

SERMONS 2019

Epiphany, 6 January, 2019

Epiphany – the revelation of the nature of Jesus. In our Christian year we mark several such revelations – the wedding at Cana where Jesus changed water to wine; his baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, Jesus' many acts of healing and the visit by the Wise Men or Magi, when Jesus was still a young child. This particular revelation has been absorbed into our Christmas celebrations. We give and receive Christmas card featuring an image of the wise men; no nativity play is complete without the 3 kings and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; many of our carols have lines or verses devoted to these visitors and 2 of our most popular carols, We Three kings and Three Kings from Persian Lands afar, both sung at Christmas, are devoted entirely to this story. These wise men, magi or kings, are an essential part of Christmas.

And yet.....

The latest edition of our Messenger includes an excellent account of our Autumn Study groups by Elizabeth Draper and Ian Cooke refers to them in his equally excellent article 'Rethinking the Commonplace,' also in the same Messenger. Just a quick reminder of the theme of those study sessions. We focussed on the Christmas story asking not 'is this true' but what does it mean?' Can we really believe the elements of the Christmas story? Did it really happen like that? I have to confess that it saddened me to realise that there is no theological substance to the accounts of the nativity which like you, I have grown up with and loved all my life. At the risk of sounding childish, but I want to stay with the Christmas theme, it was rather like the day I realised there was no Father Christmas. Can I not find 'comfort and joy' in the Christmas story? Can I still sing with conviction about stable, shepherds, angels, stars and wise men? Should we be even thinking about wise men on this Sunday in January?

By the end of our study sessions I'm happy to say that the answer to all 3 questions was YES. The Gospel accounts of the birth of Christ were written to affirm the nature of Jesus as the Messiah, a key figure in the relationship between God and his people, and to affirm that nature they draw on references from the Jewish bible, references with which the readers would have been familiar. Let's consider some of the elements of the Epiphany story.

Matthew cites Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus because he needs to establish Jesus as a descendant of David who was himself born in Bethlehem. Further, Micah prophesies 'but you, O Bethlehem, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule Israel.'

The magi or wise men are often referred to as Kings. In our psalm we read, 'The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.' All kings shall bow down before him and all the nations do him service.'

The book of Numbers foretells that 'a star shall come out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.'

Isaiah refers to camels, gold and frankincense; 'a multitude of camels shall cover the and...all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense.'

So yes, I will celebrate and relive the Christmas story each year and find joy in it. I will sing about a stable, a star, angels and shepherds. Everything about the story signifies the importance of Jesus. When we lay aside our belief in Father Christmas surely the realisation that our Christmas morning gifts actually came from our loving and generous parent who probably saved and made sacrifices to give us a magical Christmas morning, is equally wonderful? And I will hold on to the significance of this Epiphany. Let's celebrate the elements of the Epiphany story as further signs that Jesus was and is significant and important; the fulfilment of prophesy; the Son of God, the Light of the World, born into humble circumstances but recognised by the wise and powerful, even seen as a threat by Herod, sent by a loving and generous Father to challenge the old order and overturn injustice, cruelty and oppression with his message of love and redemption.

Judith Adam

Myrrh

The Magi brought to the infant Jesus their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Of these, myrrh might seem to be something of an odd one out. Gold and frankincense are mentioned together in Isaiah 60:6, a passage traditionally read at Epiphany, and thought of as a prophecy of the visit of the Magi. This verse reads: "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD." But nothing is said of myrrh in this passage. Moreover, gold may readily be associated with kings, and frankincense with priests, and so these gifts suggest the kingly and priestly role of Jesus. But myrrh does not have an obvious association.

Myrrh was a fragrant resin, which was probably produced by a low shrubby tree of the genus *Commiphora*, found in the Arabian desert and also north Africa. The word "myrrh" represents the Hebrew word *mōr*, probably from a root meaning "to be bitter", and it occurs 12 times in the OT; and in the NT related words in Greek are used 4 times to represent "myrrh". Some English Bible translations also use "myrrh" to translate the Hebrew word *lōt* which is found twice in narrative about Joseph in the Book of Genesis (37:25; 43:11), and which probably refers to the resin of a different tree.

Myrrh was one of the ingredients of the holy anointing oil, described in Exodus 30:23, which was used to anoint the tabernacle and its sacred furnishings and utensils. The oil was considered to be so sacred that its formula was forbidden to be copied and used for any other purpose. Thus in this respect, the gift of the Magi (like the frankincense) might suggest the work of a priest. But Exodus 30:23 is the only place where this use of myrrh is referred to in the OT.

Elsewhere, it is used especially as a prized perfume in a variety of secular contexts. We see from Song of Songs 3:6 that it might be burned as incense for non-religious purposes. According to Song of Songs 1:13, it might be kept in a perfume bag around the neck. Psalm 45:8 refers to it being used as a perfume for clothes, and Proverbs 7:17 to its use as a perfume for a bed. We are told in Esther 2:12 that in the Persian royal court women had to be beautified for six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments before they could go in to the king.

Myrrh was certainly a precious item. In 1 Kings 10:25||2 Chronicles 9:24 it is mentioned among the gifts that the kings of the earth brought to King Solomon each year as they came to hear his wisdom, the other items being articles of silver and gold, garments, spices, horses and mules. Similarly, in Revelation 18:13 it is among the precious items of merchandise in which the merchants of the earth can no longer trade after the fall of Babylon, that is to say Rome. Thus the Magi's gift of myrrh, like gold, was a precious item fit to present to a king.

But if we really want to appreciate the significance of this third and final gift presented by the Magi to the infant Jesus, we need to look at the only other two occurrences of the word myrrh in the NT, which I have not yet mentioned. Mark tells us in 15:23 that when Jesus was crucified they offered him wine mingled with myrrh, but he did not take it. So this final gift of the Magi points forward to the passion of Jesus. We see this further in the only remaining reference to myrrh in the NT at John 19:39, where it is said that after the crucifixion, Nicodemus came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, which was used together with linen cloths to prepare the body of Jesus for burial. This means that right at the very beginning of his life, Jesus was presented with a gift which symbolised his passion and death. He had come into the world in order to bring us his precious gifts of redemption and life, and he could achieve this purpose only by walking in the way of the cross.

David Stec

Epiphany – the revelation of the nature of Jesus. In our Christian year we mark several such revelations – the wedding at Cana where Jesus changed water to wine; his baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, Jesus' many acts of healing and the visit by the Wise Men or Magi, when Jesus was still a young child. This particular revelation has been absorbed into our Christmas celebrations. We give and receive Christmas cards featuring an image of the wise men; no nativity play is complete without the 3 kings and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; many of our carols have lines or verses devoted to these visitors and 2 of our most popular carols, We Three Kings and Three Kings from Persian Lands afar, both sung at Christmas, are devoted entirely to this story. These wise men, magi or kings, are an essential part of Christmas.

And yet.....

The latest edition of our Messenger includes an excellent account of our Autumn Study groups by Elizabeth Draper and Ian Cooke refers to them in his equally excellent article 'Rethinking the Commonplace,' also in the same Messenger. Just a quick reminder of the theme of those study sessions. We focussed on the Christmas story asking not 'is this true' but what does it mean?' Can we really believe the elements of the Christmas story? Did it really happen like that? I have to confess that it saddened me to realise that there is no theological substance to the accounts of the nativity which like you, I have grown up with and loved all my life. At the risk of

sounding childish, but I want to stay with the Christmas theme, it was rather like the day I realised there was no Father Christmas. Can I not find 'comfort and joy' in the Christmas story? Can I still sing with conviction about stable, shepherds, angels, stars and wise men? Should we be even thinking about wise men on this Sunday in January?

