

THE PREACHER

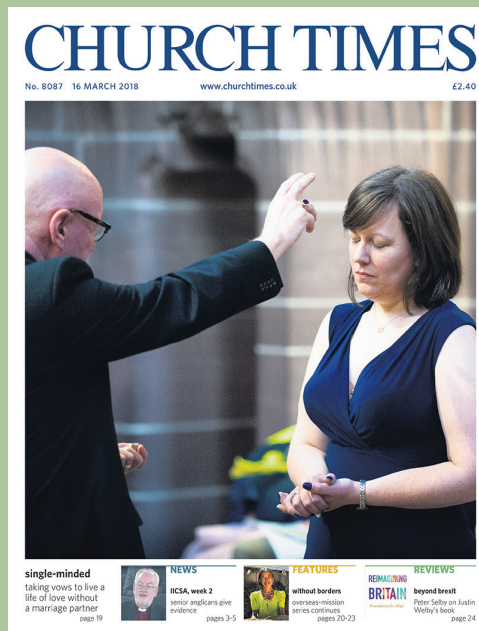
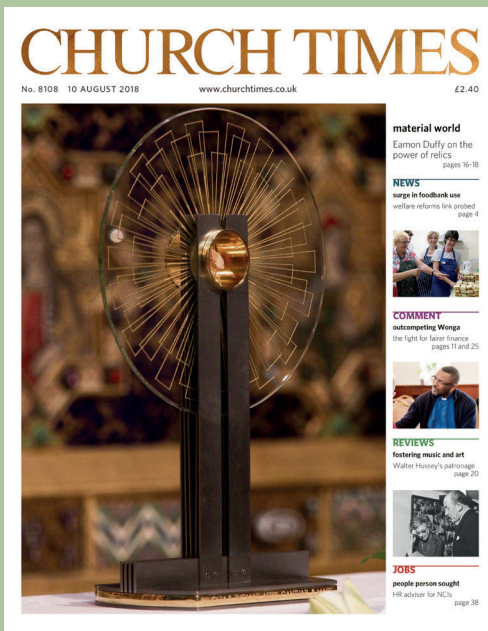
Issue 174 | July 2019

Gender Matters



SPACE FOR FAITH SPACE FOR DEBATE SPACE FOR INSPIRATION

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Editorial

DIFFERING VOICES

A WOMAN INVOLVED IN A CAR CRASH is 47 percent more likely than a man to suffer serious injuries according to the journalist and campaigner, Caroline Criado Perez. She makes a strong case that this horrifying statistic is a consequence of car design. To put it simply most cars are designed with a male body shape and size in mind. Men have more road traffic incidents than women, but women come out of incidents with significantly more injuries. Women drivers often must sit further forward than the 'standard seating position' designed for men, just to reach the peddles. Add to that a very upright posture in order to see out of the windscreen and you have a recipe for increased injury when a collision occurs.

As I draw together the components of this edition of *The Preacher*, the media are full of material drawn from Criado Perez's book (*Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, published by Chatto and Windus) which is clearly on its way to be a bestseller. The vast array of data she presents demonstrates

how so much of the everyday world doesn't 'fit' women because gender difference has not been considered in design. Again, and again the human being taken as the reference figure – 'the standard person' – is male. Occasionally the consequences are simply absurd, but sometimes they are deathly.

Of course, the book makes a contentious point. Criado Perez's critics insist poverty and profound cultural structures are more harmful than the inequalities she discloses. Nevertheless, I think it is important to take seriously how far maleness is often unthinkingly assumed to describe what it is to be human. Surely sermons should not reinforce that.

An example Criado Perez cites gave me pause for thought as a preacher: one popular voice recognition application is 70% more likely to understand a male voice than a female one. Should we not be dedicated to each preacher finding her or his own voice in an arena of expression where every voice is recognized and valued?

Christopher Burkett,
Editor

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Women's Voices

By Libby Lane

The Rt Revd Libby Lane is Bishop of Derby.

THUS SAYS THE LORD ...
 "Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So you shall be my people, and I will be your God" Jeremiah 11.4.

God's own voice is neither male nor female. But as we all, both male and female, are made in God's image, all our voices echo something of the voice of God. When women's voices are not heard, we are deaf, at least in part, to the word of God. And muting, at least in part, the voice of God.

In scripture we must therefore be attentive to the voices of women. For example, therefore, as we read of the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, we must listen out to the voice of the God of Sarah, Hagar and Keturah, the God of Rebecca, the God of Leah and Rachel, and Bilhah and Zilpah. Salvation history is told through the stories of women as well as men. We have to listen harder to God through such women's voices – and even more so for those

women who are unnamed and passed by – because so often what God is saying in and through them is drowned by the louder noise of the men around them.

This matters because when we do not listen to women, we are being deaf to the voice of God.

It is not only the narratives of scripture that specifically include women that might help us listen to God more carefully and completely. God speaks, reaches out, loves, through every word of scripture, and God does not speak with a male voice.

As I age, like most people, I am finding that my hearing diminishes. It is not only volume that makes a difference, there are pitches I find more difficult to hear. That means it takes more attention to follow some conversations; it is less likely that I can pick out particular sounds from cacophony; some music is harder to appreciate. If we only listen to particular or limited pitches of God's voice in scripture, we are missing out – certainly of

the fullness of all that God offers, and perhaps of something significant and vital.

Both men and women need to listen out for God speaking with a woman's voice through all of scripture if we are to hear God more clearly.

And further, it is not only in the words of scripture itself that women's voices need to be heard. Women's voices are necessary as we respond and engage with scripture. If women's voices are not heard in the study and proclamation of scripture we risk losing for ourselves, or denying to others, the hope of salvation because we are listening only partially. As Thomas Cranmer taught us to pray:

'Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scripture to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace

and ever hold fast the blessed hope of eternal life.'

All of scripture is for, and of, all, and each, of us. None of us hears or understands completely, and we discover the truths of God together. What we are hearing, and understanding, will be warped and distorted, as well as limited, if we ignore or marginalise the voice of women in our reception of scripture.

When we do not hear what women hear, what women have read and marked and learnt, if the ways that women have been nourished by saving word of God are not recognised, we deny the work of God. When women's voices are silenced or disregarded, God is dishonoured, and, according to Cranmer's prayer, the promise of eternal life itself may slip from our grasp.

When we do not listen to women, we are being deaf to the voice of God.

All this means, I think, that men and women alike (individually and together) need to be attentive and open, both to God's own voice sounding as a woman, and to the voices of women themselves that may be echoing the voice of God.

We women, therefore, need to take courage, and make our voices heard. If I do not speak, I am silencing something of God that cannot otherwise be spoken. We all have a responsibility to be attentive to the voice of God in women's voices. That may mean men taking responsibility not to drown us out, but it also means women taking responsibility: to use our own voices and amplify one another's voices.

For many of us that is hard. Centuries of conditioning have taught us to be silent, that we have nothing worth saying and that we won't be heard. Some of us prefer now to remain muted, and we do not want to hear that our voice is God's voice. That responsibility is too much.

My premise, though, is that we are denying God if we deny ourselves. It is ridiculous and

outrageous – but it seems that God's voice is spoken and heard in and through fallen, fallible, fractured humanity, including women and girls – including me.

My voice is God's voice.

If it is true that when we do not listen to women, we are being deaf to the voice of God, it must also be true that when we women do not speak we are silencing the voice of God.

I think I have always known the truth in all this, though it has taken me years to recognise and articulate it. The prompt for this particular train of thought was being asked to introduce the 'Women's Voices' Conference at Foxhill House in the Diocese of Chester in 2018. This is an annual conference to explore and give space to women's voices in the exposition of scripture, and through preaching in particular. This conference provides important opportunity for women and men to give attention to hearing God's voice in women, and for women to gain the confidence to speak up and speak out.

I do pray that God raises up more women to preach and teach and write and proclaim, in public places, the good news of Jesus Christ. Even though a few of us are now prominent in the church, and can make some noise, God's voice in women's voices is still only a background whisper and often still unheard or diminished. Perhaps we should not pray for it to be any other way. Perhaps in that marginalisation and silencing, God's voice is heard most clearly – if we bother to listen. Perhaps in learning to hear God with a woman's voice, we can all be freed from the pressure and expectation to be loud and overbearing in order to be heard or taken seriously.

However, my prayer is not only

for those with a recognised role and responsibility in the churches. Even more I pray that women, and men, will have the grace and gift to voice the love and invitation of God in everyday ways. That, being transforming agents of the kingdom in the ordinariness of daily life and ready to give account of the hope that is in them, women, and men, young and old, will find confidence to be the voice of God for their family, neighbours, colleagues, friends.

I pray that all God's people will be free, every day and all day, having heard God's voice, to give God voice.





Speaking Differently?

By Jenni Beaumont

Revd Jenni Beaumont is Assistant Curate at St. Mary the Virgin, Davyhulme in the Diocese of Manchester.

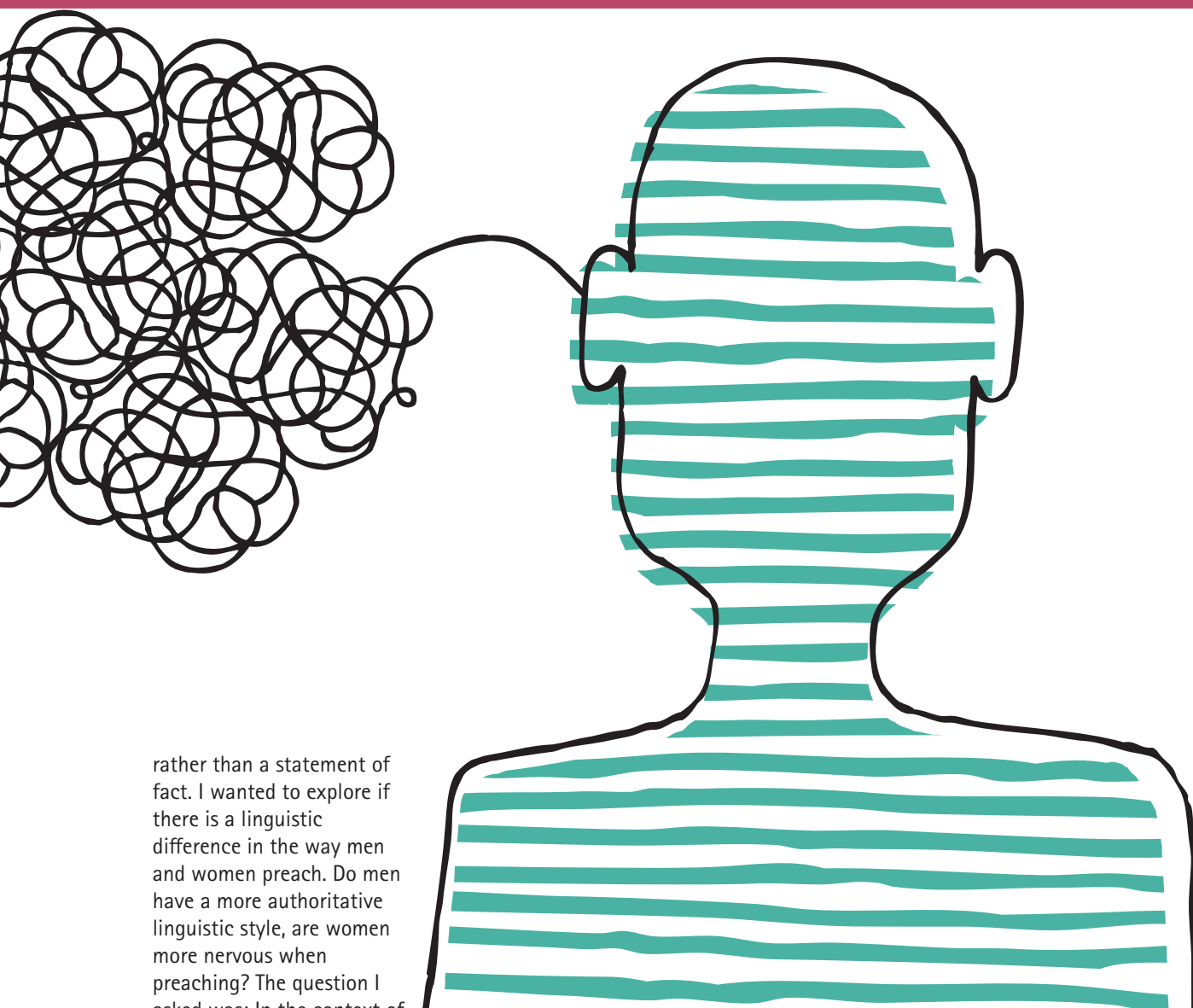
IT IS A TRUISM that men and women speak differently, so much so that the miscommunication between men and women has served as fodder for stand-up comedians for generations. The notion that meaning and message is lost in translation as it passes from a female mouth to a male ear, or vice versa, is so ingrained in our culture that it has become cliché. The subject of male and female miscommunication has also given rise to several best-selling books, most notably relationship counsellor John Gray's 1992 book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* which suggested that the reason many opposite sex relationships fail is that men and women are effectively speaking a different language.

This idea that there is a difference in the way that men and women speak is so entrenched in our psyche it has become an unquestioned article of faith of our very existence: Men never listen; women find it easier to talk about their feelings; men speak with authority and gravitas; women's speech is more tentative. These, and other, linguistic differences in the way men and women speak are accepted without question in our daily lives, but what does it mean for the preacher?

In the Church of England women are now, theoretically, permitted to hold every office in the Church. I don't want to get too bogged down in the arguments for and against women preaching, but the biblical arguments used against women preaching and leading (are 1

Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35) generally centred around whether women should have authority, or power. Anyone who has followed closely – or even loosely the arguments around women's ordination and elevation to bishop – cannot have failed to hear the arguments that men and women are of the same spirit but have different gifts. Essentially that there is a critical difference between men and women. The difficulty with a critical difference approach is that there has to be a norm, for a difference to exist.

As women now have equal access to the preaching platform and both men and women speak with assumed equal Divine authority, I decided to treat the assumptions about the way men and women speak as a hypothesis



rather than a statement of fact. I wanted to explore if there is a linguistic difference in the way men and women preach. Do men have a more authoritative linguistic style, are women more nervous when preaching? The question I asked was: In the context of the sermon in what ways do men and women establish power, and how relevant is gender in the construction of power?

