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Preaching Crisis



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CONTENTS

| | |
|----------|----|
| Features | 4 |
| Sermons | 13 |
| Reviews | 30 |

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Editorial

Avoid or Aver? Preaching Crisis

It was an obvious extension of feedback. As well as the usual group of fellow students asked to comment on the trial preacher's sermon, questionnaires were distributed amongst the congregation hosting the worship. Comments and questionnaires were then looked at in the following week's sermon class. The class considered the sermon a 'good effort' but it was the response from one of the questionnaires that made the feedback memorable. The person had written that the preacher had included far too many references to the news of the week. 'I don't come to church to hear about the dreadful things that are going on in the world,' the respondent insisted.

Perhaps we preachers don't often hear that criticism of what we say put so starkly, but we are all familiar enough with the pressure to be positive and hopeful. We may well temper our tone, content, and illustrations with a positive gloss that aims to attract rather than disturb. After all we are keen to encourage our listeners to want to return again and again. In a time of a pandemic, preaching to any group, Internet mediated or face-to-face, is difficult enough to maintain without adding discomforting application or distressing detail. To be judged as 'off-putting' isn't an achievement towards which we strive. The questionnaire respondent

might be one of those who in recent times has turned off the TV news or cancelled the paper. Things reported have quite literally been 'dread-full.'

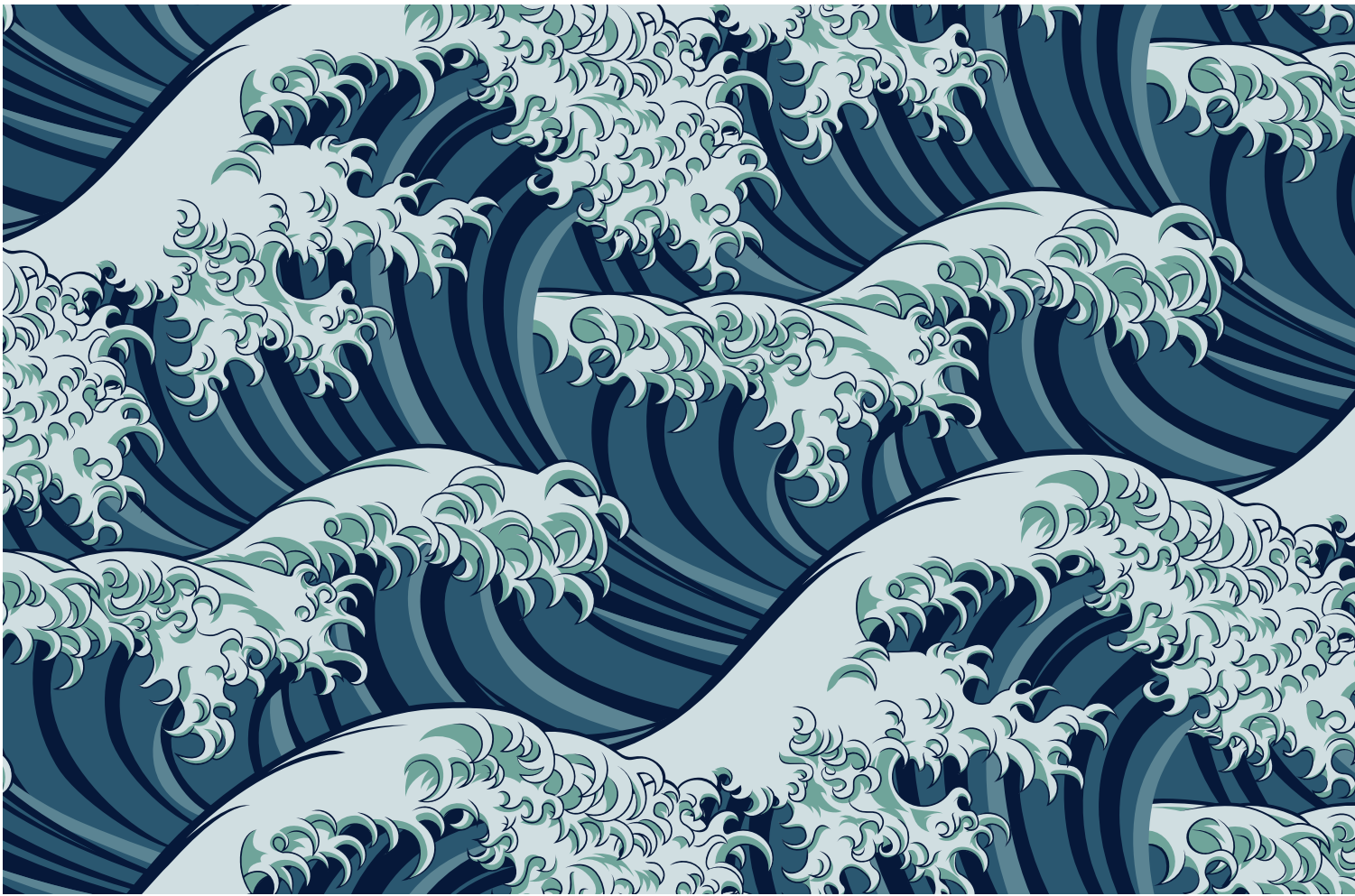
Aware of the burden of that dread, the temptation to simply pass-by the searing questions and awful realities is a real one. But it is a temptation that Christian preachers must resist. If we give into the temptation – even out of a humble acknowledgement of our own ignorance or fear – we add weight to a worldview that excludes God. To aver that this is indeed God's world is not to ignore our uncertainties or anxieties, but to assert that God's grace cannot be thwarted, even by a pandemic. We dare to name that which too often goes unnoticed: grace even in tribulation.

It is not that we are overbearing or naïve about harm or hurt, nor that we are aloof from others' worries, but that we know crisis lived with God changes the dynamic of human experience for the better. It is in that certainty that we dare to name the realities of our day and relate them to the eternal verities towards which Scripture directs us. We speak of these things in order that the gentle healing word of God can be heard even in the clamour of our troubles. We preach crisis, that its burdens may be bearable and life celebrated – even now.

Christopher Burkett, Editor



The Preacher is the journal of The College of Preachers

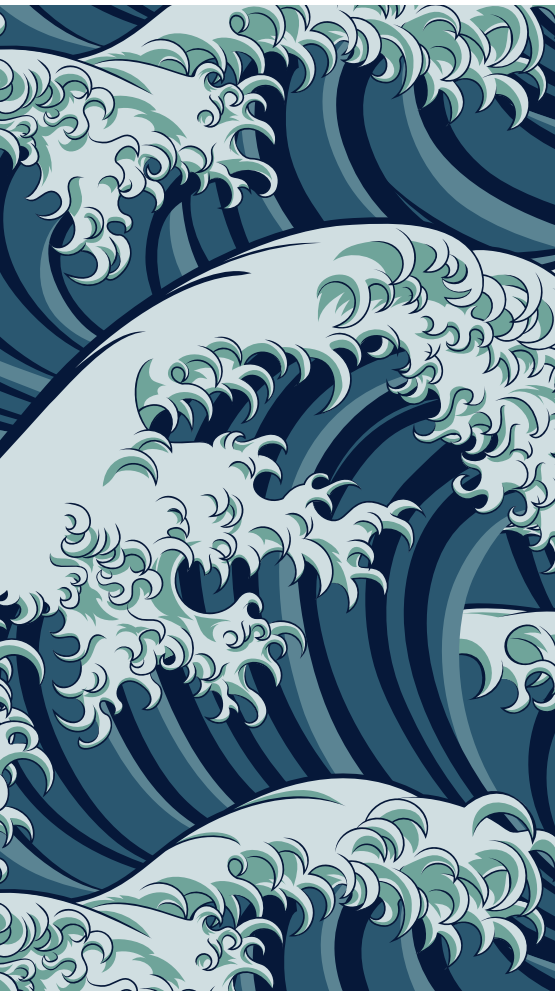


Preach that Pandemic, Brothers and Sisters!

By Meg Warner

Meg is a Reader in the Church of England and a member of its General Synod. She teaches Old Testament/Hebrew Bible at Northern College in Manchester and speaks and preaches across the UK and internationally.

Her most recent books are Joseph: A story of resilience (London: SPCK, 2020) and Megan Warner et al (eds.), Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma (London/New York: Routledge, 2020).



There is quite a lot of scholarship about the psalms of lament, but almost all of it has the same two things to say about them. The first thing is that we have sort of forgotten about the lament psalms, and the lament tradition more generally, in the Christian churches. The second thing is that we're not especially good, as churches, at acknowledging the disasters going on all around us. Everyone seems to have their own story of this church/world disconnect. Scottish theologian John Swinton (2007), for example, writes about his experience of attending church on the Sunday after the Omagh Bombing and being astounded to find that the bombings were not mentioned, and that the music chosen for the service was a selection of unrelentingly upbeat praise songs.

We ought to be able, in churches, to name our shared experiences and to acknowledge pain, shock, or strong emotions. If not in church, then where? This kind of naming and acknowledgement, however, can be just as challenging as it is important. And sometimes the lectionary, if we follow it, can seem to make it all the more difficult. I know of a Church of England priest who discovered that the lectionary appointed the 'Talitha Cum' (little girl get up) story (Mark 5:21-43) as the Gospel for the Sunday after a much loved teenage parishioner, the daughter of stalwart members of the congregation, had committed suicide by hanging. His first inclination had been to choose another reading altogether – the story seemed just too close. After reflection and prayer, however, he decided to embrace the story as a gift. He preached an honest and raw sermon in which he said, 'there will be no Talitha Cum for our little girl.' He reports that this sermon had been cathartic and had marked an important turning point in the emotions of the congregation, as people found themselves, sometimes for the first time, able to cry and to support one another in their pain.

This is a dramatic, but not unique, story. In fact, our Scriptures are an enormously valuable resource for this ministry of naming our experience (and in my experience the lectionary functions as 'helper' in this regard surprisingly often). You will already have your own list of the reasons why the Bible is an important resource at times of crisis and suffering (such as during a pandemic, just to take an example at random), but I'd like to share another that you might not have picked up on from your own reading.

Just as we worship in the context of our daily lives, and of the myriad joys, sorrows and crises that beset them, so the biblical authors wrote in the context of their lives and experiences. A recent trend in biblical scholarship

has been to note the significant disasters and traumas suffered by the Israelites during the biblical period, and to connect them with the writings they produced. Some scholars today would argue that much, if not most, of the biblical material was written in the immediate aftermath of major disasters, which seem to have functioned as catalysts for the production of Scripture. In the Old Testament period the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Babylonians in the sixth century BC, and the consequent exile of many of the Israelites in Babylon, was the most significant of these disasters, although the period immediately following the return of the exiles appears to have been almost as traumatic. In the New Testament period the second destruction of the Temple in AD 70 was the major disaster. It is no coincidence, say scholars, that three of the four gospels were written between 70 and 100 (ish) AD. Even Mark, the first of the gospels, was written in the context of a build-up of violence.

Some biblical books name the background circumstances of the time of writing. For example, the major prophets trace the experiences of the fall of Jerusalem, the exile and the return. Ezra and Nehemiah tell of events following the return from exile and offer accounts of tensions and hardships. Other books were written, or received significant editing, after all these events, but tell stories of earlier times, not mentioning current events. The gospels are just one example – the few references to the destruction of the Temple in their pages are indirect and oblique. What does this mean for us, reading and preaching the Bible in our current context? I'd like to suggest that it means four things in particular.

THE BIBLICAL TEXT IS ROBUST

The biblical books are not in any sense trite or fragile. They come out of the experiences of

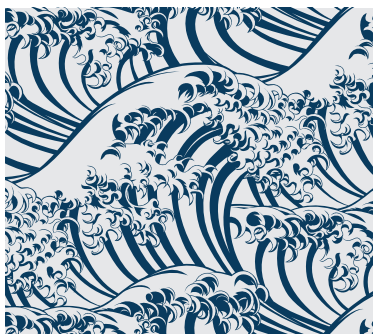
individuals and communities who have gone through the most painful and violent experiences that life can throw at human beings. They are written against a background of famines, wars, enslavement, political power struggles, natural disasters, forced migrations and apparent betrayal and desertion by God. The Bible has street cred. It understands suffering. And that means that the biblical stories, letters, poetry etc. that make up the Bible are robust resources for preaching in the context of disasters, including pandemics.[1]

THE BIBLE TELLS US WE ARE NOT ALONE

Biblical stories remind us that we are not alone, and that our trials and tribulations are not unique. As unimaginable as some of today's disasters may seem, God's people lived through comparable experiences during the biblical period and we have their stories. We can therefore read, and preach, for the 'company' of others who understand the depth of the pain of our experience. We can also read, and preach, for the 'company' of the countless Jews and Christians who have found solace and meaning in these pages over millennia.

THE BIBLE OFFERS US A LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF SUFFERING

English Bible Scholar John Goldingay describes the psalms as '150 things that God doesn't mind having said to him'.[2] When there are no words the psalms can step in and fill the gap. They cover pretty much every human emotion (edifying and otherwise). They also authorize expression, before God, of pretty much every human emotion (edifying and otherwise). The Bible also offers a literature to those who have no stories. Trying to live without stories can be excruciating, and one of the effects of trauma can be to make story-telling difficult or impossible. Here is a set of stories



(robust, pre-loved and authorized) that can become our own stories and function as a foundation for our identity building, even after the most disorienting and destructive experiences.

THE BIBLE MODELS RESILIENCE

Story-telling is an important element of building resilience. Specifically, what is important for resilience is preparedness to be flexible in the telling of the story of one's life, allowing it to shift and develop with changing experiences. The re-telling of one's story needn't involve dramatic change. It is best when the resulting story resembles a tapestry or carpet, into which new experiences are woven, influencing the colour and pattern of the whole, but without making it an entirely new carpet. There are examples of re-telling of stories throughout the Bible. As a very quick example, think of the first words of John's Gospel, 'In the Beginning was the Word.' What does John achieve by taking the first words of Genesis to begin his Gospel? Old Testament books written after the return from exile show how stories, laws and ideas changed in response to this event, and in response to the new circumstances in which the Israelites found themselves. New Testament books show how all these things changed again in light of the reality of Christ.