By the end of our study sessions I'm happy to say that the answer to all 3 questions was YES. The Gospel accounts of the birth of Christ were written to affirm the nature of Jesus as the Messiah, a key figure in the relationship between God and his people, and to affirm that nature they draw on references from the Jewish bible, references with which the readers would have been familiar. Let's consider some of the elements of the Epiphany story.

Matthew cites Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus because he needs to establish Jesus as a descendant of David who was himself born in Bethlehem. Further, Micah prophesies 'but you, O Bethlehem, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule Israel.'

The magi or wise men are often referred to as Kings. In our psalm we read, 'The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.' All kings shall bow down before him and all the nations do him service.' The book of Numbers foretells that 'a star shall come out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.'

Isaiah refers to camels, gold and frankincense; 'a multitude of camels shall cover the and...all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense.'

So yes, I will celebrate and relive the Christmas story each year and find joy in it. I will sing about a stable, a star, angels and shepherds. Everything about the story signifies the importance of Jesus. When we lay aside our belief in Father Christmas surely the realisation that our Christmas morning gifts actually came from our loving and generous parent who probably saved and made sacrifices to give us a magical Christmas morning, is equally wonderful? And I will hold on to the significance of this Epiphany. Let's celebrate the elements of the Epiphany story as further signs that Jesus was and is significant and important; the fulfilment of prophecy; the Son of God, the Light of the World, born into humble circumstances but recognised by the wise and powerful, even seen as a threat by Herod, sent by a loving and generous Father to challenge the old order and overturn injustice, cruelty and oppression with his message of love and redemption.

Comment on Ephesians 3: 1-12 for 6 January, 2019

The ruined city of Ephesus lies on the western seaboard of Turkey. It was said to have been founded by the Queen of the Amazons and later was settled by the Greeks. It was the site of the Temple of Artemis, as the Greeks called her, or Diana as the Romans called her, the goddess of chastity, hunting and wild animals, forests, but also fertility and childbirth. Her temple was vast, the largest in the world at that time, an important religious centre, and one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The Greek period was followed by the Lydian conquest and their King was Croesus (you will know the expression, "rich as Croesus", meaning fabulously wealthy. He invented coinage, circulating gold coins, later shown to be naturally occurring gold

and silver alloy). Next came the Persians and later the Romans, at which time Paul lived in Ephesus for a couple of years, about 54 AD, co-ordinating missionary activity in the hinterlands. To place it better historically, Vesuvius erupted over Pompeii 25 years later, in 79 AD.

Ephesus was an important city, probably second only in size to Rome. Mary Beard, the archeologist and historian, points out that large cities in the ancient world contained people of many races from all over the empire ... much the same as for many cities today. They came to learn, in the hope of jobs, or to seek opportunities for a better life.

In the translation of the passage from Ephesians in the Good as New bible, Paul says "God gave me a special care for those excluded on racist grounds". He is referring to the fact that the Jews believed that God's promises were for them only, not other races, but Paul emphasised that the death of Jesus had allowed those promises to be extended to everybody. Paul had had experience of racial prejudice when worshipping at a synagogue in Ephesus, so he left the city, wanting to create a community to reflect the different thought and culture God had inspired through Jesus. He said Jesus had put God's ideas into practice. Although Paul wrote the letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus, he wrote the letter to the Ephesians from prison in Rome, saying, my preaching has got me into trouble. This letter to Christians is an exhortation for a better attitude and behaviour, an encouragement to communicate with one another, to do tasks well and to help others.

Tribal loyalty is a strong emotion; in our time it has recently been seen at football matches, where racist slurs have had damaging effects. Fear and anxiety about people who are different, not least in skin colour, are natural, if you have never met anyone with those characteristics. You could say the same about bias against the Scots, the English and the Northern Irish, not to mention Australians, if you don't know them well. Of course there are always differences between people from various geographies, but they are rarely threatening, unless one sees an economic threat, an alleged driver in the Brexit debate. We should speak to strangers, find out their interesting background... perhaps they need help? Paul goes on to say "Seek unity with *all* of God's people, no matter what their culture. You'll find that the love of Jesus has no limits." and again, he says, "every Christian [should be] engaged in work that will benefit the whole community", a clear urging to work with others in a multicultural society, ... which could equally well apply today.

We visited Ephesus some years ago and were astounded that the main street was paved with marble and there were huge buildings on either side. One particular structure intrigued us, a public toilet with marble seats, side by side, right around a large open space. It was intriguing to think I might have sat where Paul once sat. If you are seated so close to someone else in such a place, you cannot keep yourself separate. Talk to

your neighbours, wherever they come from. Attitudes change when people show love for one another ... a message straight from Jesus.

Ian Cooke

13 January, 2019

Apocalypse?

The readings from both Daniel and Mark are examples of apocalyptic writing. They foretell the future, generally predicting that those who are oppressing you will have a really bad time in the future and things will get much better for you. The book of Daniel was written to bring comfort to the Jews during terrible times of persecution in the early 2nd century BC.

Mark 13 could be described as an apocalyptic warning that the end times may be coming. The 1st 2 verses appear to predict the destruction of the Temple which the Romans carried out in A.D. 70. It is most likely that Mark was written after this date. The message of the chapter is that Christians should be on their guard. It finishes: "Watch therefore... lest he comes suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch." (13:35–37)

Throughout history there have been constant predictions of an apocalyptic future. The 1st millennium provoked an apocalyptic frenzy but the end has frequently been predicted in apocalyptic terms throughout the centuries, but while plenty of dreadful things have happened we have not yet had the full works.

In our day the most serious warnings come, not from weird religious enthusiasts, but the calm, careful and measured judgement of scientists. The latest report of the International Panel on Climate Change shows us what we need to do to keep the rise in temperature to no more than 1.5° C. It also shows us how it is possible to do it but it will be hugely challenging. The report notes that emissions need to be cut by 45% by 2030 in order to keep warming no higher than 1.5° C. That implies cuts of nearly 4% a year. This is not the place to go into details but the report is tough but basically hopeful given the moral and political will.

This is the view of the Church Times which had an excellent special issue on 12 October. Rowan Williams, however, takes a graver view of the situation and is one of 94 signatories who signed a letter in the Guardian headed "Facts about our ecological crisis are incontrovertible. We must take action." One paragraph reads: "When a government wilfully abdicates its responsibility to protect its citizens from harm and to secure the future for generations to come, it has failed in its most essential duty of stewardship. The 'social contract' has been broken, and it is therefore not only our right, but our moral duty to bypass the governments inaction and fragrant dereliction of duty, and to rebel to defend life itself. We therefore declare our support for Extinction Rebellion, launching on 31 October 2018." Strong words indeed for a man as thoughtful, scholarly, careful and holy as Rowan Williams to sign up to. Extinction Revolution sum up their mission in these words: "We act in peace with ferocious love of these lands in our hearts. We act on behalf of life."

Subsequently Extinction Rebellion has been publicly supported by Bishop Pete Wilcox, the Bishop of Sheffield, Malcolm Chamberlain, the Archdeacon of Sheffield, the chair of the Methodist district, Gill Newton and many others from academia and the professions and beyond. There will always be different opinions about what

action it is right to take in support of a cause but this is an indication of how a number of highly responsible people have been prepared to indicate the level of their concern for the well-being of our planet.

