the daily course of life we see how Jesus spent himself for those he came to save: how he prayed for them, laid hands on them, responded to every individual in the crowds who came to him for help: to put it in a nutshell, he loved them. And this love and commitment to everyone who applied to him is a model for his followers to imitate. None of us will be able to act with that universal love and total commitment: but the model is there: a leader who did not just teach us to love each other, but did it himself.

And then there is another thing. In the end, when his enemies were closing in, wouldn't it have been easy for Jesus to give them the slip: to tell Judas one thing and then go somewhere different, and then head for the hills? Very easy. But then we would never have heard of him, and it's not what he did. He went to Jerusalem knowing it was his enemies' stronghold, he taught there openly, he let Judas go and tell the chief priests where they could find him, and when they came he surrendered himself into their hands. As Moses would have been prepared to do, he made the supreme sacrifice for our sake; he stood in the breach to prevent our sins from overwhelming us.

And in his teaching he suggests that we are called to follow him also in this giving of himself in service and sacrifice. 'Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy to be my disciple.' The point is not that Christians have to be martyrs. Martyrdom isn't something we should actively seek, but rather we should be ready to suffer if we have to. It certainly doesn't mean that we, sitting comfortably at home without being persecuted, can criticise Christians from Iran or Pakistan who flee to avoid persecution. On the contrary, we need to welcome them and fight to make sure they can stay. But we can honour those who have not been able to avoid it and suffer bravely because they are Christians.

Obviously this is not all that we could say about Jesus as a leader. But it is enough for now. He shows the way for us as his disciples. We can imitate his faithful love and live in grateful praise for his offering of himself for our sake.

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost and Harvest Thanksgiving

Service Date: 8 October, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. The service was an Invitation service, the occasion when we invite representatives of groups who meet on the church premises to join us. Our friends from the Ethiopian congregation contributed to the service.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 40 Come, ye thankful people, come

Rejoice and Sing 124 We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land

Praise to the holiest in the height (to a new tune by Douglas Jones)

Rejoice and Sing 42 For the fruits of all creation

Sermon:

Readings

Deuteronomy chapter 8 verses 7 – 18

Psalms 65 verses 9 – 13

John chapter 6 verses 25 – 35

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost and celebration of Holy Communion

Service Date: 1 October, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. David Stec who preached on the theme of challenging God. Just as the Israelites in the wilderness queried whether God was in their midst so can we challenge God and in the process grow in faith and understanding.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 476 Jesus, where're thy people meet

Rejoice and Sing 365 Rock of ages, cleft for me

Rejoice and Sing 449 I hunger and I thirst

Rejoice and Sing 261 At the name of Jesus

Readings

Exodus chapter 17 verses 1 – 7

Psalms 78 verses 1 – 4 and 12 – 16

Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 – 13

Matthew chapter 21 verses 23 – 32

Exod. 17:7

Sermon:

And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the faultfinding of the children of Israel, and because they put the LORD to the proof by saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'

Is the LORD among us or not?

It was not entirely unreasonable of the Israelites to ask this question.

They had been brought out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses, and were on their way to a promised land, a land supposedly flowing with milk and honey.

But their journey was a long and hard one for a people made up of several thousands of persons of all ages, and doubtless with varying degrees of health and strength.

It took them through desert regions where finding water for such a large number was always likely to be a challenge.

We are told at the beginning of Exodus 17 that "All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim; but there was no water for the people to drink."

If they were moving through the wilderness "according to the commandment of the LORD", it was reasonable for them to expect that the Lord would provide for their needs, especially their need for water.

And since this commandment of the Lord came through Moses, it was understandable that they should find fault with Moses.

It was he who was leading them through this wilderness; did he not have a duty of care for them?

So at Rephidim in the region of Sinai, when they found that there was no water for them to drink, they confronted Moses with the words, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?"

In desperation, Moses cries out to God in prayer, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

In response, God tells Moses to pass on ahead with some of the elders, and to stand on the rock at Horeb and to strike the rock with the rod with which he had struck the Nile when he turned it into blood.

When he does this, water will come out of the rock so that the people may drink.

Moses does this, and we may assume that from the rock the Israelites had all the water that they needed.

In this passage, the demand of the people, “Give us water to drink,” is taken both as finding fault with Moses, and as putting God to the test.

Thus this place is given the two names Massah and Meribah.

Massah means a “test”, “proof”, “trial”; and Meribah means “strife”, “contention”, “finding fault”.

In this passage it seems that material from two sources has been put together, and a tradition about the people contending with Moses has been intertwined with a tradition about them putting God to the test with their demand for water.

Actually, there are accounts of similar events elsewhere in the Pentateuch.

In Exodus 15, Just three days after crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites came to a place in the wilderness where the water was undrinkable, because it was bitter.

The people murmured against Moses, and Moses cried out to God and was shown a stick, which he threw into the water, and the water became sweet.

That place was given the name Marah, meaning “bitter” or “bitterness”.

And in Numbers 20, at Kadesh much later in their journey there is an alternative account of the Israelites being in a place where there was no water, and of them contending with Moses (and this time Aaron too).

Following God’s instruction, Moses struck the rock, and water gushed out of it, so that the Israelites and their cattle could drink of it.

As in Exodus 17, this place was given the name Meribah, “contention”, because the people had contended with God there (Num 20:13).

Some scholars think that all three passages are different accounts of the same event; others suppose that on a long journey through the wilderness there must have been several times when lack of water was a problem for the Israelites, and so these passages could refer to different events.

When one reads the whole of the account of the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness to the promised land, one easily gets the impression that they were an awkward, stiff-necked people, who frequently complained and found fault.

There may be some justification in this impression, but we need to remember too that the whole of the forty-year journey through the wilderness to the promised land was a learning experience for the Israelites.

For them it was a spiritual journey as well as a physical journey.

When they set out on the Exodus, they had no real experience of being the people of God, and no understanding of what that entailed.

In Egypt they had grown from being the seventy members of Jacob's family who went to sojourn there, into a people of several thousand, but there was little that bound them together apart from a common ancestry, and a sense of sharing a common oppression as foreigners in Egypt.

They became the people of God only when God made his covenant with them on Mount Sinai and gave them the ten commandments, but this was only the beginning of their relationship with God.

It was the whole experience of the Exodus which moulded them into being God's people.

Throughout this journey, they found fault with Moses – yes.

They put God to the proof – yes.

But it was through their questioning, "Is the Lord among us or not?" that they grew as a people.

For they experienced his power and readiness to provide for their needs and bring them to the land he had promised them.

As each of us go forward on our spiritual journey through life in the Christian faith, there are times when we too arrive at the place Meribah and Massah.

There are times when God seems to be remote, not listening to our prayers, not providing the help that we need in a moment of crisis, but allowing bad things to happen, for reasons we cannot understand.

At such times, it is only natural that we should want to contend with God, and put God to the proof, questioning whether he is really with us.

As people of faith, there are times in life when we put God to the proof, weighing up what a particular event or situation has to say to us about what we believe about God.

Such a questioning and critical attitude to our faith can be positively upbuilding.

For as we move further along our spiritual journey and in time look back upon our experience, we see that we have learned from it and our faith has matured.

Our lesson from St Matthew's Gospel has its setting in the last week of the life of Jesus, as he was teaching in the courts of the temple.

He was approached and asked several questions by groups variously described as chief priests and elders, Pharisees and Sadducees.

They asked him by what authority he did “these things”, by which they presumably meant his teaching and healing ministry.

They also asked him whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar, they asked him a question about the resurrection of the dead, and a question about which is the greatest of the commandments.

For the most part these questions were intended to trick him into giving an unwise answer and thus to entrap him, though the one about the greatest of the commandments might have been a genuine enquiry.

Jesus not only responded to their questions, but also used this as an occasion to give further teaching through parables: the parable of the two sons (which we heard read in our Gospel lesson), the parable of tenants of the vineyard, and the parable of the marriage feast.

Although this questioning of Jesus had an overwhelmingly negative purpose, its result might have been beneficial to those who posed the questions, if only they had heeded his teaching and reflected upon his parables, even though he was saying things that they would not wish to hear.

Certainly St Matthew and the other writers of the Synoptic Gospels must have thought that this teaching of Jesus was edifying for the early Christians for whom they wrote.

In a sense, one might say that the Christian life is all about putting Christ to the test, since it is a matter of trying out, putting into practice the way of life which he taught and showed.

It is a matter of gaining experience on our Christian journey, and growing in Christ.

St Paul in his letter to the Philippians sets out before us an account of why Jesus is worthy of our homage and devotion.

He urges the Philippians to do nothing out of selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than themselves, and to look not only to their own interests, but also to the interests of others.

He then makes use of what is believed to be an earlier Christian hymn, which paints a picture of the utter humiliation of Christ, who:

though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

The hymn then draws out the consequence of this humiliation:

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Through his utter humiliation on our behalf, Christ has proved himself to be supremely worthy of our homage and devotion as his disciples.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 24 September, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Fleur Houston and celebrated the centenary of the Ordination to Christian ministry of Constance Mary Coltman (nee Todd) (1889 – 1969).

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 41 For the beauty of the earth

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

Rejoice and Sing 581 Sing, one and all

Rejoice and Sing 403 Laudate omnes gentes

Rejoice and Sing 740 Tell out my soul

Readings

Jonah chapter 3 verse 7 to chapter 4 verse 11 (A translation by Constance Coltman)

Corinthians 2 chapter 5 verses 16 – 21

Luke chapter 1 verses 46 – 55

Sermon:

It is 24 years ago this month that I was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in this church. I remember it as a very happy occasion. John Carter, Church Secretary, made it clear in his speech that the church was breaking new ground – this was the first time in your history that you had called a woman minister. So I am doubly honoured to be invited back today to mark the ordination 100 years ago of the first woman to be ordained to Christian ministry in the UK – Constance Coltman.

“God reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” In Christ, Paul says, God has chosen to ignore the hostile ways in which human beings behave; he has actively taken steps to achieve reconciliation. In Christ's life, death, resurrection, a new age has begun. There is no going back. Distinctions that mattered before, Paul tells the Christians at Corinth, distinctions of gender, sex, status, do not matter now; for in Christ God has reconciled all people to himself. But just in case the message has not got through – and evidence suggests that it frequently doesn't- Paul

reminds them that he is an ambassador on Christ's behalf. The message he brings has authority. For he knew that he was sent by God to minister reconciliation, sent as God's ambassador so that men and women who had fallen away from grace might yet know God's blessing. This is of course a duty laid on all ministers. When a duly ordained minister declares God's grace in the Gospel, she may be seen as God's ambassador, carrying out her public duty as God's representative, and with authority.

This was how Constance Todd, as she was then, saw her calling; it was a bold, brave decision in 1913 to train for ordination. She was breaking new ground. There had of course been women preachers in England for many years before that, but it was unheard of for a woman to train for the ministry. Many people still thought that the ministry should be open only to men and that a woman, especially a married woman, should stay at home, mind the house and look after her husband and family. The preacher at her service of ordination on 17th September 1917, at the King's Weigh House Church, London, was quite clear that this was "a new thing." He spoke eloquently of "the passing away of the old order in which woman was man's subordinate and the beginning...of a happier age in which man and woman together should build up a nobler world".

This new age would be marked by reconciliation between men and women. Equality in educational opportunity was very much in the air. Constance, her sister and two brothers grew up in a "scholarly, literary atmosphere" – and this was at a time when people were still asking if women had brains worth using! Her father was First Assistant Secretary of the Scotch Education Department in Whitehall; he taught Consie as she was known in the family, to love poetry. Her mother was one of the first women to study medicine and qualify as a doctor. She enthused her daughter with female role models. She went to a school "where women are treated like sensible creatures" and won an exhibition award to that hot-bed of feminism, Somerville College, Oxford. When she left in July 1911 with a good second class honours degree in history, she was unable to receive the degree to which she would have been entitled had she been a man – that had to wait until 1920 when women were made full members of Oxford University. But London University was more enlightened and in 1915 she was awarded the BD, following that up in 1918 with an honours BD.

Then there was women's suffrage – Constance was clearly not one of the "shrieking sisterhood" as the militant suffragettes were described; "she believed women should persuade men to give them the vote and not chain themselves to the railings". In 1918 following the successful passage of the Representation of the People Act through the House of Lords, she was elated. "It is no longer a question of women as women being disqualified; the disqualification of sex, as sex, is removed. Therefore we can say that the principle is won".

The final hurdle was woman's ordination which Constance was to describe as "the crown and consummation of the woman's movement." She herself was a member of Putney Presbyterian Church but her own church did not yet recognise women's ordination. But the Congregational churches had, at least in principle, so she approached Dr Selbie, principal of Mansfield College, Oxford. On the basis of her sense of calling and her proven academic ability, she was accepted for training. Well liked and respected, she enjoyed three happy years, during which she became engaged to a fellow ordinand, a Baptist, Claud Marshall Coltman.

They were married the day after their ordination and so began a life-time of shared ministry. Their first charge was at Darby Street Mission in the East End of London, a dilapidated, underfunded, struggling outpost of the King's Weigh House, in an area riven by war and social unrest. Even though Constance had done some nursing training after leaving Mansfield College, she scarcely fitted in with conventional expectations of a Bible Woman. But despite that, her work with children prospered and the Sunday School grew in numbers both of pupils and teachers. She came to realise that she had a special ministry to women and children.

But this was never going to be a settled ministry and on 1st January 1922, the young couple moved to a new pastorate in Kilburn. Within the year a storm erupted when Constance's conduct of a wedding embroiled her in gender controversy. This is how it was reported: "The Rev Miss Coltman introduced a new marriage ritual which she said was not 'an insult to women.' This ritual, of course, omitted the word 'obey.' Instead, both bride and groom vowed to 'love, comfort, honour and keep' and each fixed a ring on the other's finger, saying: 'As this ring now encircles this finger, so let my love surround thee all the days of thy life.'" She was described dismissively as a "thoroughly modern woman" who had "smashed a precedent." Nervous guests consulted the Registrar General, who confirmed that there were no legal problems with her service and she continued to be in demand for weddings.

The ministry in Kilburn was short-lived; endowed generously throughout the years by the Callard sweetie company, the church collapsed and had to close when the last member of the family left in 1923. But Constance's next three pastorates were happy and settled: Cowley Road Oxford, Wolverton and Haverhill, with a final two years before retirement, at the King's Weigh House. The birth of children brought a new dimension to her home and ministry. She was a popular preacher, in demand for Baptisms and Weddings, and threw herself into Sunday School work and girls' Bible class. She also significantly supported women who did an immense amount of work, sincerely and inconspicuously, to raise money for the church. So unusually for a minister, she helped out with innumerable jumble sales, had a stall at bazaars, held a service to welcome Britain's Railway Queen to Wolverton; and even more unusually, she visited women outside the church in their homes, offering advice about child care and birth control. That was especially daring at a time when the government was encouraging women to have as many babies as possible as part of the war effort.

In 1938 Constance preached a sermon on Esther 4:14 to the Interdenominational Society for the Ministry of Women where she reflected on that ministry. "Our Society," she said, "both in its interdenominational constitution and still more in its supradenominational spirit, is a living example of women's passionate desire for Reunion... but even Reunion is only the prelude to a still higher end, the conversion of the world... Would the fuller ministry of women hasten revival? Yes, because we are standing for the ultimate spiritual truth about humanity. We stand for the spiritual equality, not merely of women alongside men, but of all human souls in the sight of God... our faith in the supreme worth of every individual soul, in the supremacy of the spiritual over the material, in the superiority of the whole armour of God over the arm of flesh – here lies not only the justification for the ministry of women, but also the eternal foundations of democracy, the true guarantee of freedom, and the only avenue to lasting peace. God," she continues, "has called our generation to the raising of a loftier and more justly balanced social fabric, to the forging of a stronger and more peaceful international order, perhaps even to the shaping of a wider and worthier Church organisation."

To the end of her life, she was an ambassador for Christ, a minister of reconciliation between heaven and earth, between man and woman. It is a task laid upon us all, especially so to those who are ordained. God still empowers us today to proclaim the power of God's grace in a ministry of reconciliation. For a world held captive to fear, anxiety, social injustice, war, starvation, exploitation, this is good news indeed.

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost and Education Sunday

Service Date: 10 September, 2017

Worship was planned and led by St. Andrew's Worship Group. Members of the congregation who had taught in primary, secondary and further education gave examples of pupil or student progress which had made their careers particularly rewarding.

In his address The Revd. Robert Beard expounded on the different translations of the Deuteronomy reading as seen in the gospels. We are to love God with every aspect of our being.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 99 Morning glory, starlit sky

Rejoice and Sing 321 Your words to me are life and health

O holy Wisdom (specially written for the service by Robert Beard)

Rejoice and Sing 532 Lord of creation, to you be all praise

Rejoice and Sing 651 O God, by whose almighty plan

Readings

Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 1 – 9

Matthew chapter 22 verses 34 – 40

Psalm 119 verses 33 – 40

Addresses for education Sunday

Douglas Jones

My first teaching appointment was as the Teacher of Lower Juniors in Speen/Stockcross Church of England Parochial Primary School, near Newbury in Berkshire, back in January

1979. There were only 72 children at the school, divided into one Infant, one Lower Junior and one Upper Junior class. Though I was trained as a Middle School Music Specialist, my first post did not include general music teaching at all. I did manage to squeeze £100 out of the local authority to buy some brass instruments and purchased three second-hand trumpets to start my first band! I had to teach the pupils myself because wind and brass lessons were only offered to pupils in secondary education. Most of my time was spent preparing general subjects for my own class. I remember two amazing occurrences which happened in Science and Art respectively. First, there was a girl called Susan who was a complete scatterbrain and couldn't concentrate on anything for more than a minute or two. One day she had accidentally spilt some ink (remember ink?!!) and had dropped a broken piece of blackboard chalk into the pool and been fascinated by the fact that the chalk had absorbed the ink and turned blue. She was afraid that she might be in trouble for both the spillage and the fact that she had been playing with my chalk (!), but I was delighted with her discovery and explained that some materials absorbed liquids and others did not. After this incident, I did not see much of Susan for a couple of weeks, during which she had created a complete project, expertly presented in a file displaying all the materials she had experimented upon with a complete record of all the experiments she had carried out, complete with 'before and after' examples and lots of scientific and mathematical tables. Susan was inspired and thereafter a model student – it was amazing!

Another incident occurred in about week three of the Art lessons. I had purchased only five colours of powder paint for the children to work with: red, blue, yellow, black and white. In weeks one and two we had learned how to handle the brushes and paints, and then how to mix the available colours to create a complete palette of colours which would have impressed even the experts at Dulux! Before the art lessons had started I had asked the children to bring in any used newspapers from home, which we could spread out to protect our classroom tables from getting messed up. In week three, I had set half the pupils a free art task whilst I taught the other half of the class a structured maths lesson. After working diligently for almost an hour, three of the art boys brought me their amazing work. Having spread out their newspapers to protect the table, they had come across Page 3 of The Sun, and had decided to give the scantily-dressed model a semblance of decency by designing and painting upon her former natural tones a stunning new outfit, fit to grace the glossiest of fashion magazines! After this, I was more careful to vet the newspapers in advance.

After four terms, I was approached by the deputy head of a secondary school in Wokingham, much closer to home, who had taught my younger brother and sister Geography and knew of my local musical reputation, letting me know that there was a post of Assistant Head of Music at his school and had heard that I was looking for a job. Well, I wasn't, really, but thought I would have a look at it. I was subsequently appointed to the post, but regretted it almost immediately to the extent that I asked if I could resign after only a half-term. The main problem was that I felt completely out-of-control of the tutor group of vagabonds and hooligans I had been put in charge of, but the headmaster said that he was very sorry and that he couldn't support a move elsewhere after such a short time. However, in the Music department, the following September, wonderful things began to happen. At the same time, I was given a new first-year form, 1J, to look after, who were quite lovely and who had music timetabled for the last two periods on a Friday afternoon. At the same time, I auditioned every new first-year for a place in the choir and the following Thursday lunchtime 120 children turned up to choir practice! Music was taught in a double terrapin, so the Head of Music and myself took 60 each in adjacent rooms. Amazingly,

about 60 of the singers were still in the choir at the end of the academic year. They included nearly every member of my own form.

Well, 1J became 2J the following year and 3J the year after. The Head of Music had moved to be Head of Music at Royston Comprehensive School in Cambridgeshire and I was promoted to Scale 2 with responsibility for Practical Music until a new Head of Music was appointed. This also involved running the staff and parents' choir which met every other Monday evening. After a while, I decided to combine the school choir, still over sixty strong and still containing most of my form, with the adult choir, and taught them a couple of good hymns, the anthem 'The Lord is my Shepherd' by Stanford, a set of responses and a new setting of Psalm 107 to plainsong tones with a double fauxbourdon which I specially composed for them. We then all went on a coach trip to our nearest 'big church' to sing Choral Evensong. It was a most memorable occasion for everyone, but especially me, as the big church in question was The Queen's Free Chapel of St George, Windsor Castle. This was indeed one of those 'light-bulb' moments, or might it have been candlepowered?

Sheila Dunstan

As most of you know. I taught reception children for 26 years and then did supply with Years 1 and 2 on occasions for the next 8 years the early morning phone call was the summons!

I think the church I went to at home in Scotland was the reason I thought about teaching. I went to help at the afternoon Sunday School as all the older teenagers did. After singing a few songs we broke up into groups and I seemed always to get the liveliest boys. Although I did ENG, MATHS, CHEM AND PHYSICS for my Highers I ended up teaching 4 year old boys. After my Highers it was found I had sky high blood pressure and spent much of my 6th form in hospital getting this sorted out so could not contemplate university.

I loved working with the 4/5 year old age group although they did not spare your feelings. One day when I turned up in bare feet and sandals I saw one little boy looking at my feet. He looked at me and said your feet are rather nasty aren't they Mrs Dunstan. He was right as I had suffered from bad chilblains as a child. Another time on supply my bus pass fell out of my bag and a boy picked it up looked at the pass, looked at me and said you don't look like this any more! They don't mean to be rude it just comes out.

A recent happy moment was when I saw on the school website that a very nervous boy had achieved very good grades to do medicine. Actually his mother was worse – she phoned the school every morning for some trivial reason and appeared at the gates at lunch time. He soon settled in and his Mother calmed down and was a delightful parent.