CONCLUSION

So, what does all of that mean for us in our preaching during this pandemic and at other times of crisis or disaster? First, I encourage you, in your preaching, to acknowledge what is going

in the world right now, and how it is affecting people's lives, well-being and emotions. This acknowledgement can require some degree of bravery, but I encourage you, secondly, to trust the Bible as a primary resource (and perhaps also to put some of your faith in the lectionary if you belong to a tradition that uses it). Just as you are used to finding parallels and linking themes between the various passages read in services at which you preach, get used to looking for parallels and linking themes between the readings and the world in which you and your congregation are living. Find out as much as you can, too, about the history of biblical times, and especially of the time or times when the readings were written. What had their authors experienced, and how might hearing about those experiences help to open up the readings for members of the congregation and help them to see the movement of the Holy Spirit in what is happening right now? 'Interesting Times,' like those we're experiencing now, actually create opportunities for profound exchanges between preachers and congregations. It's time to take a risk and say it how it is. Preach that pandemic, brothers and sisters!

REFERENCE:

John Swinton, *Raging With Compassion: Pastoral responses to the problem of evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

[1] For more background to reading the Bible through the lens of trauma, and these four observations, see my longer discussion in Megan Warner, 'Trauma Through the Lens of the Bible' in Megan Warner, et al (eds.), *Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma* (London: Routledge 2020) 81-91.

[2] Goldingay reportedly does not recall having said this. Generations of his students, however, remember him saying it!



Preaching in a Time of Crisis

By Maurice J Nutt

Maurice is an American Catholic priest in the Redemptorist Congregation who holds a D.Min. degree in preaching from Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Missouri. He is a Parish Mission preacher and an adjunct professor of preaching. Currently he serves as the Convener of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium and lives in New Orleans, Louisiana.

How long must I carry sorrow in my soul, grief in my heart day after day? How long will my enemy triumph over me?' Psalm 13:3 (NAB)

Psalm 13 is a cry for relief, a questioning of how long must this suffering last, a plea for swift divine intervention. The conscious feeling of separation from God has brought the psalmist to a place of despair. If we have ears to hear and hearts to hold, there are

desperate cries reverberating from the streets of cities large and small throughout the world. These global cries of anguish, anger, and agony are from the oppressed and those who stand in solidarity with those who suffer injustice and inequality. Literally the world watched the excruciating video of an apprehended 46-year-old African American man by four Minneapolis police officers, hand-cuffed face down on the ground as one of the police officers relentlessly pressed his knee into his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. The man, George Floyd in anguish cried

out, 'Please, I can't breathe' to no avail and became unconscious and died of asphyxiation. Moments after George Floyd's murder and continuing on today protests have erupted globally. An incalculable number of unwarranted killings of black people have occurred at the hands of those sworn to protect and serve our communities. How long must we carry sorrow in our souls? Is there a word from God?

Juxtaposed to the psalmist crying out to God seeking solace, these protesters are crying out in our streets with revolutionary demands for change and a more

8 Features



just world. A righteous rage and anxious agony has fuelled a global uprising against the powers and principalities of racist policing, unjust policies, and the presence of statues of racist oppressors. They are not crying out, 'How long?', but rather, 'Enough is enough!' and 'Now is the time for change!' Is there a word from God?

We are in a crisis. Besides contending with the debilitating COVID-19 pandemic, the world is also faced with the insidious plight of racism. Beyond the courageous statements condemning racism and the promise of corrective actions, people are yearning for a moral compass, a way forward by which their lives and actions are informed by their faith. For African Americans, faith and racial justice have long intersected—the church has been a place to pray, find comfort, receive a message of hope, to discuss and strategize about political and civic actions. This is not the case for predominantly white congregations. The litany of excuses for avoiding sermons about the sin of racism, includes not wanting people to feel uncomfortable, racism is a politically charged topic, and people will leave the church or worst yet withhold their money from the collection baskets. The question remains: Is there a word from God?

The Bible offers an emphatic 'yes'—God's word is replete with scriptural texts that castigate oppression, hatred, and malfeasance. When preaching against racism or any other oppression that hinders the Body of Christ, the Christian preacher is called to shepherd their congregation to a place of contrition, conversion, and reconciliation. An important work of preaching is assisting people in forming and

examining their consciences.

The preacher's responsibility is to muster the temerity to convey a message that not only refutes racist behaviour and structures but moves the congregation to sincere contrition. People are not born racists; it is a learned behaviour. One sermon indicting racism is inadequate, perhaps a preaching series is more beneficial. Once racist behaviour is acknowledged and remorse expressed, preachers invite their congregation to personal conversion, to change and make amends for their attitudes and actions. It is advantageous for preachers to admit in their sermons their own complicity in racism and their need for ongoing recovery; then congregations can come to a point of authentic reconciliation—healing with and commitment to oppressed people.

The Christian preacher is a prophetic preacher who uses prophetic language. The prophetic language of the preacher extols liberation, repentance, conversion, and justice. Prophetic preaching is multi-voiced inasmuch as it is the language of the scriptural text and the language reflecting the situational context and experiences of the people. Essentially God's word demands justice for the oppressed.

When preaching in a time of crisis the preacher must understand that God intends to liberate the world from oppression. Homiletics professor, Carolyn Ann Knight (1998, 223), defines oppression as 'a form of sin in which a person or community exploits other persons or communities. Oppression is frequently systemic, that it is results from patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that are

transpersonal.' The oppressive tendency is so deeply embedded in some social structures that oppressors do not even know that they are oppressors!

Among the most common and deeply entrenched systems of oppression are racism, sexism, poverty, homophobia, classicism, ageism, people with disabilities, and ecological abuse. Religion, too, can be used to oppress.

Liberation preachers believe that God operates through the processes of history to free humankind from oppression. Knight (1998, 223) suggests, 'The best liberation preachers are aware that oppressors are oppressed by their oppressive ideas, feelings and actions.' Those preaching for liberation alert both oppressed and oppressor to God's present activity in using individuals and groups to move toward a world in which all live together in love, justice, dignity, and shared material resources.

Christian preachers have a moral and theological responsibility to develop a sound hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures. Those who sit in the pews need to hear a word of power and spirit—a word of liberation. With the help of the preacher, congregations are able to worship in spite of the reality of oppression and injustice in the world because they believe that God is faithful and just. Yet the very act of preaching provides the 'balm in Gilead' that can heal a sin-sick soul.

REFERENCE:

Carolyn Ann Knight, (1998), 'Preaching from the Perspective of Liberation Theology,' in *Patterns of Preaching*, ed. Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press)



Preaching in Times of Trauma: Learning on the Journey

By Kate Bruce

RAF Chaplain, formerly deputy Warden and Tutor in Preaching at Cranmer Hall, St John's College, Durham. Kate continues to lead day conferences on preaching and preaches regularly. In her spare time, she writes and performs stand-up comedy and performed at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2019.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Is there something particular about preaching in a time of trauma? The ideas offered here are drawn specifically from a 'journey' I began at the start of Holy Week 2020, as lock-down became our reality, from Palm Sunday to Pentecost I shared a thought for the day, based on one of the lectionary readings set for morning prayer. I was seeking to offer a word of comfort, challenge,

or hope, based on the Gospel of God's saving work by the power of the Spirit through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. This is the theological work of preaching.

When preaching in traumatic times it is vital to return to theological foundations, reminding ourselves that God is alive and well and present whatever we face. God continues to speak through

the particularity of a scriptural text into the present day. Each time I began to write, I tried to step into the creative process, trusting God would lead, even if I had little sense of this. This journey has reminded me again of God's faithfulness working through my flakiness, and the feedback suggests the inspiration of God has been at work. So, step one in preaching in a time of trauma,

trust that God can work miracles with the crumbs of our stale loaves. When energy is low and faith wobbly, God only needs our willingness to speak; our frailty and vulnerability do not inhibit the effectiveness of his word. That is an essential theological anchoring point and a source of confidence.

MEDIUM AND METHOD

Almost as important as the content is the medium, and the method of sharing the sermon. Without a church building how do we reach the hearer? I was looking for intimacy, simplicity, and seeking to build a sense of community. Each thought was around 3–4 minutes in length and delivered as a podcast, with a copy of the text for those with no technological facility. A podcast reduces the interference between mouth and ear, lending itself to the kind of intimate pilgrimage I wanted to create. A podcast demands careful attention to pacing, inflection and tone. I wanted to use this to communicate warmth, companionship, and closeness, using colloquial phrasing and a conversational style. For those whose only access was via a text version I wanted them to be able to 'hear' my voice on the page, through the use of language.

The audio files went out to friends and contacts through email, Whatsapp and Messenger. Some found their way onto church websites. People were invited to pass them on if they found them useful. Whilst using Facebook or Twitter would undoubtedly have increased the potential audience, it ran the risk of the thoughts becoming 'scroll fodder' – which seemed to remove the intimate connection I wanted to establish. I was wary of putting out another message in a saturated space. My intuition was to 'let go', rather than 'push out', allowing the thoughts to find their own way through personal sharing and recommendation, if people felt they merited it. I had a strong sense of 'casting bread upon the waters,' to borrow from Ecclesiastes. I

think this intuition was right for my purpose in this season. I was delighted when a written version found its way to an elderly lady from a congregation I once ministered to, a woman without digital technology. She got in touch with me and we exchanged letters. An example of the intimacy of old school connectivity. In a time of trauma finding ways to express closeness is particularly important. The feedback (unsought – but came anyway) underscored this sense of a shared pilgrimage, even with people I've never met, who reached back to me sharing their stories of lock-down and how the thoughts had affected them. The truth is the words made a profound difference to some people in a way I found humbling and overwhelming. To my knowledge the podcasts reached as far as the Falkland Islands, through the military community, and across the United Kingdom. Some people reported listening in groups, others used them as they had their breakfast each day or took their daily exercise.

The necessary brevity of the audio format really lent itself to speaking to people who were feeling distracted and unfocused – and time and again the feedback from people mentioned this. When people are feeling afraid, distracted, or anxious a short 'sermon' is enough to give them hope to hang onto. Also, in a time of trauma, the preacher is not above the situation. I didn't have the energy for long complex sermons.

AUDIENCE

A really fundamental question, especially in a time when many people seem to be seeking God, is establishing who we are trying to reach. This shapes the language we use and highlights any assumptions we make. In the journey from Palm Sunday to Pentecost, I wanted to find language which might speak to those struggling to find meaning, perhaps with no faith framework, as well as to the

established Christian community. This affected how I used the Bible, making no assumptions about prior knowledge, and reminded me not to use theological shorthand or churchy phrasing. I earthed my language in local soil, drawing from aspects of popular culture, and offering the occasional aside designed to raise a smile.

It seems I am always speaking aloud to myself in my sermons. So, I question myself, exploring my feelings, fears, reactions and resources. If I feel at sea, what are my compass points? Where is the shore? Then I ponder people experiencing a different angle of this traumatic time. I live alone, in a house with a garden, near the countryside, with a secure job. How is it to live in a small flat with young children and no job security, or no job at all? What's it like to be furloughed and not know how long that will last and when it will end? Ponder imaginatively the experience of the other. Of course, there are many situations we won't even think of, but the empathetic effort will communicate.

CONTENT AND CONNECTIONS

Given the format I chose is concise, I tried to pick up on one theme or image in the biblical text and allow that to connect with a matter of the moment. Sometimes it worked the other way and something at the time of writing highlighted an aspect of the text. For example, the reference to crowds in the reading on Palm Sunday spoke powerfully into the separation and silence on the day I wrote the reflection. The intimacy of touch in the meal Jesus took with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, connected with the longing of many today to share a meal with friends or touch another person. I sought reference to issues in the news, and concrete experiences in people's lives, acknowledging the complex issues around us and reorientating us to the sovereign God in whom all our hope is founded. Here's an example from the reflection for Tuesday of the second week of Easter:



Just six words: 'in him all things hold together.' What does this mean? Paul's vision of Christ is breath-taking. This isn't some good teacher from long ago. Jesus is Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. As C.S. Lewis wrote of that lion 'If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most, or else just silly.' I think Paul would agree with Lewis. There is nothing unknown to Christ – from the mystery of space to the rhythm of your heartbeat. There is no political leader not known fully and beheld clearly; there is no act of care offered on a Nightingale Ward that he doesn't see; no quiet tear slides down a cheek without him knowing. No cry of 'Why' that he doesn't receive. No prayer slides by him. 'In him all things hold together.'

The other thing I was mindful of is the importance of lament. Sugar coating the pain of the moment in religious platitudes offers only denial. I wanted to speak in a way that provided some tools for developing spiritual resilience. Resilience calls for an honest assessment of the situation and the willingness to wrestle with how the great theological truths land in the reality of our back yards.

I end with the thought for the day from Tuesday of the third week of Easter. It exemplifies a number

of the points above and ends in a prayer, as each of the thoughts did. Whatever we face when this article goes to print, it seems a fitting prayer.

'Let it be.' When I hear those words, I think of the Beatles song. I promise you will have that as an ear worm for the rest of the day! The words of the song are strangely relevant – with phrases like 'when I find myself in times of trouble,' mention of 'broken hearted people,' and 'though they may be parted' and the need for 'words of wisdom'. In the song it's 'Mother Mary' who comes and speaks words of wisdom. If ever we needed a visitation from the Blessed Virgin Mary – now would be a good time.

To be fair – she hasn't failed us. She speaks loud and clear in the New Testament reading set for this morning. It's about the angel Gabriel being sent by God to Mary, with the news that she will conceive and bear a child. This child will be named Jesus – he will be the Son of the Most High, sit on the throne of his ancestor David and his kingdom will never end.

Mary questions the angel – over a few technical issues – and ends the encounter with the words 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.'

'Let it be.' Mary's words are far

from a passive shoulder shrug and a 'whatever' – they are dynamic, ringing with her willingness to trust the God for whom nothing is impossible.

The Beatles song promises that 'there will be an answer.' The Gospel account spells out the nature of that answer, God become human. Again, my cynical self wonders at how to join the dots between the theological statement that Jesus Christ – in his life, death, resurrection and ascension – is the answer to all the world's pain and sorrow, and the stark reality of that pain and sorrow – images of patients on ventilators, stories of people dying alone, and so on – and that is to say nothing of the hungry, the dispossessed and displaced. Is it an idle tale?

I come back to that 'let it be' of Mary in Luke's Gospel. Let *what* be? Let all the greatness of God: power, majesty, mystery, come into the world in the precarious vulnerability of skin. Let God be known in flesh. Not God far from the world, but God intimately present in life, in joy and in pain. Acquainted with suffering. Present in suffering. 'Let it be' – Mary's words are dynamic, ringing with the willingness to trust in God for whom nothing is impossible. Her trust will lead her through times of immense joy, and times of intense sorrow. But the trajectory of her story is in the direction of hope.