But the point remains. How *do* you persuade people at large and politicians in particular to address climate change with the firm purpose and decisive action that it demands? Do we have to use apocalyptic language about the appalling consequences that are all too likely to follow a rise in temperature of over 1.5°? Do we have to scare people into taking action?

The simple answer is no because it simply does not work. People react by a switching off and ignoring the issue because it is too much to face. How then do we respond? How do we enable people to face the issue honestly? How do we enable ourselves and our fellow Christians to face the issue honestly? In

A good place to start is looking at what Jesus did. He wanted people to face themselves and the world and God honestly and without pretence. How did he do it? He was not afraid to face up to those in power and to warn them bluntly, but Jesus' way was essentially the power of compassion. Consider how he responded people, for example Blind Bartimeus or the woman who anointed his feet with oil, or the tax gatherer Zaccheus or his parables especially the parable of the good Samaritan or parable of the prodigal son,, most radically "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" as we heard second gospel reading. Jesus certainly had the power to change people's lives. What we see in Jesus is indeed a display of power, but it is not power exercised by frightening people of terrors to come, but rather the power of compassion and I think this is the route that we need to go down.

We need the careful, scientific work of people like the International Panel on Climate Change and I'm grateful to them for the immense amount of work they put into producing their invaluable report. But in addition to that I think we also need to be aware of the way in which climate change is already devastating lives of so many people across the world, especially poor people now because that can unleash our compassion.

Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and UN special envoy on climate change has written of her experience visiting people, especially women, all over the world whose lives have been deeply affected by climate change. One of these was Constance Okollet from eastern Uganda. She recounted how her tiny village had been devastated since 2000 by drought, flash flooding, and erratic seasons. She said: "In eastern Uganda, there are no seasons any more. Agriculture is a gamble." For nearly 7 years, Constance had noted dramatic changes in the weather that withered her maize, sorghum, and millet crippling her yields. The unpredictable weather, Constance worried, was a warning that the villagers of Asinget had done something calamitous to incur God's displeasure. Then came a particularly calamitous flood. Constance said, "After the floods, we had no rain for six months, not even a single drop. The topsoil was very thin after the floods, but it was further eroded by the drought. The plants, particularly the cassava, all dried up. People started to die of famine. Things were completely turned round. People began to ask themselves, 'why is this happening?'" Reluctantly Constance and the rest of her village had to approach the local government to help. It was a humiliating moment for

a woman who had never asked for government assistance. "Now we are beggars," she said.

In the spring of 2009 Constance heard that Oxfam was holding a meeting about food insecurity in the nearby town of Tororo and for the first time she heard the words *climate change*. "I learned that over pollution from developed countries had caused real changes to the climate. I wanted to know whether the people in developed countries could reduce their emissions so we could have our normal seasons back."

However she also used information from the meeting to urge her neighbours to consider their own impact on the environment. "Now everyone is planting trees," Constance says, "lots of mango, avocado, and orange trees. Every Sunday I travel to different parishes and speak after mass. I stand up and tell the people that climate change has come to stay but we can overcome it by planting trees. For those who don't want to plant, I tell them to simply think of their grandchildren." But of course they can't overcome it by themselves: it is we who have the greater responsibility.

I believe the power which will enable us to discharge that responsibility is not the power of apocalyptic and scare stories, but the power of careful science and powerful compassion.

Two prayers which I find helpful to face up to this honestly and realistically but without being overwhelmed. First the phrases from the Lord's prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven."

Second a prayer from Jim Cotter:

Be with us, O God, as we struggle for a more just and sustainable world, yet remind us that our actions so often tighten the mesh that binds the oppressed. Keep us from pride in our own strength, and keep us from despair when evil seems entrenched. Renew our trust in your good purposes for us all. Give us the gift of discernment, that we may know when to strive in the power of your spirit, and when to be still and wait for your deliverance. Come in your good time, but come soon.

Rev. Dr Michael Bayley

Sermon for Holocaust Memorial Day 27 January, 2019

In recent decades, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust has encouraged remembrance of the terrible murder of six million Jews under the Nazi persecution and the date of January 27 marks the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. It is therefore especially right that on this Sunday, this year, we remember not only the persecution and killing of Jewish populations across central Europe during the Second World War but indeed the centuries of such killings and also the genocidal wars which have taken place since 1945.

To mark this day there will be a film and discussion this afternoon in the Showroom, when through the film, *My Nazi Legacy*, the elderly sons of two Nazi war criminals tell of how they have dealt with the actions of their fathers. And tomorrow in the Winter Garden, there will be a candlelit vigil from 5.30pm to 7pm.

I am currently reading Ian Kershaw's history of Europe from 1914 to 1945, appropriately entitled 'To Hell and Back.' The recalling of history reminds us of the persecution of Jewish people throughout the so – called Christian Era. At times of economic depression and political chaos, for example in the early 1920s after the first world war, in countries such as Russia, there was a cascade of anti-Jewish violence. In Ukraine alone somewhere between 50,000 and 60,000 Jews were killed in some 1300 pogroms in 1921. But the causes of antisemitism , as we know, have deep theological roots from the early centuries when the Christian church of the Constantinian empire saw the Jews and not the Romans as the Christ killers.

It is only right therefore, as we come together to read the scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian testaments, that we remember the scholarship of the last two hundred years and what it really does teach us about the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and our gospel today is a very suitable platform for our reflection.

So lets begin by dealing with a few aunt sallies. Most of us will remember the Jesus of our Sunday school days, white, handsome, meek and mild. Or the Jesus of the early movies, looking so American. Time and again we have created Jesus in our own image, as indeed we do with God. I once read of a Texas senator who opposed the introduction of foreign languages in the schools of Texas, saying 'If English was good enough for Jesus, its good enough for us'. Ideas of Jesus abound – was he gay? Was he married? Did he even exist?

During our advent discussion group, as we examined in detail the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, we recalled how the stories around the birth of Jesus, so deeply theological can have the danger of taking us away from the factual reality of who Jesus was as a human being.

So let's recall what a consensus of scholarship would first of all tell us about Jesus. He was born into an observant Jewish family, sharing his Nazareth life with four brothers and sisters. He lived and died a faithful Jew, observing dietary laws and the major festivals, versed in the Hebrew scriptures and a religious enthusiast, baptized by that fiery preacher John. The story of how this charismatic Jewish teacher became the Christ of faith is here in the unfolding gospels, the acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul. And whilst two thousand years of Christian history has sought to separate the two great religions of Judaism and Christianity, as we mark Holocaust Memorial Day there is a fresh opportunity to see how the authentic voice of Jesus can and does bring hope to all in our world today.

Here in the fourth chapter of Luke we have Jesus in a fully Jewish setting, in the synagogue at Nazareth, on home territory. Baptised with others by John, anticipating some kind of cataclysmic intervention by God to free the Jewish homelands from the oppression of pagan Rome, here Jesus is fired up, learned in the words of the prophets of Israel, in this case Isaiah chapter 58.

The Lord has appointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed.

Those words have inspired politicians, revolutionaries, freedom fighters, religious leaders across the world in all cultures and throughout history. Good news for the poor – freedom for the oppressed. Whether you are living on a sink estate in Sheffield, dependant on benefits and relying on foodbanks, whether you are living in the squalor of a Venezuelan favela, fearful at the moment for your country's future, whether you are on the high seas in a flimsy boat escaping from war torn Syria, whether you are being held as a political prisoner in Iran, these words of Jesus, these words of Isaiah echo down the ages, stirring people to action, calling for a transformation of our world.