Using the established sociolinguistic methodology, Critical Discourse Analysis I analysed four sermons preached at four different cathedrals on the same Sunday. Drawing on Michel Foucault's *Orders of Discourse*, Norman Fairclough developed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in 1989 to offer a rigorous assessment of what is meant when language is used to describe and explain. Essentially what Fairclough was saying is that language is the most powerful resource available to us and so every time we speak or write we make a linguistic choice. Language does not exist in isolation from the world, so whenever we produce any discourse we do so in dialogue

with other factors. The extent those factors influence the discourse – what is written or spoken – is what Critical Discourse Analysts are interested in. The linguistic choices we make, Fairclough claims, demonstrate our ideological stance. I used this method to explore and gain a deeper understanding into the underlying theological beliefs (ideologies) of male and female preachers displayed through the linguistic features used in sermons. In short, it is a kind of exegesis of a sermon. To guard against making sweeping essentialist generalisations linguists developed a context focused approach called Communities of Practice. For the purposes of this study, the Community of Practice has been identified as senior cathedral clergy delivering a sermon in monologue

form during the Liturgy of the Word of a main Sunday Eucharist service.

To identify which cathedrals to analyse I kept a spreadsheet on which I listed all the English cathedrals. I recorded every time a cathedral uploaded an audio file of their sermon to the internet. I kept this spreadsheet from the end of September 2017 until January 2018, and it wasn't until December 2017 that more than two women preached at different cathedrals on the same day. I identified four sermons which were recorded live and whose sermons are freely available in the public domain. The Sunday selected for analysis was the fourth Sunday of Advent 2017, which by a quirk of the lunar calendar and the lectionary was also Christmas Eve. The readings set for that Sunday were 2 Samuel

>>> 7:1-11,16; Canticle: Magnificat or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 [or 89:1-8]; Romans 16:25-end; Luke: 1 26-38.

The starting point for any Critical Discourse Analysis depends on where the critical analyst locates and defines power. In the case of the Church of England, it seems to me that power is exercised by highlighting and creating differences between men and women. Very few places, other than the Church of England is the question of gender such a salient point. The research I carried out was a very small-scale research into sermons preached at cathedrals in England. The four cathedrals selected represented the breadth, tradition and diversity of the Church of England and included two men preachers and two women preachers.

I discovered that both men and women have equal access to powerful linguistic features and both men and women use those linguistic features well and do so frequently. Both men and women use adversarial language with equal frequency to challenge,

provoke and entertain their hearers. I also found no evidence to suggest that men and women preachers in cathedrals use a different language to communicate their sermons. Neither men nor women are more or less powerful when they speak.

However, representations of the world coded in the language of the sermons, revealed that there is an ideological difference between those sermons preached by men and those sermons preached by women. I previously claimed that I believed power is created in the Church of England by highlighting differences between men and women, and the sermons analysed in this study reveal that it is men who do just that. The male preachers included in this study maintained power and authority by defining differences between men and women and overlooking women's powerful attributes.

When men preach, women are overlooked. In both sermons preached by male preachers Mary, the woman chosen by God to bear his Son; the woman who had found favour with God, is reduced to a walk-on part. Her contribution to Jesus' birth is side-lined and silenced.

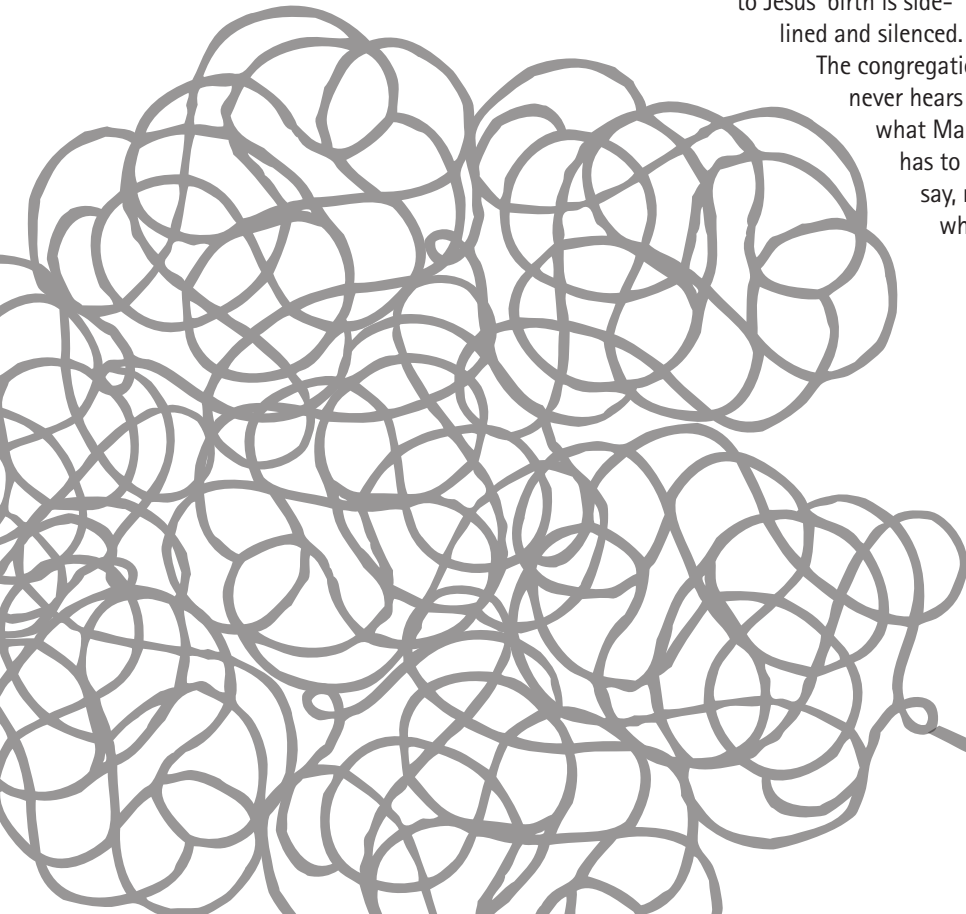
The congregation never hears what Mary has to say, nor what

Mary offered to the world or to God. Her silence and obedience are highlighted and whenever women are mentioned in the sermons preached by men they are mentioned as victims of male authority or their sinfulness is highlighted. In both the sermons preached by men the sermon focussed on the Old Testament reading for the day, David's own tribute to God in the form of a temple.

This study demonstrates that if we look for differences then we will surely find them, and it is male preachers who notice the differences. Coded in the linguistic choices of the male preachers analysed in this study was an ideological framework to put human worldly constraints on women saints. To counteract this the men sought to assert male supremacy, deny women an identity and highlight sinfulness as an inherently womanly attribute.

The idea that women's speech is in some way deficient to that of men's is a fallacy, there is no evidence to back up this claim. There is also no evidence to suggest that women have adapted their language to a more androcentric institutional norm in order to somehow "fit-in" with the male tradition in the church. If we persist in perpetuating the myth that men and women speak or preach differently, then we are colluding in a lie; to half quote St Paul, 'there is no male and female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ.'

[The study described was undertaken in part fulfilment of a MA in Practical and Contextual Theology at the University of Chester. The full study is available to view online in the university's library.]



Preaching and Listening

Grist for Ordinary Lives

By Deirdre Brower Latz

Rev. Deirdre Brower Latz is Principal of Nazarene Theological College, Manchester. Her doctoral studies were completed at the University of Manchester, focussing on contextual readings of John Wesley's theology and issues of ecclesiology, justice and urban poverty.

WRITING ARTICLES for people who spend their time/days preaching is daunting.

While this is partially true of me, I found myself a bit paralysed. Who am I to tell you – *people who think, breathe, live and research preaching* – anything? Can I be thought-provoking enough you think it's been worth the read? Therein lies the preachers' dilemma. **What is it that we do in weekly preaching that enables our speaking of God, about God, for God, to others, worth hearing?** What is it we offer, in researching deeply, in wrestling with ideas, ancient texts, well-trodden pathways, that might give grist for ordinary lives?

I ask that because some encounters make me wonder what it is we preachers think we are doing when we preach. And, what do we think listeners are yearning to hear?

From the perspective of the listener – in whose ranks I fall on one Sunday out of four, I contend that most of us want grist. That is, we want something

that matters to the depths of real life. Something to chew over, wrestle with, and plunge into. Something that reminds us of the God's-eye-view of the world. We yearn for something that will help us understand God's mission-ing of us. **We need something that will take us deeper than we can go on our own.**

I feel strongly about this. In the ordinary life of the congregant – unemployed, or working, emerging into adulthood or ancient retiree, factory-floor or university halls, budgeting for food and water, transport and time – in that life, we need grist.

The strength of my feeling comes from encounters with others.

The bio-chemical engineer imprinted as an example of a congregant needing a penitent preacher. When I asked if he'd been equipped by his church for his role in biological weaponry defence, he said no one had ever asked him about it; nor preached in a way that helped in thinking about it. But, he reassured me wryly, the congregation prayed for his wife's Sunday school

teaching weekly. As a preacher he made me think: If he were in my congregation, would he have had grist for his ordinary life? If he had faithfully carved out time and come in hungry, would the joining of the Scriptures and my voice woven together enable him to be shaped for decisions, vocation and direction?

Or, the woman facing a doctor-led late term abortion because of compound congenital conditions in her longed-for little girl – the last hope of multiple pregnancies. What sermons speak? What moment of wrestling with scriptures aloud, allow for her to sense more of God than she knew already? What might a steady diet of preaching have offered her as grist for her ordinary life – changed forever by grief and contentious personal decisions? What space between us would ensure that meaning-making would be part of her encounter with God in the community of church?

Or, recently, on our way home from church, in spite of craving God-talk as part of the worship, we discussed why we heard

>>> nothing that wasn't immediately obvious from the reading while simultaneously hearing quite a bit that wasn't related to it! We honestly went open-hearted – but the needed grist ... well... We learned about parenting, and multiply-go-forth kind of things. Not particularly helpful to us as non-parents, never mind that in that congregation has several couples and singles who one way or another are not simply 'childless' but barren. The landing on *those* ears of quite conventional ideas of 'fruitfulness' and vocation was harsh. Where was the depth, grist, or stretch that would speak in compassionate, new and deep ways to every dimension of life?

I hope you hear what I'm urging: I'm not trying to be a critic for criticism's sake; nor a sceptic, nor a bad listener. I'm not advocating for every sermon doing everything! In fact, I have two caveats that shape what I urge.

I have a high view of the role of the Spirit.

At times sermons preached have little to do with what people hear! I expect we all have had the experience of preaching a sermon, thoughtfully crafted and full of sagely wisdom, only to have someone come later and say: 'when you said this, God said this' and thought, 'no, no, I didn't say that' – but I'm glad God speaks! The sermon serves as a vehicle of space and time and God speaks in, through and around it, by the presence and power of the Spirit. Thankfully.

I also have a high view of the life of the gathered community. The congregant, in a healthy relationship with others and God is shaped by much more than a 10 - 45-minute sermon, homily, or 'preach'. This life is shaped by prayer, engagement with

Scripture, conversation, liturgy, song, and gathers as body. God speaks in many voices and multiple ways. Thankfully.

I embrace the reality that the depth of our faith is formed by hundreds of moments, conversations and practices that enable ordinary Christians to go deeper with God. And I too, understand that one sermon, or even fifty a year, (allowing time off for sickness) cannot be the sole soul food offered to a congregant. We need wrap-around care, pastoring and love.

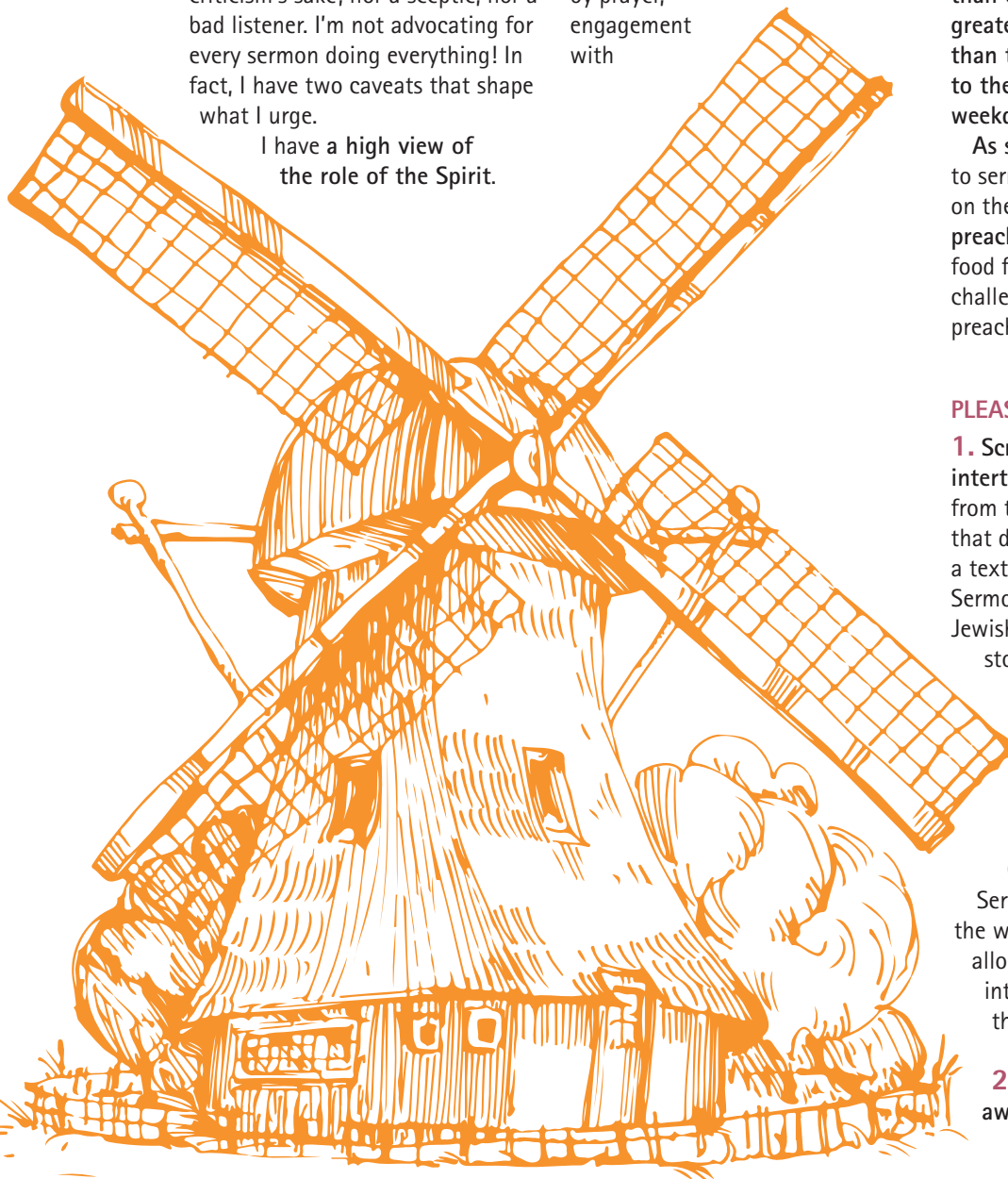
But, I am arguing for practices of preaching that mean God's voice, God's texts, God's life-breathed-by-the-spirit, can be ushered in with more depth than not, with more thoughtfulness than entertainment, and with greater authority to shape a life than thought-for-the-day offers to the Radio 4 listener on a weekday morning.