I was very pleased when a governor Mary Mc Kinnon came to thank me when her son Duncan got into Cambridge her words were – good beginnings Sheila.

My most moving moment was when at the end of the school year the mothers had organised an embroidery which said Time isn't measured by the years you live but the deeds you do and the joy you give. My eyes were very moist when I thanked them.

Monica Hanna

As the other teachers have related, teaching can be a very rewarding profession to follow. It can be rewarding for the teacher when a class achieves outstanding results in external examinations, or when individual students flourish during the course and exceed your and their own expectations at the end of the year, find the job they want or even an unexpected career opening. It can also be the lecturer who derives the reward when students share their knowledge and passions with their teacher. Learning is a two way process.

One particularly satisfying story for me dates from the 1970s, long before Hallam became a university or even a polytechnic. Our students at that time were very local and came mainly from Sheffield and the surrounding area.

In modern languages we did a lot of service teaching, which means you teach your subject to students from other departments, such as chemistry, engineering or metallurgy. This was their general studies module and generally one they would not have chosen themselves, so the teacher had to work harder to engage their interest and make the course relevant.

One such group I taught German to was HND electronics. As I recall, several students were sponsored by the National Coal Board as apprentices of promise. As the year progressed two of the lads approached me to ask how they could get to Germany. (This was long before the days of the big European exchanges like the Erasmus programme and study abroad was usually only undertaken by post graduates or language students). I suggested they approach the British Council for a travel grant and also some of the major German companies for visits. I gave them contacts we had with the big steel producers.

They were fortunate to be awarded a grant to cover travel and Krupps offered them a programme of industrial visits. When they arrived there, they found that the company had arranged travel and meals for them, so that they were able to save their travel grants for more trips around Germany. They came back to college in autumn, greatly enthused with what they had seen and learnt. It was very rewarding for the students. It was a great source of satisfaction to me.

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 3 September, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on what it means to really follow Jesus and to give our lives for justice.

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on what it means to really follow Jesus and to give our lives for justice.

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 20 August, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on how people of real faith can be found in unexpected places. In Matthew 15 Jesus meets a Canaanite woman who

shows a real understanding of who he is and of his power. She believes that although she is not of the house of Israel Jesus can still heal and save her daughter.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 103 Praise to the Holiest in the height

Rejoice and Sing 575 God of mercy, God of grace

Rejoice and Sing 319 Thanks to God whose word was spoken

Rejoice and Sing 600 Christ is the world's light

Sermon:

Readings

Genesis chapter 45 verses 1 – 15

Psalm 133

Romans chapter 11 verses 1 – 2a and 29 – 32

Matthew chapter 15 verses 10 – 28

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 13 August, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Walter Houston who preached on the real sensation of fear which we experience. Elijah also experienced fear but was reassured by the sense of God's voice within himself. Jesus reassured Peter when he failed to walk on the water and chastised him for his lack of faith. Whatever fear we experience, God is there reassuring and supporting us.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 67 Immortal, invisible, God only wise

Rejoice and Sing 704 Lord, thine heart in love hath yearned (Psalm 85)

Rejoice and Sing 354 Come, living God, when least expected

Rejoice and Sing 688 I waited for the Lord my God

Rejoice and Sing 72 Now thank we all our God

Readings

First book of Kings chapter 19 verses 1 to 18

Matthew chapter 14 verses 22 – 33

Sermon:

It isn't only the children who love thrillers, is it? They sell in their millions, whether they are trashy or well written, and the same goes for the video versions that we see on TV or Netflix. We seem to like feeling the vicarious sense of danger as the hero gets into hot water for the 20th time, and we are eager to find out how he gets out of it, and to have the comfort of knowing that the goodies win in the end and evil is defeated.

I suppose that by watching or reading stories like these we can feel the thrill of terror experienced by the hero without actually being in any danger, and then the sense of relief at being saved from the danger. Millennia of evolution surrounded by the perils of wild beasts, forest fires, famine, violence from neighbouring tribes and so on have engendered a strong pattern in us of reaction to danger: terror followed by fight or flight as appropriate. But modern life has, thank God, radically reduced our opportunities to exercise this reaction, and it may be that enjoying thrillers is a substitute—I'm only speculating, I'm no psychologist.

But though many of the dangers to life that our ancestors experienced have vanished or become less frequent, they haven't gone away altogether. From time to time every one of us, I think, will experience that sense of what has been called 'existential terror', that our life is in danger, and in some cases perhaps that life itself is threatened. For the more intrepid among us, that moment might come on a mountain wall or on the ocean wave; for most of us it is finding a lump or some other symptom that might presage a fatal illness; or the doctor's diagnosis that you do indeed have such an illness; or it might be the reckless words of a president on a short fuse.

For some it is slightly different: the terror of their lives is a sense of hopelessness that engulfs them and induces them to throw away their lives themselves. And this has been growing in recent years. How often has your train been delayed by what the announcements euphemistically refer to as 'an incident on the line', which often enough means someone has thrown themselves in front of a train?

Elijah too experienced this sense, as he says under the broom bush 'O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.' But what has led the intrepid prophet Elijah, who confronted king Ahab and faced the massed ranks of the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel with confidence, to this ignominious flight? It must surely be more than just Jezebel's message that she intends to have him killed: it is reaction of existential terror. He and all that he holds dear are under threat, and he can see no way of avoiding the disaster that is coming down the track: as he says, 'The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword.' And this is what makes him exaggerate: 'I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

Faced with ultimate terror, Elijah has given up. He has taken the choice of flight rather than fight this time. If 'take away my life' is the response of hopelessness, his terror is underlined by the words 'they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

But of course this story is not just one of terror, but of divine comfort. Like the best thrillers, it shows us Elijah ultimately escaping from the danger, but the way in which his escape takes place is important. Quite simply, he meets God; and God assures him, implicitly, that his life is in no danger, and that, more important, God's own cause is in no danger either: 'I will leave 7000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

How does the storyteller convince us of God's presence in Elijah's life? Obviously there are legendary features to it—the angel who leaves Elijah food, or the journey of 40 days and 40 nights, a symbolic figure, recalling the 40 years that the Israelites are said to have wandered in the same wilderness. We can't know to what extent the story is historical, though the confrontation over who should be the state God of the kingdom of Israel is very plausible: the traditional God of the Israelites, or the god of Tyre, Baal Melkart, supported by the Phoenician queen Jezebel. It is a matter of national politics, not just of religion. But there is also a profound theological element to the story. How does God communicate with human beings? Through spectacular natural phenomena like earthquake, wind and fire? There's plenty in the Bible itself that might suggest that. But in this story 'the Lord was not in the wind', nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire; but rather in the voice within heard in silence.

So, Elijah flies for his life. He crosses the border from the northern kingdom known as Israel into Judah. One would think he would be safe enough there, but not so: in the reign of Ahab and his heirs Judah was thoroughly under Israel's thumb, and Jezebel could easily get him brought back, or murdered by her thugs. He presses on to Beersheba, in the extreme south of the inhabited land, where he leaves his servant: he evidently wishes to be alone, goes on another day's journey and throws himself down under a broom bush and pleads to die. But here the first sign comes that in fact he is not alone: after he wakes from sleep an angel touches him, and leaves him food, not once by twice. And in the strength of that food he travels through an increasingly arid and empty country until he comes to 'Horeb, the mountain of God'. This is the mountain where according to Deuteronomy the Israelites met with God and the Ten Commandments were given. Whether it is the same place as Mount Sinai is not clear, though the Bible as we have it certainly identifies them as the same.

No one has told Elijah to make this journey. It is he himself who has been drawn, perhaps unconsciously, to this place so steeped in the lore and faith of his nation, where he may find comfort.

And here is the second sign that he is not alone: the voice of God comes to him: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' Elijah was not where he ought to be, fighting for the faith of his God. He was in flight, terrified. And he admits it: 'The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' (It is at this point in Mendelssohn's oratorio, which follows Elijah's story, that the chorus occurs that we heard just now, 'He that endures to the end shall be saved'. But Elijah is not yet convinced to endure.)

He is sent out onto the mountainside to witness a stunning display of the power of God in nature. But, he learns, this is not how God will communicate with him. The wind, the earthquake and the fire are followed by utter silence. I am sorry if you are missing that well-loved phrase 'a still small voice'. The fact is it is inaccurate in one respect and out of date in another. The word 'still' could mean 'silent' in 1611, but it doesn't convey that meaning to us today. And the Hebrew word *qol*, which often means 'voice', can also mean simply a sound. 'The sound of utter silence' gives a better impression of the meaning of the Hebrew. It is in the silence that God speaks to Elijah. It is not quite clear why at this point God's question and Elijah's answer are repeated from earlier in the story. God's final answer is simply to give Elijah a new commission. God still has work for him to do. It is not time to be giving up. He has no need to fear Jezebel.

But what supports Elijah and relieves him of his terror, I believe, is nothing that God says, it is simply the presence of God to him, a comforting and strengthening presence. And in the strength of that presence he can go to fulfil his first commission, to call a prophet to succeed him, Elisha. And it is actually Elisha who fulfils the other two commissions, to anoint new kings over Damascus and Israel.

Our other reading, from Matthew, presents us with another man suddenly struck by existential terror. This story is doubtless also largely legendary, and only Matthew, unlike Mark and John, mentions Peter's attempt to walk on the water. But we can learn from it all the same. Peter is trying to walk on the water like Jesus, when suddenly he realises that he is walking over 50 fathoms of water, or whatever the depth might be, and starts to sink. It may seem strange that an experienced fisherman, who knows how to swim and is only two yards from a boat, should be frightened of sinking, but that is what existential terror is like: it can be totally irrational. All he needs is the reassuring hand of Jesus and, again, his voice, even telling him off for lacking faith.

So what do these stories mean for us, we who are all struck by existential terror from time to time, and indeed will all at some point be unable to escape from the reality of death? Simply this: that however alone we may feel in front of deadly danger—and of course we may not be, even in human terms—we are not alone. Whether we know it or realise it or not, there is one who is there with us and knows our plight, and we have full access to his comfort. He may rebuke us for disbelieving, as Jesus does Peter, or ask us what we are doing in our fearful retreat, as God does Elijah, but in the end we will hear him saying 'I am with you, I am here for you'.

But if the ears and eyes of our spirit are open, we may know the divine presence. Nine times out of ten our terror is unnecessary, and our Lord will conduct us over the bridge above the terrifying gulf safely to the other side, or if indeed our hour has come, will go with us as our eyes close. 'Fear not, I am with you' are the gladdest words in the Bible, and they are ours to hear.

Feast of the Transfiguration and Hiroshima Day

Service Date: 6 August, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard who reflected on the contrast between the light and ecstasy of the Transfiguration and the destructiveness of the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. The latter was starkly illustrated by the image of the shadow of a little girl skipping etched on a wall as the bomb fell.

As individuals, and as a society we have a choice in our daily lives, in our actions and our relationships – to encourage and build people to be fulfilled and the best they can be, to acknowledge what is good in them, or to belittle and destroy them.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 204 O vision blest of heavenly light

Rejoice and Sing 203 How good, Lord, to be here

Rejoice and Sing 123 Think of a world without any flowers

Rejoice and Sing 433 O Thou who camest from above

Sermon:

Readings

Daniel chapter 7 verses 9,10,13 and 14

Psalm 97

Second letter of Peter chapter 1 verses 16 – 19

Luke chapter 9 verses 28 – 36

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 30 July, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. David Stec who preached on Romans 8 verse 28; 'We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called to his purpose.' This is illustrated in the story of Jacob who was tricked into marrying Leah and had to work for a further seven years before marrying Rachel, her more beautiful younger sister. God's purpose was fulfilled in that the important tribes of Judah and Levi were descended from the sons of Leah. And parables in Matthew describe God's kingdom growing with the co-operation of those who love him. Finally, Paul speaks of God's purpose unfolding through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 71 O God of Bethel

Rejoice and Sing 278 I know that my Redeemer liveth

Rejoice and Sing 100 O love of God, how strong and true

Rejoice and Sing 573 God is working his purpose out

Readings

Genesis chapter 29 verses 15 – 28

Psalms 105 verses 1 – 11 and 45b

Romans chapter 8 verses 26 – 39

Matthew chapter 13 verses 31 – 33 and 44 – 52

Sermon:

“We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.” Romans chapter 8 verses 28

These words are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

If you have been following the reading from Romans using a different version of the Bible, it is very possible that you have a rather different translation of this verse in front of you.

The Authorised Version translated it: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

And if you are using one of our new church Bibles, you will see that the New Revised Standard Version essentially follows the AV, as do several other versions of the Bible.

There is an ambiguity in the Greek in the first part of the verse, and it could be translated in either way.

Indeed the NRSV offers three possibilities:

Text: “We know that all things work together for good”.

Margin 1: “God makes all things work together for good”.

Margin 2: “In all things God works for good”

An added complication is that in many of the best Greek manuscripts the word “God” is not actually present in this part of the verse, though it is found in some manuscripts.

So as they say, “You pays your money and you takes your choice”.

My choice is to follow the RSV, for no other reason than that I like it best, and that I think it is saying something very profound, and has a tremendous message of reassurance to us.

So then, this verse reads: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

If I was asked to compile a list of great passages of the Bible, Romans 8:28-39 would certainly be among them.

What I take above all else from this passage is that God is working towards the fulfilment of a purpose, and that his purpose is one of good.

All work has a purpose.

For most people, the primary purpose of work is to put bread on the table and to provide a reasonable standard of living.

For those who are fortunate enough, as I am, to be doing work that they enjoy and find fulfilling, work can also bring many other less tangible rewards.

But in human affairs, the primary purpose of work is a material one.

Our OT lesson provides an interesting and at times almost comical example of work and its reward.

Jacob fled from the wrath of his brother Esau after he had used devious means to obtain the birthright and blessing of his father, which should have gone to Esau, and Esau threatened to kill him.

So Jacob went and stayed with his uncle Laban, and tended Laban's sheep and goats.

Laban thought it not right that Jacob should do this work for nothing, so he asked him what his wages would be.

At this point we are told that Laban had two daughters. The elder, Leah, had weak eyes, whatever that means, and the younger, Rachel, was beautiful.

Rather than ask for payment of money or wealth in some other form, he asked for the hand in marriage of Rachel, with whom he was in love, and offered to work seven years in return for her.

Laban agreed to this, and Jacob worked the seven years, and then claimed his reward.

We then see that Laban could act deviously with Jacob, just as Jacob had with Esau.

Laban prepared a marriage feast, but in the evening he brought his daughter Leah instead of Rachel, and gave her to Jacob, and Jacob slept with her.

It was only the following morning that he discovered that he had the wrong wife.

One wonders how that could possibly have happened. Was he too drunk to notice? Did he not speak to her and hear a different voice?

When he protested to Laban, his uncle replied that it was not the done thing to give the younger daughter in marriage before the elder, but that he could work another seven years in return for the other daughter.

So Jacob worked another seven years, and in due course received his reward in the form of Rachel.

Jacob's work had a very clear purpose.

We are told that the initial seven years which he served for Rachel "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her".

So much for the world of human affairs, where one's work has a material purpose, whether that be financial reward or, as in the case of Jacob, an object of a different kind.

What of God's work?

St Paul tells us that the purpose of God's work is what he calls "good"; he says, "We know that in everything God works for good."

Lets go back to Genesis 29 for just a moment.

On a purely human level this passage is about Jacob working for Laban, in order to obtain a wife, or as it turned out two wives.

But on the wider level of God working out his purpose, it is also part of a much bigger picture.

For it was from the sons of Jacob that the tribes of Israel were descended, and that the people of Israel came into being, through whom God revealed himself to mankind.

And in this respect, we can even see that God was overcoming human weakness in fulfilment of his purpose.

When Jacob wanted a wife from among the daughters of Laban, he naturally chose the beautiful one, and Rachel was always his favourite wife.

But actually Leah, the less good looking one, also served him very well.

She bore him his firstborn son, Reuben, as well as another five sons, whereas Rachel bore him only two.

A large part of the people of God, including the specially important tribes of Judah and Levi, had their origin in the sons of Leah.

Thus God took what was less valued on a human level, and used it in fulfilment of his purpose.

The OT is essentially an account of God working out his purpose in the history of Israel.

The NT begins a completely new era of the working out of God's purpose, which Jesus speaks of in terms of the growth of God's kingdom.

St Matthew in chapter 13 of his Gospel has collected more of Jesus' parables than are to be found in anywhere else in a single chapter.

And all but one of them open with the words, "The kingdom of heaven (i.e. the kingdom of God) is like ..."

... whether it be a grain of mustard seed growing into a great shrub,

... or the effect of leaven being added to flour,

... or the discovery of treasure, hidden in a field, bringing joy to the one who finds it,

... or a merchant finding a pearl of great price, and selling all that he has in order to obtain it,

... or a net being cast into the sea and gathering in fish of every kind.

In these parables of Jesus we see the kingdom of God growing and taking shape, we see some practical illustrations of the co-operation of God with those who love him, which St Paul spoke of in Rom 8:28:

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

The Greek verb here is a single word, meaning literally to "work with", "co-operate with"; God works with those who love him.

St Paul is not here describing a subjective process, in which by our love for God we can merit his help.

For to the words "those who love him," he adds, "who are called according to his purpose".

And he goes on to speak about what God had done for us, and puts it like this: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son ... and

those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

When the concept of predestination is developed to a rigid dogma, as it has been by some theologians over the centuries, this raises some difficult issues that I do not want to go into now.

But St Paul is not here presenting a developed doctrine of predestination, but rather speaking about the grace of God, and how those who are called according to his purpose, in other words those of us who are recipients of the Gospel, experience his grace.

Thus he goes on to speak about what God has achieved for us through the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ, who now sits at the right hand of God and makes intercession for us.

This is all part of the process of the unfolding of God’s purpose of good.

And as far as St Paul is concerned, this provides a tremendous assurance to us in a world in which so much can seem to be against us and threaten our well-being.

Doubtless, in part, he had in mind the persecutions and hardships faced by the earliest Christians, but what he says about the victory over sin and death achieved through the cross and resurrection of Christ are applicable to the human condition which all of us share.

The words of St Paul in this passage have provided great comfort and hope to many a bereaved person grieving over the loss of a loved one.

He asks: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”

And he continues: “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 23 July, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the second parable of seeds and the sower. Farming and growing food was vital in Jesus’ day. To-day there is still widespread ignorance among children of how food is produced and where it comes from. At the same time there is growing awareness of food waste and hunger.

The main message of the parable is that we must not judge people and decide who is in and who is out. It is God who will eventually identify and judge sinners.

Sermon:

Wheat and Weeds Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

It's no news to any of us that Jesus lived in an agrarian society; and it makes perfect sense, therefore, that he drew on the seasons and practices of animal and arable farming to illustrate much of his teaching. Moreover, even the city dwellers of his day would have been very much aware of where their food came from and how it was grown. Consequently, the imagery he used would have resonated not much less strongly with the inhabitants of Jerusalem than with those of the villages and small market towns of Galilee and elsewhere.

I've sometimes wondered whether Jesus ever thought about the durability of his parables. Was he consciously aware that, by telling stories that were predominantly about first-century farming rather than, say, commerce or law enforcement, he was tapping into something so basic to human experience that people would continue to recognise their imagery for many centuries to come? After all, it took nothing less than the fundamental social upheaval brought about by the Industrial Revolution, with its mass migration of workers and their families from the countryside to the cities, to begin to dissolve the cultural connection between the people and the land.

One consequence of these changes over the past couple of centuries is that, for a large proportion of the population, Jesus' agrarian parables have lost their immediacy. For some 1800 years after the time of Jesus, almost everyone other than the wealthy élite was directly involved in food production in one way or another, whether by actually planting, growing and harvesting food on farms and in kitchen gardens, or by preparing and cooking food for themselves or for others. Beginning with the Industrial Revolution, however, food has gradually become for most people something that we buy in shops and restaurants, with little thought given to its origin and preparation, or indeed its transportation.

You may recall the 2013 British Nutrition Foundation survey of some 27,500 children, which found that over 30% of five-to-eight-year-olds believed that pasta and bread are made from meat and that cheese comes from plants, 25% thought that fish fingers come from chicken or pigs, and about 19% did not realise that potatoes grow underground, some assuming that they grow on trees or bushes.

In the last two or three decades, we have begun to see a renewed food consciousness within certain social strata, but unless we are fortunate enough to have a garden or allotment, this modern awareness may have at least as much to do with fair trade and food miles, as with the hands-on business of actually producing food.

When we cheerfully sing at our Harvest Festival, "We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land," we are almost certainly oblivious to the fact that the original German text, written by Matthias Claudius in 1777 and based on Psalm 144, was originally published as a peasants' song, and that for those who sang it first it was literally true; they did indeed plough fields and scatter seed. Growing food wasn't a hobby for them, as gardening is for many of us; it was an absolute necessity that might mean the difference between life and death for themselves, their families and their communities.

More sobering still is the extent of famine today, and I really mean today, Sunday 23 July 2017; for even as we meet this morning to recommit ourselves to bringing in God's Kingdom, four simultaneous famines are threatening our sisters and brothers in Yemen, in South Sudan, in north-eastern Nigeria and in Somalia. In March this year, Stephen O'Brien, UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, described the situation as "the largest humanitarian crisis since the creation of the United Nations." 20 million lives hang in the balance, among them 1.4 million children. For those who remember the mid-1980s famine in Ethiopia, which BBC reporter Michael Buerk called "a famine of Biblical proportions" and which led to Sir Bob Geldof's astonishing Live Aid event raising some £30 million to help the relief effort, this is heart-stopping language.

So as we approach St Matthew's second parable of Jesus about sowing seeds, it behoves us to bear in mind that, even taken simply at face value, the subject of this story was a matter of life and death for many of his hearers, and therefore had an immediacy that we must really work our imaginations hard to apprehend.

This parable tells of not one but two sowers: one who sows good seed to grow wheat, and the other who sows weeds. Like last week's parable of the sower, the parable of the wheat and weeds offers a way of thinking about opposition to Jesus, and also about the persistence of evil in the world: not least the kind of evil that ignores or even exacerbates the fatal impact of famines on vulnerable populations.