To make sense of the world, peoples from the beginnings of civilisation have turned to religion. Having a belief in a beneficent Being who brings order and beauty to our world is there in most religions. Our Psalm for today, in its opening verses declares the glory of God seen in God's handiwork and human beings are that work. As Irenaeus said, The glory of God is seen in a person fully alive. Jesus is quoted in John's gospel as saying 'I have come that you may have life in all its fullness'. The Jewish scriptures and the Christian testament both affirm the Dream of God for God's world, a world of peace and harmony, of justice and righteousness. Yet then and now we are far from that Eden, that paradise. In Jesus's day, religion had not helped when it became distorted. Hence in many ways, through parables and actions, Jesus sought to show the love of God which transcended human barriers, a love which was not reserved for one tribe, for one religion, for one race. Jesus longed for a return to the ethical teachings of the Torah, to offer a more simple and more challenging Judaism – to love God and to love neighbour as oneself. Later St Paul, here in 1 Corinthians was to declare that in the One Spirit we are all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free.

Loving God and neighbour, the backbone of our religious faith, uniting Jew, Muslim and Christian. And we know that this backbone is needed today as much as ever. Like the 1920s the world is facing turbulence, both economic and social. Like the 1920's scapegoats are looked for. Demagogues arrive, be they in the form of President Trump, neo Nazis, populist politicians, fundamentalist preachers. There is a tribal loyalty to nation above a sense of international fraternity. Immigrants are blamed for the ills of society rather than looking to the real causes of poverty and injustice. The financial elite meet at Davos, fearful for their security. And this in a world in which the world's 26 richest billionaires now hold as much wealth as the bottom half of the world's population, some 3.8 billion people.

We are no longer living in a world where we expect a cataclysmic intervention by God, some kind of Armageddon, some kind of imminent return of Jesus to judge the quick and the dead. That is really the stuff of street evangelists. But Christians and Jews together affirm the belief that this is God's world, that we are all made in the image of God, and God is love. And whether with Julian of Norwich we believe that all will be well in the fulness of time, in the meantime we need to remember past deeds, to name the evil which human beings are capable of and to continue to, as the body of Christ, to follow the Prayer of St Francis, where there is hatred let us sow love, where there is despair, hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. And more than utter this prayer (after all Margaret Thatcher did the same outside number 10) surely we need to act upon it as citizens living in a democracy. We need, it seems to me, to demand a society which is more equal,

more respectful of each other, prepared to see the image of Christ in one another. And yes that does involve us all in making choices, choosing our politicians, choosing how we spend our money, choosing to follow Jesus, the man for Others.

Revd Adrian Alker

17 February, 2019

The Sermon: Blessings and Woes

Pause for a moment and try to imagine you are amongst the crowd gathered around Jesus that day. You've been drawn to hear what he has to say and are hoping to find peace and healing from physical, mental or spiritual anguish. Each one of you is intent on touching Jesus, so you push and jostle those around you, pressing forward without regard for anyone else. You are looking for a personal connection, a positive experience, something that will transform your life.

We're told that and "those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured" and Jesus healed all who touched him.

But this is not enough for Jesus, his ministry did not end with healing but continued with teaching which is directed towards his newly chosen disciples. It would be easy to imagine that at that moment he would capitalise on the positive atmosphere, and indeed, that is how his message begins.

Blessed are you: who are poor, who are hungry, who weep, who are hated. God's blessing is for the poor, the hungry and the sad in the ordinary senses of the words and Jesus has demonstrated this in healing those who came to him sick. Through Jesus healing power, these people would encounter more blessings than either they or we can initially imagine. Healing would not only be about the underlying illness or situation being rectified but also about how their lives could be transformed in so many other ways in the future. Freed from constraints that would have prevented them from working, enabled to engage with the communities in which they had previously been outcasts, empowered to put food on the table for themselves and their families and inspired to joyfully live life to their full potential being just a few I can initially think about. This potential is also reflected in the reading in Jeremiah, in which those who place their trust and faith in God, not only discover and experience the ordinary things that occur as a result of that relationship, but also to discover something beyond the ordinary, who see God's "otherness" and the ways God connects with us to help us grow and be fruitful. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. Jesus chooses to do something that is closer to people's experiences in daily life, something more down to earth, he speaks of the four beatitudes and four woes. Each beatitude is balanced with a warning: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."

Just as the prophet Jeremiah warned how those who put their trust in their own abilities or in the trust of other mortals and turn away from God, would be isolated and parched, so Jesus warns that woe will befall those Who are rich, Who are full, Who laugh, Who are honoured.

I don't believe that Jesus is saying that poverty, weeping, hunger and hurt are desirable states to be sought after, rather that those who are comfortably off are more likely to rely on their own resources and potentially less likely to seek to know God. This raises the question is it necessary to experience deprivation in some way to truly be ready to seek to know God?

Let me share my own experience and that of one of the families I have cared for.

For the last 30 years, I have been privileged to work as a nurse caring for children who need a bone marrow transplant. It's an area that challenges me both professionally and personally. It's caused me to look deeper into myself, to discover hidden reasons why I want to stay, and also contributed to turning me in a different direction, to becoming ordained.

It's wonderful to look back and see meaning arising out of the difficult times. Just some of the positive blessing to arise from the work I do are that I see if it wasn't for illness, I wouldn't appreciate my own health nearly as much, if it wasn't for the moments of sadness, I wouldn't truly appreciate contentment and joy, if it wasn't for my experience of the dark times, I wouldn't appreciate the light.

Easy for you to say you might be thinking. You're not the one going through the treatment, the anxiety, the bereavement...

None of us can escape life's challenges, and I'd be lying if I did not accept that some families do disintegrate under the pressures they face, but I've also seen others who grow because of them. One family wrote about their experience. In it they describe how their son, who was born with Downs Syndrome was subsequently diagnosed with leukaemia.

Spending time with him, their business folded. Not being part of a faith community, they questioned why the God they struggled to believe in, could allow such suffering. They were angry, upset, frightened and feeling helpless. Uncertain where to turn to, his mother picked up a Bible and began to read. What she read, along with the people she revealed her vulnerability to, helped her to see something other than just the pain, and gradually to recognise the blessings in the experience as it unfolded. She found the diagnosis easier to accept the farther they got away from it. Initially, there was too much shock, too much fear and too many tears to even think about blessings. Later, she felt able to have a more positive perspective on the whole thing. She didn't think the cancer, itself, was a blessing, but her experience was that her family received many blessings because of her son's diagnosis.

If I had time I could go through each of the beatitudes and show how their lives were transformed....instead I'll illustrate just a few....how when they thought they were on their own, they discovered the blessing of friends who cared for their other children,

how when they had no energy to cook, they received the blessing of meals and when they were in need of comfort, they received the blessing of arms extended and the presence of companions on the journey. Much later, they came to the profound realisation that their years of suffering had actually been a blessing as preparation for the work they were subsequently called to do within the hospital and a faith community.

They understood how parents felt, they could feel their pain, and they were better able to serve them with compassion. The earlier years gained purpose, and with gratitude they became a blessing they hadn't initially seen, and they were once again blessed, and subsequently became a blessing to others.

The beatitudes are at the heart of Christ's message and are a beautiful summary of what Christianity is all about. It's all well and good to hear the blessings and to be seduced by their positive message but we need to remember the challenge Jesus then presents us with. In his life Jesus experienced poverty, not only poverty of deprivation but also poverty of standing alone against hostile crowds and poverty of total reliance on his father. He experienced hunger, not only hunger that is relieved by food, but hunger that can only be satisfied by doing what is right. He knew what it was to weep and mourn the death of a friend and he also knew what it was to mourn about lost opportunities both for himself and

others. Jesus experienced all these things as a result of accepting his calling and fulfilling his vocation.