When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me, through St Luke's Gospel, via the Beatles, speaking words of wisdom, 'Let it be...'

A prayer for today:

Almighty God

Help us to trust in your great answer to the suffering of the world:

Jesus Christ.

Help us to trust that you are present

in the midst of sorrow.

Help us to trust

that there will be answers to the questions posed by the crisis we face.

Grant us hope. Amen

Joining the dots for ourselves

Preaching from Years A to B, November 2020 to January 2021

by Duncan Macpherson

Features Editor, Roman Catholic Permanent Deacon in the Westminster Diocese, former Principal Lecturer in Theology, St Mary's University, Twickenham

OFF THE PEG

There are insights to be gained from published sermons that can provide material for the tailoring of a good sermon. However, it is important that these should not be treated as 'off the peg' sermons. Saint Antony of Padua (1195–1231), mainly known for his help in the Lost Property Department, was, more importantly, a great preacher with serious things to say about preaching. Aware of the need to 'preach not ourselves but Christ crucified' (2 Corinthians 4:5), he observed that since 'the apostles spoke as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech, happy the man whose words issue from the Holy Spirit and not from himself! For some speak as their own character dictates but steal the words of others and present them as their own and claim the credit for them.'

Such wisdom should serve as a warning both to preachers who

preach on their own hobby horses as well as to those who borrow 'off the peg' sermons taking little account of concerns of a specific congregation.

PREACHING TO A WORLD IN CRISIS

Congregations are, of course, diverse, but worldwide crises provide universal concern. Such are the COVID-19 pandemic and the eruption of protest following the callous murder of George Floyd in May of this year. As African-American priest, Maurice J Nutt observes 'We are in a crisis. Besides contending with the debilitating COVID-19 pandemic, the world is also faced with the insidious plight of racism.'

Seeking connections, Meg Warner reminds us that 'some scholars today would argue that much, if not most, of the biblical material was written in the

immediate aftermath of major disasters, which seem to have functioned as catalysts for the production of Scripture,' and that the Bible offers 'robust resources for preaching in the context of disasters, including pandemics.'

JOINING THE DOTS

This is, however, no easy task. As Kate Bruce asks, 'how to join the dots between the theological statement that Jesus Christ – in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension – is the answer to all the world's pain and sorrow – and the stark reality of that pain and sorrow – images of patients on ventilators, stories of people dying alone, and so on – and that is to say nothing of the hungry, the dispossessed and displaced.'

PROPHETIC TRUTH TELLING

Among several examples of sermons in this issue offering prophetic truth telling, I have selected three. First, Sue Masters preaching on the Parable of the Ten Virgins, (8 November) asks, 'Where was the wedding planner when this event happened?' and moves deftly to wedding celebrations that 'have been curtailed in the restrictions of the 2020 pandemic; the wedding planners furloughed ... and preparation mothballed for a time. As weddings return, preparation will be central to the smooth running and success of this special moment that heralds a new future.' In the long waiting during COVID-19 she asks 'How have we used that waiting time? Has it been a time of preparation, of hope? And concludes that the 'here and now of faith and discipleship is important to us and to our communities; and is our focus now, and for the future ... As we look in faith to the future, we look with a hope rooted in the present.'

My second example is Kathryn Fleming's sermon for Christ the King (22 November). In the long weeks of the lockdown she admits to being consoled by the message of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* that 'It'll all be alright in the end. If it's not alright, it's not the end.' In the face of debates over the leadership offered by the government during the pandemic, she observes that such 'questions were as familiar to Ezekiel as they are to contemporary journalists. Here, too, is a nation in crisis, a nation whose leadership leaves much to be desired.' Turning then to the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats: 'here, as in the days of Ezekiel, it's not a question of who you are but how you live. ... If we want to serve Jesus, we do so in loving service to the marginalised, the outcast, the overlooked. Not duty, but love. In the end, it's quite simple, really. As Augustine wrote: "Life is for love. Time is only that we may find God."'

My third example of prophetic engagement is Mary Cotes' Advent Sunday sermon (29 November), in which she sees the crises as 'a sudden wake-up call' so that the lockdown 'has brought our abuse of the environment into clearer focus, while the murder of a black man in police custody has shone a searing light on the scandalous ways many of us sit comfortably with both our slave-trading past and our racist present. At such moments, we can have the impression of being pushed to the edge of events, longing for something new to break in. An Advent cry rises up inside us: We don't want just more of the same! There's got to be a different way! "O come, O come, Emmanuel!" Amen to that!

Sunday 1 November 2020 All Saints Day

Flawed Inspirations

Revelation 7: 9-14; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

By Philip Dyer-Perry

Parish priest of Our Lady of the Rosary, Staines On Thames

Context: principal parish family Sunday Eucharist for the feast

Aim: to encourage worshippers to move beyond both uncritical adulation and aggressive rubbishing of past heroes, recognising that Christ chooses the flawed and that his grace triumphs through our frailty, which means that this is a feast in which all of us can find new hope

Today on All Saints' Day, our minds naturally turn to those famous figures, those heroes of our faith, whose images we see in stained glass windows and as statues. Standing as they often do on pedestals; these great women and men are very much the pillars of our Church.

Yet, when it comes to heroes and pedestals, who could have predicted what kind of year we'd have since last All Saints' Day? This has been a year in which we've put some people on pedestals, and knocked others off them.

On the one hand, the Black Lives Matter protests have cast a critical spotlight on some of the figures who have been, at least until now, immortalised on public memorials. There've been the notorious figures, such as Cecil Rhodes and the now toppled Bristol slave trader, Edward Colston, there've been the more ambiguous characters like Winston Churchill,

and the spotlight has even been shone on some of the saints such as St. Louis and someone called St. Junipero Serra.

On the other hand, we've put other people on pedestals, and perhaps those who, pre-Covid, we took very much for granted. One of the memorable features of the first couple of months of the pandemic here in the UK was the weekly 'clap for carers' – where we recognised the courage and dedication of medical and care staff – and by extension other key workers, such as bus drivers and supermarket staff. They have been our heroes in 2020, and it's right that we have lifted them up.

But there is a challenge here – because taking people on and off pedestals is a dangerous game for two reasons. The first is that we can fail to acknowledge that human beings are both good and bad – and that includes the heroes who we make and un-make. The

second is that we can suppose that putting people on and off pedestals is enough, that taking down statues will of itself be all it takes to solve chronic injustices, and that calling care staff 'heroes' lets us off the hook when it comes to properly funded social care. But it doesn't – and today, on the Feast of All Saints, it's important that we don't make the same mistake when it comes to the saints.

Today we rightly celebrate the great heroes of our faith – and we rightly lift them up, so that everyone can look at them and learn from their example, and we also rightly ask them to intercede for us. But that is not enough – because the lives of the saints invite us to make our own personal response.

You see, the wonderful thing about the saints was not that they were perfect, because most of them weren't. The wonderful thing about them is that they are like us – good and bad alike. It's just that for them, although it might in some cases have been a close-run thing, it was God's grace that triumphed in them, it was God's power that won out in the end, it was those Gospel values of peace, gentleness, justice, and compassion that, not without difficulty, somehow shone through them.

In our first reading from the book of Apocalypse, the elder asked the question 'Do you know who these people are dressed in white robes?' Well, I know who those people are, and so do you. They are not just those famous saints who walked this path of faith before us, but also potentially each and every one of us. And so, the spotlight on All Saints Day falls back on us – on how we are to live the values of the beatitudes. For all their undoubted weaknesses, the saints somehow let God's power shine through them. How is God calling you and me to do the same?

Sunday 8 November 2020

Third before Advent, Pentecost 23,
Thirty-second in Ordinary time,
Proper 27

People get ready

Matthew 25: 1-13

By Sue Masters

*Anglican Reader, St. Andrew's
Coventry*

Context: morning worship
– a regular congregation of
predominately middle aged
and older members, and some
families, and part of a recorded
service viewed by approximately
100 people

Aim: exploring hope for the
future, rooted in the present

THE WEDDING PLANNER

Where was the wedding planner when this event happened? Had they considered the implications of the absence of an arrival time for the bridegroom, or that some of the bridesmaids would not have read the memo about oil for their lamps? Wedding celebrations like this wedding have been curtailed in the restrictions of the 2020 pandemic; the wedding planners furloughed, their skill of organisation and preparation mothballed for a time. As weddings return, preparation will be central to the smooth running and success of this special moment that heralds a new future.

Preparation is at the heart of Jesus' answers to questions from His disciples about what the Kingdom will look like and when He will return. With the calling and equipping of the disciples and the warning that the road ahead may not always be easy, Matthew now confronts us with Jesus' words to be ready. The words about the returning bridegroom would have spoken into the psyche of the disciples; the arrival time of the bridegroom never known precisely but the knowledge that he will come, key to how they are to be

and act. As the disciples journey with Jesus towards the cross, not fully grasping what the future holds, Jesus' words 'therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.' (Verse 13) encourage them, and us to be ready at all times. Ready not just on the appointed day like the wedding feast but living with Jesus present with us, serving Him and making Him known to others.

THE FUTURE

'People get ready there's a train a comin','; a song first recorded in 1965 by Curtis Mayfield, the lyrics evoking that sense of readiness for the future that resonate with the gospel message. 'U don't need no ticket U just thank the Lord.' There are no travel restrictions, but no one can save our place in the queue. We need to be at the station ready for its arrival, waiting with anticipation, not just of the destination but also of the journey, anticipating the future with hope.

Preparation and waiting, words we have been extremely focused on over this year. Debates about our preparedness for the pandemic abounding, 'waiting' something we had to do as the days and weeks turned into months. We have waited for the news from the daily briefings, in queues for supermarkets, for good news to out-weight the difficult statistics. In Matthew Jesus tells us that in the waiting we need to be alert, another corona message that we have heard and internalised.

Waiting is easier for some of us than others 'I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word, I put my hope' (Psalm 130:5-7).

How have we used that waiting time? Has it been a time of preparation, of hope?

THE PRESENT

The Gospel message is of Jesus inaugurating the Kingdom of God on earth and we need to be present in the here and now, despite the many distractions in our culture that can take our focus from Jesus.

Covid-19 has perhaps given us time when we have been able to wait more patiently on God amid the anxiety and uncertainties of the 'new normal' of life?

The Holy Spirit, which St. Paul calls the Spirit of wisdom, fills us like the oil in the young women's lamps. No one else can fill us, we can't be filled with someone else's faith, the oil of faith ours to have and to hold in our marriage imagery. We are called then not to a passive waiting but to action, focused not just on the anticipation of the wedding day celebrations but on the marriage ahead.

As we respond to the call to be ready, Jesus' words ignite the flame that lights our present and our future; our hope for the future wedded to today. As Jesus' disciples we are called to prepare ourselves by feasting on His word, and to share those words with others. As we seek to be kingdom people and to flood our communities with Christ's light, we are commissioned to be His hands and feet in serving others in the here and now.

The here and now of faith and discipleship is important to us and to our communities; and is our focus now, and for the future, influenced perhaps by our personal and corporate responses during the pandemic. As we look in faith to the future, we look with a hope rooted in the present.

Sunday 8 November 2020

Remembrance Sunday

Remembering the future

Revelation 21:1-5, 15-17, 22-22:5

By Darren Blaney

Pastor at Herne Bay Baptist Church

Context: an evangelical Baptist Church of 80 adults, predominantly white-middle class and 50+ years of age (but with other ages also present) in a

south-eastern sea-side town

Aim: to offer a different focus for Remembrance Sunday – God's promised future – in response to the recent global 'Black Lives Matter' protests

A VISION FOR OUR TIMES

When news broke of the death of George Floyd few of us could have imagined the repercussions it would have, not only in the USA, but across much of the Western World. It was the spark that ignited into flame issues that had been smouldering below the surface of society for generations. One such issue was how we remember and honour the past. Many of our cultural heroes, it was said, had another side to their stories that was seldom acknowledged.

One solution that the Scripture offers us to this challenge is to remember the future instead. Remembering the future may seem a strange idea, but such is the faithfulness and power of God that anything He has promised in His Word may be taken as being as sure and certain a part of history as any event that has already transpired.

Here in Revelation the apostle John is given such a glimpse of the future. This vision has served as a hope to countless Christians down through history and it can provide such a hope to us today. In many ways it is the world that so many people are longing for.

A DIFFERENT TYPE OF CITY

1. Room for Everyone. Firstly, in chapter 21 John sees the heavenly city descending from heaven. Many have wondered at the strange description of its cube-like dimensions (21:15-17). One explanation is that if you had laid a city that large on any map of the day it would have covered all the known world. In other words, the vision John sees is of a city that is big enough for anyone and everyone. No one need be excluded from the safety and belonging that God's new city offers.

2. Everyone Belongs As They

Are. In chapter 7 John sees the multitude that no-one can count or number. They are drawn, he says, from every nation, tribe, and tongue. They worship God together before His throne. Thus, in the fullness of God's Kingdom the very things that so often divide people here on earth are the things that enrich and deepen our worship in glory. Every tongue, every tribe, every nation has something unique to offer.

3. Intimacy with God. That may seem a strange term to use but there is no other way to describe it. Five times in one verse (21:3) we are told in different ways that God is with us and we with God. Not only so, but in one of the most comforting verses in all the Bible, we are told that He will wipe every tear from our eyes.

4. A True New Order. We have heard many calls lately about the need for a new order of things. Here in 21:4-5 we are promised what we are looking for. God announces that He is making everything new, the old order has passed away, and there will be no more suffering, no more death, no more pain.

5. Hope for the Nations. Often, we think of heaven in purely individual and personal terms. However, God also has an eye on the nations themselves. In 22:2 we are told that the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations, in 21:24 that the nations will walk by God's light, and in verses 24 and 26 that the splendour of kings and nations will be brought into the city.

6. God is at the Centre. Throughout John's revelation it is God Himself and His Son Jesus Christ who are at the centre of everything. It is God who gives the city light and Jesus is its lamp (21:23), there is no Temple because God and the Lamb are the Temple (21:22), the River of Life flows from the Throne of God and the Lamb (22:1), and their joint Throne is in the city as a focus of our service (22:3).

A DIFFERENT TYPE OF HERO

This then is the hope for the future that we are called to remember today. It is a hope that only God can and will bring about. But in His divine wisdom it is our faithful walk of prayer, worship, witness, and work in the world that He uses to fulfil His purposes. And it is a safe remembering, for the hero of this story is not a fallen or fallible human. The heroes we remember today are God Himself and the Lamb that was slain to bring all this to pass.