The sower sowed good seed in his field and expected a successful harvest, but under cover of darkness an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. For "weeds" St Matthew uses the Greek word *zizania*, which strictly refers to wild rice grasses, but what Matthew probably meant to signify is darnel or *Lolium temulentum*, a poisonous plant that closely resembles wheat until the ears appear; the ears of wheat are heavy and droop, while the ears of darnel stand upright. These two plants are so similar, in fact, that in some regions darnel is referred to as "false wheat", and it posed a serious problem to wheat growers until modern sorting technology enabled its seeds to be separated efficiently from wheat seed.

As with the previous parable, St Matthew provides his readers with an explanation of the parable in allegorical terms. Note that, again, the explanation is not given to all those who heard the parable, but to the disciples only.

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Matthew 13.37-39

Intriguingly for such a seemingly straightforward explanation, Jesus – or Matthew – does not say whom the slaves represent, and it is left to us to ponder the omission. Do the slaves represent the disciples themselves? Or do they perhaps represent any of Matthew's readers – ourselves included – who hear both the parable and its interpretation?

The slaves' instinctive response to the presence of the weeds is to rush out and pull them up, without any consideration of the possible consequences. Similarly, many of us – perhaps all of us – looking at the state in the world, may sometimes have felt like taking

matters into our own hands and rooting out the perceived evil that stalks (pardon the pun!) among us.

Wisely, the master, the Son of Man, prohibits the slaves from doing anything of the sort. First, as I observed earlier, wheat and darnel are not easy to tell apart before they mature. Secondly, the roots of both plants are intertwined underground in the soil that nourishes them both, so to uproot the darnel would risk uprooting the wheat as well. Thirdly, this is not the slaves' job; the master says that the reapers – not the slaves – will take care of this at harvest time.

There's more than a hint of predestination in the interpretation of the parable, which suggests there are two groups of people in the world: children of the kingdom and children of the evil one – wheat and weeds – whose destinies are determined from the outset. Jesus says that at the end of the age, the angels will

collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and will throw them into the furnace of fire. Matthew 13.41

The Greek word translated here as “causes of sin”, however, is *skandala*, which Jesus uses later in St Matthew's gospel to warn those who put a “stumbling block” (*skandalon*) in the path of any of the “little ones” that it would be better for them to have a millstone put around their necks and to be drowned in the sea (Matthew 18.6-7). In the same passage, Matthew has Jesus declare that if your hand or foot or eye causes you to sin (*skandalizo*), it is better to cut it off or pluck it out and enter life maimed or blind, than to be thrown into the “hell of fire” with body intact (Matthew 18.8-9).

Obviously, this is hyperbole, intended to shock Matthew's readers into acknowledging the seriousness of anything that leads us or others into sin, because it's not actually a hand or foot or eye that causes us to sin. As Jesus explains in Matthew 15.18-20, sin has its origin in the heart (*kardia*), which in his time was understood as the seat of thought and decision making; no one is able to amputate or excise thoughts. What this suggests is that a *skandalon* may be some aspect of a person – signified by the hand or foot or eye – rather than the whole person.

Another text to consider is Matthew 16.23, where Jesus tells Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block (*skandalon*) to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” We know, of course, that, far from condemning Peter in perpetuity, Jesus entrusted to him and the other all-too-fallible disciples the whole future of his mission. Whenever Jesus threw out the bathwater, he was extremely careful to keep a firm grip on the baby!

When Jesus says that the angels will collect and incinerate the “causes of sin” – the *skandala* – it's clear, therefore, that he means the causes of sin that live within us. Therefore the meaning of the parable is that within each of us resides both that which promotes the Kingdom and that which promotes evil. If you like – and I do! – it's an early version of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Finally, I can't help wondering whether St Matthew had anyone in particular in mind when he recorded Jesus' categorical statement that it is angels alone who are vested with the divine authority to separate the weeds from the wheat; no human being has any such mandate. This is a point that many in the Christian Church would do well to note. Perhaps St Matthew's community was plagued by Church members who thought they could tell who should and should not be allowed in. The parable makes it absolutely crystal clear that any attempt to root out the perceived weeds risks doing serious damage to the whole crop.

This has played out far too many times in congregations and denominations, with some determined to root out anyone who does not agree with the "right" interpretation of Scripture, "correct" liturgical practice, or the "proper" moral stance on a particular issue. There are also those who pronounce judgment on people outside the church – on people of other faiths, for instance – pronouncing their eternal damnation. Such judgmental attitudes serious damage to the church and its mission, and arrogantly ignore the fact that we all have our own *skandala*, our own "causes of sin" within us. We may, and must, safely leave any weeding out activities to God and God's angels, and as many passages in St Matthew's gospel declare, God's judgment about who is "in" and who is "out" is going to take many by surprise (Matthew 7.21-23, 8.11-12, 21.31-32, 25.31-46).

Revd Robert Beard B.D.

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 16 July, 2017

Worship was planned and led by St. Andrew's Worship Group. The service focussed on the parable of the sower. Comments considered the apparently wasteful sowing of seed on different types of soil but likened it to God's generosity. We were asked to consider what type of soil we are, where we sow the seed of God's love and generosity in word and action and what kind of seed we might be.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 113 Let all God's people join in one

Rejoice and Sing 329 There's a spirit in the air

Rejoice and Sing 520 For ourselves no longer living

Rejoice and Sing 574 Go forth and tell!

Rejoice and Sing 580 Lord, you give the great commission

Readings

Isaiah chapter 55 verses 10-13

Psalms 65 verses 9 – 13

Romans chapter 8 verses 1 – 11

Matthew chapter 13 verses 1 – 9 and 18 – 23

COMMENT 1 on the Parable of the Sower

The Isaiah reading and the Psalm we've just said together both praise God's abundant generosity in providing for us. You shall indeed go out with joy and be led forth in peace. Joy and peace are God's intention for us. Why then is the opposite so often found ?

In the Old Testament reading, Isaiah was encouraging the people of Israel at a time of threat; soon afterwards, the Assyrians captured Jerusalem. We are about to hear the parable of the sower, which was also intended to be optimistic. At the time Matthew was writing, his message was needed to encourage and strengthen his readers; life was not easy, there was increasing violence in Jerusalem, leading to the sack of the city and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD; and Nero was persecuting Christians in Rome. At that point in the early Church, Christians were expecting the imminent return of Jesus; there was therefore a great urgency to spread the word about it. So in the Sower Matthew is highlighting the effect that the Good News of Jesus Christ had on the world during the time between Jesus' death in c.30 AD and when he was writing the gospel in c.67-70 AD: despite failures, the seed is eventually successful, takes root and produces an abundant harvest. He is echoing Isaiah and the Psalmist when they speak with certainty that the seed and the rainwater will accomplish God's purpose.

The sower in the parable broadcasts the seed everywhere, not just meticulously planting on good ground. We know the different kinds of soil his seeds fell on – and the different results. Do the various kinds of soil in our lives help us or hinder us from hearing the word ? Maybe we experience different types of soil at different times in our own lives. There may have been times when we were less bothered about coming to church, like the stony soil; or distracted by busy lives, or pleasure, like the seed among thorns – or indeed we may have been overwhelmed by distress and misfortune, which tested our belief. And no doubt over the years we have grown a bit in our understanding of our faith, of what Jesus meant. Jesus said, 'If you have ears, then hear.' Perhaps we hear a little better now.

So, we should not condemn or pre-judge other people for not being the right kind of soil. Christ came to share the love of God with everyone. He doesn't pick and choose who is good enough to hear the Word, or assess them in our human terms; he graciously sows into everyone who's willing to accept his word.

There's a hymn we sing sometimes: There's a wideness in God's mercy (353). It says: The love of God is broader than the measures of our mind (v. 4). . . .
And: We make his love too narrow by false limits of our own (v.5)

It is the nature of a seed to grow – that is what it is meant to do – to grow and bear fruit and reproduce the plant it came from. So the Word of God is meant to grow in us, encourage us and teach us. Our religion now is less expectant of Christ's return and less focussed on going to heaven; our concern now is largely to help people now, to demonstrate faith through action – sometimes literally to feed them. Our time is no less

troubled and dangerous than in Isaiah's day or Matthew's day; the inequality and injustice that Jesus came to address is still prevalent. The command is still to be lived – to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, preach the word.

Apparently the sower in the old days did not watch where the seed was falling; his method was to keep his eyes fixed on a point ahead. It probably helped him to walk as straight as was possible. Is that a metaphor for us – sharing God's love despite the difficulties, and keeping our eyes fixed on the goal of creating the kingdom of God on earth ? – the world of peace and justice and joy and love that God intended for us.

I'd like to finish by reading another hymn that's in R&S (612). It is by John Arlott, who as well as being a famous cricket commentator was also a journalist, a poet, and a humanitarian.

God, whose farm is all creation,
Take the gratitude we give;
Take the finest of our harvest,
Crops we grow that all may live.

Take our ploughing, seeding, reaping,
Hopes and fears of sun and rain,
All our thinking, planning, waiting,
Ripened in this fruit and grain.

All our labour, all our watching,
All our calendar of care,
In these crops of your creation,
Take, O God, they are our prayer.

Comment 2 on The Parable of the Sower

Jesus frequently used parables to explain his message in words and concepts which his listeners would understand. Like all good stories the parables are worthy of being read and heard again and again. It has been suggested that Jesus may have got the idea for the parable of the Sower from lines written by Isaiah, lines which we heard earlier;

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

God's word is likened to rain that transforms the earth. It will not return empty but will fulfil God's purpose. In its historical context Isaiah's vision is of God transforming the land of Israel after its destruction by the Babylonians, rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple.

The parable of the Sower describes an apparently wasteful and random sowing of seed, allowing much of it to land on dry, stony or unweeded soil. Inevitably, much of the seed will fail to flourish into a healthy crop. Jesus is describing a method of farming familiar to his audience. To-day we would expect farmers to seek to get the maximum return for their seed, sowing it on well prepared, fertile, receptive soil.

The method of farming which Jesus describes in this parable can also be seen as a metaphor for the generosity, even the profligacy of God which we considered in the verses from Isaiah and Psalm 65 and summarised in our anthem – often sung at Harvest – where God visits and blesses the land and crowns the year with his goodness. And not just the visible, tangible gifts of warm sunshine and rain and the fruits of the harvest, but also the gifts of love and assurance of redemption which God has given us through Jesus.

These gifts are the seed. We are the soil on which that seed lands. Through our words and actions we are required to respond, to nurture that seed so that it grows to a rich harvest of love and care, improving the lives of those in need. What kind of soil are we, as individuals, as a congregation, as the wider Church? Jesus is realistic and recognises that some will fail to respond; that some will respond with initial enthusiasm but fall away when the task feels too great; that some will hear but will be too bowed down by the distractions of the world to fully respond; and Paul acknowledges the weakness of the human condition. But still God sows his seed generously knowing that some who hear will respond fully, acting as God wishes.

Perhaps we are different kinds of soil at different times.....

As well as being the soil, are we not also the sower? As Christians and members of the Church, we are charged with spreading the good news of God's word by word and action (not all of us are natural evangelisers) just as Jesus commissioned the Disciples to proclaim the word of God and to cure and heal. Jesus warned his Disciples that they would not always be welcomed – indeed they would even face hostility and violence – stony, infertile soil. So our attempts may fall on stony ground. But we must not pre-judge the ground. Seeds flourish in unexpected places- dandelions blossom in cracks in tarmac; buddleia thrives growing out of concrete pointing in walls and chimney pots; flowers bloom in the desert. No ground is too hostile to try and sow the seeds of God's love. Our words and actions may at times be ignored, scorned, rejected, but at other times they will take root and flourish, transforming a life and bringing hope and joy.

Perhaps thinking of ourselves as the seed is the greatest challenge; can we be super seeds, and grow and flourish in whatever kind of soil we find ourselves planted? I would like to finish by suggesting that the parable, happily, has one weakness. The sower sowing his seed does not, happily, truly reflect God sowing His Word. Eventually, the sower's bag will be empty – there will be no more seed – for now. But the love and promise conveyed in the Word of God is bottomless, enduring for ever. Amen

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 9 July, 2017

Worship was led by Anne Padget, Lay Reader at St. Mark's church Broomhill. She preached on what it means to love God and to be loved by God.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 117 How great Thou art

Rejoice and Sing 364 Just as I am, without one plea

Rejoice and Sing 349 I heard the voice of Jesus say

Rejoice and Sing 663 Love divine, all loves excelling

Sermon:

Readings

John chapter 4 verses 16 – 21

Song of Solomon chapter 2 verses 8 – 13

Psalms 136 verses 6 – 13 and 19 – 22

Matthew chapter 11 verses 16 – 19 and 25 – 30

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 25 June, 2017

Worship was planned and led by St. Andrew's Worship Group. The theme was being sustained by God in times of suffering and distress.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 536 New every morning is the love

Rejoice and Sing 514 O for a heart to praise my God

Rejoice and Sing 634 Pray for the Church afflicted and oppressed

Rejoice and Sing 103 Praise to the Holiest in the height

Readings

Jeremiah chapter 20 verses 7 – 13

Psalms 69 verses 6 – 18 and 30 – 36

Romans chapter 6 verses 1b – 11

Matthew chapter 10 verses 24 – 39

Sermon:

We probably know more about the life of Jeremiah than that of any other prophet.

He was born in about 650 BC to a priestly family in Anathoth, about 3 miles from Jerusalem, and lived through a very turbulent time in the history of Judah.

In an earlier age the Assyrian empire had swallowed up the northern kingdom of Israel and had come close to taking Jerusalem too, but somehow the city had been miraculously delivered.

The belief arose that Jerusalem had been spared because God had chosen Mount Zion for his dwelling place, and that the presence of the temple made the city inviolable: God would protect it, come what may.

This was the world into which Jeremiah was born, but it was a world about to undergo some tumultuous changes, and Jeremiah lived through those tumultuous changes.

In the early part of Jeremiah's prophetic career the once mighty Assyrian empire was in a terminal state of decline, and King Josiah took advantage of the independence which this allowed him, to reform the religious cult of Judah.

But this period of respite was short-lived, and the place of Assyria on the world-stage was taken by the neo-Babylonian empire, which rapidly rose to pose a threat to the other nations of the Near East.

Much of Jeremiah's ministry as a prophet was carried out under the dark shadow of this ever more menacing threat.

In 597 BC the Babylonians came up against Jerusalem, besieged it, deposed its king, and deported a large part of its population.

The Babylonians made Judah into a vassal state in the charge of Zedekiah, whom they appointed king.

For a decade before the final defeat and destruction of Jerusalem Jeremiah carried out his prophetic work in the city with ever increasing difficulty.

As a prophet, he saw the events taking place as being the judgment of God upon a sinful nation, and urged submission to the Babylonians as the only realistic way forward.

But his message was not popular, and was misconstrued as being unpatriotic.

And Jeremiah suffered much for his message, including imprisonment and being cast down a well.

From the Book of Jeremiah, not only do we know a great deal about the life and circumstances of the prophet, but we also learn quite a lot about his inner feelings.

The Book of Jeremiah contains six poetic passages in the form of personal laments, sometimes called the “Confessions of Jeremiah”, in which the prophet lays bare his soul.

Indeed, because of these passages, Jeremiah has sometimes been known as “the weeping prophet”.

And so characteristic are these passages of Jeremiah, that he has traditionally been thought of as the author of the Book of Lamentations, though few modern scholars would attribute Lamentations to him.

John Skinner, who was principal of Westminster College, Cambridge, in the early years of the 20th century wrote of Jeremiah’s Confessions:

“They lay bare the innermost secrets of the prophet’s life, his fightings without and fears within, his mental conflict with adversity and doubt and temptation, and the reaction of his whole nature on a world that threatened to crush him and a task whose difficulty overwhelmed him.”

The passage which we read at our OT lesson is one of those “Confessions”, and it is a particularly bold and moving one.

It opens with the words (in the NRSV), “O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.”

Older translations have Jeremiah accusing God of deceiving him, but the translation “enticed” is an attempt to allude to the fact that elsewhere the Hebrew verb is used of sexual seduction.

Many years earlier when Jeremiah was called to be a prophet, he protested that he was only a youth, and he was promised that whatever difficulties he faced, God would be with him and protect him and give him the strength that he would need, to fulfil his calling.

Nevertheless, fulfilling that calling came at a tremendous cost to the prophet.

He says: “For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, ‘Violence and destruction!’ For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.”

And we see the inner conflict that was tearing him apart when he adds: “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”

What exactly was it that led the prophet to pour out his heart like this?

That is something known only to him, though the editors of the Book of Jeremiah sought to give some context to this passage by making it follow 20:1-6.

In this preceding passage, Jeremiah's preaching brought him into conflict with Pashhur, a priest who held an important office at the temple.

We read that Pashhur struck him and put him in stocks.

The next day, when Pashhur released him, Jeremiah named him "Terror-all-around", and foretold that Pashhur would see his friends fall by the sword and be taken into captivity in Babylon.

It is interesting that the phrase "terror all around" is found both in this passage about Pashhur and in Jeremiah's confession which follows it.

It may have been the presence of this phrase in both passages which led the editors of the Book of Jeremiah to put the two passages together.

As a matter of fact, the same phrase occurs a total of seven times in the OT, five of them being in the Book of Jeremiah.

One of the remaining occurrences is in Psalm 31, a lament which somewhat recalls the Confessions of Jeremiah, and the other is in the Book of Lamentations, traditionally attributed to Jeremiah.

The calling to serve God can be a lonely one and a costly one, as Jeremiah found, and as he expressed so movingly in our OT lesson in Jer 20:7-13.

And Jeremiah provides us with a fine example of someone who is able to place his trust in God to bring him through this time of difficulty.

For despite all his troubles, he ends this passage on a note of confidence and praise:

"But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble ... Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers."

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Service Date: 18 June, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 99 Morning glory, starlit sky

Rejoice and Sing 553 To Abraham and Sarah

Rejoice and Sing 121 The God of Abraham praise

Rejoice and Sing 521 Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go

Readings

Genesis chapter 18 verses 1 – 15

Psalms 116 verses 1,2 and 12 – 19

Romans chapter 5 verses 1 – 8

Matthew chapter 9 verse 35 to chapter 10 verse 23

Sermon:

Abraham

Genesis 18:1-15

We first meet Abram, whose name means “exalted father”, in Genesis chapter 11, where he is presented as a descendant of Noah’s son Shem eight generations on:

Terah [we are told] was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there.

Genesis 11.27-32

Have a look at your map. There are two possible sites for Ur of the Chaldeans, each of which is marked with a figure 2 and outlined in red. Ur probably stood either in north-western Mesopotamia where the river Tigris begins to flow eastwards away from the Euphrates, in the south-eastern part of present-day Turkey, or on the south bank of the Euphrates, not far from where it flows into the Persian Gulf. Haran lies to the south-west of the first of these sites, which some scholars believe makes that one the more likely.

Although not part of the Bible, the Jewish tradition of Biblical interpretation or *midrash*, portrays Abram's father Terah as a maker of idols, an idea whose significance I'll come to in a moment, and the story continues:

The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran. Now Yahweh said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

So Abram went, as Yahweh had told him...

When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem...

Then Yahweh appeared to Abram, and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to Yahweh, who had appeared to him...

And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.

Genesis 11.32; 12.1-4a, 5b-7, 9

If you look towards the bottom of your map, you will see the Negeb marked with a red triangle, with Beersheba near the top. From Haran to Beersheba is some 570 miles: about the same distance as from Inverness to Brighton.

At this stage, the story of Abram has already made two fundamentally important points.

The first is his break with his father's – and indeed his whole world's – polytheism. In Jewish tradition, Abram is the first person to turn away from the many gods venerated by his society, and to recognise and worship the one true, living God. The *midrash* contains a number of stories about Abraham smashing the idols made by his father Terah when he comes to believe that there is only one God of heaven and earth. The story of Abram is the story of the emergence of monotheism.

The second point concerns Abram's obedience to God. He believes that God has made him a promise that in return for uprooting his entire household and establishment and moving south, God will not only give him descendants, despite Sarai's apparent infertility, but will bless both him and them. And so he steps out, in faith. Abram has seen no signs nor miracles, he has no Scripture or tradition on which to draw for insight or inspiration; all he has is his own conviction that he has received a promise from the one, true God.

Small wonder, then, that Abram is held up by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike as the ultimate example of faith, the person against whose faith we, who have signs and miracles, Scripture and tradition – however we may interpret them – to draw on, should measure our own. Small wonder that St Paul presents Abraham to the Church in Rome as the archetype of righteousness through faith:

I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

Romans 1.16-17

For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'

Romans 4.3 (citing Genesis 15.16)

It's important to note that Abraham's obedience to the call of Yahweh is not blind obedience; on the contrary, the stories tell us that Abraham frequently questioned Yahweh and even challenged him. But throughout this, the story emphasises that he trusted this God who made such extraordinary promises, and in so doing it presents us with the picture of a very special and personal relationship between God and God's faithful people.

And so Abram, the "exalted father", becomes Abraham, the "father of many people"; and Sarai, the "princess", becomes Sarah, the "mother of nations". And the special and personal relationship between God and God's faithful people established in Abraham and Sarah remains available to us down to the present day.

I've mentioned Jews and Christians, but of course Abraham is a hugely important figure for Muslims in their tradition, too, as the first prophet in the line from Adam to Mohammed (PBUH) who surrenders to the will of God, and therefore for Muslims, too, he is an exemplar of faithful obedience.

Consequently, the figure of Abraham may have the potential to unite, these three great monotheistic, "Abrahamic" faiths. In the wake of 9/11, Christians, Jews and Muslims started to meet in 'Abraham Salons' to talk about Abraham. The idea is that in a world where the differences among – and even within – faith traditions are sometimes abused as justification for division, bigotry and violence, we may perhaps find a way forward through Abraham. Many Jews, Christians and Muslims are meeting and working together to find common ground without denying, but rather respecting, each other's traditions.

Of course, there are aspects of the Abrahamic tradition which emphasise the divisions among the three Abrahamic faiths. For instance, Jews and Christians on the one hand, and Muslims on the other, disagree about which of Abraham's sons, Ishmael or Isaac, he was called to sacrifice. And the politicisation of Abraham underlies the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people; the Bible presents him as the person to whom God promised the land of Canaan, leading political Zionists to assert that because of Abraham, Jerusalem and the Holy Land are theirs – God has given it to us.'

If Abraham is to become a unifying figure for Jews, Christians and Muslims, all sides will have to show a lot more faith in God and in each other.