As someone recently *listening* to sermons, I want to let you in on the listener's perspective on preaching by way of feedback, food for thought, critique, and challenge. What would I beg of preachers?

PLEASE GIVE US:

1. Scripturally-rooted, intertextual sermons that spring from the Bible and its complexity, that don't hide from the history of a text or the deep roots of an idea. Sermons that take seriously Jesus' Jewishness and his place in a long story of God; that wrestle with texts of terror and genocide, of lament and rage, that hear the echo of prophets and that accept that remnant communities can represent God in prevailing cultures. Sermons that take Scriptures as the words about the WORD and allow them to speak as interpreted for these ears, in this day.

2. Sermons that don't shy away from the intersection of



life and the difficult, the dense, and the deep. That is, sermons unafraid to push, raise and struggle with questions of death, fear, aging, failing, illness, disease, of life, hope, youth, dementia, success, healing, restoration out loud. Sermons that help navigate the meaning of old ideas – sin, repentance, atonement, sanctification, holiness, martyrdom, sacrifice, love – and help them live in the present. In a world of high-tech, time-bound lives – what do these ideas mean? How does heaven and hell, God's will and justice, judgement and mercy, look, sound and play out in the present? What do we DO with these ideas?

3. Sermons that hide political agendas (capital P) but allow political ideas (small p) to be wrestled with. What does God have to do with life together in community? We need sermons that help us to ask (along with our ancestors in faith) what does God say to the rulers of the day? What are the powers and principalities? What about the way of Jesus for the least of these? What shapes our faith distinctly in the light of the empires of this world? What does Jesus have to do with...? Pose your question here. So, the conviction of the sermon that speaks of God's kingdom agenda drives the sermon's agenda.

4. Sermons by a preacher who believes in God, rooted and grounded in deep personal spirituality. Preachers vulnerable to their humanity but not so wedded to it that it becomes a sermon about them. The preacher's engagement with the living Word, however doubt-laden, and their living faith, however complicated, really matters. **The authenticity to believe in God who is transcendent, alive and at work matters.** Integrity counts. Of course, I'm a Wesleyan, so I'm steeped in the story of Wesley being told to preach what he *should* believe – of a heart warmed and life transformed – until he *did* believe! So, the crafting of life and

text, the relationship between faith and hope, belief and speaking of God, the role of truth-telling of God's life and engagement in the world matters.

5. **Story-telling sermons.** I like funny stories, and sad ones, I like earthed words and 'normal.' I'm a fan of narrative, immersive preaching, I like sermons that are grounded in story, but, if I leave a service remembering only the story of the preacher, I wonder if I've left having heard enough about the story of God. It is God's story and the intersection of God-and-all –creation should be the centrifugal force of a sermon. Tell God's story.

6. Theologically sound preaching that isn't fearful of **God's words doing something in a new way.** There are hundreds, thousands of books that could frame our theology. I desperately need preachers to be acquainted with some of them! I don't mind if it's in audible form, or podcasts, but **reflective, engaged, attentive theology matters.** If the preacher's theology is inherited from the time of their training, we're in trouble. Theology evolves, shifts, and deepens – and its currents move the church forward.

7. Sermons that **preach the tradition (small t) of the church.** The rooted tradition that knows the early fathers, and hears the voice of the early mothers. The tradition that understands the pastoral response to the incarnation as deeply rooted, thought-about over time. The tradition that takes us past church cultures and into church history, and helps us understand the context-laden weight of why the church has thought/acted in particular ways. I don't, of course, mean always agreeing with that tradition – or I wouldn't be an ordained preacher – but I do mean taking its heft seriously. So – I also mean **preaching with imagination:** taking traditions and continuing to develop them – evolve and renew them, to discover new ways of

describing and denoting them, framing them in new ways.

8. Diversity in speech, example and call and take seriously that ears shaped by a culture of oppression need sermons to be a place of honest liberation and inclusion. Gender and race matter. The present of the church is one that takes seriously the wideness of God's mercy, the outpouring of the spirit and the uninhibited ways God loves.

9. **Sermons that listen to God but speak in today's language,** for today's world. Culturally aware preachers, offering astute analysis, and deep understanding of our times is vital. The sermon showing prescience, preparing people for the time beyond our time. The preacher conveying deep consideration of the world we inhabit, mindful that the Jesus-way of counter-cultural truth and hope is to be spoken of thoughtfully and realistically. What does it mean to be alive in a time of three-person babies because of mitochondrial swapping? Or where insects are decimated? How to live in a world of wealth and starvation? What about end of life care? More knowledge and less wisdom? The gift of the sermon weaving together the now and the not yet, the deep and the hoped-for is vital in our day. So, I long for some sermons to be eschatological in scope!

Sermons, should give Grist, 'useful material, especially to support an argument,' which is life. As a listener I desperately want sermons to matter. As I've subjected myself to your voice, thoughts, preparation, God can speak through you; your lips – God's voice. Your thoughts, God's ideas. Your message, God's message.

In other words, please don't just tell me things I can read, hear, or think of for myself. Please don't try to entertain me. Please don't gloss over the difficult passages of Scripture, please be a vehicle of grace in the life of your congregation.

The Extraordinary Ordinary

Preaching from Year C: August to October 2019

By Christopher Burkett

Editor, and Director of Ministry in the Anglican Diocese of Chester. He holds a PhD from the University of Liverpool on collective memory and preaching.

THE BLOKE NEXT DOOR

It is the very commonplace nature of so much of what Jesus says and does that is disarming. The lofty abstract language that might be expected of a great spiritual teacher is tempered by ordinary human experiences. In this quarter-year of gospel readings we hear Jesus speak of farming – barns, watering animals, and shepherding; of social events – wedding banquets, family relationships, and manners; of familiar experiences – making budgets stretch, losing things, anticipating the weather, and contending with illness. And all these things wrapped around a witty knack for yarn-telling.

There is no doubt about the humanity of the man Jesus. He is recognisably a person of a particular time and place. He is alert to his own circumstances in an insightful but thoroughly ordinary way. The things that signify human being are recognisably his. He 'was made man,' as the Nicene Creed puts it.

Here is the wonder of the incarnation – God's Son amongst us as one of us. He laughs and worries and labours and thirsts – and all those other creaturely feelings and needs that mark every one of us.

'True God from true God' and a particular person of a particular time and place. Our particular voices must give voice to that particularity. Yes, we must speak of eternal verities but not at the cost of that human aspect. As Bishop Libby Lane puts it, we must speak of 'the love and invitation of God in everyday ways.'

THE COMMONPLACE OF LIVING

Again and again in the sermons that follow we are asked to use scripture to think through the commonplace experiences of our lives. Whether those commonplace things be about our use of money, a sense of loneliness, what sharing table-fellowship means, moving to a new house, or just where our efforts to build bridges with other people should be directed. In each instance we are asked to notice, in Jenni Beaumont's words, 'who is overlooked?' – certain that God requires more of us than a casual acceptance of popular prejudices and an easy avoidance of inequalities that work to silence voices that need to be heard. In the 'symphony of salvation' (Victoria Johnson) every player has a part.

GRIST FOR LIFE

Examining the immediate isn't easy. Real issues can amplify already disturbingly challenging words from scripture. Raewynne Whiteley so clearly demonstrates that in her use of the questions prompted by a local tragedy alongside Jesus' parable of the Rich Fool and his barns (Proper 13). As she forthrightly concludes, 'What we earn and what we own can't save us. Only God can.' Putting issues in an obviously human-shaped frame doesn't necessarily make for comfortable listening, but it can be that grist for living of which Deirdre Brower Latz writes.

Brett Ward asks us to consider who is being transfigured in the Transfiguration. Using Saint Augustine's expression 'the eye of the heart' he points to a kind of seeing that goes beyond the physical and conceptual – a 'new kind of seeing makes all the difference. The eye of the heart is the eye that looks at the world from the place where God dwells – which is within each of us.' Such seeing transfigures everything; turning the ordinary into disclosures of God. The humanly particular and the divinely eternal. Can incarnation mean anything less?

Sunday 4 August 2019

Trinity 7, Eighteenth in Ordinary time, Proper 13

Where do we put our trust?

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

By Raewynne Whiteley

Discipleship and Vocations Missioner in the Church of England Diocese of Southwark, former parish priest and sometime lecturer in homiletics

Context: Suburban parish with a mix of ages and backgrounds

Aim: to challenge people about where they put their trust

It was almost unbelievable. Just after peak hour, a huge road bridge began to crumple and fall, big segments dropping 60 or more feet, cars plunging into the river. Amazingly, most people survived. What might have been a tragedy, with deaths in the hundreds, was still a tragedy, but one laced with grace, as story after story emerged of escapes from sinking cars and rescues from fragily balanced vehicles. But not everyone survived.

Reading the obituaries, you realise that these people could have been any of us: consultant, construction worker, dance teacher. Just ordinary people trying to live ordinary lives.

But one person caught my attention. She'd just talked with her husband on the phone, and headed down the highway, a route she didn't normally take because there always seemed to be construction delays. She was driving in her new Mercedes 280. 'It was her dream car,' her husband said.

That story caught my attention because it's so similar to the story that Jesus tells in our gospel today. It's of a man who is doing so well that he decides that the barns he has aren't quite big enough to hold his crops, let alone all the other things he has bought.

And so, he decides to rebuild. Get rid of the old buildings and put up some new ones, with plenty of space. And although Jesus doesn't say it, I wonder if he also thinks that if he builds new buildings, everyone will notice how prosperous he is and accord him appropriate honour.

But just when the man is getting into his building project, he dies. He'll never get the benefit of those wonderful buildings. And there is nothing in the buildings that could save him.

When tragedy strikes, our usual response is to ask questions. 'Why did this happen?' And the answer is, all too often, that we know why. Because bridges weren't maintained, because buildings were built in flood plains, because someone drank too much and got behind the wheel of a car.

But, Jesus suggests, there is another question to ask, 'So what should I do?'

There are simple answers: spend on infrastructure; don't buy a house in a flood plain; be careful what you drink before driving home.

But another question lies beneath that one: 'what do I trust?' Do I trust in the skills of engineers to save me? Do I trust in my decision-making skills? Do I trust in what I own?

Most of us put our energy into the things we trust, the things that we believe will make life safer or better and live our lives accordingly.

When we hear Jesus talking about greed, we think, 'I'm not greedy; I don't really want more than my fair share; I've worked hard for it.'

But then he turns the conversation toward something far more substantial, far more uncomfortable: death. Because trusting in money or possessions or anything else physical can't, in the end, save us.

That doesn't necessarily mean that we have to sell up everything, give it to the poor, and abandon ourselves to others' generosity to survive. But it does mean that

we need to be critical of our own spending and the things we own. Is this something I need? Or am I using it as a substitute, to fill a hole, to make me feel better, to trust in? It's about being wise about the things that we own, and not imbuing them with power that they do not have.

In the grand scheme of things, what we earn, what we own, are secondary to our faith and trust in God. Therefore, Jesus suggests, our faith and trust in God should guide our use of them. We should make decisions about how we spend our money and where we allocate it on the basis of our love of God and our Christian faith: living with generosity rather than greed, making choices that don't just benefit ourselves, but honour God.

That's the practical side of Jesus' story. But there's another part to it. As I was talking with some parishioners about the bridge collapse, someone asked, 'If I were to die, would my husband talk about my car?'

How we live with money isn't entirely private. People make conclusions about us based on the choices they see us making. When they see us focusing on our own benefit, they may conclude that we are wisely preparing for the future or that we are greedy. When they see us focusing on the others' needs, they may think we're stupid or that we are generous and the sort of people they want to know.

And if they know we are Christians, they will make conclusions about the Church, and about God. As people who are called to live out our faith, to be salt and light to the world, to draw others to Christ, how we live with money in a society that places an awful lot of importance on it is one of the most significant acts of witness that we do.

Somehow, we've found our way from the collapse of a bridge in Minneapolis to living wisely with money. It's quite a way. But what binds it together is the knowledge that death brings life into perspective.

And part of that life is how we

live with money. What we earn and what we own can't save us. Only God can.

And to remember that everything we do, every choice we make, we do as people claimed as God's own, and witnesses to the gospel.

Tuesday 6 August 2019

Transfiguration of Our Lord

Beyond Appearances

Daniel 7:9-10,13-14; 2 Peter 1:16-19; Luke 9:28-36

By **Brett Ward**

*Parish Priest of Holy Trinity
Eltham in the Anglican Diocese of
Southwark*

Context: Parish Mass in a diverse, lively, thoughtful suburban congregation

Aim: to explore the concept of 'the eye of the heart'

The Transfiguration is unusual, we hear it twice a year. Today, on its feast, and earlier in the year on the Sunday before Lent (for us Anglicans), and during Lent for most others. But although it's familiar to most of us, it's also one of the more difficult Gospel stories.

FAMILIAR OR NOT?

Reading it again has left me wondering if we might look at the Transfiguration of Jesus from a different perspective. I was left wondering if the immense change that happens in this story isn't a change to Jesus but a change to the three disciples: to Peter, James and John.

The whole experience is mysterious and overloaded with symbolism, some of which we might pick up quickly, while we'll probably find that other aspects of the story leave us puzzled and pondering.

We get a hint of the resurrection, still a long way off. We get clear signs that Jesus is understood as

the one who is fulfilling all the ancient promises of the Hebrew Law and the prophets. The fact that it's happening on a mountain top echoes Moses and the Ten Commandments. Perhaps it even contains a suggestion of the story of Abraham when he almost sacrificed his son Isaac on the mountain top. The 'departure' they were discussing was literally an 'exodus,' so there are plenty of hints of other parts of the ancient stories too. You get the idea.

LOOKING DIFFERENTLY

So far, then, it sounds like I've contradicted myself. All these things happening to Jesus – how can it be that it wasn't he who was transfigured?

But what strikes me as we reflect more deeply on the passage is that all these things about Jesus were already there. They were already part of who he was, already part of the truth about him. But no one had seen them yet. There'd been occasional glimpses, hints, passing allusions. But no one had seen it all together in the way it was seen all together here on the top of Mount Tabor.

And the reason for that is because when we look, we usually look with our eyes. We see what's there on the surface (which is hardly surprising, since that's what our eyes are intended to do). But to look with our eyes, with what one writer calls 'the eyes of the mind,' is at best partial.

When we look with the eyes of our mind we see in a way which is influenced by our prejudices, shaped by our fears, our immediate concerns, our preconceptions about what we're going to see. We see through a prism of our own making.

Look at someone on the street – or even at someone sitting on the other side of church – and we see with the eyes of our mind. We make assumptions and judgements based on the cut of their jacket or their age, their grooming or their accent.