Sunday 15 November 2020

Second before Advent, Pentecost
24, Thirty-third in Ordinary time
(Proper 28)

Crisis as Crossroads

Matthew 25:14-30

by John Udris

*Spiritual Director at St Mary's
College, Oscott*

Context: Sunday Eucharist

Aim: to provoke an examination of our approach to discipleship through an exploration the parable of the talents, whose purpose is to inspire a radical generosity, illustrated perfectly in the Lord's own passion, death, and resurrection

A crisis can be a crossroads. And so many of the Lord's parables are aimed at provoking precisely this: a crisis that turns out to be a crossroads. Which is to say, a conversion. The parable we have just heard is a case in point. Significantly, in St Matthew's gospel it is the very last one Jesus tells before his own passion. As we shall see, it illustrates exactly his own deliberate strategy in the face of that crisis.

Today's parable compares two attitudes: caution and enterprise. It contrasts starkly two approaches to the treasure with which we've

been entrusted: do we hide it away for safe keeping? Or risk trading with it in the hope of making more? Are we governed by the fear of losing it? Or motivated by the trust that this treasure is meant to multiply? It is this staggering trust that is being explored in this last of the parables. And which then finds its finest expression in the Lord's own death and resurrection. It is this daring we're being invited to adopt as our intentional, strategic approach as his disciples.

Because the treasure of the gospel has been entrusted to us as comprehensively as that master entrusted his property to his servants. The challenge for us now is to show how we can be 'faithful' regarding that treasure – that is to say, trustworthy. But, paradoxically, this faithfulness is not a cautious preservation and keeping safe. On the contrary, those who prove trustworthy and praiseworthy in this parable are the entrepreneurs. Those who are willing to invest themselves in the adventure of making even more money for their master. Even at the risk of losing the lot!

On the other hand, the tragedy of the man who buried his talent in the ground lies in his lame excuse: 'I was afraid.' Fear is the archenemy of faith. Because its focus is always turned inward. That sorry servant was thinking only of himself. Or, at least, only thinking of his master inasmuch as this meant his own welfare. He was as tightly wrapped up in himself as the talent he had wrapped so carefully in that napkin.

He reminds me of another character we'll probably be hearing about again before too long: Charles Dickens' masterful description of that über miser, Ebenezer Scrooge. Here it is, 'he was a tight-fisted, hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.'

A Christmas Carol is the story

of a crisis which turns out to be a crossroads. Scrooge is catapulted into the future, in order to see the consequences of his attitude in the present. In order to change his approach to the present. It is the story of a conversion provoked by a crisis. By which he discovers that true happiness lies in doing the exact opposite of what he had always held to be true. It lies in what we dare to relinquish in trust and love, rather than what we hold on to in fear. In a similar way, today's parable catapults us into the future in order to change our approach in the present. Lest we find ourselves accused on the last day of being like that mean and lazy servant.

Meanness endangers and undermines everything worthwhile. Listen to how one novelist describes what it takes to be a good writer. It makes the perfect description of what it takes to be a faithful, trustworthy disciple:

'One of the things I know about writing is this: spend it all, lose it, all, give it, give it all ...The impulse to keep [something] to yourself is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you don't give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes' (Annie Dillard). Saint Dominic puts this wisdom even more simply, 'hoarded grain rots. But if it is scattered it fructifies.'

It is the same sober warning in the parable of the talents and the story of Scrooge. And the cure for this fatal condition in both cases is the same: generosity. That is how grain fructifies. That is how treasure multiplies. The secret of a life well-lived is a life well-given; the secret of a life well spent is a life well-spent, literally.

And Jesus in his passion is the epitome of this radical generosity. That is why it's so fitting that this parable is the last one the Lord tells. Because he is the one who proves himself faithful by daring to risk losing everything by giving himself to the point of no return; who is motivated by the staggering trust that makes of his ultimate

self-investment the crossroads we come here Sunday by Sunday to celebrate; whose self-expenditure we experience once again in this Holy Eucharist, in order for it to become our own daily, strategic choice.

Sunday 22 November 2020

Reign of Christ/Christ the King

How then should we live?

*Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24;
Matthew 25:31–46*

By Kathryn Fleming

Canon Pastor at Coventry Cathedral

Context: Cathedral Eucharist, for a medium-sized congregation of left-wing retirees, with a substantial fringe of African students and perhaps two dozen young choristers

Aim: to consider how to live as signs of God's Kingdom in a time of crisis

THE STATE WE'RE IN

During the first weeks of lockdown back in the spring, I was disappointed to discover that being confined to the house did not automatically equate with finally completing all the creative projects I had postponed for years or settling down to read Proust in French. Instead, in an excess of escapism, I took refuge in comfort-watching favourite films on DVD including *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* with its encouraging message: 'It'll all be alright in the end. If it's not alright, it's not the end.'

It may sound trite, but I think we've really needed that kind of reassurance as we've wound our tortuous way through the long weeks of 2020, seeing plans abandoned, and government guidelines changing with bewildering speed, prompting all sorts of debate as to what good

leadership might look like, and how we should live to protect the well-being of all.

HOW NOT TO BE A LEADER

Predictably, there is nothing new under the sun, and those questions were as familiar to Ezekiel as they are to contemporary journalists. Here, too, is a nation in crisis, a nation whose leadership leaves much to be desired. Speaking through the prophet God begins chapter 34 with stringent criticism of those revealed as false shepherds, neglecting God's people to pursue their own interests. God promises to take control and restore justice until the flock is secure again. It's a troubled landscape, of heedless shepherds caring little for the lost, injured, and weak but worse still, that flock is disunited, turning against itself with self-interest driving the actions of too many. If the description hits home for us, that's rather the point, but help is at hand as God promises to appoint a king worthy of the title: one who will prioritise the downtrodden and oust from the flock those who have no place there: the wolves in sheep's clothing. There will be a new kind of kingdom in which they don't belong. God will reorder things to establish the righteous kingdom God always intended. 'I will save my flock', even if that means driving others away.

Deep breath! That probably doesn't sit well with liberal sensibilities, does it? Can we carry on believing that it will all be alright in the end? I think so, but it's not plain sailing.

WHO BELONGS IN GOD'S KINGDOM?

Fast forward six centuries and we find ourselves in equally uncomfortable territory as Matthew shares Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats. The trouble is that it can be SO hard to tell them apart! Horned, shaggy, and bleating, they are all inclined to waywardness, and as Jesus describes the Last Judgement, it

seems that even the creatures themselves are uncertain which is which. Nobody is sure they're in the right place. They didn't set out to serve or neglect their King, so the sentence pronounced over them 'You did it to me' causes alarm and consternation.

Turns out that here, as in the days of Ezekiel, it's not a question of who you are but how you live. To belong in the Kingdom is to live by its rules. Thomas Merton spoke truly, defining the Kingdom of God not through doctrinal niceties or religious practice but as 'the kingdom of those who love'.

Love: the heart of parable and Kingdom alike, the nub of the great commandment Jesus gives us. To love our King is to love what he has made, including beautiful, broken, frustrating humanity. Our neighbours. And ourselves. And to love them is to love the One in whose image we are all made, and to recognise that image wherever we encounter it.

That's what it means to live into the Kingdom. To love, and keep on loving, just as Christ does, regardless of cost, or the shifting sands around us. It takes courage when our personal well-being is not secure, but it's the only way.

If we want to serve Jesus, we do so in loving service to the marginalised, the outcast, the overlooked. Not duty, but love. In the end, it's quite simple, really.

As Augustine wrote: 'Life is for love. Time is only that we may find God'.

That's our purpose, so keep on loving and it will all be alright in the end.

We may feel inadequate, weary, bewildered, or terrified, — but keep on loving anyway, and the more we love, the closer we will come to the God who is all love.

More, by God's grace, we may yet signpost others towards God's Kingdom. Just keep on loving.

Year B begins
Sunday 29 November 2020
 Advent 1

Wait and see
Mark 13:24-27

By Mary Cotes
*A Baptist minister and musician,
 who writes for the French website
 Servir Ensemble*

Context: a diverse congregation
 in Milton Keynes
Aim: to explore the meaning of
 Advent watchfulness

A time of crisis can be a sudden wake-up call, opening our eyes to painful realities we had not particularly noticed before. The diagnosis of a serious illness can challenge us to reassess our priorities and question our lifestyle. During this past year, the lockdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic has brought our abuse of the environment into clearer focus, while the murder of a black man in police custody has shone a searing light on the scandalous ways many of us sit comfortably with both our slave-trading past and our racist present. At such moments, we can have the impression of being pushed to the edge of events, longing for something new to break in. An Advent cry rises up inside us: 'We don't want just more of the same! There's got to be a different way! O come, O come, Emmanuel!'

Jesus' disciples also had the impression of standing on the edge of change. The structures of the Temple institution were corrupt, while state power was compromised by allegiance to the occupying force of the Roman empire. Surely, such wickedness could not go on for ever. Surely, God must be going to act!

Yes, affirms Jesus, God's new time is coming. Quoting words from a vision of the prophet Daniel, Jesus offers a powerful, poetic image of the coming of God. He

describes how the sun, moon and stars, the lights by which people habitually live, will appear to grow dark in comparison to the dazzling brightness of the Son of Man, who will emerge not from the earth, but from heaven.

When will this be? It is not for us to know, Jesus says. But in the meantime, wait and see. Just as one day all will see the Son of Man coming in glory and will view the world in the light of God's truth, so we are invited to be numbered amongst the faithful who anticipate that future by the way we see things today. Jesus is not suggesting that we just sit watching events as passive spectators. On the contrary: he is calling us to an active, attentive seeing, a way of looking which searches as hopefully and carefully for the signs of God's coming as a farmer, dependent on the land for his livelihood, looks for new leaves burgeoning on his fig trees. This kind of seeing looks beneath the pretences and empty myths upon which our societies are often built and takes us to the place of protest where we become as outraged to witness injustice as Jesus was to see the money-changers in the Temple. How we view the world affects the way we live, and this godly way of seeing leads us to rise and act.

'Be on your guard,' says Jesus first. The word he uses here simply means 'see': be aware: beware! It's the same word he has used to warn his disciples against the yeast – the unjust practices – of the Pharisees, against false Christs, and against the hypocrisy of the scribes who appear righteous in public while fleecing the poor behind the scenes. The same word occurred when he spoke earlier in the chapter about the Temple. Such a glorious building! But beware! See these stones, he says to his followers. They can't last! Look behind the surface of status and power. Corruptible human empires return to dust, but my words are eternal.

Then, says Jesus, stay awake!

This is the second way of seeing to which Jesus calls us. We are to keep our eyes open, and not allow ourselves to be lulled into sluggish apathy. Jesus will utter the same word to his disciples in Gethsemane when he begs them to 'stay awake' while he goes away to pray. We are invited to stay awake to the Son of Man who will be rejected, put to death and on the third day rise again. If we are longing for things to be lived in a different way, Jesus will show us that way, if only we follow and keep our gaze fixed on him. Stay awake in the evening, warns Jesus – the time of the Last Supper and the betrayal in Gethsemane; stay awake at midnight, the hour of the false allegations and the illegal trial, and at cockcrow, the moment of denial; and stay awake at dawn, the time when Jesus is handed over to Pilate, and when on the third day the women discover that the tomb is empty. Stay awake to Christ crucified and risen. Live watchfully in his light.

How awake are you? What would be your Advent cry and how can it shape your prayers? What in your life is the Advent God calling you to see in a new way?

Sunday 6 December 2020
 Advent 2

**Listen to the Silent Words of
 the Prophet**
*Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter
 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8*

By Dominic Robinson
*Parish Priest, Farm Street Jesuit
 Church, London; UK Director
 of Landings Programme for
 Returning Catholics; Lecturer in
 Dogmatic Theology, Allen Hall
 Seminary; Vice-chair, Catholic
 Association of Preachers*

Context: Advent Mass in a
 contemporary urban setting
 with a varied committed
 congregation, many of whom

are appreciative of the charisms of the Jesuits and Ignatian spirituality, expecting encouragement and stimulation to live out their faith in daily life
Aim: to help churchgoers to stop and discern where we are going in the midst of the preparation for Christmas and in the light of COVID-19

Going away on a week's silent retreat is an annual and much valued event for us Jesuits. And maybe indeed it is for many of us here. I think it's true that we all need to get away from it all, isn't it? To at least try to step back into varying degrees of silence, away from the sounds of the city, with its bustle and stress, whether it be the stress at work, or the clamour – especially at this time of the year – of family demands and preoccupation.

This year though has been particularly stressful. There has been, there is, anxiety, fear, grief on a mass scale. We can't minimise that: this horrific illness, people dying alone, bereavement, domestic abuse, loneliness, losing jobs and homes. So much anxiety many will have experienced psychological bad health too and the scourge of depression. So, a stressful time of the year at a stressful time to say the least for our country and for our world.

How do we use this time now, this time of waiting for the coming again of the Lord? What I want to offer us today is a challenge. And the challenge is to use this time well. To use this time well. Pope Francis has been constantly reminding us of this in fact in much of what he's been saying in the past year. He tells us this is an opportunity to recover the gift of 'contemplation.' What he means there is a gift of discernment to identify where the gifts of this time are, where the opportunities lie, and through that to look to a future we can and will need to shape for that much hailed 'new normal.'

A time in the desert, in the

wilderness. And it's when we're here in our wilderness that we give ourselves the chance to listen, to listen to God. To allow God to speak to us about his plan for our lives in our own desert that we're walking alongside the People of Israel. Just maybe being able to begin to glimpse this sketchy figure of John the Baptist who appears across the sand in front of our silent screen. Because he's inviting us to make space in our lives for the Lord, for the one who comes to us as the God made human, and so human he loves us infinitely, wants the best for us in our lives, yearns to show us again his mercy, his mercy and his compassion, wherever we are in our lives. It's no accident – rather it's in God's plan – that John comes onto the scene at this moment we know so well. The moment we're despairing, the moment of lowest ebb. It's that Advent moment perhaps when we are called to return to trust in him.

How then we are called to be aware of that private wilderness in some solitude and silence in these last days before Christmas? What's the scene all about for you when you go there and let the mists gather for a moment or two? Do the mists of the desert reveal challenges in our personal lives? Or maybe it's clouds of doubt about being a Catholic and a Christian, about faith, after all we've been going through. Maybe the 'new normal' is bringing me back to the Church after many years and I feel it's still a bit of a wilderness; or my faith has weakened in the past months, something of a desert.