Leaving all that aside, I'd like to finish with some words of the Iona Community's John Bell, which are relevant to all of us in one way or another, and perhaps particularly to Aileen on the occasion of her 90th birthday.

The lovely thing for me about Abraham is that he's an old man and he is one of several old people who indicate that God is not simply interested in young folk but that God has a peculiar calling to old people. It's interesting that later in the Bible, in Joel "...the young will see visions and the old will dream dreams..." and it's the middle aged who really have to watch out.

Right at the beginning, the story of Abraham says that God does not give up on old people and God does not give up in situations that look barren. Both Abraham and Sarah have got to their final years and for them to be the progenitors is a colossal thing.

The relationship that Abraham has with Sarah is very interesting, she's a bit of an odd puss, she can be quite nippy, particularly in her relationship with Abraham's concubine Hagar. She also does a great thing in giving God a name that has not been mentioned before – God's been seen as a creator and she gives God the name Laughter Maker because when her child is born she calls him Isaac which means 'he laughs'. She says 'I'll call him Isaac because God has made laughter for me.' She gives us a picture of God that nobody else gives: that in God's heart there is humour and there's laughter and that he gives that as a gift to humanity.

Revd Robert Beard BD

Trinity Sunday

Service Date: 11 June, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Ian Wallis. In his address he used analogies to explain the nature of the Trinity and in his sermon preached on the Commission given to the Disciples – to baptise and bring the word and commandments of God to an audience beyond traditional cultural and geographical boundaries.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 32 God is in his temple

Rejoice and Sing 38 Thou whose almighty word

Rejoice and Sing 34 Holy, holy, holy

Rejoice and Sing 39 All creatures of our God and King

Readings

Genesis chapter 1 verses 1,2 and 4a

Psalm 8

Second letter to the Corinthians chapter 13 verses 13 – 11

Matthew chapter 28 verses 16 – 20

Sermon:

In the aftermath of another General Election, leaving us frustrated, confused and uncertain; in the midst of a wave of terror attacks around our nation, engendering suspicion whilst causing division between differing political, religious and ethnic identities, we read this morning of Jesus commissioning his earliest disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

It is, perhaps, the earliest mission charge we possess, authorizing its recipients to go forth to proselytise and recruit new members. This Great Commission, as it is known, has inspired the propagation of Christian faith around the globe and through the centuries, for which there is much to be thankful. In truth, we would not be here today if it were not for those who heeded its call.

But we should also acknowledge that the Great Commission has been made to serve less worthy ends, some of which have been at variance to the gospel of Christ – breeding sectarianism, fuelling conflict, justifying inhumanity, of which forced conversions and the bloodshed of so-called ‘holy wars’ are some of the worst examples.

For it is a text that can readily be accommodated within a politics of intolerance, conformity and compliance – that states, ‘You are welcome here if you believe what we believe and practice what we practice and see the world through our eyes.’

Yet, to my mind, such abuse is a far cry from what Jesus intended. So let us attend once more and discern its meaning for our time. And we begin with an observation that is readily missed, namely, that according to these verses, Jesus commissioned his disciples to baptise.

Looking back over 2000 years of Christianity in which baptism has served as the principal rite of initiation, it may seem self-evident that Jesus should issue such a command, but it certainly wouldn’t have been from the outset – especially, when we recognise that there is almost no evidence that Jesus’ earthly ministry and mission entailed baptism.

It is true, he personally underwent the baptism of John – a baptism of repentance into a remnant of faithful Israelites who had reformed their lives in anticipation of God’s impending judgement. Initially, as a follower of John, he may even have administered this baptism alongside his mentor.

But at some juncture, Jesus' convictions about God's action in the world changed dramatically, probably as a consequence of his own experience – as the focus shifts from the future to the present, from judgement to blessing. No longer is the emphasis upon human worthiness, but divine graciousness, as the principal catalyst for transformation.

As the Israelite people, from Abraham and Sarah onwards, were formed out of God's graciousness so that they may embody that graciousness to the world – blessed in order to bless – so we find Jesus embarking on a ministry of blessing among his compatriots – ministering forgiveness, healing and deliverance, inviting all and sundry to share in the feast of God's kingdom, where all are fed and each finds his or her integrity within the renewed people of God.

Within such a vision, there is no need for baptism because all Israelites already belong within God's covenant of grace. What is needed is not some new act of initiation, but rather a fresh realization of true identity before God, along with the courage to inhabit that identity for all it is worth.

That, in a nutshell, is why Jesus didn't baptise. There was no need – you were born into God's covenant of grace and required nor further inauguration.

But from what we can gather, various encounters during his ministry caused him to redraw the contours of God's blessing – of who was a worthy recipient of divine favour.

Recall, the Syro-phoenician woman or the Roman centurion who petition him on behalf of their ailing offspring or entourage – challenging Jesus' convictions, as the latter elicits from him one of the most extraordinary sayings recorded in the Gospels, 'In no one in Israel have I found such faith.' (Matthew 8.10)

So when Jesus, at the conclusion of his earthly ministry, is remembered for enjoining his disciples to baptize, he is thereby acknowledging not the selectivity of blessing, but its ubiquity. No longer does genealogy or residency constitute the people of God; from now on, God's good will and favour are to be extended to all and can be received by anyone with faith to recognise what is on offer and to respond accordingly.

As with baptism, so also with the accompanying command to make disciples of all nations. We have here an example of what is technically described as 'synonymous parallelism' where the meaning of one phrase is elucidated by the one that follows: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.* What does it mean to make disciples? It means inducting them in God's way – in Torah.

Which is what he had spent the past three years doing with his first followers. Teaching them to focus on the commandments that really matter, namely the *Shema*, to love God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind and all your strength; and to do so – and here comes the truly innovative insight – through loving your neighbour as yourself and even, if you can drill down into those resources to do so, to love your enemies, those who wish you ill.

To love not only the loving, lovely and loveable, but also the loveless, unlovely and unlovable – where love is not so much a measure of our affection as a vouchsafe of our commitment to seek the best for someone, irrespective of their attitude towards us. A love epitomized on a cross where Jesus prays for his tormentors, ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do.’

No longer can we claim to love God in abstraction from how we treat one another. According to Jesus, these are two sides of the same coin: we love God through loving one another; and the more we love one another, the deeper into God’s love we are drawn. A form of ‘love incarnationalism’, if you will.

So gradually a new understanding of Jesus’ final commission begins to emerge. A vocation to reach out to those beyond the borders defining our religious identity and allegiance that we may embody for them the fathoms of God’s love and the extent of God’s grace.

And, finally, to do so, in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit. Unsurprisingly, commentators have discerned in this tripartite formula a reference to or, at least, a foreshadowing of, the crystallization of the Christian experience of God in the doctrine of the Trinity which emerges during the fourth century and which, of course, we celebrate this day.

But we’re probably on safer ground when we look not forward to the formulation of what we now call the Nicene Creed, but backwards to the archetypal encounter in Jesus’ life which shaped his faith and empowered his ministry and which is, indeed, the source of all Christian experience, namely his own baptism.

It was then, at this moment of trusting openness and wholehearted dedication, that the constraints of time and place are transcended as Jesus finds himself participating in the loving intimacy and gracious overwhelming that is God. A profound spiritual experience, bringing to fruition the promise of life in all its fullness, which is surely the inheritance of every child of God.

According to the Gospel Evangelists, it was this experience, administered by John, which led Jesus to start celebrating God’s presence in the here and now, as he set about enabling others to do likewise – challenging prejudices, overcoming barriers, raising horizons – helping people, especially those on the margins, to see themselves differently, as beloved of God, citizens of the commonwealth of heaven, members of a new humanity.

You see, when Jesus authorized his own to baptise the nations in the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit he wasn’t inaugurating a new religion, but fulfilling the promise of an ancient one. One borne out of the divine economy of blessing where grace engenders grace, finding its ultimate exposition in the gift of forgiveness and the freedom it bestows.

Fast-forwarding 2000 years or so, have you noticed how in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of Manchester Arena and London Bridge, survivors and supporters alike could think of nothing better to do than to gather together, to comfort one another and stand in solidarity – finding within their diversity a unity of purpose and common commitment to live

in love and peace, as they refused to be cowered by fear or to let their outrage give way to hatred.

Do you remember how in the aftermath of the gunning down of James Kamara on the streets of Broomhall in 2009, we did exactly the same.

Are these not glimpses of this new humanity which Jesus bequeaths to us? Is this not what Trinitarian living entails? Pursuing love's costly way in the company of friends and strangers, in the face of fear and hatred, in the strength of God's grace, in the inspiration of Christ's life, in the irrepressible resourcefulness of the spirit.

This is what we are called to do. This is what we are called to be – in this place, for this community, in the midst of the turmoil and uncertainty of our times. Amen.

Pentecost Sunday

Service Date: 4 June, 2017

This was a joint Churches Together In Broomhill And Broomhall service of the congregations of St. Andrew's URC, St. Mark's Broomhill and The Beacon Methodist Church Broomhill. The service was led by the Revd. Robert Beard and the sermon was delivered by Dr. Kimberley Willis, Moderator of CTBB. Clergy of all churches participated.

Dr. Willis gave an account of Pentecost from the perspective of someone present and who had also witnessed the crucifixion. She reflected on how the Holy Spirit is alive in the work of CTBB.

Holy Communion was celebrated with representatives of all churches serving the elements.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 295 Breathe on me, breath of God

Rejoice and Sing 317 Lord, thy word abideth

Come and join the celebration. A hymn especially written by Jenny Carpenter and set to music by Douglas Jones.

Rejoice and Sing 436 Dear Lord, to you again our gifts we bring

Rejoice and Sing 294 Come down, O Love divine

Sermon:

Readings

Numbers chapter 11 verses 24 – 30

Psalm 104 verses 24 – 35

Acts chapter 2 verses 1 – 21

John chapter 20 verses 19 – 23

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Service Date: 28 May, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Margaret Herbert who preached on glorifying God. Whatever we experience we must trust in God and be part of his plan for the coming of his kingdom.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 500 Jesus united by thy grace

Common Ground 68 Jubilate everybody

Rejoice and Sing 484 We come unto our faithful God

Rejoice and Sing 603 Lord for the years

Sermon:

Readings

Acts chapter 1 verses 6 – 14

Psalm 68 verses 1 – 10 and 32 – 35

First letter of Peter chapter 4 verses 12 – 14 and chapter 5 verses 6 – 11

John chapter 17 verses 1 – 11

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Service Date: 21 May, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Will Fletcher and celebrated the work of Charles and John Wesley. The Revd. Fletcher encouraged us to make time to allow us to be aware of the spirit of God within us; the Wesleys believed that we must achieve a balance between work and activity in God's name and experiencing that spirit.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 285 O for a thousand tongues to sing

All things bright and beautiful

Rejoice and Sing 447 I come with joy to meet my Lord

Rejoice and Sing 247 Thine be the glory

Sermon:
Readings

Acts chapter 17 verses 22 – 31

First letter of Peter chapter 3 verses 13 – 22

John chapter 14 verses 15 – 21

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Service Date: 14 May, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Fleur Houston and the service focussed on Commitment for Life, a scheme of giving which supports the work of Christian Aid. The Revd. Houston preached on what commitment for life means – seeking to change the world for good. It means committed giving, and commitment to consume less and pollute less, at a personal and political level. It means following in the way of Jesus and not wavering in our efforts to change the world for the better. We are sustained in this by the knowledge that God, through Jesus, has committed himself to us and is always present, loving and upholding us.

Hymns:
Rejoice and Sing 600 Christ is the world's Light

Rejoice and Sing 691 God is our refuge and our strength

Rejoice and Sing 277 How sweet the sound of Jesus sounds

Rejoice and Sing 360 Come Thou font of every blessing

Rejoice and sing 345 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

Readings

Psalm 31 verses 1 – 5 and 15 – 16

Acts chapter 7 verses 55 – 60

John chapter 14 verses 1 – 14

Sermon:

So the count-down has begun. The candidates names are registered, leaflets are being printed, hustings are being arranged, electoral officers are working long hours,. Soon the official manifestos of the main political parties will be published for all to see and party leaders will be interrogated. All will say that they want to change the world although they will certainly disagree about how to do it. That seems to be a feature of party politics.

But one thing is sure. And it took not a politician but Pope Francis to nail it on the head. This is what he said: “True statecraft is manifest when, in difficult times, we uphold high principles and think of the long-term common good”.

This is something that politicians do not always find very easy. But it is our distinctive calling as Christians. For we too are seeking to change the world, to change it for good. We are committed for life. What you may ask, does this require of us? It involves three things, mainly.

First of all, commitment for life involves committed giving. Today as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the URC project, and give thanks for the gifts of life which we enjoy, and as we remember the many ways in which God blesses us, we are challenged to dig deep into our pockets. The sums of money we offer may be large or small, but we can rest assured that our gifts will change life for the better in Bangladesh, Central America, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory and Zimbabwe. So, Ethel Mumpande and countless others like her can be helped to feed her family, can earn a living, can live with dignity.

Commitment for life involves committed financial giving that the poor might have a life. Then, secondly, it involves commitment for life. We are in for the long haul. We are called to follow in the way of Jesus. Now following Jesus is not a soft option. It takes vision, guts and tenacity. We are called to be unwavering in our determination to do what we can to make the world a better place. We will stay the course, whatever. And that takes commitment. In fact, not to put too fine a point upon it, such commitment takes our whole lives. Now you may be thinking, hold on, Fleur, you are exaggerating, this is beginning to sound a little extreme. Commitment for a day we can take, especially if the sun is shining, and the wind's in the right direction, but commitment for life? If this is what you are thinking, then remember this: Jesus gave his life for us and asks us to give ours for him.

So let's consider this in a little more depth. Where better to start than these verses from John 14. Jesus and the disciples are having supper together. Judas has just left. It is night. The disciples clearly sense that something is wrong; they are uncertain and anxious; they don't understand what is going on. But how does Jesus respond? He says to them “do not let your hearts be troubled”. Don't worry, everything will be all right. If under these circumstances, anything is more calculated to increase the anxiety of his hearers, it is to be told not to worry. And Jesus continues, “You know the way to the place where I am going!” Thomas can take it no longer. “Lord, he protests, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus responds with the magisterial statement: “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” And he adds “whoever has seen me has seen the Father”.

Does this seem to you a trifle arrogant? Over exclusive? Faced today with so much that is holy, good and true in other faiths, can we be justified in making such exclusive claims for Christianity? But this statement by Jesus is not an indication of superiority, it is a call to commitment, a summons to his followers to follow Jesus wherever it takes. It must have been so important to the people for whom John was writing. The people of the way as the early Christians were known. They were at the time being expelled by Jewish authorities from the synagogue. Take Stephen. He was a deacon in the church at Jerusalem. He aroused the anger of the synagogue leaders because of his teachings. So they lynched him. The account of Stephen's murder is terse and violent. His only crime had been to proclaim in public that Jesus is Lord. His executioners are deaf to all reason. Their rabid violence thirsts only for blood. Their twisted and hate-poisoned hearts are closed to what God had done and was doing. Stephen's vision, in contrast, is of beauty and joy; his speech is forgiving, his prayer for mercy for his attackers reminds us of the words of Jesus on the cross. His vision of glory displays the certainty that God is victorious over all that distorts human life and robs it of joy. Stephen's commitment to follow Jesus whatever it took did not go unnoticed by his persecutors. That very Saul who persecuted Stephen with such zeal was himself under the name of Paul, to become the great apostle to the Gentiles. And he in his turn was to die a martyr's death as he followed Jesus on the way. In a very literal sense, this is commitment for life.

There never has been a time in Christian history when some-one, somewhere, has not died rather than compromise with the powers of oppression, tyranny and unbelief. Stephen was one of a long line of Christians who continue to be martyred for their faith. Virtually every month, it seems, we hear reports of the persecution of Christians somewhere in the world, here in the UK, commitment to Jesus for life may not necessarily lead to martyrdom, but it will certainly involve a certain amount of self-denial. Living simply, as the slogan goes, that others might simply live.

This is personal and it is political.

Each of us buys and consumes too much. I am as guilty of this as anyone else. I have in my wardrobe three winter coats, pink, brown and black. The styles are different, indeed, and I might persuade myself that they are suitable for different occasions, but do I really need three winter coats? Likewise, I have on a shelf in the wardrobe a large bag of pashminas and pretty scarves – different colours, yes, and they match different outfits – but do I really need so many?

And then we do all of us, to different degrees do our bit to pollute the atmosphere. We may not all of us have large diesel fuelled cars, but we may regularly choose to fly on holiday rather than go by train or bus; we may buy out of season fruits that have had to be flown in from foreign parts to satisfy demand for strawberries in mid-winter.

We all of us do it – but if we are seriously committed to life we will make a serious effort to consume less and pollute less. Today's readings are a wake-up call – they remind us that, in order to change the world, and to change it for good, we must ourselves change. And for that to happen, we must think of the world differently. Not as a place where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, nor as a place where men and women are treated like cogs in a bureaucratic machine but a place where all people flourish in a vision of the common good. And how is that achieved? By long-term commitment to following the way of Jesus.

I did suggest that the issue is not only personal but also political. The cry of the poor is inextricably tied up with the cry of the earth. Thanks to the efforts of many individuals, environmental questions have increasingly found a place on public agendas – we know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be replaced without delay. But we must ensure that the poor do not end up paying the price. The countries which have benefitted from a high degree of industrialisation, at the cost of enormous emissions of greenhouse gases, have a greater responsibility for providing a solution to the problems they have caused. It is to be hoped that politicians can learn from their mistakes and find some sort of interaction directed to the common good of all.

So first, commitment for life involves generous giving that others may live; secondly it involves commitment for life with a habitual exercise of self-denial at personal and political levels. And then, thirdly, and most joyfully, God, through Jesus, has committed himself to us. And God's commitment to us is for life. "I am with you always, says Jesus, even to the ends of the earth." In 2015, pope Francis wrote an encyclical letter to all followers of Jesus. I quoted from it at the beginning of this sermon. It was entitled *Laudato Si'* the words in Italian mean 'Praise be' an allusion to the beautiful canticle of the creatures by of St Francis of Assisi. "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs." And pope Francis concludes with these words:

"May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope. God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. Praise be to him!"

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Service Date: 7 March, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Sarah Colver who focussed on verses in John chapter 10. John writes of Jesus describing the work and role of the shepherd and describing himself as the gate, protecting but also allowing access to the wider world of fields and nourishment. How can all people be protected yet allowed to thrive? How can we ensure everyone has abundant life?

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 74 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

Rejoice and Sing 552 The King of Love

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

Rejoice and Sing 289 To God be the Glory

Readings

Acts chapter 2 from verse 42 to the end of the chapter

First letter of Peter chapter 2 from verse 19 to the end of the chapter

Psalms 23

John chapter 10 verses 1 – 10

Sermon:

*May the words of my mouth
and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in your sight O God,
our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

It really good to be here this morning...I know a few of you already from other contexts but its really good to join you here on a Sunday for worship.

To be presented with familiar passages from the Bible is always a mixed blessing for a preacher ,especially in a new place; we all have our own thoughts and ideas about what we think they mean. Many of us will have heard countless sermons on one or more of these texts, and many of us will have our own associations with them.

My invitation to you this morning is to try to come to them afresh today, to see them as if for the first time – we need to step back for a while and try to let go of that which we think we know. To go back to the reading from Acts for a moment- those first Christians (although they wouldn't have called themselves that) had to explore their inherited Hebrew scriptures afresh reflecting on what they had previously been taught and had known to be true, but reading and learning from them again in the light of recent events, and their own experience of the risen Christ.

And so, let us begin again, go back to basics.. And it's the gospel text I'd like to delve a little deeper for what is essentially a reflection this morning.

We've just heard the first half of what is commonly known as Jesus' Good Shepherd discourse, but this is a bit of misleading title for this first section. Here, John writes of Jesus describing the role and work of a shepherd – but its any shepherd – no one in particular – and with no moral judgement attached. He's neither good nor bad.

Jesus describes the way in which there is a relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. He outlines the difference between the shepherd – who the gatekeeper knows and will allow to enter through the gate – and the thief and bandit, who presumably can only climb over the wall as they intend get up to no good..

When – unsurprisingly really – the disciples don't understand what he's getting at, he becomes more forthright in his explanation. But the first answer is not, as we might automatically or a bit lazily perhaps expect – the announcement 'I am the Good Shepherd'. That comes later in verse 11, at the beginning of the next section; Here Jesus says, 'I am the gate for the sheep'; and in case we don't get the point the first time in verse 7, he says

it again in verse 9: 'I am the gate'. So there we were, being led along with the disciples thinking this was a story about a shepherd but it is actually a story about a gate. There's a switch of roles as, as Levine says, 'The figure who calls to the sheep becomes the one who is the means by which they are saved'...No wonder the disciples were puzzled- this can leave us puzzled too..

I've read explanations that argue that shepherds sometime slept in the gateways, so were both the person and the barrier- but I'm not sure that's intimated here- for there is also a gatekeeper mentioned too. So what is this about? It certainly leaves us with some questions...

Ultimately this is as it says, a figure of speech, closer to a parable – open ended, perhaps with more than one meaning.

Some might wish to interpret the language of 'being saved' seen in this translation in a very particular way but as D Mark Davis says; While the phrase 'will be saved' (might) evokes notions of eternal salvation from the fires of hell, here the threats are strangers, or false shepherds who are thieves and bandits.

A gate to a sheepfold provides access to safety and protection within, but does not permanently confine; It also allows the sheep out again, access to the fields, the wider world, nourishment. Its more about being safe from harm and thus able to thrive. And so this passage ends with the powerful and compelling phrase: I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

And that, so far as a reflection, might be neat and tidy, and a good place to end; but in some peculiar twist of the lectionary system, at 8am this morning I was preaching on 1 Peter 2 verses 11-17 – and here the reading was verses 19 onwards.

The reading from the Authorised version used in the BCP service ends with the rather stark and memorable verse; Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the King.

As you can imagine, good feminist that I am, I wasn't terribly 'chuffed' by that – but hopefully we got somewhere as it's a verse – and translation – of its time. I was more concerned when I realised that verse 18 is missing from the beginning of our RCL reading because it's the verse naming the particular group of people to whom this passage was addressed. It's hard to hear for us, but it reads:

**Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference,
not only those who are cruel and gentle but also those who are harsh.**

In the context of the time of writing slavery was of course commonplace; they are being told to endure suffering and reminded that Christ had done so- as if that somehow makes it ok? This is part of a whole chapter in 1 Peter advising Christians to live quietly and blamelessly as strangers and aliens in a society to which they don't quite belong and forms part of the household code.