The huge change that happened in the Transfiguration is that,

unlike every bit of seeing they'd ever done before, the disciples didn't look with the eyes of their mind. They were changed. They were transfigured.

It was as if their chests were ripped open and for the first time they saw with what we can call the eye of the heart. And that new kind of seeing makes all the difference. The eye of the heart is the eye that looks at the world from the place where God dwells – which is within each of us.

For the first time, they saw clearly the person who had been in front them and alongside them the whole time. As they looked with the eye of their heart, they looked at Jesus with all their faults and preconceptions and narrow failings stripped away. As they looked with the eye of their heart, they were able to see as God sees, to see with perfect clarity like they'd never seen before.

It was only a moment. The disciples returned to the bumbling, well-intentioned but sinful characters they were before.

BECOMING DIFFERENT

Except they didn't. Because once they'd begun to look with the eye of the heart, once they'd been transfigured, there was no going back. God had opened to them a new way of seeing, a clearer way of seeing, and life had to be different. The way ahead was slow, winding and perilous, but they'd been given a new momentum in walking that way with the Lord.

The Transfiguration is an experience we're all invited to enter. This inner eye, this eye of the heart, is a way of looking which is the way of wisdom, the way of love. In the 5th Century, St Augustine wrote: 'Our whole task in life is to heal the eye of the heart so that God may be seen.'

Once that eye is healed and open, everything we see is transfigured. We see a world charged with God's grandeur, individuals made in his image and loved by him, we see ourselves as unique and beautiful people. We see without prejudice, without fear.

We see the glory of God which isn't just revealed on the mountaintop, but in the world's darkest places as well as on the High Street and in our homes.

Sunday 11 August 2019

Trinity 8, Nineteenth in Ordinary time, Proper 14

Seize the moment!

Luke 12:32-40

By Christopher Burkett

*Diocesan Director of Ministry,
Chester and Editor of The
Preacher*

Context: a morning service for a regular congregation in a large village

Aim: to reinforce the notion that every moment is a moment to serve God's purposes

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

There I was walking along New Street in Birmingham. Perhaps you don't know it. Not just the location of the railway station, it's right in the middle of the retail area of the city centre. This day, the street is its usual busy self, the shops ablaze with light. I can't remember what I was there for – probably on my way to a bookshop, or maybe a committee meeting. Anyway, there I am, preoccupied as usual, making my way slowly through the pressing throng.

All at once I'm stopped by an attractive young woman in a suit. I'd never seen her before in my life. She asks me if I can spare an hour to go with her to a room in one of the large international hotels just there. I had never seen her before in my life, what was I to say? This was years ago; I couldn't believe it. Was it real? What was I to say?

Well, I said yes, and I did indeed spend an hour with her in a room on the tenth floor. I spent an hour giving my instant reactions to the colours of oil cans! She was a

market researcher, and a major oil company was planning to relaunch its motor oil for the retail trade.

FINDING PATTERNS IN LIFE

Unexpected – it certainly had never crossed my mind that my time would be occupied in such a way. I wonder what you thought I was going to say. We are a people much given to making patterns out of what happens in our lives – planning, anticipating, ordering, striving, securing, preserving, and on and on. It's good to know where you're going, as it were. But sometimes things don't turn out as expected.

The Birmingham incident came to mind as I thought about Our Lord's words in today's Gospel: 'You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour' (Luke 12.40). Jesus makes much of being ready at every and any moment because it's impossible to predict when the critical moment will be – be ready for action, have your lamps lit. It may be in the middle of the night or it may be at dawn ... Live as if the critical moment is imminent.

Our experiences should surely alert us to the truth of Jesus' words. We know things come on us all unawares: a sudden broken relationship; a sudden illness; a road traffic incident; a lottery win; the consequence of unthinking folly; unsought promotion; or someone wants to buy that picture you painted! I know of two instances when young men have turned up at their parental home to give news of an impending wedding when the parents didn't know anyone was being courted! What comes to us unawares isn't always a disaster.

What Jesus is saying about the life of faith is that it is always in that 'unawares' frame of activity and being. ALWAYS. This we find so hard to take on board. We fool ourselves into thinking that God is just sort of knocking about, available anytime we like; and anyway, God shouldn't interfere in our busy schedules – when

we've got a moment, when it's convenient, then God is okay. Rather like dial-a-pizza if you think about it – comes when you want it, but you needn't give it a second thought when you don't. But that is as wrong as you can be about God – there are only two options, all or nothing. 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be.'

GOD'S TIMING

The distinction we have to be clear about is the difference between two Greek words for time – Chronos and Kairos. Chronos is easy enough isn't it? You know chronology, chronometer – the linear measurement of time, the time that stretches before us. Just one thing after another, as Henry Ford almost said! Kairos is more urgent and immediate and is not predictable – it is the time of the Lord God's challenge to his people; the time when the world to come breaks into the world as it is – the decisive time, the significant moment. There is no avoiding it and no way around it. The saving power that lasts forever breaks into our experiences. If we miss the kairos, there is no second chance. 'Be dressed for action,' says Jesus.

How do we translate this urgency, this decisiveness into our lives? What I take from Jesus' words is this: that every moment of living is of ultimate significance – every moment. And it is what you make of every moment that is absolutely crucial. If you are casual about God, casual about life, in the sense of just ambling along, never putting yourself out too much, never making conscious decisions about what God wants of the living you're doing, all of it, then one day you'll realise you've missed out. Every moment is a moment to let God touch your life, your living and your destiny. The moment is critical – never again will you have this opportunity; every moment an ultimate moment. How else can we expect to survive those 'unawares' that come upon us? 'You also must be ready' (v 12:40a) – now is the critical moment.

Thursday 15 August 2019

The Blessed Virgin Mary

The Assumption as an act of solidarity with the poor

Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab; 1 Corinthians 15:20-27; Luke 1:39-56

By Brian McMahon

A Catholic priest in the diocese of Westminster, serving at St Joseph's Catholic Church in Stevenage

Context: a working-class parish of nearly eight hundred members, comprising of several ethnic minorities

Aim: to communicate that the Blessed Virgin Mary stands with us in our poverty from her vantage point in heaven.

County Mayo is a really beautiful part of Ireland. You may have heard of a small town in that county by the name of Knock? It is the location of the main Marian shrine in Ireland. Pilgrims flock there every year looking for a sense of connection with something over and above themselves and this crazy world we live in. I guess you could call it transcendence. There is something of the wonder of the Garden of Eden to be experienced at Knock Shrine. I was privileged to celebrate Mass in the Apparition Chapel at Knock Shrine in the summer of last year, where Pope Francis prayed this year during his pastoral visit to Ireland. The origins of the shrine are rooted in August 1879 when, at 8pm fifteen people from the village, witnessed an Apparition of Our Lady, St. Joseph, St. John the Evangelist, a Lamb and cross on an altar at the gable wall of the Parish Church. Unique amongst Marian apparitions no verbal message was given. However, we should take note of the history of the period to deduce what message may have in fact been given by Our Lady, though no words were spoken.

The year 1879 was the height of the Great Famine in Ireland. Over a million Irish people starved to death and a greater number left the island for America or Australia. The remaining population suffered greatly at the hands of absent landlords, who unhesitatingly evicted Irish people from their small cottages because of non-payment of rent. Against this background the apparition occurred. Of note during the apparition was the demeanour of Our Lady, as described by several witnesses. In common with St Joseph and St John, Our Lady seemed to be composed of pure light as there was no physical aspect to be experienced when some tried to touch her. Her hands were raised in prayer and her head and eyes focused upwards, to heaven presumably. This apparition is illustrative of what we celebrate in our churches today, that is, the physical elevation of her sinless soul and incorrupt body into Heaven, at the end of her earthly life, commonly known as the Assumption.

Some Christians may say, 'whoa, hang on! Where does it say that in the Bible?' Well of course as Bible reading Catholics, we know it does not do so explicitly. However, we believe in a twin and complementary approach to Revelation, that is, the interplay and coherence between Scripture and Tradition. When Pope Pius XII defined the doctrine of the Assumption in 1950, he was not introducing a novelty but acknowledging what Catholics believe to have been implicit from earliest times. Pope Pius XII wrote that, 'it is our hope that belief in Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven will make our belief in our own resurrection stronger and render it more effective.'

At this point we turn sharply back to that rain sodden field in Knock. What we see there is the silent Mother of God standing in complete solidarity with a poor and disadvantaged people, exercising God's preferential option for the poor, long before that phrase was

coined. Her demeanour is focused completely in prayer on the Father, as if to say to the witnesses in that heavenly apparition, that whatever you are going through now is nothing compared to what you will experience when every tear is wiped away and that this touch of heaven that is now revealed to you, stands with you in your deprivation, is fully realised at the end of time. Heaven is with you. Just keep your gaze on the Father no matter what happens.

The Assumption is, as Pope Pius XII wrote, a strengthening factor in our belief in the resurrection, making it take effect in our lives through the support and care of a celestial mother who knows and understands the details of our suffering, whilst she stands in solidarity with us from the place where she has gone to before us. Indeed, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI put it at his General Audience in August 2016; 'By contemplating Mary in heavenly glory, we understand that the earth is not the definitive homeland for us either, and that if we live with our gaze fixed on eternal goods we will one day share in this same glory and the earth will become more beautiful.' The Assumption is an intimation of what waits for us and what we already we experience in the Eucharist.

Sunday 18 August 2019

Trinity 9, Twentieth in Ordinary time, Proper 15

We are not alone

Hebrews 11:29-12:4

By Graham Pearcey

Methodist Local Preacher, and a Trustee of The College of Preachers

Context: non-Eucharistic service in a suburban chapel with a congregation of 30 to 40 adults

Aim: to examine the role that the saints play in 'the race that is set before us'

Compared to other Christian traditions, are we over-reliant on words in our worship? Imagine if we decided to follow the example of some other denominations, placing pictures or statuettes of saints within our church buildings. Who should we pick? Modern heroes like Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela? In any case, surely not a prostitute, drunkard or murderer?

Well, interestingly, today we heard the writer to the Hebrews, in compiling a catalogue of faith heroes, include a prostitute: Rahab. Earlier in the same chapter the writer had listed Noah, who got drunk; and Moses, who slayed a man in a fight!

These are Old Testament characters, of course, but New Testament heroes are equally flawed. James and John squabbled over the best seats in the kingdom; Peter denied his Lord; Thomas doubted. Which is somewhat reassuring in 'the race that is set before us': if they could keep the faith and reach the finishing line, there's hope for me yet!

A five-year-old boy sat alongside his dad on an aeroplane. They'd taken this flight because the lad's mother, the man's wife, was the pilot; and this was her first flight as captain. Needless to say, when the boy excitedly shared this information with passengers around him, some weren't quite as ecstatic as he was! But the 'plane moved off on time, taxied along the runway, took off perfectly and climbed gently skyward; and the boy squealed, 'Way to go, Mum!' Do saints do for us what this lad did for his mother: cheer us on without getting directly involved? Or can they do more?

Derek Redmond was a British athlete who went to the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona with high hopes of a medal in the 400 metres. Come the day, the semi-final was going very well, the

finishing line within sight, when disaster struck: Derek tore his hamstring and fell to the ground. Derek's father, watching from the crowd, forced his way past stewards onto the running track, took his son's arm, and helped him limp to the finishing line. Derek won no prize that day, but he did reach the finish. Of course, the father got in trouble for what he did; but are saints like that?

One day a Catholic was defending the, to us questionable, practice of 'praying to' saints. He asked me, 'If you were facing a particularly tough challenge, would you consider requesting prayers from a Christian friend?' 'Of course,' I replied. Then he said, 'Do you believe in life after death for people of faith?' Again, I had to say, 'Of course.' And finally, he asked, would I consider requesting prayers from a Christian friend after he or she had died? It was checkmate! The Catholic explained, 'We don't pray to saints. We ask them to intercede for us.' So, faith heroes of the past can directly help us on our Christian pilgrimage. But can they do more still?

I draw your attention to Orthodox churches, that typically don't have steeples or towers, but domes. And painted on the inside of the dome is 'the cloud of witnesses', a reminder that the saintly community don't only inspire and encourage us but invite us to raise our sights heavenwards and look to Jesus. Today's Scripture referred to this 'cloud' of witnesses – the literal meaning of the Greek word 'nephos.' Such imagery, seemingly strange to us, would have been clear to the first readers. In Jewish thought clouds symbolise God's glory. The Israelites in the wilderness were accompanied by a pillar of cloud by day. Moses disappeared into a thick cloud when he received the Law. The disciples were overshadowed by one at Jesus' transfiguration. And a cloud took Jesus out of their sight at his ascension. The cloud of witnesses give glory to God and encourage us to look to Jesus.

Saint Teresa of Ávila wrote, 'I am

not asking you now to think of [Jesus], or to form numerous conceptions of him, or to make long and subtle meditations with your understanding. I am asking you only to look at him.' In particular, Teresa encouraged people to visualise Jesus' crucified body. Marathon runners are often advised, upon hitting the so-called 'wall' at around 20 miles, to try and visualise the objects ahead, and themselves successfully negotiating them. Well, when we're hitting the 'wall' on our Christian journey (as, evidently, the recipients of the Letter to the Hebrews were), the saints invite us to 'Look to Jesus ... who ... endured the cross.'

Jesus performs many functions in our Christian 'race': he's our starting pistol; he lines our route; he's alongside us aiding our steps; he's ahead of us showing the way; and he's the finishing line! We worship a crucified Christ, 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith.'

Sunday 25 August 2019

Trinity 10, Twenty-first in Ordinary time, Proper 16

Celebrating the Sabbath

Luke 13:10-17

By Trevor Jamison

Minister of St Columba's United Reformed Church, North Shields

Context: a congregation of 20-25 worshippers in a town in the West of Scotland

Aim: to rediscover 'Sabbath' as resource for just and joyful living, not as a deadening weight of regulation

'Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath' (13:10).

A female church member once told me about her experience of observing the Sabbath day. In Liverpool, prior to 1939, she and

her sister were forbidden by their father from knitting on a Sunday. He deemed that such activity constituted 'work.' When the war came, they successfully lobbied him to be permitted to knit for the troops on a Sunday, redefining knitting as charitable action. Perhaps they referenced Jesus's healing of the woman on the Sabbath in support of their request. Moreover, after VE and VJ Day in 1945, they just quietly carried on with their Sunday knitting, and nothing more was ever said.

Perhaps, like her, many of us have memories of twentieth-century Sabbath observance; stories of religious and social rules and regulations that limited what we could or could not do on a Sunday.

Back in first century Palestine, teaching in synagogues on the Sabbath day was not controversial. It was a laudable activity. What occurred on this occasion, however, was very controversial. Jesus decided to bend – or break – several of the rules so that a woman could straighten her back. His healing work done, the woman straightened up and praised God, but the synagogue ruler was 'indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath' (13:14). 'There are six days on which work ought to be done,' he says, 'Come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day' (13:14).