Advent takes us to the desert with John to bring us to the oasis of our lives, to point in hope and trust to the Lord's coming among us again. Wherever you are on our journey in life take heart from this, that he will visit us again to bring all things in heaven and earth to the fullness of a new creation where suffering, doubt, sin, death, will be no more. We are being invited there to see his presence among us now, to drink from the living streams which flow

from the Lord's side and spill out into the life of the sacraments. To renew the promises made at our own baptism by water and the Spirit, the Spirit truly here inside of each one of us. To know the God of reconciliation, to know deeply God's mercy and compassion flowing out to us, reaching out to us in Jesus' humanity softening and transforming our reluctant hearts. Knowing in Holy Communion the God who in Jesus has sacrificed himself for us so we may be free of the fear of death and of our own human tendency to turn away from what is good for us.

Here and now John the Baptist calls us towards him in his desert place and points us forward in joyful expectation. With him we look to the bank of the Jordan, across the misty river, to the land beyond the wilderness in us all, to the one who is far greater than our daily expectations. He is the one who sheds rays of light on our clouds of doubt, the one who is total mercy, total compassion, total love, in whose voice is now for us the Word. No mirage, no ghost, but a God who is real, en-fleshed, here in our midst, and will, we know in certain hope, will visit us again. The God of Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate.

And we move forward in certain hope in that God. Because Advent is not about making ourselves worthy. It's about a certain hope that Christ is coming again to make a dwelling place in us. Through the witness of our lives the Word of God, the way, the truth and the life, can break through the wilderness around us, and even in the most silent human desert, can speak joy to our world again.

Sunday 13 December 2020

Advent 3

The Joy of Waiting

*Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11;
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24;
John 1:6-8, 19-28*

By Taemin Oh

*Dean of Cultural Diversity,
Edmonton Area, Vicar of St George,
Enfield – Diocese of London*

Context: all-age service, probably for the young parents who have newly joined the church

Aim: to remind the congregation of the joy of waiting for the Lord's coming. What we've been given to us is the evidence of the love of God.

MY LITTLE CONFESSION

I have to make a little confession before I say anything to you my brothers and sisters! I always find the third Sunday of Advent is a bit awkward! It is not because I don't love Advent or even Christmas. The third Sunday of Advent is quite often the moment when I switch to panic mode realising that I haven't actually bought or even ordered any Christmas gifts for my family! Also, I know that my patience sometimes is running out around this time, and I can hear this creeping voice from my heart saying, 'I want my Christmas, now!' No matter what happens to me, I still love Advent, as it makes me think about the meaning of waiting.

WAITINGS IN THE BIBLE

Now, I would like to ask you to pause from what you have been doing and think about, not your Christmas shopping list, but any Bible story that contains the sense of 'waiting'.

Are there any stories that you can remember?

Of course, there are many stories in the Bible, telling us of different waitings. The story of Moses can

be one of the good examples of containing such a sense of waiting; the people of Israel, being enslaved in Egypt, they were waiting to be freed from their enemies. The story of Noah is also another great example; when the whole world was covered by water, he and his family members had to wait inside the Ark until they could land on dry ground. And we have many more stories that contain the sense of waiting.

TODAY'S READINGS

For those who have read or heard today's Bible readings attentively, I am sure you will also be able to spot that all three readings contain the message of waiting in one way or another.

In the first reading the prophet Isaiah tells us the joyful waiting of the people of Israel as God's own people and what they would see in the future; rebuilding the ancient ruins, brings justice and blessings to the people. What a wonderful image of hope we hear from Isaiah! And again, in the second reading, we see the same theme, but with a slight twist in style; waiting that requires us to do a little more action such as keeping our spirit and body sound and blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus! And finally, in today's Gospel story from Saint John, we hear the story of John the Baptist, whose calling was to be a herald for Christ. His task was to bring the lost sheep of Israel back to God through repentance. Knowing that the Messiah's coming is very close, John the Baptist himself was also waiting for Christ with a great expectation and trying to encourage people to join him in humility with humble hearts.

In all three readings, the object of their waiting is the coming of the Messiah, long prophesied through the lips of the prophets. And the act of waiting can be seen as a time of joy and excitement, as well as a time of repentance and restoration. This makes us think about our own waiting. Are we waiting for Christ's birth, properly?

Are we faithfully engaged with the spirit, and nurturing our faith?

WAITING FOR CHRISTMAS

This wonderful season of Advent is set for us, so that we can reflect on the true message of Christmas. Also, particularly, today's Bible readings, remind us of the powerful promise of God to all human beings; the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ on earth is the good news for the whole world, and it is freely given to us, who profess Jesus Christ is Lord!

Of course, when we say 'free', it doesn't mean that what God is offering has no value in it. Rather, it is completely the other way around; he offered his own Son as a sacrificial offering for our redemption, exchanging the life of Jesus with ours.

Therefore, what we need to do is to respond to the call of God, and once we know the deep love of Christ within our heart, we will begin to experience the wonderful transformation of our lives in God.

Advent is the season when we wait patiently for God's love to be revealed. I sincerely pray that the Lord's anointing spirit may dwell in us all, so that we may enjoy our waiting for the Lord's coming, and may, through this waiting, be nurtured into Christ's likeness.

Sunday 20 December 2020

Advent 4

Dare to follow

*2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16;
Luke 1:26-38*

By Janet Wootton

*Former Director of Studies for
the Integrated Training Course,
Congregational Federation*

Context: morning service, or online worship. Children's activities could include a 'follow-my-leader' dance, or following the star or angels – lots of movement

Aim: to reflect on some of the freedoms discovered in the lockdown period

The radical singer/songwriter, Sydney Carter, is best known for 'Lord of the dance,' which became a great favourite in churches and school assemblies. In it, Jesus dances through people's lives, inviting them to join him.

He wrote another immensely powerful song about this dancing God, and the danger of trying to trap him, or keep him still. It's called 'The bird of heaven,' and it tells us that if we try to hold God down, to contain, or control him, we will 'look again tomorrow, and he will be gone.' We must be prepared to 'follow where the bird has gone.'

During the corona crisis, we have proved the truth of this. Quite suddenly and unexpectedly our places of worship had to close. Our parish churches and chapels, our great Victorian preaching houses, and our cathedrals, stood empty. And this all happened at one of the greatest Festivals of the Christian year. The buildings which would normally have resounded with the poignancy of Good Friday and the Alleluias of Easter Day, were silent.

But the 'bird of heaven,' the Holy Spirit, who fills our lives and inspires our worship, was not trapped alone in the echoing building, but free, out in the world, and among God's people. This has been the amazing experience of Christians, old and young, conservative, radical, and evangelical (and the rest), all over the country.

Jesus' call has always been to 'Follow,' to let go of whatever holds us back, or holds us down, and follow him. He calls us to a great adventure, and maybe when our faith is new, we respond. But, as time goes on, life happens, things get in the way: family, career, happiness – or disappointment. These things, which could be part of the adventure, can box us in. Where is God in this?

Our reading caught up with

King David, at exactly this point in his life. The young David was an adventurer, ready to hear God's voice and follow his calling. Remember when he took on the giant Goliath, armed with nothing but his shepherd's slingshot? But nobody is perfect, and David was also ambitious and manipulative.

We meet him when he has achieved his greatest ambitions. He is living in Jerusalem, the city captured by his own elite troops, beholden to no-one. There he has built a royal palace, where he can live in magnificent splendour, and from which he can rule over God's people. He has everything he wants. And now he wants God.

He has brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, and is planning to build a sumptuous Temple, cedar and marble and gold, a Holy of Holies where mighty carved statues will lift their wings over the throne of God, where God will live, from now on. Sydney Carter warns: 'Temple made of marble, beak and feathers made of gold, . . . but the bird has gone.'

Yes, God has other ideas. His response to David is quite simply that he doesn't require a Temple but prefers to be on the move. Never mind David building a house to contain God; God is going to do the building, and intends to create a house made of people, descendants of David, until the one comes who is the true Messiah. Not marble and stone, but flesh and blood.

So we shouldn't be surprised that, when the Messiah comes, it is not to Herod's Palace, or the Temple, but to an ordinary family uprooted in a complex political landscape: hard to find, if you want to control, or kill; but if you want to worship, the path is easy, marked by angels and a star.

Mary couldn't be less like King David! God comes to her unexpectedly, through an angel, who greets her courteously, and answers her questions. She responds simply: 'Here am I.' She will bear the

promised child, her own flesh and blood, and she will watch him dancing through people's lives, calling them to follow him through life and beyond. And that is all that matters.

It doesn't matter if this Christmas is not the same as all the others we have known: if some of the usual trimmings are missing, and life has changed. God doesn't require all that. 'Lock him in religion, gold and frankincense and myrrh carry to his prison, but he will be gone.'

Instead, God calls us to follow Jesus, to let him guide our steps into the unknown future. If we dare to do that, to open our hearts to God, and to the world around us, to the difference God can make in people's lives, the dance will go on.

Thursday 24 December
2020
Christmas Eve

Everyone Loves a Baby

Isaiah 9:1-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

By Jeremy Garratt

Parish Priest of Waterlooville and Horndean parishes in Portsmouth Catholic Diocese

Context: Midnight Mass in a mixed urban/rural parish in Southern England with the usual Christmas mix of very regular and very occasional worshippers

Aim: to show people that beneath the 'cuddly' image of the birth of the Christ-Child there is a more challenging message about the God who comes to birth on the margins so that the marginal and the powerless may discover that they belong; and so that our hearts might be changed.

What is it about dogs and babies?

You can be walking along the

street on your own and most people will pass you by, though some may smile a greeting, but mostly, we leave each other pretty much to ourselves. Something to do with the British stiff upper lip, I suppose.

But walk down the same road past the same people with a dog in tow or pushing a stroller, and everyone is suddenly your friend. There is an instant rapport, as if you've known each other all your life. All the barriers tumble away and a bridge of understanding is immediately established as the other person 'oohs' and 'aahs' at baby or tickles Fido's ears asking what breed he is (a complete mystery as far as our mutt, Ben, is concerned). A conversation develops, a friendship is forged and a relationship of mutual respect and fellowship blossoms, often to be continued the next morning and so on thereafter.

How clever of God, then, when He really wanted to grab our attention to send a baby! Everyone loves a baby, and soon angels and shepherds and wise men crowd in to bill and coo and wonder what this baby will become. If you believe the traditional school nativity play, even some animals are there to wonder – an ox, an ass, the odd sheep, (even a lobster according to Love Actually!) but no dogs to steal the limelight. Everyone loves a baby – Oh, apart from King Herod, perhaps!

Yes, a king – why not send a king? The prophet Isaiah tells us to expect a king with royal power ruling from the throne of David. Surely if God wanted to come among us, why didn't he choose to come as a king, wrapped in power and authority, dressed in the finest silks and ermines and bedecked with precious jewels? This would surely better befit his exalted status and great majesty. This would surely make everyone sit up and take notice.

But, no. He came as a baby so that no one would be ashamed to approach Him, no one would feel small in his presence because no

one is smaller than a baby. And no one is weaker than a baby so that the powerless would find in him a friend. No one is more helpless than a baby, so that the defenceless would find their champion in him. No baby can speak so that the voiceless and those deprived of justice and their rights would know he was right there with them in their need.

And how strange! Here, a stone's throw away, was the holy city of Jerusalem, God's own city, the greatest city on earth, the centre of the world. So why didn't God have His Son born there to prove the point that this was His Son? No, God chose that Jesus should be born in Bethlehem, the least of the cities of Judah, six miles from Jerusalem, on its very margins because God sent this baby to be the champion of those who live on the margins – the homeless, the street sleepers, the street walkers, the exile, the stranger, the immigrant, the stateless, the poor, the leper, the beggar, the down-trodden and the broken-hearted.

In Jesus, God became a child for us so that we should give our heart to Him, for everyone loves a baby, and so that we, in turn, should become God's children, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. As Charles Dickens said, 'it is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child himself.'

Friday 25 December 2020
Christmas Day

A Picture of Christmas

John 1:1-18

By Ally Barrett

Chaplain at St Catharine's College, Cambridge

Context: a Christmas morning, middle of the road parish, with regular and occasional attenders

Aim: to explore the idea of 'heaven touching earth'

If I asked you to draw a picture of Christmas, what would you draw? Mary and Joseph, the new-born baby Jesus? A shining star above a stable, and a manger for a crib? Shepherds, angels, magi? This is the picture of Christmas that we have in our minds – the characters and scenes that are familiar from the carols we've been singing, and from a million Christmas cards. Christmas in Saint John's gospel is a different kind of picture. It's as if we zoomed out at great speed from the baby in the manger, travelling upwards and upwards, with the stable, Bethlehem, and then even the earth itself getting smaller and smaller until it's all just a tiny speck in a vast universe. This is what Saint John sees – it's harder to grasp, harder to comprehend, and it feels a lot less 'earthly' than the picture we're familiar with.

A PICTURE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

What if instead I asked you to draw a picture of the relationship between heaven and earth? What would you draw? It's a much harder task! Maybe this is closer to what Saint John wants to show us. He knew about the baby, the manger, but wanted to offer a bigger perspective on that earthly story – a perspective in which the baby laying in the manger is seen in the context of the whole of creation, all of space and time. It's an ambitious picture to paint, and sometimes we hear Saint John's words and it can all feel a bit distant – beautiful, but mysterious and somehow far away. Far from the messy stable, and the reality of everyday life.

HEAVEN SEEMS A LONG WAY OFF...

We're sometimes given a picture of the earth as about as far from heaven as it could possibly be: imagery in scripture, hymns and carols presents us with stark contrasts of darkness and light, sin

and holiness, time-boundedness and eternity, leaving us with a mental image of a world that is estranged from God and an image of heaven that is a long way away, somewhere unattainable beyond the clouds and stars. The contrast between the peace and majesty of heaven, and the squalor of a borrowed, straw-strewn hut. The contrast between heavenly blessing and earthly hardship, division, and suffering.

And yet the Christmas story is one of heaven touching earth, and John's gospel isn't, after all, a picture of the distance between heaven and earth.

HEAVEN EMBRACES EARTH

The image we are given is not of God reaching out across the void for the first time, but rather of God re-embracing the world from the inside. The picture that Saint John paints is still full of light and darkness, but it shows us a world which is, and always was, nestled in the embrace of heaven. It recalls the Word at the moment of creation, speaking the universe into being, bringing sudden light out of darkness and drawing purpose out of the chance movement of swirling space-dust.