This is challenging stuff; we can't begin to understand the life experience of those by whom and for whom this was written but personally I don't think verses should be omitted just because they are hard; if these words from 1 Peter are to have any meaning for us today it can only be through thoughtful engagement- they have to be read intelligently, with their meaning and context questioned and explored.

They also serve to demonstrate that it's important that we don't treat any scriptural passage in isolation for they are always part of a bigger picture. Going back to our gospel, John's placing of the pastoral images here at the beginning of Ch 10 follow straight after stories where people are trying to establish who Jesus is, questions of identity; Is he a prophet? From God? The Messiah or the Son of Man who will judge the world? Some see, and believe, and others do not. And then, after our almost-parable, Jesus does finally say, 'I am the Good Shepherd' and the immediate connections are finally made with OT imagery of God as the shepherd and leader of His people, as seen in Ezekiel 4 and of course the words of psalm 23 which we said together earlier.

What then can we take away from all of this? I think we can be led to ponder some deep questions for ourselves – What do we need to be protected from? And what do we need to feed us?

How might we receive abundant life? What might it look like?

But the whole Christian story, the narrative from Acts and the reminder found in 1 Peter should push us much further that that – to ask how might all people receive that which is necessary to thrive? What more can we do through our words and through our deeds to make this come about? For most surely, God is the shepherd and guardian of all our souls. Amen.

Service Date: 19 March, 2017

Val Morrison's sermon

Hymns:

Sermon:

Exodus Ch 17 vv 1 – 7, John Ch 4 vv 5 – 42, Romans Ch 5 vv 1 – 11

Is it that there is something wrong with this story or is it that it is something of a classic farce? Well no doubt for many of us it is just a familiar story and the danger with familiar stories is that as we read them or listen to them we fail to hear the shades, the nuances and the layers which are contained within them.

So at one level – nice bright sunny day in the Middle East, tired man, sitting by a well waiting for his friends who had gone shopping. Along comes a woman to collect water for her family, a bit of a conversation, friends return and woman goes back to her home. There's a bit of banter between the friends but they have their picnic. The woman returns with her friends and invites the man to stay in their town which he does, for two days.

Well, that's nice, they all seem to be enjoying themselves, sharing food, making new friends, seeing a bit of the country which they maybe haven't visited before. From such an

encounter they could all move on and there would be very little change in anything for any of those involved.

But even the simplest story opens up possibilities for reflection and even taken at this simple level there are things to think about and explore. In the version I have just related there are things which are only part of my imagination. However likely it is, nowhere do any of the gospel accounts tell us anything about the weather, surely that part of my mental image of the event is directly related to my British context where the weather is a crucial piece in the jigsaw of our observations.

Jesus, we read, was making this journey to avoid dissention between his disciples and those of John. To get back to Galilee, Jesus could have led his disciples on a long roundabout route to avoid passing through Samaria but he made the surprising decision to take the shorter route. Such a journey would expose pious Jews to defilement by bringing them into contact with Samaritans so ignoring 500 years of hostility between the two nations.

Even having taken the shorter route this man Jesus, was tired and needing a rest, just as would any other human being and along comes the second surprise in that context. A woman coming to draw water in the middle of the day. Not normal. Neither was the fact she was on her own. Women in this society were not independent in the way that women in our society are. They went to the well together for protection, they went when it was the cooler part of the day. And the third surprise, Jesus asked her for a drink. It was not normal for a man to engage a woman in conversation. Men in this society were expected to withdraw to a distance of at least 20 feet, indicating that it was both safe and culturally appropriate for the woman to approach the well.

With a simple (and we might say, not very polite) request 'give me a drink', there begins an exchange about social mores of the time, the nature of water, practical matters about obtaining water, the history of the well and the traditions and understanding of the nation. Have you ever noticed how when Jesus asks a difficult question or makes a statement which requires some deeper thought people often try to side track him by introducing into the conversation something practical or legal or historical?

Of course the whole conversation is a series of misunderstandings. at least on the part of the woman, most of which has to do with the different backgrounds, experiences and expectations of the two participants. Whilst I think we can be confident that Jesus knows what he is doing, the woman is, not surprisingly bemused. I would be surprise if we have not all had the experience of being involved in an exchange with someone where they are saying words which we feel should make sense but which strung together in the way they are, seem to be just outside our grasp to understand. In such a situation we might well do what the woman in our story did and fall back on the depth of the well and the lack of a bucket.

Sometimes in such situations we can hear a phrase which we think we understand and we hang on to that in the hopes of the whole thing somehow making some sense here, for this woman, the phrase "the Gift of God" would have been such a phrase. It would have signified for her the Torah of Moses and she might have known that for the Jews it was the Law and the Prophets. God's ultimate gift was a book, but even this was not the anchor

she could hold on to because Jesus was trying to tell her that now the “gift of God” was a person not a book.

So it's back to the practicalities and a bit of a challenge about the significance of her ancestor Jacob, and Jesus, who has no desire to get involved in a debate about the significance or otherwise of historical figures, ploughs on with his theme of living water permanently conquering thirst and becoming a spring gushing up to eternal life.

For the woman that promise of water which will permanently conquer thirst so avoiding this difficult journey to the well each day, strikes a chord and she accepts the offer, still not, I think, totally understanding what this might mean for her.

Having made this much progress Jesus again breaks with tradition. He commands her to 'go' 'call' and 'bring'. He has a job for her to do and against all the accepted way of doing things he is calling her, a woman, to go and witness to him, a man.

During this part of the conversation, Jesus makes clear to the woman how well he knows her circumstances and through exposing her somewhat questionable past and embarrassing present causes her to once more change the subject. This time into a discussion of the ideological divide between the Samaritans and the Jews and Jesus follows her lead picking up on a major theme about worship and where God's presence is to be found. It has been suggested that the woman's response to these profound thoughts is a huge sigh as she recognises that this man she is talking with has -to say the least – unusual qualities, which lead her to express the belief that the Messiah is coming and that when that event occurs everything will be a whole lot easier. All these complicated questions and challenging thoughts which this extraordinary man is facing her with will in fact be clarified.

In some senses we can only guess at what she thinks about Jesus' statement “I that am talking to you, I am” because the disciples, not known for their sensitivity, come blundering back into the scene with the sandwiches for lunch and the woman, leaving her precious water jar behind goes off to the city to tell her friends and we are told that;

many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony

So in the many layers we can find in this story we need to ask what it says to us for our Christian journey in the world of 2017.

Well, I think that one thing it maybe says something about is mission and how we engage with the world.

Here we have a story in which to begin with Jesus is very much portrayed as a human being, tired and thirsty, presenting to the person he encounters someone in need of help, making himself vulnerable just by the route he took and his challenge to the accepted rules of society, by his requesting the help of an immoral foreign woman.

As we offer our help and support to those in need, those on the margins of society, do we make ourselves vulnerable? Do we accept their offer of a drink? Sometimes on a Sunday

morning one of the homeless to whom we serve breakfast will begin to put chairs and tables away or wipe the tables or tidy up the crockery, they won't necessarily do it in the way we would like but they want to help and be valued for that help, which is the important thing.

"May you be my servant too" in the line from the hymn brother sister let me serve you is a good phrase to remember.

But of course the Jesus we see in this story is also very much the divine, the son of God, with an understanding of his place and his calling. As we think about our mission today, it is the whole person of Jesus that we are called to share. The extraordinary concept that this man was also God, in on the world at creation and alongside the creator throughout the ages.

As we consider our mission, we often despair of a world which we feel passes us by. Where there are events and developments which we find it hard to understand or keep up with and where we know that we must change to be able to share our message.

I think one of the most difficult things for us to understand about the gospel story was the profound changes which Jesus brought. In today's story it was the whole matter of women's place in society and the expectations that they themselves had, never mind the expectations that society had.

Jesus elevated the position of women in ways which shocked society and broke taboos. He talked with them, invited them into his band of disciples, was financed by some of them and had some of them travel with him. In today's story he chose a woman as an appropriate audience for profound explanations of the nature of God and of true worship and then he called and sent this woman, who by the expectations of that day could not have been expected to understand anything of what he had shared with her to be an evangelist in her own community, the first woman preacher.

In all of that a reminder for us that we must overcome our prejudices, learn to see God's word in unexpected places, but above all expect that the world can be changed by single conversations and actions which in themselves may seem insignificant but which added together with others may be more effective than we could dare to hope.

There were a number of points in the conversation where the woman tries to sidetrack Jesus, times when he asks difficult questions or when he exposes something in her background of which she is not proud and I think there are two lessons for us to learn here.

At a personal level, trying to sidetrack God when he has a call on our lives or when there is a difficult situation to be dealt with will not do. My experience of God is that he just keeps on calling and so it is best just to accept that call right from the start delaying tactics don't work and serve only to waste time and effort.

But I think there is another way in which this can be seen and that is as we try to understand more of God's word and we engage in discussion about the interpretation of his word. Let's not be afraid of what we might discover, it may be challenging or

uncomfortable but it is I believe only by going through those sort of experiences that we deepen our faith.

And finally, (though there is much much more which could be said as a result of reading the story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria) the conversation seems to have been more a case of two people talking together but not hearing what each other were saying until the point at which Jesus began to speak about the woman's background. From that articulation of his understanding she began to listen more carefully and to understand more fully.

And it seems to me that trying to understand the context of the person we are talking to or the group of people we are trying to provide for is crucial to all our mission.

By sitting by the well, Jesus put himself in the place where he would meet a disturbed and possibly disturbing woman. By making himself available to talk and by showing his understanding of her situation he took her on a path of transformation from village outcast to village evangelist .

Now there is an aim for all our lives and our mission. How many outcasts can we take on a path of transformation just by being in the right place at the right time and by showing we understand the lives of the people we meet?

Third Sunday of Easter

Service Date: 30 April, 2017

Worship was led by Mrs. Jenny Carpenter

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 292 When morning gilds the skies

Rejoice and Sing 722 I'll of salvation take the cup

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

Rejoice and Sing 41 For the beauty of the earth

Rejoice and Sing 195 Lord of the dance

Readings

Psalm 116 (Found at Rejoice and Sing 721)

Acts chapter 2 verse 14a and verses 36 – 41

Luke chapter 24 verses 13 – 35

Sermon:

NEW LIFE FOR ALL

Have you ever heard an exciting piece of news and wanted immediately to pass it on? In this world of tweets, all kinds of important and totally unimportant messages are being sent all the time. I had a wonderful Easter Sunday this year. I shared in the St. Mark's Dawn Service on the Green at 5.45 am followed by breakfast (bacon rolls and coffee) then proceeded to Stephen Hill for a further breakfast (cereal, fruit, boiled eggs) and a 9.30 Communion Service in preparation for leading the 11am Easter Service there. Not only did we affirm the Easter Good news "*The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!*" but there was a further joyful message- our minister, Will Fletcher, announced his engagement to Helen, and we saw her ring to prove it! In the window between the end of the Communion Service and the start of Broomhill's 10.30 service, I drove to Broomhill to share the news of Will's engagement, only to be told "*Will is engaged. He e-mailed Josie and asked her to share the news with the Broomhill congregation.*" Shades of the ending of the Emmaus story! Then I drove back swiftly to Stephen Hill for the 11am service!

How do people encounter the living God? It is often a deeply personal experience. The psalmist wrote "*For you have rescued my life from death, my eyes from tears and my feet from stumbling. I will walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living.*" This sense of a new lease of life, joy after sorrow and help in negotiating difficulties seems to me to encapsulate the experience of encountering the risen Christ. "The Walk to Emmaus" easily gets into my 8 "Desert Island Bible Passages". Cleopas and his wife (why ever not?) are joined by a stranger as they make their desolate way home. They share with him their dashed hopes and sense of emptiness and bewilderment. He **accompanies** them and carefully points them to passages of scripture which show how Jesus' life has echoed the prophetic literature: the inevitability of his death but also the assurance of the final victory of good over evil, of life over death. "*Did not our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?*" Ref. To Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme.

This morning on Radio 4 Mark Tully was interviewing the former Master of the Order of Dominican Friars, which is primarily a preaching order. He stressed that preaching should be done not from a pulpit six feet above contradiction but on a level with the congregation. It should aim to help them in their exploration of faith and life rather than pronounce dogma or direct practice. Not "I know it all! Do as I say!" but rather as one beggar telling another where to find bread. I am simply trying to make sense of what has happened, is happening, will happen.

That's what Peter was doing in the Pentecost sermon. No, we are NOT drunk. He, like Jesus on the Emmaus road, finds a passage in the OT prophetic literature which seems to have happened. The POURING OUT of the Spirit. And this isn't just for the privileged band who were already followers of Jesus. NO!

Acts 2 v. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, for all who are far away, EVERYONE WHOM THE LORD OUR GOD CALLS TO HIM".

“All are in need of salvation; all can be saved, all can know they are saved; all can be saved to the uttermost” became the Mantra of Methodism.

It's based on this foundational sermon of Peter's.

Peter implicates all his hearers in responsibility for the death of Jesus – this Jesus, whom YOU crucified. Cf *Ah, holy Jesus how hast Thou offended? 'Twas I Lord Jesus, I it was denied Thee. I crucified Thee!*

It hits home. In response to the cry “What shall we do?” Peter says

REPENT

BE BAPTISED in the name of Jesus Christ

SO THAT YOUR SINS MAY BE FORGIVEN AND

YOU WILL RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT (to help you grow in love)

For the promise is to you , yes YOU, ALL OF YOU! No matter what sort of a life you have been living. There's already been reference to Joel's prophecy that God will empower by his Spirit young and old, male and female, slave and free.

FOR YOUR CHILDREN. Responsibility to transmit the good news of Jesus Christ. Gospel's Story. Finding new ways to express it that connect with today's context.

FOR ALL THAT ARE FAR OFF Gentiles? Missionary imperative, backing up the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel. Peter's vision – Cornelius. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Wesley... “I look upon the whole world as my parish” I consented to be more vile – open air preaching. Missionary imperative – David Livingstone, Mary Slessor, James Chalmers.

EVERYONE THAT THE LORD OUR GOD SHALL CALL. Power of prison chaplaincy. Appeal to people little regarded – Dalits in India. Slaves in the Caribbean.

Pentecostal churches because they emphasise the empowerment of the Holy Spirit appeal to people who are not necessarily well-educated and in influential jobs.

“Whosoever will may come!”

“O for a trumpet voice on all the world to call,

to bid their hearts rejoice in him who died for all!

For all my Lord was crucified, for all, for all, my Saviour died.” C. Wesley

Resurrection Preaching is about the offer of new life in Christ.

A life in which he offers to accompany us, prompting us by the Holy Spirit, enabling us to grow in grace so that we become more and more the human individuals that God intends us to be and that this world becomes more evidently God's world where love, trust, justice and peace prevail. This is our Easter faith and hope. Alleluia!

Second Sunday of Easter

Service Date: 23 April, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. Keith Albans who preached on Easter Faith. The testimonies of the disciples to Jesus' resurrection are placed in a bigger picture, linking the humanity of Jesus to the divine action and intention of God. The Easter story is one of limitless love, hope and faith and has meaning when we tell it and live it.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 236 Come, ye faithful people, come

Common Ground 46 Haven't you heard that Jesus is risen

Common Ground 150 You show your friends

Rejoice and Sing 244 O sons and daughters (part 2)

Rejoice and Sing 260 Christ is alive!

Readings

Acts chapter 2 verses 14a and 22 – 32

First letter of Peter chapter 1 verses 3 – 9

John chapter 20 verses 19 – 31

Sermon:

An Easter Faith

For us, this is the year of moving... Stationed to York, which for us is a return – 1984 – the year the Minster burnt down – David Jenkins consecrated as Bishop of Durham. Hopefully it will survive our return there this summer!

Jenkins – famous for his assertion that the resurrection was more than 'a conjuring trick with bones' – but sadly more famous for the frequent misquotation that the resurrection was a conjuring trick with bones!

Ever since it seems that we have had to endure what I call the seasonal smallmindedness with which Easter (and some other Christian festivals) get dealt with by the media. Fake News is no new invention!!

This year it was the National Trust Cadbury Egg hunt story. Made into a story by the intervention of the Archbishop of York, and even the PM joined in, as did many others, promising boycotts of Cadbury and cancellation of National Trust membership...

And then, just when that story began to fade, we had the results of a survey commissioned for BBC local radio which were released on Palm Sunday... Pick a headline! ***Resurrection did not happen, say quarter of Christians*** was the BBC's choice, although they did add ***However, almost one in 10 people of no religion say they do believe the Easter story, but it has "some content that should not be taken literally"***. Read the survey (2010 British adults on the phone) and you learn that:

§ ***17% of all people believe the Bible version word-for-word***

§ ***31% of Christians believe word-for-word the Bible version, rising to 57% among "active" Christians (those who go to a religious service at least once a month)***

§ ***Exactly half of all people surveyed did not believe in the resurrection at all***

"It depends what you mean..." reaction!! After all you could say that 25% of gospel writers were not that clear what they believed about the resurrection!!

I've always found it strange that we get presented by others with what they assume are the basic standard tenets of our faith (Virgin birth and empty tomb), knowing that both are literally 'incredible' and, according to modern thinking at least, 'unprovable'! And by allowing ourselves to be misunderstood, we have made it all too easy for people to dismiss our faith, lambast our belief, consume our chocolate and play with the Easter bunny!

But we are here precisely because the stories which we share in this Easter season over the next few weeks have nothing to do with seasonal small-mindedness!

We heard three Bible readings. Each is well known, each focuses on the Easter event but while each one is interested in the core foundation of the Easter faith, they do so by tying it into something much much bigger.

Thomas' story – very familiar account and details:

- Easter evening – locked doors
- Appearance and message of resurrection
- Confirmation with their own eyes
- Thomas absent at first – but a week later he's there
- 'Reach out your hand' (nb does he?)
- Declaration of faith...

But John wants us to see beyond the simple story – he’s painted it on a broader canvas...

- The locked door is no barrier...
- The work of the Father (as the Father sent me...) [?] The gift of the Holy Spirit – The Trinity!!
- The spreading of the message

And on the testimony of the disciples, the story starts its journey of encounter and proclamation.

Acts 2 – Peter was one of the 11 disciples who met Jesus... And here on the Day of Pentecost (link to Jn 20) he tells us something of what he has made of his Easter experience...

- Peter recaps his encounters with Jesus and his sharing in his ministry...
- The death of Jesus is recounted
- God raised him...

And again, Peter casts the event larger and wider...

- Quotes from Psalm 16 – casts the events backwards into the mind and purposes of God...
- He of whom David had spoken!!
- Language of Messiah...

And from the testimony of the two women in a garden, and the frightened men in an upper room, we are into the stuff of everywhere and every time!

1 Peter 1 – So where can we go from there?!

- An inheritance kept in heaven!
- Salvation of our souls...
- Nb Community in Asia Minor are being sustained through persecution by this hope...

This is not a story of seasonal small-mindedness is it?! Anything but. But neither can it simply be a story of “once upon a time”. But it only becomes the story I believe it is meant to be, when we do something with it – tell it and live it!

John Bell’s hymn – one of my favourite modern writers... One of his Easter hymns has this fascinating last verse... **“Christ has risen and forever lives to challenge and to change all whose lives are messed or mangled, all who find religion strange.”**

And then he continues... **“Christ is risen. Christ is present, making us what he has been – evidence of transformation in which God is known and seen.”** Wow!!

Another of my favourite modern writers in Brian Wren. One of his shorter and less well known hymns says this:

Look at this man. What does he say? Has he a song for today?

Distant in time, foreign in ways, is he the one we should praise?

Look at this man. What will you do if he is looking at you?

And it’s taking those two testimonies together which I believe brings us to the heart of the Easter faith, because on the one hand it focuses on the real humanity of Jesus and on the other it focuses on the divine action of God – and it holds them not as opposites and extremes, but as two sides of the same coin...

That’s why the Easter story is told the way it is – human events and experiences linked to the action, timescale and infinite purpose of God.

So the Easter faith joins earth and heaven, Jew and Gentile, God and human, Jesus and Christ, Then and Now, death and life, cross and resurrection, and offers us the promise of living in the one reality and experience, literally earthed in the promise and hope of the other...

And in that kind of living, there is no room for seasonal small-mindedness! And in that kind of living we remember that the Easter faith is not an un-doing of all that we were remembering during Lent, and all that we marked again during Holy Week.

It is about God! God raised Christ... This wider perspective is witnessed in several recent writings.

Firstly, Rowan Williams, who features in the latest edition of your Reform magazine, and who in his book ‘God with us’ writes – **“Here is divine love that cannot be defeated by violence. We do our worst and we still fail to put God off. We reject, exclude and murder the one who bears the love of God in his words and work, and that love continues to do exactly what it always did.”**

We live and tell the Easter story, not in arid debates on things that cannot be proven, nor in trying to assert one thing over and against another. Rather it is in holding together the one and the other, as God is revealed in Jesus.

Secondly, Cynthia Bourgeault and Richard Rohr put it like this: “Jesus stayed close to the ground of wisdom: the transformation of human consciousness. He asked those timeless and deeply personal questions: What does it mean to die before you die? How do you go about losing your little life to find the bigger one? Is it possible to live on this planet with a generosity, abundance, fearlessness, and beauty that mirror Divine Being itself? These are the wisdom questions, and they are the entire field of Jesus’ concern.

Thirdly, in this year’s Easter message from the President and Vice-President of the Methodist Conference, they make exactly this point. First they explain the meaning of the word confidence – it comes from the root words of con “staying with” and fides “faith” “Staying with the faith is a far more appropriate way of understanding confidence at Easter.”

And then they write this: ***“Do we sometimes race over the reflection of holy week and the pain of Good Friday, in order to reach the joy of Easter? And by doing this, do we deny the pain? Are we really staying with the faith?”***

In this Easter season we declare our faith in the God who raised Christ, who joins earth and heaven – nothing to do with seasonal small-mindedness. The images of Easter are of unquenchable, limitless love, of hope that can exist in the midst of absolute disaster, and of the faith that, with God, the final word is one of life, not death.