No doubt he had in mind the Fourth Commandment, about keeping the Sabbath day holy: 'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work ... for in six days the Lord made heaven and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it' (Exodus 20:8-11).

The world of first-century Palestinian synagogues seems a very long way away from ours today. In fact, even the Sabbath observance practices of the

mid-twentieth century seem firmly located in the past. Yet, today I want us seriously to consider observing the Sabbath. To be clear, though, this is not a call to reimpose the sort of social and legal regulations which many found deadening to life. No! We should observe the Sabbath day as being about everyone getting the chance to enjoy life to the full within and as part of God's creation. And we want to do this in freedom and with justice.

Had the synagogue leader recalled the image of God resting on the seventh day it might have occurred to him that keeping the Sabbath in the way that God does is less about rules and regulations of religious decorum and more about enjoying creation. Rather than the seventh day in the creation story being an add-on it is in fact the crown of God's creative activity. Perhaps, dare I suggest it, enjoyment of creation, not making us human beings, is the purpose of God's six days of work. If so, then for us creatures said to display God's image in their life and being, Sabbath is for rest, for recreation (re-creation) and enjoyment!

But such a Sabbath can only be fully enjoyed by all if it is equally available to all, and Jesus is prepared to bend or break several formal and informal rules of his time in order to make this so. He is prepared to 'work' on the Sabbath by healing another human being. Additionally, as a man, and contrary to social expectations, he publicly notices a woman, even interrupting religious teaching to talk to her. To top it all, he touches her, ignoring concerns of his day about ritual defilement.

These social rules, which so restricted the lives of women and others in Jesus' day, are not the rules of our day. We have different rules, though women and others might contest whether all of these provide equality for all before God. Even were we to respect or accept all such rules, which then or now weigh down women, in addition to the physical back condition which weighed down this woman, all

such rules are trumped by understanding that God's Sabbath is about joy and freedom.

People are not to be weighed down by human regulations that prevent them standing up straight, so they can enjoy life within and as part of God's creation: 'should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham ... be set free on the Sabbath day?', Jesus asks. There's no better day in all God's world to do that very thing.

Sunday 1 September 2019

Trinity 11, Twenty-second in Ordinary time, Proper 17

A place at the table

Luke 14:1, 7-14

By Jenny Bridgman

Parish Priest and Assistant Director of Ordinands in the Diocese of Chester

Context: a small, suburban congregation at an evening Eucharist which includes the laying on of hands with prayer and anointing

Aim: to reaffirm our place, and that of others, at God's table.

THE LONELINESS EXPERIMENT

Last year the BBC launched The Loneliness Experiment. Over 55,000 people responded, and 35% of all respondents said that they feel lonely 'often' or 'very often'. In our parish of 22,000 people, there might be 8000 people on our doorstep who battle with chronic loneliness. Perhaps some of us here this evening would say that we are chronically lonely.

Nowhere can one feel lonelier than when surrounded by other people, particularly if one feels unaccepted or unloved by those gathered. I am struck by how lonely Christ might have felt at this lively dinner gathering. It comes immediately after his forlorn lament over Jerusalem, full of wistful longing for meaningful

relationship with his people. Did Luke intend us to hold this longing in mind as he moves onto the account of the Sabbath meal?

Over dinner, Christ is surrounded by people, but things seem far from well, with the Pharisees 'watching him closely'. In this lonely room, how much does the sense of Christ's longing intensify as he begins to look ahead to a great heavenly banquet?

JOSTLING FOR POSITION

Jesus' teaching here was not a lesson in dinner party etiquette, even if it was triggered by the elbowing for position at the table. Instead, it was a caution against jostling for position before God. The Pharisees had form for this, concerned for their own piety and righteousness before the wellbeing and flourishing of the other. Christ's warning was clear: when it comes to the heavenly banquet, those who think they are best in the eyes of God will likely be surprised to see divine honour bestowed on those less pure, less righteous, less worthy.

I wonder how we hear this caution today? Thankfully, the days of renting pews in church, of purchasing one's position in the house of God, are long gone. But is there a warning here for those of us who are tempted to consider ourselves more holy, more spiritual, more committed, than another? Perhaps. Although I'd like to turn this on its head a little.

Father Richard Rohr writes: 'If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it'. If we are tempted to jostle for position before God, I would hazard that our competitiveness is rooted not in an inflated sense of ego, but in a lack of it. We feel so deeply insecure, so mortally wounded by life, that we cover our pain with defensive frustration:

'I have done my bit, why can't someone else have a go?'

'Why can't they commit to coming more than once every couple of months?'

'I don't want them coming in and ruining my church'

We might think these things, even if we don't always say them (but, believe me, say them we do!). What might be going on within us? What fear or pain lies beneath these thoughts?

'I have done my bit – but is it really enough for God?'

'I come every week, but they seem so much more at peace than me.'

'This is my territory: the place I feel secure.'

Here, our deepest fears trigger unhelpful comparisons in our desperation to know that God has seen us, too. If we don't begin to address these insecurities, we transmit them as criticism and competition.

BEING TRANSFORMED

Healing and wholeness are lifelong journeys. As we travel, it is not just ourselves who are transformed, but our community. The fear and self-criticism that we project onto others, when transformed into a love and acceptance of our self, leads us into deeper love and acceptance of others. When I value what I bring to the table, when I see that God values it, so I value the contributions of the other. My perspective changes; my vision enlarges. I see myself, and others, as God sees us: gathered around the table and ready to share in the fruits of his kingdom. Together, we are transformed.

If you feel lonely this evening, you are in good company. Imagine again Christ's loneliness as he was surrounded by hostile companions at dinner. Imagine his loneliness as he went on to face betrayal, desertion, and death.

If you are worried this evening about whether there is a place at the table for you, then please cling to this image of the heavenly banquet, where the humble, the poor, the crushed in spirit, will be held in highest honour.

If you think that your place at the table is threatened by your unworthiness, or by the piety of another, then hear again: at Christ's table, our own worldly standards are turned upside down,

and there is room for all.

And if you feel moved to transform your own pain and to reach out with Christ's invitation to another, then hold onto the statistic that one third of our neighbours are lonely. Perhaps a smile, a kind word, a thoughtful favour, might just be the catalyst that begins to transform the pain of another, and offers a foretaste of Christ's heavenly banquet.

Sources mentioned:

BBC Loneliness Experiment: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-45561334>

Rohr – Transforming Our Pain: <https://cac.org/transforming-our-pain-2016-02-26/>

Sunday 8 September 2019

Trinity 12, Twenty-third in Ordinary time, Proper 18

Building Bridges

Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

By Ann Jack

Retired United Reformed minister

Context: a town centre congregation of mixed backgrounds and ages

Aim: to encourage us to think about relationships with all those around us

It is strange for us to read the familiar story of Philemon. It challenges us at so many levels with our sense of the injustice that Philemon's slave Onesimus suffered. We think of his absence of human rights, and perhaps think about what it might mean if we were to experience a similar loss of rights. Yet, it is not this that Paul is concerned with. Paul doesn't challenge the rights or wrongs of slavery. He wants to allow Philemon and Onesimus to be reconciled as brothers in Christ.

Paul wants Philemon to put aside his rights as a slave owner, and to accept a returned run-away slave,

without exacting the normal punishment. Paul is asking a great deal of both Philemon and Onesimus. It would take considerable courage for a runaway slave to return to a place where punishment, perhaps even death, await. Philemon and Onesimus are both asked to look beyond the norms of society and to see a brother in Christ and to live together as brothers. It is a radical challenge.

One of the dangers of life in our times is that we can feel slavery is gone. Surely the abolitionists of the 19th century saw to that! But we are all too aware that there is modern slavery, perhaps not as socially acceptable as the slavery of old, but just as real. People have their identity documents taken and they live in fear and in poor conditions. They may be trapped in the sex industry, nail bars, construction sites, drug trafficking, even agriculture. The list of possibilities is endless, and in every case, there are the people who control the operation and benefit from the work of those who are enslaved.

The story of Onesimus, and Paul's appeal to Philemon, is perhaps a reminder to us that we need to think carefully about the value of the goods that we purchase and, if something appears to be cheap, it may be cheaper than it should be at a price to a fellow human being. Our faith needs to impact all our decisions.

What is harder perhaps is for us is to link this call, to loving relationships rather than exploitation, with the harsh reality of Jesus' own words. How can we love God if we hate our mother, our father, or those around us? Surely, we must start to practise love in our family unit, in our community, in our church, so that we can hope to learn to love God?

Yes, Jesus called his disciples to leave their homes, their families and their livelihoods to follow him and to be dependent upon God and the generosity of others for their living. They were to give up anything that might get in the

way of their love of God and their commitment to building up God's kingdom here on earth. There was an urgency about the work, something we sometimes lose sight of. Jesus' disciples needed to be willing to go where they were needed, and he recognised the pressures and the missionary needs for the new community that he was building.

In our own time and in our own communities, as disciples of Jesus we are called to follow his example and to reach out to the most vulnerable. We can only do this if there is time and space, and energy for us to do this.

The urgency of the task for us is as real as it was for the first disciples. Around us we see that the poor, the vulnerable, the people who are different, have become the target of increasing numbers of hate crimes. It is as if the lid has been taken off some 'Pandora's box' and released the worst of human nature.

Many attribute this change in behaviour to the rise in the use of social media. But whatever the cause, it makes the call to live loving and faithful lives, reaching out to our neighbours both near and far, even more important.

There is hope. There are many wonderful examples of Christians and those of other faiths and none working together to build bridges across communities in this country and across the world.

Perhaps our calling in this generation is to take a stand against the populist messages of hate and difference and help to build bridges across divisions and to reach out to the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalised. It may not be popular, but it seems to offer us a way to be Jesus' disciples today, making a difference in whatever way, however small, for the building of God's kingdom of love and justice.

Sunday 15 September 2019

Trinity 13, Twenty-fourth in Ordinary time, Proper 19

Moses, the Calf, the Shepherd and the Sheep

Exodus 32:7-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

By Rob Esdaile

Parish Priest of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church, Thames Ditton, Surrey

Context: a congregation of 150 of all ages in a largely wealthy middle-class suburban parish in which many have very pressured lives

Aim: to let Jesus lead us beyond a religion of denunciation to the joy of encounter

We have an interesting menagerie of animals in our scriptures today – one golden calf (inanimate, of course) and a flock of 100 sheep, very much alive (but one of them sadly lost). The Golden Calf is heaped high with opprobrium in the biblical record. It is the very epitome of idolatry, something inherently sacrilegious, blasphemous, a betrayal of the Covenant (and if we were to read on for a few verses we'd see Moses throwing down and shattering the two stone tablets of The Law in vivid expression of the fact). However 'unreal' and lifeless it may always have been, the Golden Calf had and has enormous symbolic power. The people didn't want a living God. (Do we ever, really? That's the question!) They wanted a mascot to go at their head and lead them into battle. They wanted the validation of their own choices, a 'god' entirely in their power, following where they chose to go, rather than showing them the way and challenging their choices; a 'god' to baptise their prejudices.

IDOLATRIES, RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR

Disturbingly, Aaron the Priest was

all too willing to placate the mob and give them what they wanted, crafting a petty deity as a substitute for the great 'I AM'; an idol in their own image rather than the One who might teach them to discover God's image in each other. The story reminds us that religion as easily cloaks self-interest and exploitation as unmasking them and protecting us from such abuses. Even when society dispenses with faith (as much of our culture claims to do), the false gods emerge regardless: the artificial idealisations of youth, beauty, image; the shameless pursuit of power; the cults of convenience, consumption, leisure, and the rest. Sun worship, too, is alive and well and is a principal motor of the travel industry! Idolatry is in our DNA. The Golden Calf is clearly damnable – and promptly gets destroyed by a furious Moses. If the incident is recalled it is offered as an awful warning to the people, not held in fond remembrance.

NOT CONDEMNATION BUT JOYFUL HOMECOMING

But if we turn now to the two Gospel Parables which we hear today, the atmosphere could not be more different from the Sinai scene. Here there is no room for condemnation, but rather only joy. Perhaps we do not notice the fact, but there is no criticism of the wandering sheep, although anyone who has ever gone in search of a straying dog or a lost cat (never mind a wandering sheep in desert heat) knows how utterly frustrating the search can be. The lost sheep isn't labelled foolish, naughty, wicked or perverse. Its lostness is simply stated, because the lostness is not the point. Lostness is only the prelude to being found, to a triumphant homecoming, borne aloft upon the shepherd's shoulders, and to a celebration among friends. As with the Parable of the Prodigal Son which follows, there is no time for condemnation in these two stories, just the urgency of gathering people to celebrate the Good News: 'I have

found my sheep that I have lost' and 'Rejoice with me, I have found the drachma I lost.'

THE CRAZY HEART OF JESUS

In these Parables Jesus takes us to the heart of his mission and his understanding of his role. These stories are his answer to the Pharisees and the Scribes who criticise him for 'welcoming sinners and eating with them.' Moreover, so Jesus says, these celebrations here below are only a faint echo of the greater rejoicing among the angels in heaven. He is acting out the cosmic drama of redemption, one dinner party at a time! As he says a few chapters later, at the end of the story of Zacchaeus: 'The Son of Man has come to seek and save what was lost.' (Lk 19.10) and as John 3.17 famously puts it: 'God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world but so that through him the world might be saved.'

Here we hear the heart of Jesus – and here we discover that his mission is also a little crazy. Leaving 99 sheep unattended in the wilderness in order to find one is not normal behaviour! Calling out the neighbours to tell them you've found a few quid down the back of the sofa would certainly raise an eyebrow in our understated suburban society ... and it is also probably going to cost you a good part of that drachma in tea and biscuits!

RECOGNISING OUR STORY

Which face of religion are we more comfortable with? A furious Moses denouncing idolatries and safeguarding the purity of faith from the holy Mountain, or a slightly crazy shepherd going in search of the lost and holding parties in their honour when he finds them? And how great is our God – One able to lead us where we need to go or a pocket-sized deity who follows our desires? And how open are we to the 'Friend of Sinners?' On the one hand, are we ready to be found when we are lost, or would we rather pretend that all is fine? On the other, do we

have the freedom of heart to share in others' joy when the Lord seeks them out? For that joy amidst brokenness is a glimpse of heaven.

Sunday 22 September 2019

Trinity 14, Twenty-fifth in Ordinary time, Proper 20

Crisis demands a response

Amos 8:4-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

By Duncan Macpherson

Features Editor, Roman Catholic Permanent Deacon, retired Lecturer in Theology at Saint Mary's University, Twickenham

Context: a Sunday Eucharist in a mainly suburban parish; the congregation comprises people of all ages, from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds

Aim: to awaken a stronger sense of discipleship and an active concern for the poor.

HOW DO WE RESPOND IN A CRISIS?