EARTH EMBRACES HEAVEN

And then, wonder upon wonder, it shows us the semi-ordered chaos of the world in turn bringing to birth the Word-made-flesh – squashy, small, vulnerably and messy. That same eternal Word, now somehow finite and time-bound. Earth in heaven, and heaven in earth: the Word became flesh and lived among us.

A NEW PICTURE OF CHRISTMAS

This is the mystery of Christmas, a mystery that John's picture of Christmas shows us so clearly. The truth that is revealed by God's coming into the world is that, in fact, the world is in God, and always was.

A picture of heaven lovingly surrounding earth, and heaven, paradoxically, held within the

earth, in the form of a new-born child. A picture of heaven powerfully and gently surrounding Mary, and heaven, miraculously, contained within her, as she carries and bears Jesus, loving him and holding him just as powerfully and gently as she herself is held. A picture of heaven tenderly and steadfastly surrounding us, and heaven, against the odds, becoming real within us. Yes, even us.

Jesus coming into the world as a baby turns everything inside out, brings the heaven that always surrounded us into the midst of us, so that we are confronted with the reality that God is with us – not somewhere out there, but in our very midst. Christmas is the turning point in earth's history because it shows once and for all what has always been true: God's overwhelming, never-ending, infinite love for all that is made.

HEAVEN AROUND US AND WITHIN US

Heaven is closer than we think. Because the love of God is all around us, and everything we do out of love springs from that heavenly presence in the world and draws earth and heaven even closer. As we gaze on the stable scenes, and the baby lying in Mary's arms, may our earthly lives be so full of heavenly love that we, too, bring heaven to birth in all the places we find ourselves today, this week, and beyond.

Sunday 27 December 2020
First Sunday of Christmas

Our celebrations are not yet over

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 (NIV)

By Delroy Hall

Minister of religion, senior counsellor and wellbeing practitioner

Context: an African Caribbean congregation in the north

of England comprising four generations from the Windrush generation epoch

Aim: to remind believers that our celebration transcends the world's celebration of Christmas and continues after their party has ended

What a jubilant portion of scripture to read a week after the gaiety, hustle and bustle and frivolity of Christmas when many folks are worn out and tired due to the long days and long nights of overindulgence on food and alcohol, and days where little structure has kept them in order. Many are now ready to return to work for a rest!

That space between Christmas and the New Year can be a strange time where often a lull in events occurs before we pluck up new energy and courage to begin a New Year.

For many, the one whom we allegedly celebrated is now almost a mist in their memories after a near two weeks frenzied build-up. The prophet, through the power of vivid and dynamic words, captures our attention and our imagination through our many senses. He stirs us up to remember the one we have just celebrated. The time of jubilee is not yet over. The Christ, the Son of God, is with us and he calls us to rejoice and worship. The party has only just begun. You have not seen anything yet!

The world goes on as usual but rejoicing of another sort finds expression in another space and in another realm. As one studies the words of this pericope, there is such beauty in being in the presence of the King. It almost feels as though the earth, being dry for so long, is overjoyed having waited for this precious moment.

In the prophet's description of the Messiah who is now with us he draws from marriage rites and adornment. He draws from the world of nature showing how things grow, to depict that this new King is not about keeping things dead. He is about

transformation and growth. When we see plants beginning to emerge from the darkness of the soil, when we see plants beginning to grow and flowers open up in full bloom, what a vivid description of nature bowing before the heavenly King in adoration and extending their leaves and petals in worship!

Reflecting on this scripture reminds me of the joy and exclamation of one who has found the beloved Christ. They, though life may have been good for them, until they met the new and living King had no idea of the joy and rejoicing of one clothing us in a garment of righteousness.

I recall my years as a pastor and the numerous testimonies of individuals who, after years of resisting the call of the Holy Spirit, finally submitted to experience the love of God in a personal way. The joy they experienced was unexplainable. The love they felt from God was immeasurable and many felt brand new. It is as though the Lord, in his glorious compassion, has 'clothed them with garments of salvation and arrayed them in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.' One of the distinctive features of one who has found faith is the compulsion in wanting to share with everyone this newfound love. They cannot remain silent, even if they try to.

The overwhelming love of God reminds me of those beautiful words found in the great Psalm 23. 'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.' It is not possible for one to contain the love of God within the limitations of our human frame, hence God's love overflows, drenching things in our path if we allow it to happen. Listen keenly. The prophet's portrayal of Jesus does not end there. Not only does he clothe us with fine raiment, he gives us a new name.

Names are important as they

have important meaning and, in some cultures, that links to one's identity. I am thinking of biblical and African cultures. In the Bible, the name given to a person generally had a bearing on their personality, character, and destiny. Similarly, within African cultures traditional names given to children have, somewhere within their definition, a distinctive aspect referring to the nature of God. The Lord gives us a new name which gives us a new identity. How great is that?

For those who have found new faith in Christ, and for all believers in Christ (especially those who, at this time, feel as though their backs are against the wall), the new clothes, the call of righteousness, the celebratory joy, the blessings of salvation and your new name happen so that you are a royal diadem, a badge of loyalty, in the palm of God's hands. That is simply awesome.

Sunday 3 January 2021 Second Sunday of Christmas

**Welcoming The Word,
Breathing The Spirit**
Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:10-18

By Sergius Halvorsen
*Assistant Professor of Homiletics
and Rhetoric; Director, Doctor of
Ministry Program, St. Vladimir's
Orthodox Theological Seminary*

Context: a homily for Christ the Savior Church, a small parish in rural Connecticut, USA. It was closed for three months in the spring of 2020 because of the pandemic and, at the time of writing, the parish is only allowed to have small numbers of people present at services
Aim: to inspire and enliven the faith of people who have been through a very difficult year

good riddance. I am ready to return to normal life! I feel like a deep-sea diver who has been trapped on the bottom of the ocean, fighting to return to the surface, to feel the sun on my face, and take a breath. Last year, when we had to start wearing facemasks in public, there were times that I would go to the market and find myself unconsciously holding my breath as I tried to keep my glasses from fogging up. After about ten minutes of shopping, I'd feel short of breath and tightness in my chest. It was frightening! Fortunately, it was nothing serious, but since every exhale into the mask would fog up my glasses, I unconsciously exhaled less often, and after ten or fifteen minutes of shallow breathing, you start to feel rather strange.

I feel like I've been partially holding my breath, spiritually and emotionally, for most of the past year: waiting for danger to pass, waiting for life to get back to normal. It is not a good feeling; it is an unnatural restriction of the soul; it leads to low level panic and desperation. In this state, every moment can feel like a crisis; everyone starts to look like an enemy; and I'm constantly on edge. Anyone who has ever been trained as a lifeguard knows that trying to save a drowning person can be extremely dangerous. Not being able to breathe, a drowning person panics and in that state, they can unintentionally injure people nearby, even those who come to help.

Today John the Evangelist reminds us that the Word of God comes into the world, yet the world does not recognize him. He comes to his own people and his people did not receive him. Yes, we just celebrated Jesus' Nativity, but have I received the Word of God into my heart, into my life, into the depths of my soul? To be brutally honest, I have not. My soul is hard and bitter and dark, constricted from months of holding my breath. I have not allowed the grace of the Spirit to fill me with life. Today I am one of

Happy new year!

Goodbye 2020 ... goodbye and

God's people who has not received Christ, even though I desperately need God's grace and hope and love. If you feel the same way today, fall down before Christ, and pray that most honest prayer, 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief!' (Mark 9:23-5)

No matter how unloving and unfaithful we may have been, our God is the God who loves us, and is faithful to us. No matter how many times we reject our Lord, no matter how long we might hold our breath, cutting ourselves off from the life-giving Holy Spirit, the Crucified Messiah endures our rejection with divine patience and mercy. And today, Christ calls us to renewed life in his loving embrace. Today St. Paul tells us that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. This is not a blessing that is hiding somewhere around the corner of a future time or unknown place, this is God's blessing that shines brightly into the inky depths of the sea of sin. Today God allows us to breathe divine grace under pressure.

When I was little, I thought I had figured out an easy way to be a deep-sea diver. I took a long clean hose and placed one end up on a chair next to the swimming pool, and I took the other end with me into the water. On land, I could breathe through the hose just fine, but once I went under water, I couldn't get any air. No matter how hard I tried, I could not breathe in air through the hose. If you know about scuba diving, you know exactly why my experiment failed: in order to breathe underwater, you need pressurized air to counteract the water pressure in order to fill your lungs. Breathing underwater with scuba gear is an amazing feeling: your lungs fill effortlessly as the equipment gives you just the right amount of pressure—not too much, not too little—exactly what you need to breathe. This is how the grace of the Holy Spirit works when we are under pressure. There is nothing we can do to force the Spirit to fill the lungs of our soul, but by totally surrendering to God's mercy, by admitting our complete

powerlessness, God is able to breathe into us the grace of the Spirit no matter what is pressing in around us. This is what it means to be a child of God in Christ: we breathe easily, calmly, faithfully, in the loving embrace of our Heavenly Father, in the midst of every earthly trial and tribulation.

Whatever this coming year holds for us, today we are renewed in our faith, renewed in our relationship with God in Christ Jesus, and breathing deeply of the Grace of the Spirit, we set out once again to do God's will and glorify His Holy Name.

Wednesday 6 January 2021 Epiphany of Our Lord

Becoming the Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3: 1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

By Joseph Fernandes

Vicar of St Hilda's Ashford, Middlesex, Area Dean of Spelthorne

Context: a Church of England congregation, with mixed ages, in a suburban town location

Aim: to become the Epiphany amid troubled times

'There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.'
Leonard Cohen.

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany. It is a well-known narrative, but one that can seem removed from our context. Looking out for a light that shines in the darkness of the world, when living through a pandemic, is a journey which bridges the age gap. This light can lead us to a new life, a light that brings hope and peace to the night skies of our life, and ultimately union with God.

We do not know exactly what was in the sky, what the wise men saw in that first night of Jesus' birth. We do not know what was in their hearts, what they felt, longed

for, or dreamed. What we know is that once they saw it, they decided to see where it was leading, and they set off on their journey. They did not know where it would take them, but they did not hesitate.

FAITH IN THE NIGHT

Having faith in the night, watching and waiting, looking and searching, trusting and knowing that the darkness is not the ultimate reality, but that light does shine in the darkness, as the darkness can never overcome the light, even if it might have felt like it at times during the pandemic. There are occasions in our lives when our night sky has been lit brightly, and our minds illumined, our hearts enlightened. Those moments give us courage to travel beyond the borders and boundaries of our everyday lives. We describe these moments as 'epiphanies', those times when something calls us, moves us, to a new place, a new experience, where we feel the presence of God in a new way.

But there are times when the night skies are the difficulties and sorrows which we experience in our lives when living through a pandemic.

Something happened to the wise men as they began to see and hear the stories of their lives, something stirred within them, and they began to wonder that they were part of a much larger narrative. Perhaps this is why the wise men kept watching the night sky. They kept watch; they did not give up on their search. It was not a coincidence they saw the star in the sky one night, an event that otherwise could have gone unnoticed. The night sky comprises faith, trusting beyond what we can see with our physical eyes or understanding with logic, not knowing what lies ahead, but relying on God. Such is the place where we find ourselves as we try to come to terms with the aftermath of the pandemic. Jesus is the presence and light in our night sky, illumining our way and transforming our life. This light

makes all the difference in the world; when we are changed, the world is changed.

THE EPIPHANY LIGHT

The epiphany light enables us to open the treasure chest of our lives, not holding back from Christ all that we are and all that we have. We respond to the incarnation, the God that wants to get personal and close, fully divine, and fully human. Our treasure chest has become full of God's love and grace, of salvation and redemption. The journey beyond a post-pandemic world takes us towards God, towards home. This journey is not straightforward, and it has many challenges ahead, but just like the wise men, who were not escaping from home, but finding their way through another road. Once we experience the Epiphany, once we embark on this journey, guided by faith, by the light of Christ, we are no longer able to follow the old path, because we are not the same old person.

God notices us, knows us, lives with us and calls us, continually revealing himself in and through humanity, becoming human in Jesus. Our night sky looks different; we have witnessed the glory of God; we have seen the light of Christ; we are the light of Christ.

BECOMING THE EPIPHANY

Just as the wise men, we need to be on the lookout to engage with God. Seek in your lives the epiphanies, the stories, the events, that have and continue to change who we are, how we live and the path we travel, moments where you believe life is sacred, holy and acceptable to God. They can be moments of ordinary life in which divinity is revealed in humanity, and we witness God's glory unfolding before us. We become the Epiphany.

Sunday 10 January 2021

Baptism of Christ

That is the end, right there
Mark 1:4-11

By Andrew Dart
*Superintendent Minister,
Lambeth Methodist Circuit*

Context: a medium sized multi-cultural congregation in inner city London

Aim: to encourage people at a time of change and uncertainty

As Apollo 13 sped on its way towards the moon in April 1970, an oxygen tank exploded during a routine procedure. The spacecraft was two days into its mission and there was confusion both on board and on the ground but as the seriousness of the incident began to dawn on the mission controllers one of them was heard to exclaim: 'That is the end, right there.' This was the end of the planned mission, but it was to become the beginning of the most extraordinary spaceflight of all time. Against all the odds, the three men in the crew were brought back safely to earth.

In our gospel text we are presented with Mark's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. There is no birth narrative as in Matthew and Luke, no deep theological exploration as in John, but instead Mark dives straight in and tells us about the baptism of Jesus by the Baptist. Yet although this is a beginning of a story it is also an ending. And the end needs to be grasped before the new story can truly unfold.

We know that in the first century there was a great air of expectation amongst the religious Jews in Palestine. People believed that God was about to do something new and that the old age was coming to an end. They lived under Roman occupation and with the daily humiliation of being a people no longer in control of

their destiny. There was a longing for change and so it is no surprise that people flocked to hear John preach in the wilderness. He gave voice to their feelings, their hopes and their longings, and his offer of baptism symbolised their need for a new start. And Jesus joined them in the queue.

A NEW BEGINNING

When we came out of the Coronavirus lockdown, although shops were reopening there were queues everywhere. They have become a way of life and people by and large wait patiently, knowing that this is for everyone's benefit. I wonder what the people were thinking as they queued to be baptised. What was Jesus thinking?

If we only had Mark's gospel we would be asking lots of questions at this point. Who is this Jesus? What is his background? What has he been doing up to now? And even though we have some of the answers to these questions from the other gospel writers, we might still wonder this – how much was Jesus aware of what was about to happen to him?