Jesus does not ask that those who commit their lives to following him have to be poor or hungry, mournful or afflicted but he does ask that we engage with the reality of a broken world and that we fight for truth and justice so that those experiencing the woes of life are able to connect with the hope that one day, their lives could be transformed through the love and grace of God.

Amen
Rev. Shan Rush

**ST. ANDREW'S UNITED REFORMED CHURCH SUNDAY 10 MARCH, 2019 at
10.45am First Sunday in Lent**

Sermon: Tackling Temptation

Temptations in the Desert

Led by the Spirit into the wilderness on retreat! Thinking through how to fulfil his vocation. Fasting and prayer essential part of this preparation. Methodist ordinands have several days on retreat prior to their ordination.

IF you are the Son of God – the world's your oyster!

Stones into Bread : wilderness experience. Stony desert – stones like breadcakes. Attend to people's material needs and they'll follow you.

Quotes from Deuteronomy 8 v. 3 "The Lord humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." NB after feeding of 5,000 they wanted to make Jesus king! He slipped away.

Malcolm Guite: Stones into bread

High mountain with panoramic view of the kingdoms of this world :

probably overlooking the Rift valley with the Dead Sea within it. Note importance of mountains as places where God reveals himself and his will for us ... Moses, Elijah. Temptation to **compromise** with worldly values. William Barclay puts it like this in his commentary on Luke "The devil said "I 've got people in my grip. Don't set your standards so high. Strike a bargain with me. Just compromise a little with evil and men will follow you." Quotes from Deuteronomy 6 v. 13 "The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve." and Deuteronomy 10 v. 20 "You shall fear the Lord your God: him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast...."

Malcolm Guite: All the kingdoms of the world

Parapet of the temple – signs and wonders:

There was a sheer drop of 450ft from the point where Solomon's porch met the Royal porch down to the Kidron valley below. Temptation to be **sensational – a nine days' wonder**. He can justify this from Scripture. The devil cites Scripture to his purpose - Psalm 91 v. 11 "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.and v. 14 "Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name."

But Jesus recognises that this would be deliberately putting God to the test and so he refutes one piece of Scripture with another quoting Deuteronomy 6 v. 16 "Do not put your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah". See Exodus 17 v. 1-7. Massah was the name Moses gave to Rephidim, the place in the wilderness where there was no water and the people railed against Moses for bringing them out of Egypt to die of thirst in the desert. They had lost trust that God was with them and that they could rely on him. Moses cried out to the Lord " What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!" Moses was instructed by God to strike the rock at Horeb (holy mountain). He did so and

water flowed out so the people could drink and quench their thirst.

God promises his help and support: we are not to abuse it by using unusual or sensational methods to get public attention expecting God to bail us out. Or as a modern paraphrase puts it "You mustn't push God too far." Jesus as the Son of God must learn to quietly rely on his loving relationship with his heavenly Father and let God's love emanate to all he meets. However difficult things get, he is to trust in God's saving presence.

Malcolm Guite: Pinnacle of the temple

Jesus emerges from this time on retreat with a deepened trust in God in which there is no room for personal gratification and aggrandisement. On the contrary, he will embrace humility, mercy and justice.

Lent is a time when we can "go on retreat" – quiet days; making more time for prayer and reflection; self-discipline such as fasting. But above all renewing our commitment to embracing humility, mercy and justice in a deepening relationship with God.

The devil "departed from him for a season" or "departed from him until an opportune time" or "left him, biding his time." Ominous. Need to be aware of temptations to court popularity; to be too pre-occupied with material things; to use less than honest and open dealings to achieve our goals.

Don't put yourself to the test unnecessarily. It will happen often enough anyway!

Quote from Hebrews 4 v. 15 about Jesus as our great high priest "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Jenny Carpenter

31 March, 2019

Readings: Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:11-32

Sermon

Here is a story about two sons. Jesus signals that right at the start: 'There was once a man who had two sons.' We call it the 'parable of the prodigal son' as though there's only one son who matters, and calling him 'prodigal', which means free-spending, manages to focus attention on possibly the least important aspect of his conduct. However, it is true that the younger son is the central focus of the story. But the question that the story leaves us with isn't about him, it is about the elder son: or rather it is for the elder son. The issue for the elder son is his attitude to his younger brother.

There is one key sentence that is repeated. The father says to his servants when he gives the orders for the celebration: 'This son of mine was dead and has come to life again, he was lost and has been found.' And at the end of the story he says to his other son, 'We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life again, and he was lost and has been found'. There is a difference between those two sentences, of course: 'this son of mine/this brother of yours.' The elder son has just called his brother 'this son of yours' as though he had

nothing to do with him: subtly and politely his father points out his mistake and tries to bring him to look at his brother as a brother who has been lost and is found.

A parable in the Gospels is never just a story. It is not even a story with a meaning. It is a question looking for an answer, a question that is addressed to someone whom it concerns. According to Luke, Jesus told this story because the Pharisees and teachers of the law were complaining, 'This man is welcoming sinners and eating with them.' The question is to them: are you willing to welcome those whom God welcomes? But even for Luke that can't be the end of it: he was writing for a mainly Gentile audience in the wider Mediterranean world, where there weren't any Pharisees or teachers of the law. And we are still reading his work today. What does it mean for us? What questions does it leave us with? How do we answer it?

Let's look at the story in more detail. The younger son is a most unsatisfactory son. We have to think about the story to see just how unsatisfactory he is. He starts by asking his father to give him that share of the property that would fall to him after his father's death according to the law. A law in the book of Deut suggests that that would be one-third of it, with the other two-thirds going to the elder son. So the father hands over the whole property, which would consist almost entirely of agricultural land, to his sons, and the younger one sells his share. So he's started by taking a one-third bite out of the ancestral inheritance: there is only two-thirds left to hand on to their descendants in an age when bad harvests and high taxes could more easily ruin a smaller property. You see why his brother makes a point of saying 'he has eaten up your livelihood with prostitutes'. This is the 'sin against you' that he confesses to his father.

Then having exchanged his inheritance for money, he leaves. No more help from him in running the farm. No loving and helpful company for his father and brother, and his mother if she is still alive—she isn't mentioned, but I'll come back to the implications of the story for Mothering Sunday in a minute. They are all of them simply abandoned, and it seems there is no communication from him till he comes back.

Then how does he spend that irreplaceable inheritance? On what the wonderful KJV calls 'riotous living'—'he wasted his substance on riotous living': in other words, enjoying himself without restraint: sex, booze, gambling, expensive food, expensive clothes, the lot. A lot of this would be 'sinning against heaven', which he also confesses. All of it is an irresponsible use of what he should have regarded as a sacred trust.

He comes to his senses only when the money runs out and he hits rock bottom looking after pigs—unclean animals for Jews—and so hungry he could eat the tough bean pods the pigs are given. So he goes back—it is all he can do. And he prepares

a little speech for his father. You do wonder whether the repentance he expresses in this speech is sincere, or just a ploy to get his father's sympathy.

We'll come back to him in a minute. Meanwhile, by contrast, his brother is a model son. He is industrious and dutiful. His hard work is keeping the family farm going even after his brother has stripped away a third of it. He has always obeyed his father and done what he has wanted. By this time he has probably married and is bringing up a family to carry on the farm while his brother is flitting from one woman to another. A very satisfactory son.