Crises demand a response. A sudden accident, a suspicious package, a house on fire – ring 999! Or maybe the crisis is more personal. You realise that you have run into the buffers and you are at a loss to know what to do next. In Luke's Gospel, we heard about how a steward responds to a different kind of crisis. The meaning of this parable seems a bit obscure. Was Jesus praising the man for being dishonest or (more improbably) was the landowner praising the steward for cheating him? Or was the man being dishonest at all? Maybe he was simply cutting down on his own commission to gain favour with the peasants who would then feel that they owed him a debt of gratitude after he had lost his job. Anyway, 'the master praised the dishonest steward for his astuteness: For the children of this world are more astute in dealing with their own kind than are the

children of light.' The obvious lesson is that the followers of Jesus need to be as resourceful in spreading the kingdom as businessmen, shady or not, are in covering their backs in matters of finance.

A MATTER OF TRUST

But the Gospel passage links the story with the more general theme of wealth. Economic justice is demanded. If we cannot sort out the problem of inequality between rich and poor, what chance do we have of making proper use of the much more important spiritual riches that Christ came to bring? If you cannot be trusted with money who will trust you with genuine riches?

GOOD NEWS

It sounds more like a warning than good news: 'No servant can be the slave of two masters: he will either hate the first and love the second or treat the first with respect and the second with scorn. You cannot be the slave both of God and money.' But it is good news, because it is pointing to true riches. In psalm 19, we read about riches 'more to be desired than gold, sweeter than honey from the honeycomb.' As the 16th century saint and theologian, Robert Bellarmine put it: 'What is easier, and more agreeable than to love goodness, beauty and love, all of which you are, O Lord my God.'

But loving God above all things, loving God more than money, means loving other people more than money too. It means being committed to working for justice and against poverty. We live today in a world in which millions of people live on less than a dollar a day and others produce more and consume more than they need. Amos was describing economic injustice 2 500 years ago, but some things do not change. We can still 'buy up the poor for money and the needy for a pair of sandals.'

In the words of Pope Francis: 'Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to

feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons... Free market economics has created a tyranny, in which people were valued only by their ability to consume.' We can go into a local chain store and spend fifty pounds on a pair of shoes or sandals produced in a sweatshop in Asia where the worker receives only a few pence in payment – often under age, working in unsafe, unhealthy cramped conditions, denied the right to form a trades union or to go on strike—without the means of redress that the Church proclaims as basic human rights.

So, what do we do in this crisis? Pope Francis has called on world leaders to end the 'cult of money' and to do more for the poor, 'Poverty is the flesh of the poor Jesus, in that child who is hungry, in the one who is sick, in those unjust social structures. We should pray for an end to the unjust exploitation of the poor in our world.' Paul reminds us that we should pray for the decision makers, 'prayers offered for everyone – petitions, intercessions and thanksgiving – and especially for kings and others in authority.' We need to pray for all those with political authority so that they will always serve the cause of peace and justice. However, we can't leave it to them. Prayer and almsgiving are important, but the social teaching of the Church makes clear that it is not enough. We need to campaign for justice for the world's poor. 'If you cannot be trusted with little things who will trust you with genuine riches?'

Sunday 29 September 2019

St Michael and All Angels

St Michael: warrior patron

Revelation 12:7-12

By Alison Fulford

Priest in Charge of the United Benefice of Baddiley, Wrenbury and Burleydam

Context: small rural church celebrating its Patronal Festival for the first time in many years

Aim: to explain the role of angels, particularly St Michael, in the Christian life

SPOTTING ANGELS

Who can see a depiction of a warrior angel here in the church? In our east end window, we can see a beautiful illustration of our patron: St Michael. He is dressed for battle but kneeling in prayer, his wings folded back and his sword at his side. By tradition he is one of the chief angels, a so-called archangel. Today we are going to consider the place of angels, particularly our war-like St Michael, in our Christian pilgrimage towards God.

CUTE LITTLE CHERUBS?

Let me refresh your memory about how we understand angels in the Christian tradition. What we believe is a little different from what you might think angels are all about if you gleaned your angel theology (angelology!) from a gift shop. Images of angels are highly popular: gorgeous creatures with wings, shown on teacups, posters, trays, cards, memes, the lot. Many people find these images inspiring, even consoling. As I take funerals I have heard many people say that their loved one is now an angel. But let's just pause a minute.

It is true, that many of these images have been copied from great artists of the past who were working within the Christian

tradition. The way that they are often used now, however, has floated free from its original moorings.

We need to remember that angels are creatures but in a different manner from us humans. Just as we are certain that we are human and not cats and will never become a cat, so we can be certain that we are human now and in the life to come. We will not change species and become an angel. The difference is this: we humans are body and spirit, but angels are just spirit. Just as we have the vocation to praise and love God in the midst of our human lives, so angels too have the responsibility to serve God, to act as God's messengers and to love and praise God.

GOD'S CREATURES OF POWER AND MIGHT

In our reading today we see a brief description of St Michael, warrior angel, living out his vocation to serve God. The writer of the book of Revelation, John, sees a war open up in heaven, with a being described as a 'dragon' stirring up rebellion against God. John can't find enough negatives to describe this enemy. As well as being a dragon, he is called the serpent, an accuser and a liar. You have the sense of a great energy of malevolence. And yet, St Michael and his angels prove themselves the stronger in battle. The dragon is defeated in heaven and thrown down to earth, where he is allowed to continue to make trouble for a limited time.

The writer John had to struggle with the experience of exile and persecution. If he is asking the question 'why are we suffering?' then our reading is part of his answer: because the devil has been allowed to maltreat believers on earth. This is not the whole truth, however. Inspired by the book of Daniel, where St Michael appears to challenge evil and help God's people, John represents the archangel as an agent of God, offering God's own mighty protection and assistance for struggling communities.

ST MICHAEL POINTS US TO GOD

We live in a different place and time from John the Revelator, as he is called in the famous Blues song. So, what can the figure of St Michael – our patron – say to us today? It seems to me that the key to making good sense of angels is to focus on how they help us understand and worship God. Angels do not want to be the point; their job is to point to God. When we ask, 'why is St Michael important to us?' the answer needs to point to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Look at the illustration of St Michael in our window once more, glowing in the morning light. Let's allow each part of him to help us apprehend our loving God. He has the gift of speedy swooping wings, reminding us that the Spirit is never far from us, and always close. He has the gift of chainmail, helmet and sword, reminding us that the battle against sin and evil has been won in Jesus Christ. Lastly, his gift of prayer reminds us that our heavenly Father promises to provide all we need and calls us to petition for it.

PATRONS PAST AND PRESENT

In the past, this church benefited from the gifts of the powerful local family, the Mainwarings. They were our ancestors' human patrons. But we also have a powerful spiritual patron in St Michael. The Mainwarings may have paid for the timber, the glass and the priest, but the heavenly general St Michael can keep us focused on the life of the Triune God. His names translates as 'who is like God?' No created being, that is for sure! But in God's graciousness, we can catch a glimpse of some aspects of God as we consider the angels.

Sunday 29 September 2019

Trinity 15, Twenty-sixth in Ordinary time, Proper 21

Mind the Gap

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Luke 16:19-31

By Joe Aldred

A bishop and ecumenist responsible for Pentecostal and Multicultural Relations at Churches Together in England

Context: a multicultural inner-city Pentecostal congregation

Aim: to encourage hearers to beware the gap between rich and poor, haves and have nots in our world

Come with me on a short journey now as we ponder together the dangerous gaps of inequality and injustice in a world of power and of plenty. Of significant concern here are three important facets: the indulgences of the rich, the ignoring of the poor, and some consequences of the gap that result from the way we live.

I invite you to think about the phrase heard often on the London Underground, 'Mind the gap!' This repetitive warning alerts travellers to a potentially dangerous space between the platform and the train step – it is a metaphor for life. Some gaps are wide enough for a foot to fall through, others are not quite as wide but still hazardous. In life we must mind the gaps that threaten peace, harmony and prosperity between rich and poor, men and women, worker and employer, bourgeoisie and proletariat, Muslims and Christians, theists and atheists. My brothers and sisters, life teaches us that it isn't always possible to close the gaps that exist, but we must mind them; that is, remember they are there and mitigate against them. In the one holy, catholic church to which we all belong we must mind the gap between denominations, between different theological and traditional streams that intensify

disunity and blunt mission and worship.

Time does not permit me to speak of all the gaps that exist, so allow me to reflect a little on the gap between rich and poor, haves and have nots.

INDULGENCES OF THE RICH

The rich are given a hard time throughout Scripture and yet many of the characters presented in the Bible were rich in land, stock, money and power. Wealth and the way the wealthy live is the source of much contention in our world today as we read about greedy bankers, overpaid footballers, corrupt politicians, millionaire prosperity preachers. There is no denying that there are some extravagantly rich people in our world – the overwhelming proportion of the earth's resources are taken up by a privileged minority. But, rich and poor are relative terms. In fact, each of us is rich or poor relative to someone else. It is so tempting to sit in judgment of those we deem rich while absolving ourselves from the adverse effects of our relatively wealthy lives. Our own opulence can blind us to the plight of those far from us – in time, space or class.

Forgive me if I do not pick on the super-rich alone here, because I believe the Old Testament prophet Amos puts a lot of us in the dock as those who 'sit at ease in Zion,' enjoying and indulging in wealth and power. We live well, dress well, eat well, pamper ourselves even as we complain about the excesses of those we deem richer than ourselves, and all the while pay little regard to our poor neighbour. Mind the gap!

IGNORING THE POOR

We sometimes leave modern day Lazaruses to wallow in their sores, with stray dogs and cats and birds for company. We are prone to pass the homeless by, ignore refugees and asylum seekers, displaced persons, those cowering from bombs raining down in the struggle against international terrorism and extremism. Our self-indulgence can

leave little room to see and grieve over those whose lives are in ruin from natural disasters and wars, and it's sometimes convenient to assuage our guilt by giving £2 a month to the most unfortunate in our world, often the victims of past and present western exploitation and excesses.

Andy Mitchell in his book 'Whose wealth is it anyway', reminds us that Jesus did not come from a wealthy background. Born in a manger in Bethlehem, when he was circumcised on the eighth day in Jerusalem his parents seemingly could not afford the usual ox or sheep as accompanying sacrifice, just a pair of doves. But Jesus lived life to the full in selfless agape love. We need a new moral and ethical code. In his book 'Good for the poor – Christian ethics and world development', Michael Taylor warns against Christians giving easy answers to difficult questions and argues that a faith-driven morality should seek to be and to do good to others for good's sake (p. 6). This requires each of us to take a hard look inward, instead of pointing a finger of blame at others. Mind the gap!

CONSEQUENCES OF THE GAP

Amos warns that our neglect of the principles of God to love and care for the poor in our lifetime can result in the bondage of exile. It is possible to be in exile right where we are! And beyond this life, none of us really knows what happens. The Bible offers a few glimpses and one of them is in our Luke's Gospel text. Ignoring Lazarus in life landed the rich man in the torment of hades. The poor man Lazarus ended up in Abraham's bosom, paradise. Eternal reality may be a little more complex or simple, but the warning is clear. Love your neighbour or you risk a miserable eternity.

Today's call to mind the gap points us towards those we wittingly or unwittingly allow to fall into dangerous gaps: women, ethnic minorities, those without education, those on benefits, those with disabilities. Or those we simply don't like or don't get along

with; those who are not our kind of people. Mind the gap!

CONCLUSION

Brothers and sisters, we have been called by God to model minding the gap of disadvantage and inequality in our shared humanity. God in the incarnated Jesus models this for us and we must make it happen now. As we recognise the gaps in life let us remember that by the power of God we can help others mitigate them for human flourishing and to the glory of God. Mind the gap.

Sunday 6 October 2019

Harvest Thanksgiving

Jesus on Bread

John 6:25-35

By David Muskett

Methodist Minister in the East Solent and Downs Methodist Circuit, Tutor with the College of Preachers, author of 'Jesus on Gardening' and the forthcoming 'Jesus on Food'

Context: Methodist Church, Harvest Festival; several items of food both fresh and tinned/dried, displayed and offered, will be auctioned or donated for the local food bank.

Aim: to make a connection between bread/food and the bread of life which endures to eternal life, i.e. a sacramental understanding of Harvest via the food bank

People get hungry. Go without food for long and you get hungry. Some seem to need to graze all day and feel hungry if they haven't eaten for half an hour, others don't seem to be hungry for hours but eventually everyone needs to eat. Gifts from Harvest Festival contribute to feeding those who would otherwise be hungry.

What hungry people need is

real food. When they find a source of food they'll come back to it, especially if it's cheap – or free! The crowds around Jesus had been fed when they got hungry and they continued to follow him. They might have been amazed by his teaching with authority; they might have been impressed by his signs and wonders in healing people. Jesus sees behind that and points out that they have a primary need. They get hungry; they need to be fed. Jesus is a source of food.

John's account of Jesus' life and ministry is structured differently from the other three Gospel narratives. John is less bothered by chronology and more thematic; he wants to make connections. John's depiction of Jesus is as a person who makes connections and turns conversations from the physical and material concerns of those he encounters to the spiritual aspects of life in relation to God.

So, in a conversation two chapters earlier with a woman about the need to drink water from a well he starts to talk about 'living water' and where that comes from. Now, faced with a crowd that he sees who are hungry he talks first about food that endures to eternal life. This is not bread – that will go mouldy. This food is doing the work of God, believing in the one God has sent.

When that seems problematical Jesus goes back to bread and points out the difference between the bread God gave through Moses and the food that endures. The Manna went mouldy and those who ate it died. In physical terms that bread sustained life on earth for a while but didn't give eternal life. Jesus wants to talk about bread that endures.

But Jesus is never so heavenly minded that he's no earthly good; always what he says and does in reference to eternity have application in the here and now. Jesus talks of spiritual things, but they have an earthed, material reality.

In this case Jesus talks about bread from heaven that endures to eternal life, but it is present in the

here and now and works through a belief in him, a reliance upon him, a faith in him to make that connection between earth and heaven – between humanity and the Kingdom of God.

In a sense John summed it up in the prologue to his Gospel: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It provides the scheme for all that he has to say about what Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection are all about. Jesus is the connection between earth and heaven and makes it possible for us to live now and in eternity.

It means that at Harvest we can celebrate food and give thanks that we will eat because we have gathered in another harvest. We give thanks that there are many who work hard all year round mostly unseen to ensure that there is food in our shops and on our tables day by day. We give thanks for the material, physical food that we have and that we can help to distribute to those who do not have enough. Jesus helps us see beyond the practical and physical to the spiritual. We do not live on bread alone but on the word of God that endures for eternity.

As we take and eat, as we give and distribute through the food bank, so we pray for and know his presence to feed for eternity because we do the works God requires.