For this story is not just at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, it is also about the end of all that has come before. As a new chapter begins for Jesus, so another chapter closes. We sense this as the gospel continues – for the next passage, which is not part of today's reading, is the story of the temptations in the desert where Jesus struggles with the true nature of his calling. So as Jesus queues up to be baptised, I wonder, what is he about to leave behind? What is coming to an end for him?

As the three astronauts aboard that stricken Apollo 13 began to put all their efforts into staying alive and carrying out the hundreds of new and precise instructions that the mission controllers and the scientists back on earth were passing to them, they had little time to think about what had just been lost. There would be no moon landing, no opportunity to carry out what they had trained for, no

glory of success. Instead they faced hunger, cold, numbing tiredness and many scenarios where they might have ended up being lost in space for ever.

NEW CHALLENGES

As Jesus's disciples today, we face constant new beginnings. The crisis of the last twelve months has challenged us as individuals and communities as we have had to adapt to new ways of being church. In our own lives we constantly face unexpected challenges and opportunities as well as disappointments and failures. Yet each of these new chapters also represents an ending. A new beginning is also a time of grieving for what is lost, a time of giving thanks for what has ended, a time of reflection on what is past. As we look at the story of Jesus, though, we are reminded that through all these challenges of a new beginning, the Spirit was with him. At his baptism the Spirit descended like a dove, and as he went into the desert for 40 days it was the Spirit that drove him there. And as we face new beginnings, and we will sometimes be forced to face endings we feel ill prepared for, so God promises that the Spirit will be with us too.

Sunday 17 January 2021
Epiphany 2, Second in Ordinary
Time, also Peace Day

Start Right Where You Are
1 Samuel 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:35-42

By Clare Wordsworth
a Roman Catholic member of the Chaplaincy Team in a female prison.

Context: Roman Catholic prayer meeting reflecting on the forthcoming Sunday readings with up to 20 women, some coming to faith for the first time and others who have engaged

with their faith while serving a prison sentence

Aim: we are loved where and as we are.

When Samuel was woken in the night by a voice, he thought was Eli's, he went and said, 'Here I am, you called me.' After the third time, Eli realised that, actually, it was the Lord calling Samuel. So, he told Samuel to reply by saying, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'

Eli was Samuel's guardian, spiritual teacher, and priest. He would have taught him a great deal about God and here he recognised that it was the Lord's voice Samuel was hearing. I wonder how many more times Samuel would have got up that night if Eli hadn't helped him recognise God's voice and encouraged him to meet Our Lord?

I've always enjoyed hearing the story of a lost tourist in Ireland wanting to get to Dublin. When he sees a local man sitting at the side of the road, he pulls over to ask him for directions. After a few moments of chin-stroking and a good think, the man says, 'Well now, if it's Dublin you want to get to, you'd best not be starting from here!'

How often can we feel that to be in the presence of God, or even to have a conversation with Him, we'd best not be starting from where we are? I'm not worthy, we tell ourselves, I'm not good enough. He won't want to hear from me.

When we read in the Gospels that Jesus called His disciples, and that they seemingly dropped everything – all they'd built and constructed, all they were connected to, and upped sticks and followed this man – we can be forgiven for wondering what on earth did Jesus say to them? The women were already with Jesus and walking with Him – what did Jesus offer that was so attractive?

We don't know exactly what was said, but we can be sure that it wasn't what Jesus promised on earth and it wasn't what was on earth that caused people to drop everything and follow Him. Jesus

spoke of returning to His Father and promised us that we could be with Him there.

We might not hear God's voice in the middle of the night, but God invites us, every one of us, to be with Him. He doesn't require us to have our lives in order. He accepts our hearts when they're broken, when we have taken a wrong turn in the road and unlike the Irish man, He won't say to us that we 'don't want to be starting from here.' God loves us just as we are and just where we are.

Growing up in a large family, one of my earliest memories on a typical summer's day was heading out to the woods to play, only coming home when it was time for food. Running into the kitchen, the first question my mother would ask was, 'Where are your brothers and sisters – you were sent out together this morning, I expected you to look out for each other and come home together?' If I couldn't answer that question, I was in serious trouble. Reflecting on that today, I wonder if that might be a question asked of us when we meet our Lord – 'I sent you out into the world together, I expected you to take care of each other and to lead each other home.'

Like Eli, there may be people whom we meet who will help us and lead us to experience an encounter with God. There may be places we can go where we feel close to God, like the chapel where we can 'just be.' There may be kindness or forgiveness shown by another when we don't think we deserve it and times when we can dare to believe that we are loved, cherished, forgiven, children of God and the apple of His eye. In those moments, it doesn't matter how the world sees us or how we've felt about ourselves at times.

Let's each ask ourselves the question: Do I have an 'Eli' in my life who supports me in my spiritual journey and experience? Or am I an 'Eli' for somebody else? Can I show a kindness or compassion in a situation that really doesn't deserve it, or can I be

an example of love and gentleness that is irresistible?

As women, we can feel that we sometimes get a rough deal from Saint Paul. And if you wanted to explore his writings you certainly 'wouldn't want to start from there' – the reading we hear today. But Paul isn't telling us to think negatively about our physical selves here. For him 'the body' means ourselves as they are in real life. He tells us what Eli taught Samuel: that we are the Temple where God's Holy Spirit dwells, the place where God speaks; each and every one of us, no matter how we feel about ourselves or our stories (or our bodies). Once we have grasped that, we're on our way – and we'll get to where we want to get to.

Sunday 24 January 2021 Epiphany 3, Third in Ordinary Time

'Heaven in ordinarie'

Genesis 14:17-20; Revelation 19:6-10; John 2:1-11

By David Hanson

Reader, St Michael and All Angels, South Beddington

Context: South London Church, Anglo-Catholic tradition, 50-60 adult attenders

Aim: an encouragement to see God in the everyday

I'd been slaving over a hot computer all day. Zoom had lost its appeal. Finally, I was outside enjoying some late afternoon sunshine but still, to be honest, a little jaded. And then there appeared, over the top of the tall garden fence, a hand, as though from heaven. More heavenly still, it held out a bottle of beer. This was my neighbour Dave, who I hardly knew until lately. He had read my mind. He knew when a chap's spirits needed lifting. The day picked up. A beer or two, blue sky, a friendly chat. The world once again had life and joy in it. 'Epiphany' might be pushing it but

still, for me, a glimpse of God's everyday goodness.

Abram's meeting with the mysterious Melchizedek sounds far from every day. It has meanings that speak to us across the centuries. Of the blessing of 'God most high,' of whom the Canaanite priest and king spoke more truly than he knew. Of Salem, future Jerusalem, city of David and of peace. A place of hope for so many. And the bread and wine: a simple meal and an act of hospitality. But for us, the ultimate sign of God's love, of Christ himself, and of the banquet that, so Isaiah tells us, God has in store for all peoples. The marriage supper in Revelation draws on that vision too.

WATER INTO WINE

Scroll forward two thousand years. Jesus and his mother are at Cana where the first of his miraculous signs unfolds – plain ritual water for washing, changed into a huge quantity of wine. It speaks in symbol of God's limitless love and generosity.

There's plenty here that grabs attention – the role of Jesus' mother, who knows when not to take him at his rather discouraging word. The threat of social embarrassment and a catering crisis. And the wine: it isn't just magicked up out of nothing; Jesus creates it out of plain, everyday water. Just as he makes us, his disciples and followers, out of sometimes unpromising raw material – a work of transformation that continues daily.

And there is a message here about our call to be part of God's transforming work in all creation, not just in ourselves. Archbishop Cosmo Lang wrote: 'The Christian is the true artist of life ... It is not too much to say that the main business of the Christian life is to go through the world turning its water into wine.' That is such a huge challenge. But exciting too.

BEING FED; FEEDING OTHERS

What might that look like? Being attentive and simply valuing

companionship on equal terms can be part of it. Years ago, I was with a pilgrim group in the Sinai desert for a couple of weeks. Not so far from where Abraham had journeyed, Moses received the law, Elijah sought refuge, and Christianity's earliest desert fathers and mothers lived and prayed. Local Bedouin tribes' folk kept us fed, watered, rested and safe. They were our paid and skilful hosts; we, their very well looked-after guests. But one evening, to the accompaniment of food and drink, in the clear night air beneath starlight, we talked, and we sang. We heard one another's stories. We became friends.

'HEAVEN IN ORDINARIE'

And sometimes in God's economy, guest and host become one and the same. No distinction. Just a year ago, a young man from Syria found asylum here in the UK. His home village had been attacked, he had fled, he'd spent time in the refugee camp in France, the so-called Calais Jungle. He had looked after a sick friend while he was there and had discovered a talent for cooking, for feeding people, even in the most limiting circumstances.

And now? He has a pop-up café in north London and it's doing well. Having received a welcome, he is building community there and welcoming others. He gets to share with people from all places and backgrounds the cooking of his homeland and stories of the country he loves. And the top item on the menu is 'Jungle Eggs.' That name redeems the memory and experience of a dark place and time. It transforms the ordinary into something rather wonderful.

George Herbert wrote of prayer as that which feeds us and draws us to God: 'the church's banquet; exalted manna.' As that which transforms the everyday: 'heaven in ordinarie,' he called it. Now and always, God's world-changing life is all around, if we will see it. Like the kingdom of heaven, it is within us.

Sunday 31 January 2021
Epiphany 4, Fourth in Ordinary time

Setting people free

Mark 1:21-28

By Deirdre Brower Latz

Principal of Nazarene Theological College, Manchester, and one of the preaching team in congregations in Longsight, and Ashton-Under-Lyne, Greater Manchester

Context: a congregation from a range of ages/backgrounds in a multicultural urban church in Manchester; many of the congregation are impoverished. A Eucharist Service

Aim: to encourage the congregation to consider a combination of their discipleship, Christ's identity and the nature of freedom

Scripture invites us to consider whose we are and to wrestle with our identity in Christ. Here in Mark's Gospel we're called to consider the good news of God, and the arrival of God's kingdom. That's the beginning: The holy one; with his holy, and wholly unexpected, followers; on the holy day; going into a holy place; to open the holy book and speak.

This story in Capernaum isn't comfortable. It's excruciating on several fronts.

1. Who is Jesus anyway? He's an unexpected guest speaker, in the teaching seat, unlocking the scroll and whatever he's saying, it's FRESH. The synagogue listeners – including four visiting fishermen whose whole identity has been left behind for one of discipleship – are shocked. There's tension, drama, the people are astounded. Something about Jesus has interrupted mental to-do lists. Eager ears and bodies leaning in – what's he saying? He's changing the world with his words.

2. And then, there's the public moment every speaker dreads. The possessed, unclean-spirited person raucously shouts out – interrupts

with excruciating tortured words: the shout of pain, and plea. The man (you realise) isn't unclean, he's possessed by that which is – a demon – something evil that has 'swallowed him' from the spiritual realm. His shouts identify Jesus: What do you want with us? Do you want to destroy us? I know who you are ... I HAVE SEEN WHO YOU ARE...THE HOLY ONE OF GOD. In this moment, evil is seeking to name Jesus and gain power, doing what it does best, breaking in to create chaos; spread anxiety; warp goodness, But, in this moment, evil declares something true. Jesus is the holy one. Not a, not one of, but THE. Meanwhile, the shout lingers ...

3. Can you imagine the gasps? I wonder if the leaders tried to throw him out, like bouncers. I wonder if his wife sank to her knees in torment. I wonder if his little boy was fearful as his father became unrecognisable. I wonder if a circle emerged around him – something dread in their midst – might it be contagious? I wonder ... But, it happens in a flash. The tormented shout. The identification of Jesus as holy, as something MORE ... 'Have you come to destroy us?'

4. And then, the voice. The Word speaks. The words spoken: 'Be silent, and come out of him!' The rebuke, sharp, concise, and uncompromising; no mumbo-jumbo here. The evil spirit, the demon, addressed and conquered. In the presence of Jesus, no evil has power: he's no mere exorcist, the evil realm is defeated. Jesus demonstrates here, in this worshipping place, that he is who he is. That, in fact, the best answer to 'have you come to destroy us', if the 'us' in that sentence is evil, darkness, chaos-creating, pain-giving spirit – the best answer is yes!

5. The man, now dis-possessed, is juddering, throwing his body around, convulsed. He's released, liberated, clean, empty of evil, free to be fully himself – his life, reputation, community restored. The demon didn't go quietly – of course, but it DID GO.

6. Everyone else, now they really have something to talk about! This man, who seemed already to have authority – it's not just what he says, it's what he does – his authority is rooted: when the Word speaks, it comes to pass. They are amazed, and they gossip: Jesus' fame grows. The people are stunned by him, a new miracle-maker – but in this story anyway, that doesn't translate into revival, following, or obedience. It translates into bursts of news door to door, the first-century equivalent of a viral tweet.

7. What does this story mean? As disciples, whom we follow is Jesus. He has authority, and he comes to set people free. He's profoundly good news – and his being, his life, his teaching and his actions here remind us that 'God reigns, God is here.' Even demons speak truth when he's in the room: he is from Nazareth – that's his parentage; and he is the holy one of God – that's his present and his future.

But we're asked to grapple with some challenging questions:

What possesses us, holds us captive? What brokenness, captivity, or oppression, possesses people around us? What possesses the church? Power? Racism? Misogyny? Wealth? Fear?

Whatever the answer to those questions, in the middle of a worshipping community – the synagogue here, and the church in our lives – the holy and messy intersect. There's something right about broken people drawn to a place of worship. Something wrong about the reality that in this place of worship, his brokenness still rules him. And something beautiful and hopeful in that Jesus sets him free.

God shows up and liberates and heals broken people. God is HERE. The Holy Spirit is at work to release the captives. This is a good news story!

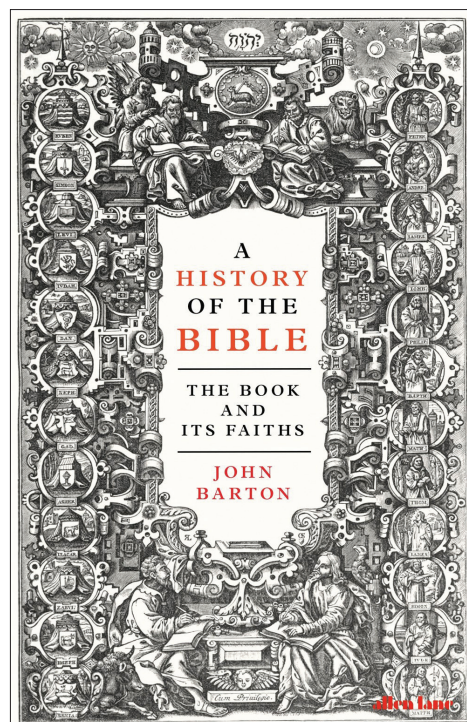
A History of the Bible: The Book and Its Faiths

John Barton

Allen Lane, 2019, £9.50 Paperback.