Finally, I read this the other day in a book from Iona, talking about John’s Easter story. *“Applying my reasoning facilities, such as they are, to this story is a huge waste of time. I don’t believe it and I don’t want to believe it. I don’t even think that meaning matters here. It’s not a story to explain, it is a story to live by. Reading or telling stories is about a lot more than what I do or don’t believe. It has to do with poetic sensibility and liberated imagination. Storytelling is resurrection – and resurrection, somebody once said, is a laugh freed for ever and ever.”*

Over the past decade we have increasingly come to recognise that we are part of a society which is discovering that the stories we have convinced ourselves are true, don’t work anymore! Have we got the courage to tell our resurrection stories in that climate? Resurrection stories are fragile stories, told against a counter theme of despair, failure and abandonment. To tell stories is to trust in life, to hope. Those things are of far greater import than all the sterile arguments about the fine details.

The Easter faith joins earth and heaven, today and eternity, and as I said earlier, it offers us the promise of living in the one reality and experience, literally earthed in the promise and hope of the other...

Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of our final hymn (also by Brian Wren). He wrote it in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, at a time when he was pastor of the Church close to where the event had occurred. And so he wrote:

Christ is alive, no longer bound to distant years in Palestine

But saving, healing here and now, and touching every place and time.

This is our Easter faith – so may we live it in hope and in faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Easter Day and celebration of Holy Communion

Service Date: 16 April, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the Resurrection. We don't know what actually happened in the tomb between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Some of the people who saw Jesus on or after Easter Day saw, heard and touched a physical being. Others experienced something more mystical – a being who disappeared through walls, who appeared suddenly beside them and could travel great distances very quickly. What matters is that the spirit and message of Jesus continues in us; everytime we respond to human need, Jesus is there.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 246 The day of resurrection!

Rejoice and Sing 238 Good Christians all, rejoice and sing!

Rejoice and Sing 233 Christ the Lord is risen again

Rejoice and Sing 239 Jesus lives!

Sermon:

Readings

Acts chapter 10 verses 34 – 43

Psalm 118 verses 1,2, 14 – 24

Colossians chapter 3, verses 1 – 4

John chapter 20 verses 1 – 18

A Liturgy for Maundy Thursday

Service Date: 13 April, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard and included Communion

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 207 My song is love unknown

Rejoice and Sing 215 Ah, holy Jesu, how hast Thou offended?

Go to dark Gethsemene

Sermon:

Readings

Psalm 51

Matthew chapter 26 verses 30 – 35

Rejoice and Sing 747 *Salvator Mundi*

Matthew chapter 26 verses 47 – 56

Sixth Sunday in Lent and Palm Sunday

Service Date: 9 April, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Margaret Herbert

Hymns:

Common Ground 4 All are welcome

Rejoice and Sing 210 We have a king who rides a donkey

Common Ground 86 Meekness and Majesty

Common Ground 21 Christ be our light

Sermon:

Readings

Isaiah chapter 50 verses 4 – 9a

Psalm 118 verses 1,2, 19 – 29

Philippians chapter 2 verses 5 – 11

Mark chapter 14 verses 1 – 15

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Service Date: 2 April, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard. Instead of a sermon, after some observations on the readings, the Revd. Beard encouraged a discussion on what inspires and motivates us. This developed the ideas in the readings of the breath or spirit of God giving life and activating us.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 295 Breathe on me, breath of God

Rejoice and Sing 331 Out of the depths I cry to thee

Rejoice and Sing 285 O for a thousand tongues to sing

Rejoice and Sing 278 I know that my Redeemer lives

Sermon:

Readings

Ezekiel chapter 37 verses 1 – 14

Romans chapter 8 verses 6 – 11

Psalms 130 (Found at Rejoice and Sing 728)

John chapter 11 verses 1 – 45

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Service Date: 26 March, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the origins of Mothering Sunday, its distinction with Mothers' Day, and the concept of a nurturing church. Mothering Sunday falls on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, a period of preparation and nurturing. The Early Church developed that Sunday into a celebration in honour of the Mother of Jesus who provided nurture to pious Christians. We to-day are nurtured by Christ and have a responsibility to nurture in return.

All the women in the congregation were given a spray of daffodils in recognition of their caring and nurturing role.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 378 Awake, my soul

Rejoice and Sing 677 The God of love my Shepherd is

Rejoice and Sing 349 I heard the voice of Jesus say

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

Sermon:
Readings

First book of Samuel chapter 16 verses 1 – 13

Psalm 23

Ephesians chapter 5 verses 8 – 14

John chapter 9 verses 1 – 41

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Rejoice and Sing 349 I heard the voice of Jesus say

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

Sermon:
Readings

First book of Samuel chapter 16 verses 1 – 13

Psalm 23

Ephesians chapter 5 verses 8 – 14

John chapter 9 verses 1 – 41

Second Sunday in Lent

Service Date: 12 March, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Canon Adrian Alker who preached on the meaning of newness of life, focussing on Nicodemus' meeting with Jesus. Individuals and the Church need to move forward, to expand our understanding and experience. This will lead us to a new understanding of God and his love.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 203 How good, Lord, to be here

Rejoice and Sing 726 I to the hills will lift my eyes (Psalm 121)

Rejoice and Sing 553 To Abraham and Sarah the call of God was clear

Rejoice and Sing 204 O vision blest of heavenly light

Readings

Genesis chapter 12 verses 1 – 4a

John Chapter 3 verses 1 – 17

Sermon:

The season of Lent can be many things for many people. To the vast majority of our fellow citizens it means very little, perhaps the marking of Shrove Tuesday with a feast of pancakes but little else. For those who attend church this season can be viewed and experienced in different ways. Today I want to suggest that Lent might offer a period of time before the great Festival of Easter to lift up our eyes to the hills, as the Psalmist says, in other words to seek for new horizons. The Genesis passage reminds us of the call to Abraham to look ahead for those new experiences, to go on a journey into the unknown, to leave behind the security of home and with his family to take the risky adventure of striking out. But it is the gospel from John, telling of the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus that emphasises the need always to experience newness of life. And it is this story in today's gospel that I would like to explore with you.

The gospel of John, as you know, is very different in its feel and theology from the other three synoptic gospels. It is far less a story of Jesus' earthly life but rather a form of Jewish mysticism, using symbol and sign to point to the way in which Jesus of Nazareth becomes the channel through which people experienced something of the mystery, the transforming power, joy, wisdom and compassion of God, as seen in Jesus. Through those symbolic and metaphorical accounts of changing water into wine, of the multiplication of bread and fishes, of healing the blind and the sick, of raising Lazarus from his tomb, profound insights into the meaning and experience of the Divine are offered to the reader.

Nicodemus is described by John as a Pharisee, an orthodox Jew who was clearly inquisitive about Jesus of Nazareth and his teachings. Nicodemus addresses Jesus as rabbi and acknowledges that in the person of Jesus ordinary people were glimpsing something of God. But Nicodemus had come by night. Darkness and light are of course powerful contrasting images and in the opening verses of John's gospel we are reminded of the image of the coming of the Word made flesh, the Light shining in the darkness. Nicodemus hesitatingly refers to the signs which mark out the presence of God and Jesus declares that one must be born from above, which can be translated born anew, born again, in order to see and experience the realm of God. But Nicodemus just doesn't get it – 'can I enter again my mother's womb?' he laughingly asks. And Jesus says you must be born of water and the Spirit to enter the realm of God.

These kinds of phrases – born again- have been taken up by Christians and churches in different ways and I think we need to discount some interpretations. Being born anew does not call for a conversion experience which draws a line between true believers and others. It is not a test of belief but rather an invitation to enter a new consciousness, to lift up one's eyes, to see the signs of the kingdom of God around us. Being born of water simply means born into this life and to be born of the spirit is to enter a new dimension of what it means to be fully human, connected to the mystery of creation. And yet Nicodemus, this teacher of Israel, is still in darkness, still not searching for wider and greater horizons.

Lets just try and ground all of this in our present day world and lives. In the Church of whatever denomination and tradition, there is so often an inability or unwillingness to seek and to see new horizons, to journey into more risky territory, to be born anew in understanding and in experience. The controversies in the Church of England over gay relationships and same gender weddings or the more closer at home disquiet over the refusal of some bishops to ordain women are examples of how we can fail to see the signs of the kingdom of God around us.

We are living through times of immense suffering endured by refugees from war. Yet so often those in power can shut their eyes and stop their ears and refuse to go the extra mile in helping those who are in such desperate situations. We prefer the darkness to the Light of God's fierce justice and demanding love.

The concluding two verses of today's gospel are well known as texts, used by many Christians to judge the worthiness of others. Everyone who believes in Jesus will have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world but to save it. How are we to grasp the depth of meaning of these verses in this mystical gospel of John? Well believing in Jesus is not about assenting to a set of doctrines about Jesus. Believing in Jesus is about believing that kind of life which Jesus demonstrated – a life infused with the Spirit of love, of compassion, of wholeness, of justice, of healing. When we enter a new

awareness of the Light of God's love in our midst, experienced through a thousand acts of kindness, inspired by the self sacrifice of others, overwhelmed by the love extended to the stranger and the alien, then we have entered that eternal life of God.

When Moses put the bronze serpent on a pole and those who had been bitten by the fiery serpents sent by God as punishment for faithlessness, looked upon that bronze serpent and lived, John is saying that Jesus too, lifted up on the Cross became a sign to the world of human beings, that in him and in his way of life, we see the way of love and healing.

These are powerful stories, symbols and images. But behind the metaphors and the symbols lie a deep truth – that each human being can be born anew, can enter a new experience, a new dimension of life, a new understanding of God, not hemmed in by the past, by tradition, by regulation, by fear. Lifting one's eyes upwards, moving away from the shadows, seeing new possibilities of love, of justice, of bringing in that realm of God, right here into the heart of human existence – this is the great invitation, the call of Christ to each one of us as it was to Nicodemus. It is the call to those in power in the church to dare to break free of the constraints imposed by rule and regulation, by tradition and by the past and to dare to think afresh. It is a call to those in secular power to be born anew, to see those possibilities of love in action at all levels of society in order that indeed the world might be saved and made whole.

The times they are a changing, sang Bob Dylan. Indeed they are and always have been. The invitation of Jesus to Nicodemus is to try and catch the wind, as Dylan sang, be aware of the Spirit moving and transforming us with the love and justice of God.

First Sunday in Lent

Service Date: 5 March, 2017

Worship was planned and led by St. Andrew's Worship Group. The theme was conflicting voices. The congregation was also encouraged to support the Water Aid Lent appeal by placing a coin in a jar either every time they used water or every time they saved water.

There was no sermon but two comments. The first drew together the readings. In the reading from Genesis, Adam and Eve obey the voice of the serpent, not that of God. In the Matthew reading, Jesus resists the tempting voice of the Devil while in the wilderness and remembers the words of God which he had heard at his baptism. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us how Christ's sacrifice reconciled human kind to God again.

The second comment spoke about our abundance of fresh water and the lack of it in some parts of the world; the words of a child living in such deprivation were shared. We were asked to add our voices to those of charities which say 'this isn't right – everyone should have access to fresh, clean water – and it is possible.'

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 543 Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us

Rejoice and Sing 103 Praise to the Holiest in the height

Rejoice and Sing 613 Lord, speak to me

Common Ground 50 I, the Lord of sea and sky

Readings

Genesis chapter 2 verses 15 – 17 and chapter 3 verses 1 – 7

Psalm 32

Romans chapter 5 verses 12 – 19

Matthew chapter 4 verses 1 – 11

Comment 1:

The Old Testament and Gospel readings for today may at first sight seem not to have very much in common. The passage from Genesis has its setting in the well-watered luxuriance of the Garden of Eden, whereas that from Matthew is set in the barren and empty wilderness. Yet when we look at them more closely, we see that amid the contrasts there is something of a common theme. Both passages are about being confronted by conflicting voices, and finding one's identity through having to choose between them.

The man, that is to say Adam, was placed in the primeval paradise of the Garden of Eden, with the purpose of tilling it and keeping it. There he had everything that he could possibly need: beautiful surroundings, an abundant supply of food and the companionship of a wife, when the woman, that is to say Eve, was formed to be his helper and to share with him in his work. God, who created him, did not make any great demands of him or burden him with a complex set of laws, but gave him only one simple commandment: he could freely eat of any tree in the garden, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for in the day in which he ate of that tree, he would die.

But the woman heard a different voice, that of the serpent, who since before NT times has been identified with the devil, but who in Genesis is presented only as one of the creatures of the garden, albeit the most subtle of the creatures that God had made. The serpent disputed that they would die, if they ate of the fruit of the tree that had been forbidden them, and added: "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So they had to make a choice: Would they listen to God, and continue to live their blissful life in paradise, without that knowledge of good and evil?

Or would they listen to the serpent, in the belief that they could have the delightful and delicious fruit which came from that tree, together with the special knowledge which would make them like God? They chose the latter. They indeed gained the knowledge and wisdom which came from the fruit of that tree; and the serpent was right that they did not die, at least not in the day when they ate of it. But they also lost a lot.

They lost their state of blissful innocence in which they had hitherto lived – for evermore they would have this “knowledge of good and evil”, and would have to live with it for better or for worse. They lost their state of sinlessness, because they had broken the only commandment which God had given them. And they lost the possibility of gaining everlasting life. For they were expelled from the garden, thereby losing access to the tree of life in the midst of it. The temptations of Jesus immediately followed his baptism.

As Jesus emerged from the water, a voice from heaven declared his identity: “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” Straightaway we read: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Jesus now hears a very different voice from the one which declared him to be God’s son at his baptism. The voice which he now hears opens with the words, “If you are the Son of God ...” This is a challenge for him to prove his identity to himself. Jesus had now fasted forty days and forty nights, and was hungry.

The voice says that if he is the son of God, he should be able to turn the stones into bread and feed himself. Jesus counters this with a quotation from Deuteronomy: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” The second temptation also opens, “If you are the Son of God ...” If he is the son of God, he should be able to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple and remain uninjured. Again he counters this temptation with a quotation from Deuteronomy: “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”

The final temptation is perhaps the greatest one. The devil offers him all the kingdoms of the earth and their glory, if only he will fall down and worship him. For a third time Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy: “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” Jesus has heard the voice of the devil questioning who he is, but he has chosen to listen to the competing voice of God in scripture. He has allowed this voice of God to shape him as he grows in his understanding of who is and what he has been sent to do.

St Paul in Romans 5 teaches us that Adam and Jesus were each representative of humanity, in very different ways. The very name Adam means a human being or human beings collectively. In Genesis 2 and 3 the name Adam might be used in 2:20 (though some Bible translations have “man” here), but is otherwise not used until 3:17, quite late in the account of the Garden of Eden. Throughout the passage which was read to us earlier Adam is not named, but referred to as “the man”.

In the account of the Garden of Eden the man or Adam (and properly speaking, the woman too) was always intended in some sense to represent humanity. Adam committed sin, something which is characteristic of all humanity — none of us are perfect, and Adam’s sin was in some sense related to his failure to attain everlasting life. It is not necessary to take the story of the Fall in the Garden of Eden literally, as some theologians have in the past, and have thought that subsequent humanity became tainted by Adam’s sin.

It is sufficient to say that in some ways all humanity was somehow identified with Adam and what happened in the Garden of Eden, just as all humanity is somehow identified with Christ. He was tempted at the beginning of his ministry, but did not yield to those temptations, and throughout his life he followed a righteous path. His greatest act of righteousness was to give himself up to death upon the cross, and this was followed by a

victory even over death itself. Thus St Paul in Romans 5 thinks of Jesus as a second Adam, the very opposite of the first Adam, and the Christian Gospel promises us that we shall share in his victory.

In the words of St Paul, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned ... If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.”

Comment 2:

For anyone who has not watched it, I shall give a brief background to the television drama *Call the Midwife*. It is inspired by the memoirs of Jennifer Worth, a real life qualified nurse and midwife who worked in the east end of London in the 1950s and 60s. She worked with team based at an Anglican religious nursing order so some of the midwives were also ordained nuns. It’s probably true to say that now that we are in the 6th series there is a high fiction content in the episodes and they are not dramatisations of Jennifer’s actual experiences but they are strong stories which highlight real social and moral issues and the joys and dark times of being human. They are very moving – at times, harrowing, and with a spiritual dimension.

In the Christmas episode, several of the midwives along with Patrick, the local doctor, Fred, the indispensable handyman who can fix anything from bicycles to boilers and Tom, the local Curate, respond to a call to support an understaffed and struggling clinic in rural Africa.

The clinic provides a wide range of services including delivering babies, antenatal and post-natal care and vaccination programmes. The clinic is facing a crisis; the spring which provides its water is drying up; water has to be strictly rationed, conserving it for the most essential aspects of hygiene and patient care; laundry piles up; personal washing is restricted; adults limit the amount they drink; new babies aren’t bathed properly but wiped with a moist cloth.

A good story line but not something we identify with. We take fresh, pure water for granted. Every drop of water we draw from our taps is of drinking quality, yet we use it to water our lawns, wash our cars, even flush our toilets. We use this precious resource liberally. Our waste water is recycled using sophisticated engineering procedures and technology. There are huge reservoirs on the edges of our city. And don’t we feel inconvenienced when our water supply is interrupted or discoloured even briefly through a fault or essential maintenance work.

But, we should listen to the *Call the Midwife* story because it is not entirely the work of imagination. Nearly 1.2 billion people live in areas of water scarcity. Charities such as WaterAid, Oxfam, Christian Aid and the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, tell us about adults and children risking fatal waterborne disease every time they wash in, cook with or drink, dirty, stagnant water – the only water available to them. Often children are

walking miles each day to collect the water instead of attending school, or playing – enjoying a normal childhood.

Listen to the voice of Nanya.....

‘I am eight years old and live in a small village on Madagascar. Around 6am each morning I fetch water which takes about an hour because the water source is quite far away. It is down a steep, muddy path and is surrounded by ferns. There are mosquitoes; the water is covered in algae and there are leeches in it. I am used to carrying the bucket of water on my head but it hurts my head and makes my teeth ache. I do this three times a day and twice on Sunday, before and after church, because we need the water to cook with. When I drink dirty water I get sick. In school when we get thirsty we go down to the rice field to drink some water. It is dirty too.

When we get sick our parents take us to a health centre, an hour and a half walk from here, to get medicine. When I get too sick to walk my dad or my older brother have to carry me on their back. If we can’t get medicine at the health centre we have to go to the big hospital which is about 40 kilometres away. ‘

The charities which ask us to listen to these voices are also acting – digging wells, laying pipelines, installing water filters, training local people to maintain the infrastructure. They are a voice saying ‘ this isn’t right – everyone should have access to clean, fresh water – and it is possible.’

Let’s return to ‘Call the Midwife’ and that African clinic. There was another source of clean water but a long way away. The materials and the skills and strong hands needed to lay a pipeline were available but it would take months, and time was running out. The route of the pipeline and the time taken to lay it could be hugely reduced if it came across a large neighbouring farm. However, the wealthy landowner was no friend of the clinic; his young wife and baby son had died there many years before. He resolutely refused permission for the pipeline to cross his land. A voice in his head said ‘they killed my wife and child – I will not help them.’

However, the equally resolute Sister Julienne was another voice. She felt for his grief and loneliness, and gently planted the idea in his mind that the pipeline would prevent further tragedies and be a fitting memorial to his wife and son. The episode finished with joyful faces, including that of the landowner, watching crystal clear water flowing into the clinic’s water tanks.

To-day we have the opportunity to add our voices to the voice which says ‘ this isn’t right – everyone should have access to clean, fresh water – and it is possible.’ During Lent, could you put a coin – even a small one- in a jar every time you fill the kettle, switch on the washing machine, take a shower? Or every time you save water – spending a minute less in the shower, only putting the water you need in the kettle? Digging a well, laying pipelines, installing filters do cost money but when set beside the benefits they bring they are beyond price. Our coins could mount up over Lent and transform the health and life of a community.

If you would like to be part of this voice, find a jar, drop your coins in it and help give hope.

Transfiguration Sunday

Service Date: 26 February, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the Transfiguration of Jesus and the significance of mountains in encounters with God. Erica Hill spoke about the work of Sheffield Churches Council for Community Care.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 47 O worship the King

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

Rejoice and Sing 203 How good, Lord, to be here

Rejoice and Sing 532 Lord of creation

Sermon:

Readings

Exodus chapter 24 verses 12 – 18

Psalms 99

Second letter of Peter chapter 1 verses 16 – 21

Matthew chapter 17 verses 1 – 9

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date: 19 February, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Dr. Walter Houston who preached on Matthew chapter 5 verse 39 -'If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also.' Jesus is overturning the traditional macho dominated culture and emphasising loving and giving. We need to lay aside our pride and avoid being oversensitive and easily offended. Jesus suffered humiliation for us, as well as physical pain, at the crucifixion.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 104 Praise my soul the King of heaven

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

Rejoice and Sing 310 Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost

Rejoice and Sing 522 From heaven you came, helpless babe

Sermon:

Matthew 5:39 (part): 'If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.'

The swing doors of the saloon burst open. The crowd of drinkers at the bar fall silent and turn to the door. The chink of money on the poker table suddenly stops. All eyes are on the stranger, a tall thin man with a face as hard as nails, tanned by the sun and lined by the wind. His hands rest idly on his pair of Colt .45s, as his cold narrow eyes search the room 'It's Mad Jake Mulligan, the fastest draw in the West', goes the whisper. 'Jake, whaddya doing here?' starts one. 'Shut ya mouth, codface! I ain't interested in you. I'm looking for the man who called me a liar. And that man's dead meat, or my name ain't Jake Mulligan.'

You may think there's not a lot of resemblance between first-century Palestine and the 19th-century Wild West. But they do share one thing which is not so obvious among our friends and neighbours. They were both macho societies, dominated by men, with women keeping well in the background; and the men were passionate about their honour and dignity, and highly competitive with other men. Any insult had to be avenged, and for a man to slap a man's face was the ultimate insult. Not for a woman, of course, that was just amusing, because men weren't in competition with women. But Jesus says: 'If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other one also.' In other words, don't avenge yourself, accept the insult.

It is very easy to misunderstand this verse. It isn't about how you ought to behave to a gang of muggers, and it certainly isn't about domestic violence. Jesus is not telling women to submit to abuse and violence from their partners. Still less is he criticising the way society deals with criminals, or how a country might respond to foreign aggression. All these things might be covered in thinking about the implications of Jesus' teaching, but they are not the primary thing he is talking about. What he is denouncing is personal vengeance. More deeply, he is criticising the way in which men's sense of honour leads them to feel bound to avenge an insult.