Sunday 6 October 2019

Trinity 16, Twenty-seventh in Ordinary time, Proper 22

Growing in faith

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4, 2
Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10

By Wilma Roest

Team Rector, Richmond Team Ministry, Richmond upon Thames

Context: medium-sized congregation in a town setting at Sunday morning main Eucharist

Aim: to encourage hearers that

growing in faith requires active participation

Moving to a new house is a pretty challenging experience. First packing everything up, then moving it all to a new place, where the joy of unpacking begins: boxes are opened, books find their new places, furniture is being moved about, and pictures get a place on the walls. The computer is connected once again to the internet, and slowly, very slowly, normality resumes, albeit in a new venue. The new venue does mean though that things are different. For a little while the new home will still be very new and even a bit strange but soon it will be home. To embrace new things or new ideas is at times very good. It makes us think about what is important and precious. I would suggest that embracing something new by just getting on with it, is probably the best way to make that the new becomes familiar. A new house becomes home by living in it, by getting on with life. It never becomes a home it you don't unpack the boxes! A new job becomes familiar by getting on with the work and enjoying it, by getting to know your colleagues, the work routine. Of course, it can be daunting to embrace something new, but with friends and family around, the scariness of the new will soon fade.

New faces, new people, new tastes, new customs, new traditions, new surroundings, new sights, new sounds, new views, new voices, and the list might go on. We all face newness at some points in our life.

Jesus encouraged his followers to have the courage to attempt new things. In today's gospel reading, the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith. And Jesus replies: 'If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea', and it would obey you.' A big challenge they would not have faced before! Would you have the confidence and courage to embrace the new things

you may find on your path and make them your own? However, there is something you need to help you make new things your own.

Something you can't influence. Let me try and illustrate it. Suppose I give you a violin and tell you that I'm looking forward to hearing you in a concert next week? Would that be possible? Just having a violin doesn't mean you can get up and play in a concert. For that you need years of practice and a musical gift. We know about this about playing the violin, but we sometimes forget it when it comes to our faith.

Suppose I give you a Bible and a cross? Just because you have these things, does that mean you have all the right answers, can make the right decisions, are perfect in every way? We think the faith we have is what it is, and it won't change. But we need to grow and develop and embrace the new opportunities our faith may give us. In other words, we need time to develop and grow our faith.

The word faith is not used often in Luke's gospel. Up until this point, the gospel writer has used the word faith five times. Luke only seems to use it in special circumstances, such as in the story of the men who lowered their crippled friend through the roof, so Jesus could heal him. Or in the story of the woman ill for many years who touched the hem of Jesus' clothes. It is also used in the story of the storm on the lake where Jesus asks the disciples, where is your faith?

We often distinguish the faith that 'moves mountains' from basic trust in God or Christ. Our tendency to distinguish these two types of faith tends to be rooted in the assumption that the former has to do with manipulating some kind of supernatural power and the latter has to do with submitting to an external authority or set of beliefs or standards of conduct. Yet Jesus' very statement 'your faith has saved you' to those he helps implies that something else is going with faith. To have faith means having our whole way of

perceiving and responding to life transformed by the richness of God's creative justice and power. What seems 'impossible' for us is 'possible' for God.

When Luke uses the word faith in his gospel, he doesn't talk about something kept only for special days or for emergencies, but he talks about an active faith, faith that shapes the way we think and behave.

As a church we rightly rejoice every time when we baptise a child or adult. Then we rejoice again when someone takes the step to be confirmed. But growing faith is not just about those two events. Increasing faith is about what happens throughout our lives, every day. It's about working with the little bit of faith you may have. The prophet Habakkuk sums it up very succinctly: 'The righteous live by their faith', better translated as 'the righteous live by their faithfulness'. To grow in faith means faithful living, daring to embrace new things, daring to trust in God.

Sunday 13 October 2019

Trinity 17, Twenty-eighth in Ordinary time, Proper 23

The Thankful Leper

Luke 17:11-19

By Georgina Pinches

Retired Salvation Army Major

Context: a regular Sunday morning Salvation Army congregation of around fifty worshippers

Aim: to remember to be thankful in all things

Leprosy is a chronic, progressive bacterial infection causing sores and eventually nerve damage. Disfigurement from leprosy is often because of damage to the nerves in the skin resulting in infections and wounds. Although treatment is available it is still found in areas of

deprivation and poverty. In ancient times of course it was everywhere, including Europe. What also made it so unbearable was the rejection that those with the disease experienced. They were outcasts, beyond the pale, people to be avoided at all costs. Remember the beginnings of the AIDS epidemic in the eighties? How many people were treated appallingly when it was discovered they were HIV positive? Well this was the same kind of thing.

Desperate people do desperate things and here we have recorded by Luke the story of ten lepers, shunned, spat on, discarded by society who, in their desperation, approached Jesus. No NHS walk-in service for them. No local A&E to go to for treatment. No local GP to refer them to a specialist. To add insult to injury the man who was commended for thanking Jesus was a foreigner – a Samaritan – considered to be almost less than human.

Here we are then, yet another person who met Jesus who did not go away disappointed. The other nine also were not disappointed but they omitted to say thank you to the one who had so readily met their need.

As people of faith we are in no doubt about what is known as the Golden Rule. It's part of the wider conversation in ethics generally to 'do to others as you would have them do to you'. We know how we should behave, yet if we were to be entirely honest, sometimes, after doing our good deed, we are a bit miffed if the recipient of our kindness doesn't show their gratitude. Loving and helping our neighbour is a scriptural injunction. Sucking up their ingratitude takes a bit more effort!

Jesus was just coming into a village on the Galilee/Samaria border. He was shouted at from a way off, by a bunch of ten men – smelly, dressed in rags, daring not to get too near for fear of reprisals – and they gained his undivided attention. He told them to show themselves to the priests as the law dictated because of course he

was going to make them clean. Off they went, but only one man turned back and remembered to say thank you.

Someone once said that perhaps the saddest thing about being an atheist is that when their lives are going well they have no one to thank. Well it could be that those who don't believe in any kind of God wouldn't agree. But CS Lewis went on to suggest that perhaps it's not so much not believing in God that's the problem but believing in a God who loves us.

There are several things about this narrative that we can consider.

BEING THANKFUL EVEN IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

The background to this story is grim. Leprosy is a dreadful disease and it's easy for those whose lives are straightforward to suggest that being thankful in the midst of chaos is something we should do. But it's a bit like forgiveness. If we forgive someone who has done us great wrong, it is actually also good for us. It's not easily done, and it may take a long time to arrive at that place, but forgiveness works. And so does thankfulness. We sometimes forget to be thankful and we take things so often for granted but saying thank you is good for us too.

We shouldn't say, 'Lord, as soon as there's enough money, I'll follow your instructions.' We shouldn't pray, 'Lord, if you'll just solve this issue in my family, I'll start to I'll put my faith in you.' Instead, God places a demand for faith on us, before anything at all has changed. This happened with the lepers even during their suffering. They exercised faith and immediately something happened.

MAKE SURE YOUR THANKFULNESS LEADS TO ACTION

One healed leper came back. He put his celebrations on hold, turned back and 'praising God aloud' as the story says, he threw himself at the feet of Christ and thanked him. Jesus never asked any of the men for thanks, yet it was the foreigner

who had the wit and wisdom to express his gratitude. The man demonstrated his thankfulness, and the challenge is for us to do the same. Here was a man whom the Jews would have despised because he was a Samaritan, willing and able to thank God for his healing. This reminds us as Christians that our thankful response to God should always result in action and commitment to the world that God has placed us in.

I remember that when our children were small we always tried to ensure that they sent a thank you note for Christmas and birthday presents received. Just a little thing but important. It was a sign of appreciation of a blessing received and also reminded our children to be thankful. Hopefully we can do the same.

We are God's children – so be thankful!

Sunday 20 October 2019

Trinity 18, Twenty-ninth in Ordinary time, Proper 24

Learning for Life

2 Timothy 3:14–4:5 and Luke 18:1–18

By Victoria Johnson

Canon at Ely Cathedral and Trustee and Tutor for the College of Preachers

Context: a principal Sunday service, either Eucharistic or Non-Eucharistic

Aim: to encourage Christian disciples to engage in learning, and 'practice' their faith.

Those who have ever attempted to learn a new language, or a musical instrument or have trained for a marathon, understand very well the need to be persistent and practise, practise, practise. It is only possible to gain deeper skill and knowledge through a disciplined approach to learning, whether of mind, body or

soul. One cannot just speak French without a considerable investment in learning vocabulary, words, and verb tables and actually conversing with others. One cannot just pick up a violin and play a Concerto, as one cannot run a marathon without months and months of training and careful preparation. In a culture where many things come instantaneously, and where knowledge can be acquired at the touch of a button or the swipe of a screen, how do human beings form habits and practices which can sustain them? In terms of our approach to Christian learning and living as a practising Christian, for many learning stops at confirmation or at Sunday school, and there has long been a culture of church going which only requires one to listen to a ten-minute sermon once a week! Is that enough? Where can we mine down into our faith tradition and learn more, either individually or corporately?

In Paul's letter to Timothy, there is an instruction to continue in our learning through the reading of scripture as something inspired by God. It is also useful for teaching, for reproof and correction, and for training in righteousness. This act of learning is not being done to get a certificate or so we can brag about how well we can quote from the Bible. This learning is to equip the community of the faithful for every good work that they may be called to engage in. This is no easy task, and the Christian must drink deeply of the well of wisdom and also be prepared to be challenged by their learning. Sometimes learning something new can be like wrestling an angel through the night, it can be uncomfortable and painful and very occasionally we may emerge from the experience feeling bruised or even, as Jacob did, out of joint. We should always expect to be changed by our knowledge of the living God, but if we don't open our hearts and minds to learning about God through prayer, through study, and through worship, there is no prospect of being changed at all.

We may stagnate, and our faith may become brittle and irrelevant.

Paul also suggests that the fruit of learning, the proclamation of the message of Jesus Christ, may not be received with open hearts. Whether the time is favourable or unfavourable we are to proclaim the message with the utmost patience in teaching and carry out our ministry fully, as an evangelist, to those who hear and those who refuse to hear. How we do this is a matter for the whole church to reflect on. In an age where many have itching ears, what can we do or say to make a difference? Jesus offers us a parable to reflect on. He advises his disciples to pray and never lose heart. Is it accidental that the term 'disciple' is connected to the word 'discipline'? A disciple is someone who is persistent in following a way of life and being open to learning, in this case from Christ himself.

What is Jesus teaching us? He tells of a widow, who is persistent in prayer, persistent to the point of being a nuisance. The judge she was appealing to did not fear God, or have respect for people, but this woman's quiet perseverance caused him to reconsider his judgement. If the heart of an unjust judge can be softened, anything is possible. And how much more will God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?

The parable then is about persistence, and about practice. It is about attending to our Christian faith with the seriousness it deserves and shaping our lives as disciples in the truest sense of that word. To be a Christian is to be someone who is open to learning about God, about ourselves and about our neighbour safe in the knowledge that this is a life-long task, and we are called to sit at the feet of the one who was called 'Teacher' and who said, 'follow me'.

By persevering in faith and by living as a disciple of Christ, we become a witness in ourselves, in our very being. Through our words and actions, informed and formed by prayer and worship, word and sacrament we become a living

testimony to our faith. We give an account of the faith that is within us not by pomp or shows of piety, and not by passing exams, but by quiet persistence, day by day, in season and out of season. Our practice of the faith then becomes so much a part of who we are that we are able to speak a new language of love and proclaim the good news; we are able to play our part in the symphony of salvation and we are able to run the race that is set before us.

Sunday 27 October 2019
Last Sunday after Trinity, Thirtieth
in Ordinary time, Proper 25

Supplicants all

Ecclesiasticus 35:12-17; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

By Duncan Macpherson

*Features Editor, Roman Catholic
Permanent Deacon, retired
Lecturer in Theology at Saint
Mary's University, Twickenham*

Context: This is also an appeal for funds for World Mission Sunday at Eucharist in a suburban parish in a mainly well-off locality

Aim: to stress that we have no claim on God's mercy except for our need and that it is in that spirit that we extend his mercy to others

Some other churches celebrate Mission Sunday in February but, in the Catholic Church, today it is World Mission Sunday, celebrating the mercy of God by spreading his love by supporting the missionary work of the Church, and the missionary work of the Church is not only about spreading the message but also involves bringing help to those who are most in need. We heard in the first reading that God 'does not ignore the orphan's supplication, nor the widow's as she pours out her story.' And nor should we. I know this congregation will be more than generous.

THE PAPAL KNIGHT AND THE LOAN SHARK

In some ways we might be inspired by the example of a papal knight in my story. He got his decoration because he was a generous supporter of the missions as well as lots of other good causes. He went to Mass every day, never over-indulged, was always faithful to his marriage vows and never cheated anyone in business. Perhaps he couldn't really help feeling a bit smug when he went into the cathedral to pray. The loan shark wandered into the same cathedral and sat down at the back. Suddenly it dawned on him that he was under the judgement of God for all the people whose lives he had ruined. He knew that he was a grasping, selfish rogue. Then, in a moment of sincere repentance he prayed and asked for the mercy he had never shown to others. Amazingly, his prayer was heard while that of papal knight was not.

I tried to find this modern parallel because sometimes we hear the Gospel stories that Jesus told so often, and we miss the point. The world he talks about is in some ways different from our own. We call people we don't like 'Pharisees' but we don't know any real Pharisees. They lived exemplary, religious lives, trying to keep the law as perfectly as possible so as to the usher in the golden age when the Messiah would come to rule the world.

MISSING THE POINT

Because we are used to thinking the Pharisees were so awful, we miss the point that they were the kind of people we would have thought an asset to any parish or Christian community. Where would be without our Pharisees? They are reliable pillars of the Church. They are involved in parish activities some of them might even become deacons! Religion for them is very important but it can easily become an end rather than a means. The Pharisee prays but he is not talking to God but to himself.

However, it is no good comparing today's tax collectors with those at

the time of Jesus. Tax collectors today are simply civil servants doing their job. The tax collectors of Jesus' time were part of a group who squeezed as much as possible out of people so that they could pay the Romans and still have a fat profit left over. They were worse than the modern loan shark because they weren't only ripping people off, they were doing it for the enemy occupier. The words of Jesus in the Gospel must have caused real offence to the respectable pious people who heard him caricature the presumption of the Pharisee in the parable.

A GREAT REVERSAL

But what is bad news for the Pharisee is good news for the sinful tax collector: 'This man went home again at rights with God ...' The tax collector stood some distance away: the distance between the

two was both ritual and social but, as Augustine tells us, 'the tax-collector stood far away yet drew nearer to God.'

Like the parable of the Prodigal Son and the parable of the Tax collector and the Pharisee, this is a warning for the self-righteous. Both parables, like so many of the parables of Jesus, are parables of role reversal: the mighty being put down from the thrones and the humble and the weak exalted; the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent empty away.