ISBN 978-0141978505

*Review by Neville Manning,
Retired Anglican Priest in Chichester Diocese*



Reading this monumental work we have the impression of being in the hands of one who knows the territory he is writing about, which should be no surprise as the author John Barton, Anglican priest, was for several years Oriel and Lang Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the University of Oxford. Here is a book which is both scholarly and readable but also at times challenging. Its sweep is both deep and wide, as the author deals with The Old Testament, The New Testament, Textual issues and then the Meaning of the Bible.

He takes his cue from the Anglican Divine Richard Hooker and his plea for a balanced approach to Holy Scripture, not attributing too much to the Bible, lest in so doing we actually undermine its real significance. Barton is very clear that for him the Bible is crucial but not infallible. One of the main points which comes over is the diversity of Scripture, which is not monochrome, and the need for awareness of the many different genres included in these writings. For those of us who preach sermons it raises the pertinent question of whether we are

prepared to vary the styles of our sermons in order to reflect that diversity. For example, a sermon on a narrative and parabolic story like Jonah needs to be different from the unravelling of the complexity of Paul's Letter to the Romans. It is all too easy to get stuck in the proverbial homiletic rut whereby every sermon has a dull predictability about it.

Another key point which comes over is about our basic approach to the Bible. Do we look into the constituent parts of the Bible, which can be very illuminating? It is fascinating to follow Barton's accounts of how the different strands of something like the Pentateuch came together in the form we have them. Or do we simply accept Scripture canonically as we have received it, for instance treating the Book of Isaiah as a whole, rather than focussing on its three constituent parts? There are advocates for both approaches in the scholarly world. However, at the risk of seeming like Mr. Facing Both Ways, I suspect we need both approaches, not either-or.

Barton makes us aware of the different ways in which different Faiths understand particular Scriptures. A Jewish reading of the

Old Testament will often differ from the ways Christians have tended to read it, with our wish to connect with Jesus Christ and the story of our salvation, perhaps thinking of Jesus on the Emmaus Road 'beginning with Moses and all the Prophets (explaining) what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (Luke 24 v27).

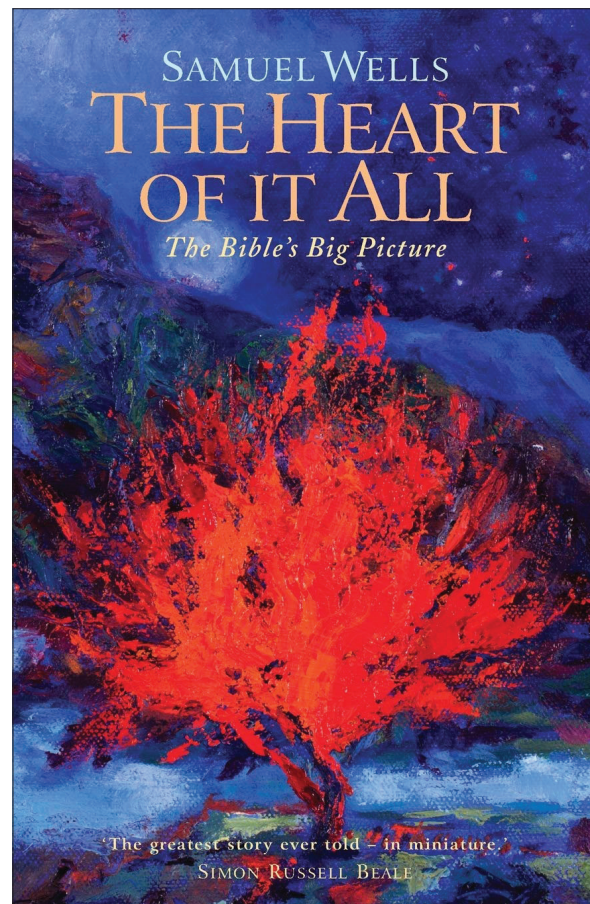
The author faces a number of difficult issues in Scripture, including ethical ones or those about inconsistencies. A few bits of scepticism found my eyebrows being raised: did Ezra the Scribe really not exist, or did Luke not actually write The Acts of the Apostles? He also seems to favour the Gospels as a form of biography, an idea which I thought went out a long time ago. More positively and personally I found his comments on the Psalms very helpful. It is also good that several passages of Scripture are printed out in full, so that we are engaging with Scripture and not just with a book about it.

The book is obviously not about preaching sermons, yet it is a valuable resource in understanding the writings through which we hope people will be helped to hear the Word of the Lord.

The Heart of it All: The Bible's Big Picture

Sam Wells
Canterbury Press, 2019,
paperback £9.99
ISBN 978-1786222251 (ePUB £6.49).

Review by Liz Shercliff, Director of Studies in the Diocese of Chester, Reviews Editor



The Preacher October 2020

In this slim volume, Sam Wells manages to include an overview of the whole Bible in 93 pages and a six-week study guide. The motivating idea behind the book is equipping Christians to give a summary of the whole biblical story. Chapters 1-8 tell the story of the Old Testament, including key themes such as covenant, fall, exile, renewal and return. The New Testament section, chapters 9-18, begins with Paul in Rome, in a chapter called Resurrection, and returns to the person, teaching, work and death of Jesus, before moving to Pentecost, Paul's missions, and Revelation. The final section of the book is called Commentary and consists of a three-part commentary on what has gone before. The Epilogue speaks of the wonder of Easter Day.

Written from a Jewish perspective, sections on the Old

Testament story manage to combine the narrative with some interpretation, without being dogmatic. Chapter 1, Fire, Water and Wilderness, tells the story of the exodus from the perspective of the later Babylonian exile. Chapter 2 begins 'It turns out that fire, water and wilderness were all about preparation,' and goes on to say, 'Under Moses we discovered that our security came only from God.'

The New Testament section of the book begins, in chapter 9, Resurrection, with the words 'Paul was in a different kind of exile.' It looks back to 'who was this Jesus whom God so raised from the dead?' and makes links with Old Testament prophecy – 'Isaiah had said "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."'

The commentary makes the point that biblical writers did not know they were writing the Bible,

and that both the Old and the New Testaments begin in the middle. Each of these points might be new to congregations!

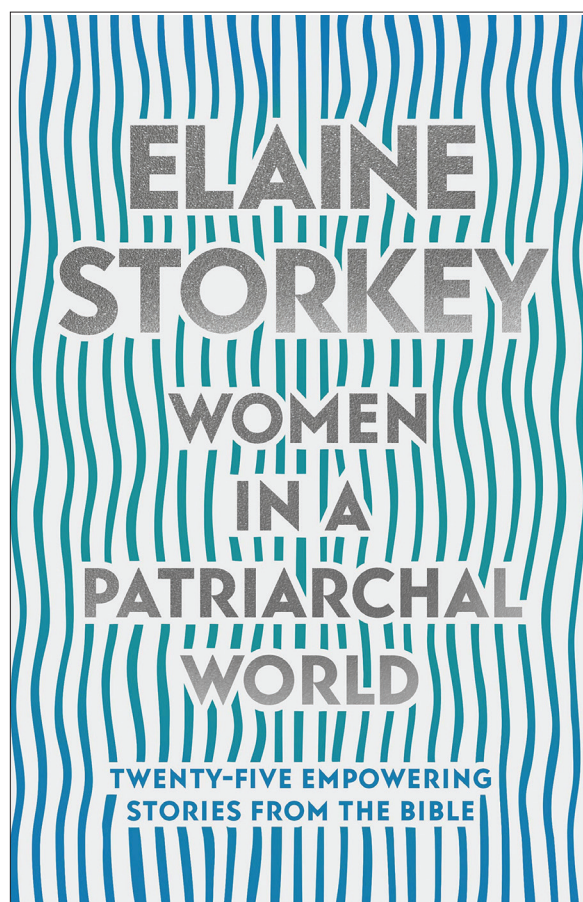
The study guide invites theological reflection rather than propositional learning. Substantial reading is required, including several chapters of the book itself, and several smallish portions of the Bible. Rather than questions, the studies ask 'I wonder if ...' or 'I wonder whether ...'. For example, Week One says 'I wonder whether Israel wanting a king was a sign of faith or a sign of unfaith.' In this way, the studies are non-judgemental, and leave room for a range of opinion.

The book seems to provide a very useful focus of study for a sermon series or for home (Zoom?) groups. The ability to present the Bible narrative in such a short space has much to commend it.

Women in a Patriarchal World:

Twenty-five Empowering Stories from the Bible

Elaine Storkey
 SPCK, 2020, £9.99,
 ISBN 978-0281084074 (ePUB £6.49).



Review by Liz Shercliff

Preaching Bible women without the help of books such as this can prove difficult, because the preacher needs to free themselves from the patriarchal norm. Storkey's book helps us to escape preconceptions and accepted world views. She introduces us to twenty-five Bible women, many of whom we already know, then relates their stories to contemporary life in a section called 'Facing our challenges today.' Each question ends with some questions to ponder.

Many of the chapters were originally magazine articles, which results in the style being very accessible. The book is a good, well-considered work which can helpfully contribute to sermons about the women presented. Eleven chapters present women from the Hebrew Bible, fourteen women from the New Testament.

The list of women is not exhaustive, and there are notable exceptions (the Levite's concubine and Bathsheba, for instance). Instead, we have the Hebrew midwives; Moses' mother and sister; the daughters of Zelophehad; Rahab; Deborah; Ruth, Naomi and Orpah; Hannah; Abigail; the wise women of 2 Samuel; the mothers in dispute before Solomon; and Huldah from the Hebrew Bible. From the New Testament, Storkey includes chapters on Mary; the Samaritan women; the woman who washed Jesus' feet at the Pharisee's house; Joanna; the woman with a haemorrhage; the Canaanite woman; the widow who offered her mite; Martha; Pilate's wife; the women at the cross and the tomb; Mary of Magdala; Lydia, Priscilla and Euodia and Syntyche. Simply reading the list of unnamed women from the New Testament makes

clear the need for these women to be given some sermon time!

The two questions that follow each chapter provide useful prompts for preachers about what sermons might include. The chapter on the wise women, for example, asks 'what is your perception of King David's rule?' – a question most preachers on any part of David's kingship might do well to ponder.

The book is a celebration of Bible women, introducing them in different lights with potential to re-interpret their stories. In Storkey's hands the women she portrays become clever and courageous, influencing events, and taking leadership, if not the limelight, in a variety of ways. Underpinned, as always, with Storkey's rigorous scholarship the book provides a useful and insightful resource for preachers.

Virus as a Summons to Faith: biblical reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety

Walter Brueggemann
Cascade Books, 2020, £9.75,
ISBN 978-1725276734

Review by Liz Shercliff

'Only Walter Brueggemann could have written this book' states Rabbi Nahum Ward-Lev at the start of his introduction to this slim work. In six weeks 'Professor Brueggemann has written a profound, insightful, and actional book, bringing forth deep biblical wisdom to provide real support and guidance to face the present crisis.' Not every chapter is new material, as Brueggemann acknowledges in his introduction. It was, I think, the first book off the printing presses related directly to the coronavirus pandemic and owes much to Brueggemann's years of study and contemplation of the Bible.

In the opening chapters, Brueggemann portrays a merciful God who provides a firm basis for faith in the face of pandemic; and prayer as a means of recontextualising disaster. We come then to a meditation on Psalm 77. Brueggemann calls us to turn

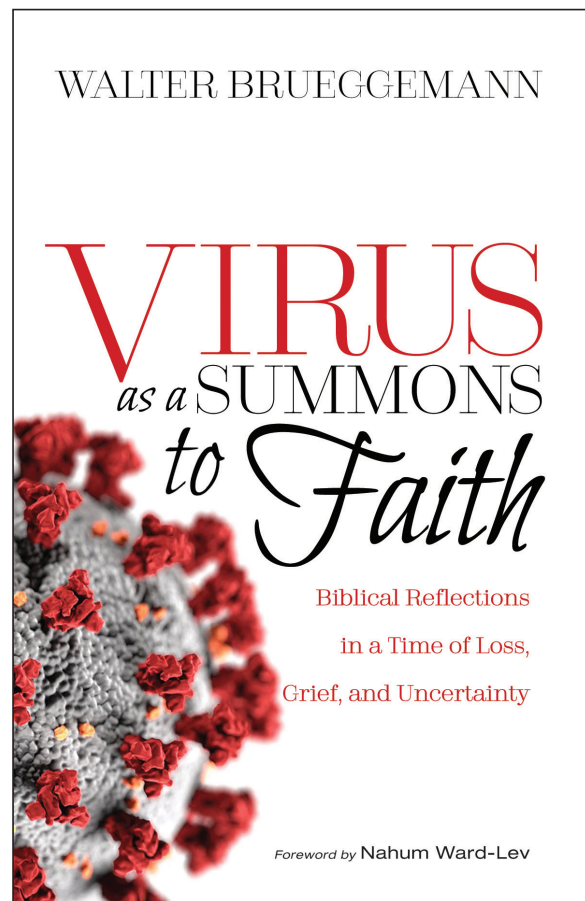
from narrow pre-occupation with self to focus on the larger Self we find in God; to turn to the mysterious and unknowable divine who liberates us to create a community of care. The newness toward which God calls us is not pain free. Rather, God groans like a woman in labour as new life is called forth. God's people are called to acknowledge that the old has failed.

Finally, Brueggemann identifies and challenges two habits: the habit of denial and the habit of despair. Denial, he says, refuses to groan in acknowledgement that creation has failed. Despair groans but acknowledges no possibility of a new hope. Creation groans in bringing forth new life, and the ones who have caused most damage, humankind, must do most of the groaning, he contends. The pandemic is the beginning of our birth pangs, according to

Brueggemann. We must give groaning full sound, rather than expect to accept the current trials with serenity.

The book consists of just seven chapters, each based on a reading from the Old Testament. It is relevant, contemporary, and well-written, as might be expected from Brueggemann. It offers very useful and faith inspiring reading for the individual but would also provide a firm basis for a sermon series.

The argument of the book offers a valuable contribution to any debate about Church and the virus. Perhaps most significantly it provides a theological counterpoint to the kind of hope based on getting back to normal and casts the pandemic itself as having a role in Christian hope. The challenge to preachers is to inspire wonder. 'We preachers are not mandated to live within the confines of modern rationality.'



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