That is, until the turning point of the story, when the father welcomes back the younger son. He doesn't even let him finish his little speech. Maybe he doesn't even hear it. One does get the impression that the question that concerned us just now, whether his repentance was sincere, doesn't worry him at all. Nor does he ask what made him come back, whether it was just desperation. What if it was? What matters to him is that the son that he loves is back, that 'he was dead and has come to life, was lost and is found'.

As I noted just now, there is no mother in this story. But the father in truth is playing the mother's role. In the average romantic tearjerker you would expect the mother to be showing all the love and compassion and not worrying about what the son had been doing and whether he was truly repentant, while the father would be saying he's got to show he's sorry and work off what he owes us. But not a bit of it! He welcomes his son back unconditionally. And he wants and needs his elder son to join in his joyful welcome for the one who was dead and is alive again, was lost and has been found. That is the question that the story ends with.

So far, the signs are not good. For the first time in his life, the elder son is refusing to do what his father wants. The obedient son has become the disobedient son—disobedient because he has not understood his father's love and compassion. And maybe one begins to wonder whether all his dutifulness came out of love for his father and desire to please him, or rather was just toeing a moral line to make himself feel superior to his ne'er-do-well brother. His very obedience may now be betraying him into disobedience.

As we all realise, the story is really about God, just as it is equally surely about us. We know that however far the country that we wander to, we can't wander beyond the reach of God's love. But we can refuse God's love, wall ourselves off from it, stop our ears to the voice of God's motherly compassion. That is what the younger son in the story does, by taking his share of what should be a shared inheritance and walking away. We all do this when we want to do something that we know is not right and not in accord with God's will.

But the smallest move we make back in God's direction, the smallest chink we leave to God's love, God will seize on: just as the father in the story sees his son coming from a long way off and runs to kiss him. We don't have to make a formal speech, a formal prayer of repentance. There is no formula that you have to follow to be reconciled with God, because as Paul says, it's God in Christ who is doing the reconciling, not us. And actually in the two other stories that Jesus tells in Luke 15, the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, there is no question of the lost item having to make a move: the shepherd or the housewife does it all. But in this last and longest story there is allowance for the sinner's own free agency: we do have free will and if we really want to walk away, there is nothing to stop us.

But the elder brother has also walled himself off, and far more completely, from his father's love, because he is unable to share it. I don't suppose there are many people here that are tempted into the younger brother's 'riotous living', but there may be more who are more like the elder brother, more like the Pharisees and teachers of the law that Luke takes as the examples in Jesus' day, because this is a constant danger for religious people. We have got where we are by being faithful to what God asks of us, we've turned up at church Sunday after Sunday, read our Bibles and said our prayers, maybe taught in the Sunday School and become elders. Some of us have even heard a call to the ministry. Obviously we must be first in God's love rather than someone who has lived a pretty dodgy life and doesn't really know what being a Christian is all about.

Wrong!—as if you didn't know! Of course you knew that God's love is for everyone equally, just as the father in the story loves both his sons. But it's always so easy for us to be jealous of someone who seems to have wangled a good position without putting the effort into it that we feel we have. Not only that, but we may feel that we have nothing much in common with some people who turn up on the church's doorstep, and with the greatest good will we feel awkward talking to them.

Hearing the reading from one of Paul's letters to the Christians at Corinth just now, and thinking back on it, there is one thing you might be a bit puzzled by. He says: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Fine, Paul was a missionary with the message of the Gospel, which is the message of reconciliation. But why does he then go on, speaking to these Christians, 'we plead with you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled with God.' These are people who have heard the message, believed in Christ, formed a new church excited by the richness of God's gift of his Holy Spirit. Surely they are already reconciled and don't need to be asked to be reconciled?

The parable of the two sons points to the answer. Being reconciled with God has to mean being reconciled with each other, because it means sharing in God's motherly love, and extending to others that same generous and compassionate welcome that

God has shown to us. And we are always slipping back from the fullness of our enfolding in God's love, because we are jealous, because it's too much effort, because we are afraid of what welcoming others might mean to us. So being reconciled to God isn't a one-off, it's ongoing work, new every morning. That's why we have a prayer of confession at the beginning of each Sunday service, so that we can be reconciled once again with God before we start.

One thing more. The parable of the two sons is an invitation to rejoicing. 'We have to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found.' There's a great feast in progress: the fatted calf has been killed, there's music and dancing, this is probably going to be an all-night affair. And this is a picture of what our life in Christ ought to be like. We celebrate because in Christ God has reconciled the world to God's self; because high and low, male and female, rich and poor, black and white, even those that everyone else sees as hopelessly lost and has given up for dead, all have been welcomed into the warm encompassing bosom of our redeeming God. And so 'we have to celebrate and be glad', and that I hope is what we do every Sunday.

Rev Walter Houston

4 April, 2019

Easter Sunday

Isa 65:17-25, 1Cor 15:19-26, John 20:1-18

John 20: 8 "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed."

All four Gospels give an account of the finding of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning. The first three Gospels (or at least Mark and Luke) seem to suggest that the burial of Jesus had been a rather hasty affair, so that it might be carried out before the beginning of the Sabbath, and his body had not been properly prepared for burial. So very early in the morning on the first day of the week, some of the women who had followed Jesus went to the tomb, bringing perfumed oils and spices, in order to do for him what should have been done on the Friday afternoon.

John's account is a little different in this respect. According to him, the body of Jesus was already anointed before burial, as was the custom, with spices brought by Nicodemus. John tells us that Mary Magdalene alone went to the tomb early on the first day of the week while it was still dark.

We are not told the purpose of her visit, but we can assume that she was simply following the natural human wish of anyone who has just been bereaved of a loved one to go to be as close as possible to the last mortal remains of that person.

It must have come as quite a shock to her to see that the stone, which had sealed the entrance to the tomb, had been removed. We are not told that she stopped to look in the tomb, though we may suppose that she did, since her immediate reaction was to run to Jesus's disciples, the news, saying, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Her use of the plural "we" may be a

hint that she had not been alone in going to the tomb, just as the other Gospels tell us that it was two or more women who went to the tomb on the Sunday morning, though John speaks only of Mary Magdalene.

She reported the news of the empty tomb to two of the most prominent of Jesus's disciples, Peter and the disciple "whom Jesus loved". Peter is, of course, very well known from all four of the Gospels, and we know more about him than any of the other apostles. He is the first in the lists of the Twelve, a fisherman whom Jesus called together with his brother Andrew; he is the one who affirmed his faith in Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, and one of those who witnessed Jesus's transfiguration. Despite denying Jesus after his arrest, Peter would soon become an important witness of the risen Christ, and would go on to be foremost among the leaders of the early church.

But what of that other disciple, the one "whom Jesus loved"? This disciple is mentioned only in John's Gospel, where he is referred to five times. The first time is at the Passover meal, the occasion when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, which in John's Gospel takes the place of the Last Supper in the other Gospels, and John tells us that the disciple whom Jesus loved was reclining in the bosom of Jesus (13:23).

The second time we meet this disciple is at the crucifixion of Jesus. From the cross, Jesus sees his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing close by, and he says to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!", and to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!"

The next time we hear of the disciple whom Jesus loved is in John 20, in today's Gospel reading about the finding of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning. When Mary Magdalene came and reported her news to Peter and this disciple, they both ran to the tomb, to see for themselves what had happened. The disciple outran Peter, and reached the tomb first. He stooped to look in, and saw the linen cloths in which Jesus had been wrapped, but did not go in. Then Peter arrived and, ever the rash impetuous one, did not so hesitate to enter the tomb, but went in and saw the linen cloths lying about, and the napkin that had covered the head of Jesus lying separately.