And we get off on the wrong foot if we think of Jesus as laying down a law which Christians must literally observe. True, Matthew does give the impression that Jesus is a new Moses, going up the mountain to hand down a new law to his disciples, taking sentences from the old law and brushing them aside or going beyond them. But to think that everything he says here is meant to be taken literally leads to absurdities. Just think: if someone slaps you on the face, the appropriate response might be to tell them to calm down, to ask them what's got into them, to run away or to call the police, depending on the circumstances. What Jesus is doing is taking a vivid example of the effects of this sense of honour and turning it on its head.

He is doing the same thing with his next two examples. 'Real men', confident of their power, didn't take each other to court. They sorted things out on their own, testing their power and honour in a duel of wits, if not physical violence. To take someone to court was an admission that you were weak, that you couldn't get your rights any other way. So to be sued and lose your case meant that you had been forced to give way to a weaker man. But Jesus says: 'If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.' Give way with a good grace!

Judaea was an occupied country. A Roman soldier had the right to compel a member of the subject population to carry his pack for one mile. What a humiliation for a proud Jew, a member of God's people, to have to do the work of a slave, not just for anyone—that would be shameful enough—but for one of your people's enemies. But Jesus says: 'If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two.' Rejoice in your humiliation, offer him more.

All three examples are criticisms of a society based on male prestige and pride. Swallow an insult! Ask for another! Give way to the weaker man, and even be generous to him! Rejoice in your humiliation! This is even more radical teaching than might have appeared at first sight, for Jesus is cutting at the root of his people's culture. He is preaching against their pride. Jesus is saying to men: you need to exchange the pride which is so quick to take offence and sees all other men as a threat for a humility which sees others as potential friends and brothers.

And 'love your enemies' follows from that. For if every man is a potential enemy, some will always be actual enemies. In any little village, you would find two families who hadn't spoken to each other for generations, because of some injury or insult in the past, and hatred had sunk deep into their souls. Jesus is saying: let all that go. He quotes 'you shall love your neighbour' from Leviticus, but adds to it, 'hate your enemy', which is not in Leviticus, but some might have thought it followed. They might say 'I'm happy to love my neighbour, as long as it doesn't include my enemy.' But in fact 'love your neighbour' implies 'love your enemy', because some neighbours will always be enemies, and in fact, as you may have noticed, the Leviticus passage says 'Do not take vengeance' just before 'love your neighbour'—which is what Jesus is trying to say. As Jesus points out, no one has any difficulty in loving their own friends and family, but to love your enemies is the hard part. That is, to treat your enemies as if they were not enemies. To do that means swallowing your pride again, forgetting the insults and the history and the hatred, and stretching out the hand of friendship.

Now you may be thinking that none of this has anything to do with you. We are completely different from the people Jesus was speaking to; we are not macho and what Jesus says doesn't concern us. It especially doesn't seem to concern women. And it is true, as I have said, that it is a misinterpretation of Jesus' teaching to encourage women to submit to male violence, or more generally if we encourage the weak to give in to the powerful and the brutal and the violent. When the Church has been in league with the powerful of this world it has often been to its advantage to interpret it in that way. But that's not what Jesus meant. He was speaking *to* the proud and the powerful.

But that doesn't let us off the hook. If the particular culture Jesus was speaking to is not ours, pride is something which every human being knows, women as well as men; indeed in some form it is necessary and right for every human being. If that were not so, Westerns would not be so popular. The best Westerns can show us the real human emotions which lie beneath the brittle crust of male pride.

You can see that pride, touchy, bitter and explosive, on the football field and in the boardroom. You can see it in the Twitter feed of the President of the United States! And while Donald Trump has often been accused of having a thin skin, he only shows in an exaggerated form what is true of us all. What is serious about it in his case is that he is the most powerful man in the world, with the man carrying the nuclear codes standing always

a few feet behind him. And such pride, we know, has terrible effects in the competition between nations and ethnic groups. Wars break out when a group refuses to back down or admit they were wrong, because they would lose face.

On a different level, how many families practise the competitive bogus 'unselfishness' so tellingly described by C.S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters*? (pp. 133-34: not given here to protect copyright).

What Jesus is asking us in these few verses is to reorder our priorities so that the needs of others come before our own dignity. But is it too idealistic to say that everybody should give up their pride? It is perfectly true that a person without any pride is a poor thing, miserable and crushed and not able to play their full part in the life of the world.

But the point is, not to get rid of our pride but to put it in its proper place, where it enables us to offer of our best to other people instead of excluding them and damaging them. That is a practical problem in educating our moral sense, learning a better way of living with others. How did Jesus tackle this task of education? After all, he was no lofty moral teacher, telling us what was right and leaving us to get on with it.

I would put it this way. He offered his own humiliation as the transforming power through which our own pride is taken up into his humility.

When his disciples were competing for the right to be his second in command, he told them that the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. We tend to overlook the fact that the worst thing about crucifixion, to people at the time, was not the pain (although that was excruciating), but the humiliation. A man was stripped naked in public, lashed until he collapsed, and hung up in full view of everybody, for people to hurl insults, rotten vegetables and worse at him.

That is the fate which Jesus embraced for our sake. The Gospels don't spell it out. But Paul says that he 'humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, *the death of the cross*.' And everybody knew what kind of humbling that was. And he met that humiliation because of the pride of others, who could not bear to confront his radical demands.

Learning in the school of Jesus means, first, being forgiven by the free love of God which comes to us through his life, death and resurrection. God has plenty of reasons to stand on his dignity with us. We've offended him more than anyone has ever offended us. But he doesn't: he freely forgives. Even if we have been his enemies, he can never be ours. That is the beginning of the education of our pride.

The second thing learning in the school of Jesus means is joining together with all his disciples to imitate his example, to live as his body and in the power of his Spirit. We share in his humiliation, but we also share in his glory: 'therefore God highly exalted him, and gave him the name above every name.' That means that we do not *need* to live out of our own pride and glory; our pride is to share in his and all our fellow-Christians' pride. So we educate our pride. We take pride not in always competitively defending ourselves against the threat of other people's achievements, but in co-operating with others to achieve things together. In becoming members of Jesus' family, parts of his body, we become able

personally to deal with insults and slights and humiliations, because these things are all put into perspective.

For many years the most intractable, and certainly the bloodiest, feud in these islands was that between Republican and Loyalist in Northern Ireland. The Catholic and Protestant labels which each side carried were badges of pride, symbols of an identity which had to be defended against threats. They did not refer to the Lord Jesus Christ who humbled himself to the death of the cross. But the very fact that so many people on both sides identified themselves as Christians perhaps made it easier for the true message of Christ to reach them. And perhaps that was the reason for the relative success of the Good Friday agreement.

Perhaps too, the Corrymeela Community, in its quiet setting by the coast of Antrim, helped in the process. Here, people come together from both sides in a peaceful, non-threatening atmosphere, and Christians learn to *be* Christians, to understand each other's fears and hopes, to live with each other and to love each other—to love their enemies! Here the followers of Christ fulfil their true calling, humbly helping others to achieve the humility of Christ and so the love of Christ.

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date: 12 February, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard who preached on Thomas a Kempis' *The imitation of Christ*' and its relevance to the gospel reading, Matthew 5 vv 21 – 37 where Jesus is teaching people to avoid not only evil deeds but also evil thoughts and feelings which give rise to evils deeds.

Hymns:

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

Rejoice and Sing 558 Will you come and follow me

Rejoice and Sing 551 O for a closer walk with God

Rejoice and Sing 521 Forth in the name, O Lord, I go

Sermon:

Imitating Christ (Matthew 5.21-37)

The fourteenth century was as uncertain and dangerous a time for the average Western European as any there has ever been. Rural areas were full of roving marauders driven there by poverty or greed, continual peasants' revolts kept city dwellers unsettled, and Europe experienced some fifty major conflicts including, on our own soil, the 32 years of the Wars of the Roses. Moreover, the western Church was torn apart by the Great Schism of 1378 to 1417, which saw the establishment of rival papacies in Rome and Avignon. And to cap it all, the Black Death was brought into Europe along the Silk Road from Central Asia, killing up to half the population.

Into the wreckage of Europe towards the end of what came to be known as “the Calamitous Century”, there was born a man about whom we know almost nothing except that he wrote a book: a book that has now been continuously in print for nearly half a millennium.

- The book was written in Latin in four parts between 1418 and 1427
- Copied by hand at first, there still exist 750 manuscript editions of the work
- It was first printed in Augsburg in 1471-72
- By the end of the fifteenth century, it had been translated into French, German, Italian and Spanish
- It attracted some pretty good reviews:
 - o George Pirkhamer, the prior of Nuremberg, said of the 1494 edition, “Nothing more holy, nothing more honourable, nothing more religious, nothing *in fine* more profitable for the Christian commonwealth can you ever do than to make known these works.”
 - o Henry VIII’s Lord Chancellor and martyred ‘Man for All Seasons’ Sir – or St – Thomas More (1478-1535), said it was one of the three books everyone ought to own
 - o Founder of the Jesuit order St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) read a chapter from it every day and regularly gave away copies as gifts
- Father of Methodism John Wesley (1703-1791) said it was the best summary of the Christian life he had ever read
- By 1779 it had reached its 1,800th edition
- There are 545 extant editions in Latin and no fewer than 900 in French
- The British Museum houses 1000 different editions
- It has been translated into more languages than any other work except the Holy Bible.

I myself would go so far as to say that its author’s insights provide an unparalleled key to unlocking the meaning of much of Jesus’ teaching as recorded in the gospels, and especially this morning’s reading from the Sermon on the Mount.

It is *The Imitation of Christ* by the German theologian Thomas à Kempis.

As I said earlier, very little is known about our brother Thomas. Born c. 1380 in the Rhineland town of Kempen (hence “à Kempis”) near Düsseldorf and educated by the Dutch Augustinian Brothers of the Common Life, at the age of 19 he entered their

monastery at Mount St Agnes near Zwolle in Holland, and remained there until his death at the quite extraordinary age – for those days – of 91. He became the prior's assistant, charged with instructing novices in the spiritual life, and it was in this capacity that, between 1420 and 1427, he wrote four booklets, later assembled into a single volume and given the overall title of the first booklet, *The Imitation of Christ*.

Remarkably modern in his outlook, Thomas did not particularly look for comfort after death, but wrote:

Vain and brief is all human comfort. Blessed and true is that comfort which is derived inwardly from the Truth.

On finding happiness in life, he said:

The glory of the good is in their own consciences, and not in the mouths of men.

There are people following strands of Christianity in the world today who seem to believe that all they need to guarantee themselves a place in Heaven is to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour: after which it doesn't much matter what they do with themselves and their possessions, nor how they treat those less fortunate or more vulnerable than they are. Thomas would have had none of this. I quote,

We must imitate Christ's life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do, then, to reflect on the life of Jesus Christ.

In this morning's Gospel reading, St Matthew records Jesus teaching the people to avoid not only evil deeds and words, but also the evil thoughts and feelings that give rise to evil deeds and words: not only "You shall not murder", but also a command not to feel angry with anyone.

For human beings who seem all too often unable to control our speech, let alone our actions, the injunction to control our thoughts and emotions is a tough call. "Why?" we might ask; "What difference does it make what I'm thinking and feeling, as long as I'm behaving like a good Christian?" Put like that, of course, the hypocrisy is fairly obvious, and the motivation to do something good because it makes me feel good, rather than because I genuinely love the other person, while it may make little immediate practical difference to the other person, is self-centred to put it mildly. It's a bit like giving to charity because I've been made to feel guilty, rather than because I actually care about my sisters and brothers in need.

If we've ever felt really angry but known somewhere deep down that our anger will get us nowhere – as though we were trying to wrestle our feelings out of the place of self-love where they sometimes sit so easily, and into the place of self-giving love where Jesus might want them to be – we know that our feelings don't easily submit to being wrestled. Instead, we need something that connects with both our emotional and our rational faculties. We need motivation. The insights of Thomas à Kempis can be immensely helpful to us here. In one of the most often quoted passages in *The Imitation of Christ*, he says,

Be not angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be, since you cannot make yourself as you wish to be.

This insight is, I think, the key to this morning's reading. Learning to conform to the pattern of humanity that God reveals to us in Jesus, learning to imitate Christ, learning to avoid the hypocrisy of appearing to do something for the right motives when we're thinking or feeling something quite different, is not about trying to wrestle our feelings from one place to another. What it requires instead is that we continually examine ourselves in the light of Christ's teaching and example, so that rather than trying to make other people more like us, we seek continually to make ourselves more like Jesus.

Thomas again:

If you want to learn something that will really help you, learn to see yourself as God sees you and not as you see yourself in the distorted mirror of your own self-importance. This is the greatest and most useful lesson we can learn: to know ourselves for what we truly are, to admit freely our weaknesses and failings, and to hold a humble opinion of ourselves because of them.

Revd Robert Beard BD

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - Service of Holy Communion

Service Date: 5 February, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Dr. David Stec who preached on Jesus's statement 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.'

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 320 The heavens declare thy glory, Lord

Rejoice and Sing 613 Lord, speak to me

Rejoice and Sing 441 Be known to us in breaking bread

Rejoice and Sing 623 Eternal ruler of the ceaseless round

Sermon:

Matt. 5:17 "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them."

Some Christians find it difficult to relate to certain parts of the OT, particularly some of its legal portions. This has probably been the case ever since the earliest days of Christianity, even though the OT forms a large part of the canon of the Christian scriptures. Part of our Gospel reading for today is a passage in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-20) which some find particularly difficult, since in it Jesus makes a strong and explicit

affirmation of the validity of the OT law. Jesus opens this passage with the words, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets."

Why should anyone think that he has come to do this?

This might well seem to be a reasonable supposition to make, since right from its beginning Christianity never embraced the OT law in the same way that Judaism did. The Law of Moses, that is to say the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch or the Torah, came into being over a long period of time, and probably reached something like its final form at about the time of the Babylonian exile. After the return of the exiles, we have the account of Ezra teaching the Law to the assembly in Jerusalem. (Neh 8:1-8) From that time forward observance of the Law was a fundamental means by which the Jewish people expressed their identity. But this was never a completely straightforward matter because of the very nature of this Law.

Once the Torah was completed, it achieved a fixed form and became not just a body of legislation but the Law of God, and therefore immutable. No human being had the authority to change it, whether by adding to it or taking from it. But with the passage of time, some of its laws seemed less and less relevant to the needs of society as that society changed. For example, laws framed for the needs of a simple society based primarily on agriculture, increasingly failed to meet the needs of society as it became more urbanised with a more complex economy. The rabbis solved this problem by developing a series of oral laws which interpreted the laws of the written Torah and applied them to the particular situations of the people of their own times. And the rabbis avoided any possible accusation that they were adding to the Law of Moses by claiming that these oral laws were revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai together with the written Law.

These laws were passed on orally from generation to generation and not put into written form until many years later than the time of Jesus. The Christian church, however, right from its very beginning took a very different approach to the Law of Moses. The earliest Christians believed that with the coming of Christ a new dispensation had begun, and that the followers of Christ were no longer bound to follow the law in all its detail. This is an issue that St Paul discusses in Romans 3, and in essence he concludes that, "*We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.*" (3:28) Among the first generation of Christians there was a great controversy about whether the practice of circumcision was binding upon Christians from a Gentile background, and it was decided that it was not. This is not to say that the church entirely rejected the OT Law.

On the contrary, Christians greatly valued many of the ethical commands of the Law, such as the Ten Commandments and the requirement to love one's neighbour. But they regarded the detailed regulations such as those concerned with sacrificial ritual as not binding upon the followers of Christ. Thus it comes as something of a surprise (and a cause of some difficulty for many) to find that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made such a strong defence of the continuing validity of the Law. He says, "*Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.*" And he adds, "*For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.*" This is really quite incredible, and English translations have quite a problem with the two words used here. The RSV which I just quoted has "iota" and "dot", the NRSV has "one letter" and "one stroke of a letter", but probably most of us are more familiar with the AV which has "jot" and "tittle".

The first word is not too difficult; it is the Greek letter *iota*, which is the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet, and is used here to represent the Hebrew letter *yodh*, which is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The other word is the Greek *keraiia*, meaning “a horn-like projection”, and used of the small stroke or extremity at the end of some letters; and in the Latin version this was translated *titulus*, meaning a small stroke above a word to indicate an abbreviation, hence the AV “tittle”. Thus Jesus is saying that not even the smallest letter, not even the tiniest stroke can be omitted from the law. And he goes on, “Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” He even goes as far as to tell his followers that unless their righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

We see from this passage that Jesus had a very positive attitude to the Law, even if he did not necessarily have a very high opinion of those who taught and interpreted it. You may find his words difficult. I think that verse 17 is the real key to understanding this whole passage. Jesus says, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.” It is important to notice that he puts the prophets together with the law, and apparently treats them as of equal importance. The Law and the Prophets made up the two most authoritative sections of the OT. Jesus certainly greatly valued the prophets, and particularly in Matthew’s Gospel he frequently quoted from them, and believed that they looked forward to him.

Here in the Sermon on the Mount he tells us that he has come to fulfil not only the prophets but also the law. This word “fulfil” is an important one. The Greek word used here (like its Hebrew and Aramaic equivalents) had a wide range of meaning: to fill, make full, fill to the full; to complete, fulfil; to execute, accomplish, carry out to the full. Jesus is saying that he has come to make full, complete, carry out to the full both the law and the prophets. The whole of the law and the prophets anticipated him, and he is the fulfilment of all that they represented. His teaching does not contradict the law of Moses, but expresses its essential and deepest meaning.

We see this in the passage of the Sermon on the Mount which immediately follows. There is a whole series of sayings in which Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said ...”, and he quotes one of the commandments of the OT, and then he says, “But I say to you ...” And he goes on to give his own interpretation of how the commandment is to be fulfilled, that is to say, practised to the full with all that is implied by it. For example, he cites the commandment which prohibits murder. He says, “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.”

Thus at its deepest level, the commandment not to kill also prohibits anger and verbal abuse, since these are also a kind of violence against the person, and can so easily get out of control and end up with someone being killed. So where does all this leave you, if you find some parts of the OT, particularly some of its laws, difficult to relate to? It is very possible that those particular parts of the OT which have always caused you problems will continue to do so. It is also possible that some of Jesus’ strong sayings in Matt 5:17-20 about the continuing validity of the law seem to add to you difficulties rather than help. You

should try not to concentrate on the individual difficult bits, but rather to think of the whole of scripture as a unity, which has its fulfilment in the person and teaching of Jesus.

The important thing to remember is that Jesus came as the fulfilment of the whole of the law and the prophets. The whole of scripture is summed up in his person, and his teaching gives expression to its deepest meaning. To live the kind of life which Jesus both taught and showed by his own example, is to fulfil the whole of what the law and the prophets require of you.

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date: 29 January, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Robert Beard

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 45 Morning has broken

Rejoice and Sing 623 Eternal ruler of the ceaseless round

Blest are the pure in heart

Rejoice and Sing 599 Christ for the world we sing

Sermon:

Don't Stop Rocking the Boat (Micah 6.1-8, Matthew 5.1-12)

The inauguration of President Donald Trump and the ensuing worldwide protest marches (even in Antarctica) are just the latest symptoms of the divisions that are setting nations, communities and individuals against each other: divisions that seem destined to characterise at least the first quarter of the 21st century.

The ceaseless conflicts in the Middle East and the western powers' involvement in them, the burgeoning economic power of China and India, the military and political struggles in many African countries, the hostility shown to people fleeing war and starvation, and even the continuing tussles around the UK's proposed secession from the EU, all betray a human race profoundly at odds with itself.

Our awareness of these events comes predominantly from the World Wide Web and our rolling news media, which enable us instantly to inform – or misinform – ourselves about situations across the globe as they develop in real time. Our unprecedented level of access to knowledge about our human sisters' and brothers' lives is something that earlier generations could scarcely have imagined.

In fact, while our awareness of international events may make us the best informed generation in human history, this very awareness may also be a factor in spreading what would have once been only local divisions right across the world, enabling – and

sometimes encouraging – people to take sides in conflicts and struggles in other countries, of which our forebears might have remained blissfully unaware.

It is sometimes easy to feel overwhelmed and powerless to do anything about the conflicts and catastrophes we learn about from our news media; but in the face of deep divisions within the human race throughout the world, our course of action is as clear as ever. In the 21st century, however, no less than in the 7th and 8th centuries BC (the time of the prophet Micah), or in the 1st century AD (the time of Jesus Christ), the message of the Jewish and Christian traditions reminds us that there is always something we can, and must, do.

Micah came from Moresheth-Gath in the southwest part of the southern kingdom of Judah. He prophesied about 737 to 696 BC, during the reigns of the kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, and was a contemporary of the prophets First Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. Micah's messages were directed chiefly toward Jerusalem. He prophesied the future destruction of Jerusalem and Samaria, and the destruction and then future restoration of the Judean state; he rebuked the people of Judah for dishonesty and idolatry; and it is his prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem that St Matthew cites in his gospel (Micah 5.2; Matthew 2.6). His 40-year career over, he disappeared from history and we have no information about the end of his life, but he left behind one of the best-known sayings in all of Scripture:

God has told you, O mortal, what is good;

and what does Yahweh require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6.8

I'd like to do this as an activity sometime; but for the moment imagine, if you will, a big paddling pool, as large as you like, standing on the floor in front of the Communion table, and filled with water. Anchored in the middle of the paddling pool is toy boat representing St Andrew's church, partly filled with grains of sand and tiny pebbles. Floating on the surface of the pool are dolls representing different kinds of people, some in boats and some just lying in the water, some close by and some further away. Nearby are our city councillors in boats, and Sheffield's rough sleepers floating. Not far beyond them are our political and business leaders in boats, and ever-growing number of homeless people floating. Further out are people on flimsy rafts representing refugee camps in southern Europe, and beyond them more refugees almost submerged beneath the water. Further out still are symbols representing, say, the cities of Mosul and Aleppo. There are figures rolling around in a thick patch of sticky oil, representing the victims of the 140,000 gallons of diesel oil that has just leaked from a broken pipeline into Iowa's water supply. And so on...