GRACE ALONE

So, am I the tax collector or the Pharisee? Of course, I am both. It is bad news for me when I admire my own virtue and achievement without realising that all I have or achieve is pure gift. When I give for World Mission Sunday, I am giving away something that is not really

mine—no need to feel smug about how much I give! and the parable is bad news if I compare myself favourably with others. It is good news for me if I can identify with the tax collector or the loan shark. Paul tells us 'We who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.' Like the tax collector we know that we have no claim on God's mercy—it is pure gift. We have been set free from worrying about achievement, about what we have accomplished, and we have been set free from guilt and failure.

In the Eucharist we approach God as forgiven sinners with the certain knowledge that we are loved and accepted by God's grace alone. We have no claim on God's mercy except for our need and our openness to receive it. It is in that spirit that we extend his mercy to others through our giving, on World Mission Sunday.



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Women's Voices 2019

Women Preachers, Women Hearers

This year sees the fifth Women's Voices day conference, originally launched by The College of Preachers through this magazine, and a sell-out each year!

Deirdre Brower Latz will be the keynote speaker. Deirdre is Principal of Nazarene Theological College, Manchester.

Jenni Beaumont will present findings from her recent research on women's sermons in cathedrals. Jenni is an active researcher in homiletics and is Assistant Curate at St Mary the Virgin, Davyhulme.

Liz Shercliff will launch her new book *Preaching Women: Gender, Power and the Pulpit* at the event. Liz is Reviews Editor of *The Preacher* and Director of Studies

for Readers in the Diocese of Chester.
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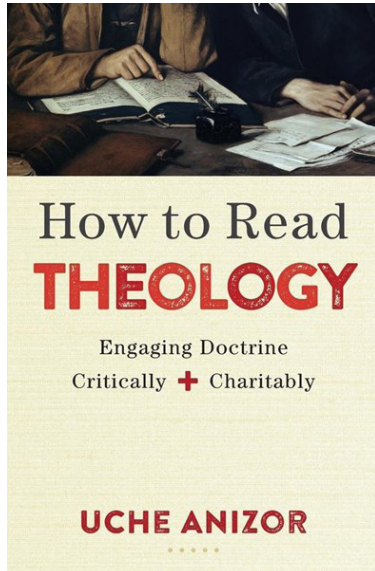
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and she will forward your interest to me.

Christopher Burkett

THE
PREACHER

How to Read Theology: Engaging Doctrine Critically and Charitably



Uche Anizor

Baker Academic, 2018, £13.99

ISBN 978-0-80104-975-0

Review by Jenny Gilbertson, Reader in the Diocese of Chester

Uche Anizor describes his book as 'a primer for those wishing to sharpen their skills as readers of theology'. An Associate Professor of Theology at Biola University, Anizor is writing primarily for fledgling theology students but his book also has something to offer the fully-grown reader of theology.

As the title suggests, the book is in two parts. The first challenges the reader to read theology charitably. This really boils down to reading with an open mind and heart rather than dismissively and Anizor suggests that two things will facilitate this. The first is to understand something of the theologian's own backstory – her church context, her social and cultural context, and the controversies and issues at play when the work was written. Anizor's own church context is evangelical as is readily ascertainable from a swift online search and as is indicated in his text. He concedes that locating any given theologian's context may not always be possible. He could perhaps also have acknowledged the risk of pigeonholing. Things

are not always what they seem.

Second, drawing on biblical texts, Anizor suggests that to read charitably it is necessary to be alert to one's own pride, prejudice, preferences and impatience. This is helpful for the newly embarked reader of theology who may be anxious about the risks of being exposed to theological views which differ from his own. But it is also valuable for the seasoned reader who may well have become comfortably entrenched in her own viewpoint.

The second, rather longer section of the book presents a systematic and orderly 'how to' approach to reading theological texts. Anizor's research interest is theological method, and he suggests ways in which the student might handle the relationship between theology and scripture, tradition, reason and experience. By and large the careful structuring of these chapters leads the reader along clearly marked paths through the theory of studying theology. At times though, the argument is over-structured and the path becomes lost in a thicket of section, sub-section, bullet points

and so forth. More brief examples of the theories applied to actual texts would have helped to flesh out this section.

The two sections do not stand in isolation from each other. Anizor rightly argues that the charitable reading is also the most intelligent reading. The risk though is that the reader may be overly intimidated by the demands made to research the theologian being studied, identify the theological

genre and constantly analyse context, use of logic and approach to scripture – all the while bearing in mind other competing understandings. The upshot could well be that he never dares pick up a theology

book again! In his epilogue Anizor does acknowledge the risk of being overwhelmed and encourages the reader at least to start somewhere, even if that start is small.

For the preacher? 'Good theology forms good people', writes Anizor. It is surely the case that good theology – charitable theology, non-complacent theology, rigorous theology, also forms good preaching.

“ This really boils down to reading with an open mind and heart rather than dismissively ”

SHORTS by Liz Shercliff, Reviews and Resources Editor

Everyday Conversations with Matthew



everyday conversations with matthew
john holdsworth

John Holdsworth
SCM Press, 2019
£12.99
ISBN 978-0334057468

Everyday Conversations with Matthew is just the kind of book most preachers will appreciate. For one thing, it is not too big, yet it is packed with gems of wisdom and

ways of making connections between the Gospel of Matthew and its twenty-first century readers or hearers. At last we have a book by a theologian and working minister that encourages not only exegesis of the text, but also eisegesis, a way of starting with contemporary experience and then looking to the text to see what is mirrored there.

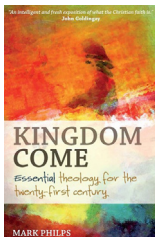
The book is peppered with worthwhile 'To Do' sections, and realistic scenarios linked to different sections of Matthew. Let me give you a

flavour:

Chapter 7: The Beginning of the End begins with the story of Sue and Derek. Sue attends a home group that has been studying Matthew's Gospel. Derek is a sporadic church attender, mainly going to support his wife. He teaches maths and has a keen interest in science.

The week he agrees to go to the study group, they are reading Matthew 23-25, the apocalyptic climax of Jesus' teaching prior to the passion narrative. I leave you to imagine what might have been said!

This is a very helpful book, putting the Gospel of Matthew into a contemporary context, and suggesting some ways in which it might link with everyday experience. It is reasonably priced and a worthwhile addition to the shelf of preachers or home study leaders.



Mark Philips
Sacristy Press, 2019
£9.99
ISBN 978-1789590036

Unusually for a serious theological work, this book is divided into bite-sized sections that seem easily digestible. The single-word titles of almost all chapters (seven out of eight) indicate an intent to present profound truths accessibly. In fact, in his Preface the author comments that one of his motivations in writing was to rescue theology from impenetrable obscurity.

Addressing doctrinal themes relevant for twenty-first century

Kingdom Come: Essential Theology for the Twenty-first Century

teachers of the faith, Philips looks at Kingdom, Covenant, Cross, Commission, Character, Charism, Christology and New Creation straightforwardly and relevantly. Chapter one, for example, begins with different understandings of Kingdom, before looking at biblical definitions, and the background to Jesus' own understanding. Kingdom should be at the heart of our theology, according to Philips, and he presents six coherent reasons for this. In chapter two, Covenant, he considers the difficulties of translating some

biblical ideas into English. This is a very grounded book.

Although endorsements on the back of the book are clearly from a particular group of churches, this belies the book's wider appeal. The final chapter is clearly influenced by NT Wright's teaching: 'God is not planning to make new things but to make existing things new,' and some of it is recognizably evangelical in flavour. The books breadth and depth make it a valuable resource for, as it claims on the cover, 'anyone in, or training for, church leadership'.

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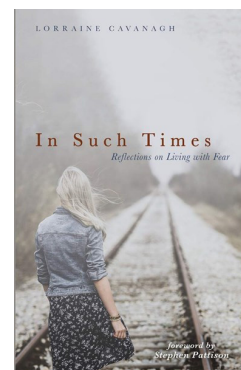
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In Such Times: Reflections on Living with Fear

Lorraine Cavanagh

Cascade Books, 2018, £16.00, ISBN 978-1532641763

*Review by Liz Shercliff, Director of Studies,
Diocese of Chester*



This proved a difficult book to review. Sensitively yet challengingly written, it drew me in, and I found myself using it as an aid to reflection rather than a book to critique. I believe that every preacher could benefit from doing the same.

The book offers an antidote to the kind of overconfident preaching that seeks to inoculate hearers from the pain of fear, and a challenge to honest preaching where hearers are challenged to live life courageously. Fear both connects us to and alienates us from the other. Facing up to fear is not enough, however. Through the pages of the book, Lorraine Cavanagh encourages us to realise acceptance and compassion – we are securely loved, and therefore can love others. In a world apparently dominated by fear in so many levels, here is a vision of a compassionate yet vulnerable world, a worthy aspiration for human life.

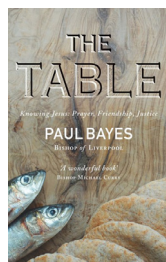
Beginning with 'Original Loneliness' the human state for which God has compassion both before and after the 'Fall', the book moves on to 'Fear of Failure' (Chapter 2). The introduction is uncompromisingly honest: 'Hiding from others also involves hiding from reality, including, in certain cases, the reality that requires that we take responsibility for ourselves in situations that feel threatening.' The chapter goes on to consider the kind of abuse and rejection in and by the church aimed at making people conform, and the risk of teaching that leads some to believe that 'being excluded is something they must learn to expect, that it is even part of their life's purpose.' Chapter 3 considers 'Fear and Faith', using as an example, President Trump's fear of 'loss of face' – this is a very contemporary work! 'Fear and the Church' (Chapter 4) looks at status anxiety, competition and

deep truth. 'In the World but not of It' (Chapter 5) discusses the relationship between church and world: 'Although we are bound up in our particular contexts – historical, social, economic, and cultural – we are not imprisoned in them ... As a people of faith we are free. But we are also part of the world of today and we bear its loneliness.' Again, an issue for preachers to consider in our work.

'The Outsider God' (Chapter 6) envisions evangelism as radical hospitality; 'Fools Rush In' (Chapter 7) discusses the importance of trustworthiness in leadership; 'Return to Center' (Chapter 8) concludes with the challenge to 'surrender into the goodness of people', to 'take responsibility for the other from within what might be called the collective heart.'

This is certainly a book that preachers should read, for the sake of our own reflection and for the sake of those to whom we speak.

The Table: Knowing Jesus: Prayer, Friendship, Justice



Paul Bayes
Darton, Longman,
and Todd, 2019
£12.99
ISBN 978-
0232533729

In this book the Bishop of Liverpool proposes a vision of the Church as a table, built by the carpenter Jesus and reaching into

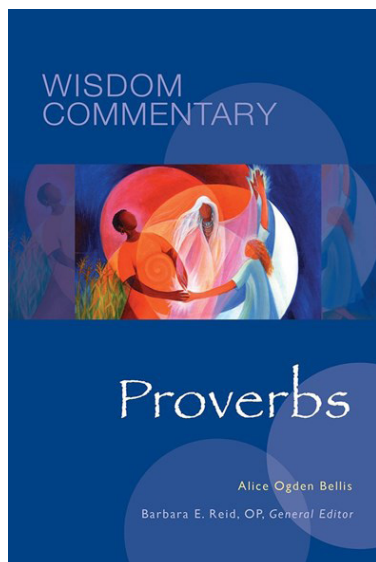
every corner of society. At the table everyone is invited to sit and eat, agree and disagree, as equals with their Lord. The table is built to accommodate a rich diversity of people, and when the Church constructs barriers to inclusion it is acting against the will of the Host.

The current decline of the C of E, and the church in England, is seen in a positive light. The people who should be invited to

this table are not in positions of power and privilege, but 'on the edge and underneath.' If the church finds itself there, it finds itself in the place of ministry it is intended to inhabit. Justice that demands quiet and determined perseverance are part of the call of Jesus to the church.

This is a readable and approachable book, offering a clear understanding not only of Bishop Paul's theological perspectives, but also of doctrines of inclusion. To preachers it offers a way of seeing the church as hospitable space and discipleship as involving prayer, friendship and justice.

Wisdom Commentary: Proverbs



Alice Ogden Bellis
Liturgical Press, 2018, £25.99,
ISBN 978-0814681220

*Review by Liz Shercliff, Director of Studies,
Diocese of Chester*

The *Wisdom Commentary* aims to provide feminist interpretation of every section of the Bible through serious, scholarly engagement with the text from a feminist perspective, focusing on how the text is heard and understood by women and men today. Commentary is provided from a range of religious traditions, diverse age groups and varying cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds and contexts. It is an ongoing and ambitious project, with 58 volumes planned. Some are already in print, including this one on Proverbs.

The title of the series, *Wisdom Commentary*, reflects the importance to feminist theology of the figure Woman Wisdom in Scripture, and wisdom offered to

the whole church by feminist biblical commentary. Authors of this series explain their understanding of feminism and the feminist reading strategies they use in exploring their text. The aim of the series is a better understanding of biblical text, not a rejection of it.

The commentary on Proverbs offers a 'gender sensitive reading', alert to the language used and how it affects interpretation of the text. The introduction to the commentary and its methodology is thorough and useful.

The layout of the commentary is familiar and easy to follow, although I did particularly appreciate the way in which 'Translation Matters' are highlighted. For example, in the comments on Proverbs 1:2, the writer highlights the fact that the Hebrew word used can be translated as both 'learning' and 'knowledge', meaning both 'know and learn'; 'know a person – both socially and carnally'; and 'know how to do things on a practical

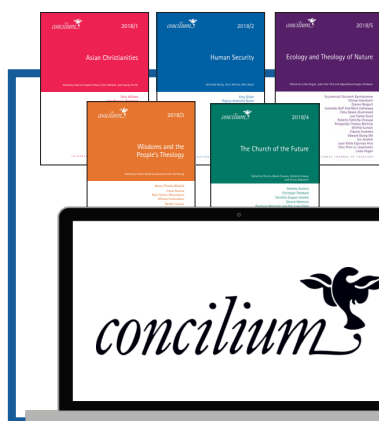
level', which implies wider significance for the collection of sayings we call Proverbs.

The commentary is supported by a wide range of sources (the list of works cited runs to 8 pages) and cultures – an African womanist comments on Proverbs 31, for example.

The work stands out from other consciously feminist works by commenting on the whole text (indeed, by the end of the project, on the whole Bible) rather than just those that explicitly mention women. It aims to be faithful to the ancient texts and to explore how they are heard by contemporary men and women.

It is possible to buy a book at a time, or the entire series can be bought for a 'lock in' price – a good option for churches, libraries or commentary enthusiasts.

This is certainly a worthwhile venture, and for preachers offers a way of balancing existing commentaries with a more gender sensitive approach.



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