It is at this point that we are told, "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed. "And he saw and believed" — These words are very important. They invite the question, What did he see, and what did he believe? Of course, he saw the things that were there to be seen: the linen cloths, and the inside of the tomb, in which there was no longer any corpse. But the implication is that he also saw much more than this.

Peter observed the same things, but did not grasp their significance. What the disciple saw, however, led him to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, and this means that he was the very first person to perceive what had happened to Jesus. This is really quite remarkable.

John adds the comment, "For as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead", a reference to the later Christian belief that the resurrection took place in fulfilment of OT prophesy. But without the benefit of any later hindsight, this disciple whom Jesus loved, immediately understood that Jesus had risen from the dead, and

I would like to suggest that he came to this realisation because of his closeness to Jesus.

The other Gospels tell us that Jesus three times predicted his death and resurrection, but his disciples apparently utterly failed to comprehend what he was saying. However, we can suppose that the disciple whom Jesus loved had been particularly close to him, and on the Sunday morning when he saw the empty tomb, his immediate reaction was to believe that what Jesus had foretold had come to pass, and that he has risen from the dead. This disciple thus stands in stark contrast to another of Jesus's disciples, Thomas.

Later that same day when the risen Jesus began to appear to his disciples, and they told Thomas about this, since he had not been present when Jesus came, his reaction was to say, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." It was only when Jesus made another appearance eight days later, when Thomas was present, that he believed the evidence of his own eyes. Jesus responded to him with the words, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

What a contrast with the disciple whom Jesus loved! We hear again of that disciple on a later occasion when the risen Jesus again appeared to his disciples. They were fishing in the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus came and stood on the shore, but they did not recognise him, even when he spoke to them, but it was the disciple whom Jesus loved who first recognised him, and said to Peter, "It is the Lord" (21:7). It seems quite remarkable that this disciple immediately recognised Jesus, when the others, including Peter, had failed to do so.

So who, exactly was this disciple? This is not known for certain, but perhaps most scholars believe that he was John, the son of Zebedee, who seems to be claimed by the end of the Gospel of John as the author of that Gospel. For he is referred to just one more time (21:20), right at the end of John's Gospel.

Following their fishing trip, the disciples are invited by the risen Jesus to have breakfast with him. After breakfast, Jesus has a dialogue with Peter, in which three times Peter declares his love for Jesus, and Jesus apparently predicts that he will die a martyr's death, by which he will glorify God. Peter then turns and sees the disciple whom Jesus loved, and he asks, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus replies, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!", words which, as John explains, some in the early church wrongly interpreted to mean that this disciple was not to die. John adds the comment, "This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true." Thus the authorship of John's Gospel seems to be attributed to this disciple.

A word of caution, however, needs to be entered here. John's Gospel probably originally ended at the end of chapter 20, and chapter 21 seems to be an appendix added later, whether by the author or someone else. The date and authorship of John's Gospel are not known. Nevertheless, this disciple whom Jesus loved plays an important role in the Easter story.

The Christian hope of everlasting life is a most wonderful hope for all humanity, and it is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15 St Paul says, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied." And he adds, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." For our belief in the resurrection of Jesus, we necessarily depend on the testimony of those who were there at the time.

The disciple whom Jesus loved gives us his testimony of the truth of these events. On Easter Sunday morning, he looked into the empty tomb and he "saw and believed". He was later present when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples. He leaves us his testimony, so that through his eyes and in faith, we too can see and believe.

Rev. David Stec

7 April, 2019

St Andrew's URC

Passion Sunday 2019

This Sunday marks the beginning of Passiontide in the Church's year, a period of two weeks leading to Easter when our focus is on the journey which Jesus makes, for the last time, with his disciples, to Jerusalem. It will be a hard time, opposition to the teachings and challenges of Jesus is growing, not so much from the Roman occupiers but from the leaders of the Jewish faith, from the chief priests, elders and scribes, from Pharisees and Sadducees and Herodians. Why was this? Well Palm Sunday and the Cleansing of the Temple will say it all. In Jesus's eyes, the Jewish Temple authorities had so colluded with the pagan empire of Rome that they had made a mockery of the Jewish faith, of the centrality of worshipping the one true God.

In his three years of speaking about the kingdom of God, Jesus had cut to the chase of what it means to love God and to love neighbour as oneself. As the prophets before him, Jesus, in his parables and teachings, had in effect distinguished between good and bad religion. Bad religion was when a system of rules and regulations, feasts and sacrifices had become more important than doing the work of God, of healing the sick, of lifting up the poor, of giving release to captives. The good Samaritan was closer to God than the pious priest who passed by on the other side. The forgiving father embracing the penitent and prodigal son showed the love of God more clearly than the self-righteous older brother. This was good religion, showing mercy, kissing the leper, healing the centurion's son.

But challenging the establishment – be it religious or political- in any day will bring its furious opposition by those who have much to lose: the privileged, the corrupt, the self-seeking.

And so Jesus faces his Passion, his trial, his torture, his execution. And where will his disciples be in all of this? Can they also show the courage to be faithful to the God of the Torah? It would seem not, for as we approach the events of the last week of Jesus life we see betrayal and denial and desertion.

Today's gospel tells a story of the anointing of Jesus by Mary, Martha's sister, when she pours expensive perfume over the feet of Jesus. Judas Iscariot was outraged, claiming dishonestly, that he would have sold the perfume and given it to the poor. In our Lent group we have just read this story in Mark's gospel, although in that version it is an unnamed woman and Jesus is in the house of Simon the Leper. But in both accounts the message to the reader, to the listener is the same and it is profound and it is about our discipleship.

The earliest gospel, Mark, is sharper over this point than John. For Mark first of all describes how the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus. Then Mark tells the story of the anointing of Jesus and immediately follows it up with Judas agreeing to betray Jesus, thus meeting the needs of the high priest. The two stories jostle with each other in the text. They present us with two examples of discipleship – one is loving, fervent, all embracing – the woman anoints Jesus. The contrast is with the failure and utter weakness of discipleship and the ultimate sin of betrayal.

Mark and John are writing their gospels at a time when the young Christian communities are facing hostility and danger from both Rome and the Jewish communities, who refused to see that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah. The gospels are there to encourage those fledgling churches in the face of persecution. But two thousand years later what can we take from the story of Jesus' Passion and our discipleship?

Well let's first take the word passion, not this time with a capital P, referring to these two weeks leading to Easter but rather with a small p, referring to the passions of Jesus or turn this around to a question: what was Jesus passionate about?

And the answer is there in the gospels. Jesus was passionate about justice, about a kingdom of love and righteousness. He was passionate about bringing in a world of peace and harmony between peoples of different backgrounds. His kingdom was a Kingdom of Nobodies. His table companions were considered at times to be unclean. Judas may have betrayed Jesus because Judas was disappointed that Jesus did not lead an armed rebellion, was not that kind of freedom fighter.