Now, let me draw your attention back to the boat in the middle. It is, of course, a fishing boat, because St Andrew was a fisherman. Imagine that a tiny act of love is represented

by one of the grains of sand being dropped over the side of the boat. The sound it makes as it hits the water is barely discernible amid the general brouhaha of Church life, but to someone who is observing very, very closely, it makes microscopic ripples that spread out and, as long as there's not too much disturbance, just kisses one of the homeless people or very slightly rocks the boat of a city councillor. Now imagine that one of the pebbles represents our fundraising for the children in the Calais 'Jungle'; this time the noise is louder and the ripples are bigger. Finally, imagine that there are other Church fishing boats floating on the water and that, say, a hundred of us all drop pebbles at the same time; this creates something altogether more choppy, and one of the politician dolls is has to put its head over the side of its yacht.

I said that the St Andrew's boat was only partly filled with sand and pebbles. I also observed that St Andrew was a fisherman, but of course Jesus called him to become a fisher of men and women. So there is room in the boat for anyone who wants to be hauled out of the water to come aboard and join our crew. Fortunately for newcomers – and fortunately for us, too – there are no papers to be presented or articles to be signed; they are welcome just as they are.

Amid all the turmoil of current events, there remain little communities of people who have glimpsed the vision of a different way of relating to people whose beliefs and lifestyles are different from their own. In their worship and in their outreach, these communities continually commit and recommit themselves to seek out, welcome, shelter and aid their brothers and sisters of every background and experience. Churches – although not all Churches – understand themselves as called and equipped to be just these kinds of communities: and not only Churches, of course, but an all-but-infinite variety of compassionate communities. These communities unite around Micah's injunction to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. Of course, not all such communities use religious vocabulary to describe what they seek to do, but the evidence of their actions shows that they share the same values as those who do.

Turning to our gospel reading, it is within such communities, whether they bear religious labels or not, that those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, who are the pure in heart, who are peacemakers or who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, find their natural home. They may not all talk about God, but their work is characterised by the justice, kindness and humility of which Micah spoke.

All such communities are blessed, not material rewards and public adulation – the blessings that come from outside – but with a blessing that comes from God incarnate working within them, or in non-religious terms, from the love that they embody. Their actions may not be regarded as newsworthy, but to those whose lives they touch, they are revolutionary and transformative, and may ripple outwards to have far-reaching effects.

Let us pray:

God of love, amid the conflicts and catastrophes of our times, may our resolution never waver to commit ourselves continually to the justice, kindness and humility of which your prophet spoke, that we and all whose lives our lives touch may experience the blessings that you hold out to us in your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Revd Robert Beard BD

Third Sunday after Epiphany and marking week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Service Date: 22 January, 2017

Worship was led by Mrs. Jenny Carpenter who preached on the theme 'crossing barriers.' There are natural barriers and human- created barriers in our world. The story of the Prodigal Son is full of barriers; by the end of the parable some have been broken down; some are still there. Paul preached a ministry of reconciliation and reconciliation between Christian denominations is progressing.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 559 Blessed city, heavenly Salem

Rejoice and sing 561 Christ from whom all blessings flow

What shall our greeting be

Rejoice and Sing 567 Thy hand O God has guided

Sermon:

Crossing Barriers

The theme for today's worship is "Crossing Barriers". **Great Barrier Reef** – barrier between coastline and open ocean. Barrier presented by the **Alps** – Hannibal's feat. Barrier presented by dangerous currents of the **Pentland Firth**.

Barriers that **East Midlands Trains** wanted to erect to make Sheffield a "closed" station, interfering with the use of the station pedestrian bridge by people crossing from Norfolk Road/ Park Hill to the city centre without any intention to board a train. (*ask Anne Cathels*). Barriers stop us crossing from A to B.

They may be there to protect us; Berlin Wall to keep East Berliners from defecting to the west. The wall in Israel/Palestine to regulate the movement of Palestinians and to be a very visible sign of Israeli control and oppression. A wall may keep people **In** or keep people **Out**. It signals US and THEM. Donald Trump's intention to build a wall along the Mexican border. Brexit seen as an attempt to keep foreign workers out. BUT : even when choosing Abraham God had in mind that "in his seed would all the nations of the earth be blessed."

Paul developed a clear **theology of reconciliation** which involved the breaking down of barriers. In many ways he had a privileged position : a Pharisee trained by Gamaliel, a leading theologian and lawyer yet hailing from Tarsus in what would be modern day Turkey, and having the privileges of a Roman citizen. Quite an unlikely combination! But it was his overwhelming sense of the reconciliation of humanity to God that had been achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus that made him argue so strongly for Christians to exercise a ministry of reconciliation. "We love because he first loved us."

In the story of **the Prodigal Son** or **the Forgiving Father** or **the Resentful Brother** all kinds of barriers have to be broken. First there is the barrier of the **tight-knit family** that the younger son is itching to break, demanding his inheritance NOW and going off to explore the big wide world with all its attractions. Then there is the barrier of his **pride** which he is forced to swallow, first by going to herd pigs, and then steeling himself to return home and admit that he's let everyone down.

He anticipates that he has erected such a **barrier between himself and his father** that it may prove insurmountable, but finds that his father doesn't recognise its existence.

But the **barrier between the brothers** is formidable and is also creating a **barrier between the elder brother and their father**. The story ends with that particular barrier pretty firmly in place. Is the elder brother going to join the party, or sulk in his room? How long will it take for the family to settle into truly reconciled relationships?

Perhaps there are parallels within the world-wide Church. The East/West split of Christendom goes back 1,000 years. 2017 sees the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's famous 85 Theses challenging much of the teaching and practice of the

Roman Catholic Church and calling for its reformation. He did not intend to set up a rival Protestant church: but the Catholic Church was, it seemed, incapable at that point in its history of adjusting to rid itself of its evident failings. Luther was not the only Reformer on the scene – Zwingli and Calvin in Geneva developed distinct brands and Lutheranism and Calvinism between them were soon established almost to the exclusion of Catholicism in the countries of Northern Europe.

Not many people seem to realise how far all the main Christian denominations have moved in their emphasis and their practice.

International ecumenical agreements have paved the way for the commemorations marking 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation. The Porvoo Agreement established full communion between Anglican and Lutheran Churches in Great Britain and Ireland, the Nordic region, Baltic countries and Iberia. Catholics and Lutherans have had formal international dialogues since 1965. The most dramatic result of these has been the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999, which established a "differentiated consensus" on what is generally held to be the core theological issue of the Reformation. Pope Francis recently visited Lund in Sweden to mark the beginning of the commemoration. It is clear that reconciliation is real.

Fr. Raniero Cantalamassa, the Preacher to the Papal household recently said :

"Let us not remain prisoners of the past, trying to establish each other's rights and wrongs. Rather, let us take a qualitative leap forward, like what happens when the sluice gates of a canal lock enable boats to continue to navigate at a higher water level."

A canal lock may appear to be a barrier but in fact it allows two-way movement. Perhaps we have discovered another metaphor for Jesus. "I am the canal-lock. I provide the Living Water which enables you to move freely in the love of God."

May that be our experience!

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date: 15 January, 2017

Worship was led by the Revd. Dr.Keith Albans who preached on the theme 'What do you want? What are you looking for?' – the question Jesus asked of John's disciples.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 127 Hail to the Lord's anointed

Rejoice and Sing 364 Just as I am

Rejoice and sing 688 I waited for the Lord my God (setting of psalm 40)

Rejoice and Sing 382 Come let us join our cheerful song

Rejoice and Sing 497 Give to me Lord, a thankful heart

Sermon:

John 1:38 "What do you want?" ["What are you looking for?"]

2016 – A tough year... Trump / Brexit / Syria...

2017 – What will it bring?

In reality, were these two years so different? 1916/1917!

Society at a crossroads? Meanwhile – people keep spending, debt rises...

We want something – not sure of what it is, but there is sense of emptiness and longing in so much of society.

And in Church – the question 'what do you want?' tends to bring answers in terms of a full church, all ages, clear leadership, enthusiasm, a Minister who is God's gift to the Church, works every hour God gives but doesn't neglect his family.... We could go on...

What do you want? What are you looking for? How typical of Jesus to make his first question (at least in John's gospel) such a difficult, perceptive and deep one. When I read today's readings through earlier in the week, that question just knocked me over! And if you take nothing else away, please take the text and wrestle with it in the days to come – and see what God says to you through it!

But when you put the text and the passage alongside our other readings – you can see that this isn't the first time God has posed this kind of question...

Isaiah 49 – One of the Servant Songs – sets God’s call to Israel in a particular framework. It leaves no place for self-congratulation (we’ve been called, we’re special!) Instead God makes clear that the people of God have a servant role.

v3: “You are my servant through whom I shall win glory”

v4: “Once I said, ‘I have toiled in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing, and to no purpose.’ Yet my cause is with the Lord and my reward with my God.”

What do you want? – Both those verses make clear what is in God’s mind. And of course at the end of the passage the role of the servant is clarified even more. It is not simply enough to bring the 12 tribes back to God – nothing less than the whole world will do!

v6 “It is too slight a task for you, as my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob, to bring back the survivors of Israel: I shall appoint you a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach earth’s farthest bounds.”

Reminiscent of Covenant Service promises? What do you want? – Who is the “you” in that sentence?

Hardly surprising that passages such as this were applied to Jesus?

Psalm 40 – The Psalmist witness to a deep experience of having wants met. It’s a spiritual experience – one of rescue. “From sinking sands he lifted me” – it’s that type of experience.

v2 “He raised me out of the miry pit.. He set my feet on rock.”

And of course from the experience of salvation, the Psalmist sings his songs of praise and enjoins everyone to sing along!

1 Corinthians 1 – the beginning of a long-standing correspondence? The first two readings give the sense of background to this congregation.

- Called to be saints...
- Not lacking in any spiritual gift...

John 1 – two characters in the passage examine their wants. John the Baptist and Andrew. John is the one who declares Jesus to be the one that his people want and need – “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”

And having made the identification, he goes on the point it out to others... “He it is of whom I said...” John, whose ministry of preparing the way is almost at an end, sees in Jesus the one whom he wants, and whom he wants the people to want!

And then there is Andrew. Given the way in which Simon Peter has pre-eminence in the gospels and in the church, it’s a wonderful touch that John includes here in his account. (Maybe a sign of continuing tension between a ‘Peter Party’ and a ‘Beloved Disciple’ Group – as witnessed in the end of the gospel?) That aside, it is Andrew who tumbles upon Jesus after hanging around with John. And we read:

v41 “The first thing he did was to find his brother Simon and say to him, ‘we have found the Messiah.’”

We could discuss for ever exactly what he might have meant – but what seems clear is that Andrew perceives in Jesus not only someone he wants his brother to meet, but someone for whom he believes his people have been waiting a long long time. The Messiah was the one the people expected to free them and to heal them and make them whole. “What do you want? We want the Messiah”

And seeing that raises the question that was to go through the gospels... What sort of Messiah do you want? Do you want a Jesus who will solve all of our problems with a flick of the wrist? Or are we prepared for a Jesus who is truly “flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone?” The gospels demand that we see that not simply a question which First Century Judaism faced – it’s part of Jesus’ “what do you want?” question asked to us as well.

“What are you looking for?” “What do you want?” Jesus’ questions which still come to us down the centuries. What might we say?

a: Above all, as I said earlier, this is a question to wrestle with.

In a busy activist church it is too easy to assume that the question should be “What can we do for Christ?” But Jesus’ question comes first – “What are you looking for?” And note that when we respond, so does Jesus – “Come and see” is his invitation. Faith, verified by Jesus, grows forever because it is inspired by the Spirit, focused on Christ and grounded in God.

Like those who heard the Servant Song words of Isaiah, it’s too easy to assume that we know what God has in store for us. But remember, the glory always belongs to God.

Alessandro Pronzato wrote “In the desert you discover your true name, and God calls you by that name.” Only as we discover who we are, do we discover what we want and what we need to look for.

b: Mission, and Society’s aspirations.

If we ask anyone in our area today “What are you looking for?” Or “What do you want?” I can guarantee that “The Messiah” will not feature in the answer – unless we’re in the Classical Music section of a Music Shop! But there are aspirations, there is emptiness, there is a search for meaning – and a general feeling that the Church is not the place to look for answers?

Two things are hugely important tasks for the contemporary Church. One is articulating Christian answers to 21st century issues, the other is finding 21st century ways of expressing Christian doctrines and beliefs. We are very good at offering the answers to questions people are not asking! We need to learn to listen for the questions that are being asked so as to discover ways of addressing them.

Psalmist – his was an experience of rescue – and that was what he spoke of. Testimony has a place within mission, but again it needs to be addressed to the needs of those around us.

Jesus began his work by probing to the depths of human experience. If we do not scratch where folk are itching, then we miss them and they miss us.

c: What sort of Jesus are we looking for?

Mission series featuring pictures of Jesus from different cultures... Interesting reactions!

Christians often berate the Jews for missing Jesus – yet we are so good at missing Jesus ourselves! Christmas – the fast of the incarnation – “The Word made Flesh” usually followed by weeks of behaving as if God had never become part of our lives and part of our world.

How open are we to the rich diversity of pictures of Jesus that we encounter in the Bible and Christian tradition? Jesus wants to open our eyes, minds and hearts to the depths of God....

What do you want? Here's a poem with that title.

**He turned and asked me, what do you want?
And suddenly I found myself unable to answer.
I thought I knew, I really thought I knew.
A fine car! A gracious house! A loyal friend!
More money than I could possibly dream of,
Good health, world peace, and an end to hunger, grief and pain,
No more death, or dying, or tears or heart aching weary longing.
What do you want? The question left me speechless,
Silent because too many things clamoured for attention
Or perhaps too few, none at all
All hope gone and all longing dead?
For I have longed before for so many things
But disappointment has quenched the fire,
Experience diminished the need.
I have taught myself to long no longer
Hating the pain of a child on Christmas Eve, Birthday Eve, or Holiday Eve, New Car
Eve or New Baby Eve.
What do you want? He asked again
Speaking to a rusty, weary child within,
Waking up to the me that long ago got lost
In duty disappointment and despair.
For only a child can enter here. He seemed to say,
Only a child can hear this call.
With unpractised voice, fearful of another let down,
I heard the question and knew the beginning of the answer.
"Where do you live?" I asked, as a child might ask of a stranger,
A perilous question fraught with unknown danger.
"Come and see", he said.**

What do you want? May God in Christ guide our thinking that we may ask him where he's going and have the grace to follow. Amen.

First Sunday after Epiphany

Service Date: 8 January, 2017

Worship was led by The Revd. Robert Beard who preached on the challenge of living as Christians in an unchristian society. The exiled Jews faced a similar challenge – how to maintain their identity in a society whose beliefs and practices were very different from their own. Isaiah's message gives a vision of what it is to be God's people living in hostile circumstances.

Hymns:

Rejoice and Sing 26 Father, we praise you

Rejoice and Sing 131 The voice of God goes out to all the world

Rejoice and Sing 191 Songs of thankfulness and praise

Rejoice and Sing 432 Now is eternal life

Readings

Isaiah chapter 42 verses 1 – 9

Psalms 29

Acts chapter 10 verses 34 – 43

Matthew chapter 3 verses 13 – 17

Sermon:

Bruised Reeds and Dimly Burning Wicks

American Professor of Old Testament Studies Walter Brueggemann opens his book *The Prophetic Imagination* with a chapter entitled 'The Alternative Community of Moses' in which he writes,

The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act.

I suggest that when it is true for the Church in the United States it is even truer for the Church in the United Kingdom: Drawing roughly indicative figures from a variety of research sources suggests that some 37% of Americans attend Church at least once a month, while just 12% of Britons do so. Across Europe, Church attendance is highest in Poland and Ireland, and lowest in Norway and Denmark, while globally the country with the highest overall Church attendance by its Christians is Nigeria with 89%, and the lowest Russia with just 2%.

I wonder how many of this nation's practising Christians took time to reflect during the Twelve Days of Christmas on the part played in our national, corporate and individual celebrations by the Christian story of Jesus' birth. How many of them spent time at home talking about the meaning of the coming of the Christ-child? How many, on the other hand, left the religious and spiritual side of Christmas in Church? How far have we Christians allowed ourselves to be co-opted into the popular Christmas culture of Santa Claus and reindeer, presents and twinkling lights, Christmas pop chart hits and Christmas food? How many so-called Christmas cards or Christmas films make any reference at all to Christ? I was struck when I read recently in a report by the St Nicholas Society, that

To this very day St Nicholas [who was a fourth century Bishop of Myra in Turkey] arrives in Holland each November, dressed in a bishop's vestments.

When did any of us last see Santa Claus dressed properly as a Bishop?

I can imagine Screwtape – the senior tempter created by C S Lewis – cackling with glee over the success of the scheme developed by the one he calls “Our Father Below” to nudge susceptible humans closer and closer towards the spellbinding secular trappings of Christmas, and further and further from the source of spiritual – and practical – enlightenment presented to us in the manger at Bethlehem.

Don’t get me wrong! This sermon isn’t intended to guilt-trip us into planning a more sombre and meditative Christmas for 2017. It really is hugely challenging to maintain a visibly Christian way of life, when we are surrounded by another way of life that is brighter, brasher and better marketed. In his book, Walter Brueggemann goes on to say that

Our consciousness has been claimed by false fields of perception and idolatrous systems of language and rhetoric.

Our situation, however, is nothing new. Following the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem, a siege that resulted in an arrangement for regular tribute to be paid by King Jehoiakim. But in Nebuchadnezzar’s fourth year, Jehoiakim refused to pay up, and this led to another siege in Nebuchadnezzar’s seventh year, culminating in the death of Jehoiakim and the exile of his successor King Jeconiah with his whole court and many others. In Nebuchadnezzar’s eighteenth year, Jeconiah’s successor King Zedekiah and others were also exiled, and a further deportation occurred in Nebuchadnezzar’s twenty-third year.

In exile in Babylon, the Jewish religious leaders, in particular the prophet we now call Second Isaiah, found themselves struggling to equip their community with a theology that would enable it to maintain its cultural and religious identity, in the face a society whose beliefs and values and practices were very different from, and often hostile to, their own. As the people struggled with the challenge of living distinctively as Jews in a completely alien society, they must surely have been asking themselves, and their leaders, “What has happened to us?”, “Why has it happened to us?”, “What did we do wrong?”, “Will we survive?”, “What must we do?”. Living as exiles, and with the holy Temple – the very centre and focus of their faith – destroyed, their understanding of who they were, and maybe even whose they were, was brought into question, and an unsettling, painful question it was. Could they still live as God’s people? Indeed, were they still God’s people, or had God abandoned them? What the exiled Jews needed was someone who could imagine and visualise for them a new understanding of how to remain faithful to God even when they were living in a foreign land under foreign rule.

But it’s not easy to offer a vision of hope to people who have experienced great trauma. These days, we think little of travelling to foreign countries and engaging in various ways with foreign peoples and cultures. But we must imagine ourselves into the shoes of a people, many of whom knew of other nations only through the exotic tales told by passing merchants and travellers, and whose balance of mind might well have been tested to the very limit by their being forcibly uprooted from their homes and undergoing the culture shock of confrontation with the monumental wealth and power of Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon.

Second Isaiah is convinced, however, that God has not abandoned the Jews and that they are still the Chosen People; but he also recognises that his audience is a battered and bruised people, and that the lamp of faith is burning low within them, so he opens his prophecy – a prophecy we may apply both to God’s people Israel, and also to the coming of the Messiah – very gently:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,

my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him;

he will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry or lift up his voice,

or make it heard in the street;

a bruised reed he will not break,

and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.

He continues,

he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed

until he has established justice in the earth;

and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

And then the prophet reassures the people of who, and whose, they are:

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,

I have taken you by the hand and kept you;

I have given you as a covenant to the people,

a light to the nations,

to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,

from the prison those who sit in darkness.

This prophetic message calls to us too. As the gulf between society's values and the values which the Christian Church is called to uphold and promote grows ever wider, we too need to hear and capture the vision of what means to be God's faithful people living in unfamiliar and sometimes hostile circumstances.

Many observers have commented on the recent rise of far-right political parties – including some who are proud to style themselves Nazis or neo-Nazis – and other extremist groups across Europe, America, Africa and the Middle East, and how easily some people seem to be seduced by, or simply succumb to, their messages of fear and hatred. And even without considering behaviours that attract the “extremist” label, we can see all around us evidence of people who publicly espouse values that fly in the face of the Christian Gospel of unconditional love for all: political infighting, hate crimes against people labelled “immigrants” or “scroungers”, the BHS pensions scandal, homeless people freezing to death, “false news” and “post-truth” – otherwise known as “lies”! – the murder of Jo Cox MP, the crisis in social care and A&E departments...

In so many ways, Christians seeking to hold fast to the example presented by Jesus find ourselves profoundly at odds with the society and culture we live in, controlled as it often seems to be by a small but super-rich minority of men and women who have few if any scruples regarding the means by which they become richer still, and who have the means to persuade large numbers of people to collude with them, even where this means working against those people's own interests.

In 1932, Albert Einstein wrote to Sigmund Freud a letter in which he discussed the rise of Nazism:

How is it possible for this small clique to bend the will of the majority, who stand to lose and suffer by a state of war, to the service of their ambitions? (In speaking of the majority, I do not exclude soldiers of every rank who have chosen war as their profession, in the belief that they are serving to defend the highest interests of their race, and that attack is often the best method of defence.) An obvious answer to this question would seem to be that the minority, the ruling class at present, has the schools and press, usually the Church as well, under its thumb. This enables it to organize and sway the emotions of the masses, and make its tool of them. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3864

Walter Brueggemann's book speaks of the imagination of the prophets in their reshaping of the people of God as the people of God who are exiled and living under a largely hostile system, opposed to God's values. This is something we in the Christian Church must also do, and do continually, especially when our social analysis lead us to the conclusion that popular – I might say “populist” – values have strayed far from the path of unconditional love for all.

Christmas is gone for another year, but as we continue to do our best to live as a Christians in an unchristian society, we may care to reflect on these words by Howard Thurman, African-American philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader:

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and the princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flocks,

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among people,

To make music in the heart.

Epiphany

Service Date: 1 January, 2017

The service was planned by the Worship Group. Instead of a sermon the congregation were invited to discuss where they see the love of God in action, and how they respond.