If we are to be true disciples of Jesus in our world today it is not difficult to see what we too should be passionate about. We too should be unafraid to challenge established organisations, religious or political, if they deny the kingdom of God. Last week there was one such example of how being a follower of Jesus can lead to passionate anger against the establishment. On May 3rd in Westminster Abbey there is to be a "National Service of Thanksgiving to mark 50 years of the Continuous at Sea Deterrent (CASD)". There is at least one Trident submarine at sea at any one time, with each carrying sufficient nuclear warheads to bring about catastrophic damage to many cities and impact the climate in a way which would affect the entire world. The decision to host this service in Westminster Abbey is surely contrary to the motion passed by the Church of England General Synod in July 2018. That motion says that "***nuclear weapons, through their indiscriminate and destructive potential, present a distinct category of weaponry that requires Christians to work tirelessly for their elimination across the world.***"

Here is one example of how being a disciple of Jesus calls on each one of us to ask whether we are with Mary and want to anoint our Lord, in other words to give him the honour which is due or to betray our Lord, as did Judas. Is giving thanks for Trident nuclear submarines anointing or betraying? I leave it to you to decide.

Following Jesus has never been easy nor is the invitation to take up our own crosses. It may be easy to wear a cross around our neck, more difficult to be passionate in the cause of right. As Jesus said, which is easier to say "your sins are forgiven" or "take up your bed and walk". In other words do we as Christians simply talk the talk (or sing the hymns) or walk the walk, even if that walk can lead to ridicule, hostility or danger?

Rev. Canon Adrian Alker

21 April, 2019

St Andrew's 21.04.19 1

Easter Sunday

Isa 65:17-25, 1Cor 15:19-26, John 20:1-18

John 20: 8 "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed."

All four Gospels give an account of the finding of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning. The first three Gospels (or at least Mark and Luke) seem to suggest that the burial of Jesus had been a rather hasty affair, so that it might be carried out before the beginning of the Sabbath, and his body had not been properly prepared for burial. So very early in the morning on the first day of the week, some of the women who had followed Jesus went to the tomb, bringing perfumed oils and spices, in order to do for him what should have been done on the Friday afternoon.

John's account is a little different in this respect. According to him, the body of Jesus was already anointed before burial, as was the custom, with spices brought by Nicodemus. John tells us that Mary Magdalene alone went to the tomb early on the first day of the week while it was still dark.

We are not told the purpose of her visit, but we can assume that she was simply following the natural human wish of anyone who has just been bereaved of a loved one to go to be as close as possible to the last mortal remains of that person.

It must have come as quite a shock to her to see that the stone, which had sealed the entrance to the tomb, had been removed. We are not told that she stopped to look in the tomb, though we may suppose that she did, since her immediate reaction was to run to Jesus's disciples, the news, saying, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Her use of the plural "we" may be a hint that she had not been alone in going to the tomb, just as the other

Gospels tell us that it was two or more women who went to the tomb on the Sunday morning, though John speaks only of Mary Magdalene.

She reported the news of the empty tomb to two of the most prominent of Jesus's disciples, Peter and the disciple "whom Jesus loved". Peter is, of course, very well known from all four of the Gospels, and we know more about him than any of the other apostles. He is the first in the lists of the Twelve, a fisherman whom Jesus called together with his brother Andrew; he is the one who affirmed his faith in Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, and one of those who witnessed Jesus's transfiguration. Despite denying Jesus after his arrest, Peter would soon become an important witness of the risen Christ, and would go on to be foremost among the leaders of the early church.

But what of that other disciple, the one "whom Jesus loved"? This disciple is mentioned only in John's Gospel, where he is referred to five times. The first time is at the Passover meal, the occasion when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, which in John's Gospel takes the place of the Last Supper in the other Gospels, and John tells us that the disciple whom Jesus loved was reclining in the bosom of Jesus (13:23).

St Andrew's 21 April, 2019

The second time we meet this disciple is at the crucifixion of Jesus. From the cross, Jesus sees his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing close by, and he says to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!", and to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!"

The next time we hear of the disciple whom Jesus loved is in John 20, in today's Gospel reading about the finding of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning. When Mary Magdalene came and reported her news to Peter and this disciple, they both ran to the tomb, to see for themselves what had happened. The disciple outran Peter, and reached the tomb first. He stooped to look in, and saw the linen cloths in which Jesus had been wrapped, but did not go in. Then Peter arrived and, ever the rash impetuous one, did not so hesitate to enter the tomb, but went in and saw the linen cloths lying about, and the napkin that had covered the head of Jesus lying separately.

It is at this point that we are told, "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed. "And he saw and believed" — These words are very important. They invite the question, What did he see, and what did he believe? Of course, he saw the things that were there to be seen: the linen cloths, and the inside of the tomb, in which there was no longer any corpse. But the implication is that he also saw much more than this.

Peter observed the same things, but did not grasp their significance. What the disciple saw, however, led him to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, and this means that he was the very first person to perceive what had happened to Jesus. This is really quite remarkable.

John adds the comment, "For as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead", a reference to the later Christian belief that the resurrection took place in fulfilment of OT prophecy. But without the benefit of any later hindsight, this disciple whom Jesus loved, immediately understood that Jesus had risen from the dead, and I would like to suggest that he came to this realisation because of his closeness to Jesus.

The other Gospels tell us that Jesus three times predicted his death and resurrection, but his disciples apparently utterly failed to comprehend what he was saying. However, we can suppose that the disciple whom Jesus loved had been particularly close to him, and on the Sunday morning when he saw the empty tomb, his immediate reaction was to believe that what Jesus had foretold had come to pass, and that he has risen from the dead. This disciple thus stands in stark contrast to another of Jesus's disciples, Thomas.

Later that same day when the risen Jesus began to appear to his disciples, and they told Thomas about this, since he had not been present when Jesus came, his reaction was to say, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." It was only when Jesus made another appearance eight days later, when Thomas was present, that he believed the evidence of his own eyes. Jesus responded to him with the words, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

St Andrew's 21.04.19 3

What a contrast with the disciple whom Jesus loved! We hear again of that disciple on a later occasion when the risen Jesus again appeared to his disciples. They were fishing in the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus came and stood on the shore, but they did not recognise him, even when he spoke to them, but it was the disciple whom Jesus loved who first recognised him, and said to Peter, "It is the Lord" (21:7). It seems quite remarkable that this disciple immediately recognised Jesus, when the others, including Peter, had failed to do so.

So who, exactly was this disciple? This is not known for certain, but perhaps most scholars believe that he was John, the son of Zebedee, who seems to be claimed by the end of the Gospel of John as the author of that Gospel. For he is referred to just one more time (21:20), right at the end of John's Gospel.

Following their fishing trip, the disciples are invited by the risen Jesus to have breakfast with him. After breakfast, Jesus has a dialogue with Peter, in which three times Peter declares his love for Jesus, and Jesus apparently predicts that he will die a martyr's death, by which he will glorify God. Peter then turns as sees the disciple whom Jesus loved, and he asks, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus replies, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!", words which, as John explains, some in the early church wrongly interpreted to mean that this disciple was not to die. John adds the comment, "This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true." Thus the authorship of John's Gospel seems to be attributed to this disciple.

A word of caution, however, needs to be entered here. John's Gospel probably originally ended at the end of chapter 20, and chapter 21 seems to be an appendix added later, whether by the author or someone else. The date and authorship of John's Gospel are not known. Nevertheless, this disciple whom Jesus loved plays an important role in the Easter story.

The Christian hope of everlasting life is a most wonderful hope for all humanity, and it is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15 St Paul says, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied." And he adds, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." For our belief in the resurrection of Jesus, we necessarily depend on the testimony of those who were there at the time.

The disciple whom Jesus loved gives us his testimony of the truth of these events. On Easter Sunday morning, he looked into the empty tomb and he "saw and believed". He was later present when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples. He leaves us his testimony, so that through his eyes and in faith, we too can see and believe.

Rev. David Stec