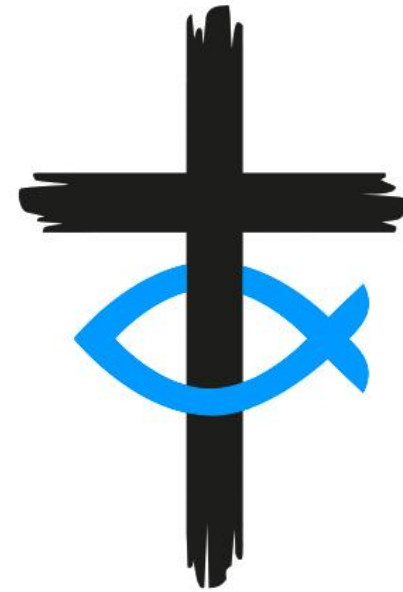


Daily Devotions from the URC

1st – 12th January 2019

St Luke (2)



Introduction

We continue with our journey through St Luke's Gospel.

Andy Braunston

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Tuesday 1st January Jesus' Baptism	3
Wednesday 2nd January Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea & Gregory of Nazianzus, Bishop of Constantinople	4
Thursday 3rd January Jesus' Ancestors	6
Friday 4th January Temptation	8
Saturday 5th January Nazareth Synagogue	10
Sunday 6th January Psalm 80	12
Monday 7th January The Man with an Unclean Spirit	14
Tuesday 8th January Healings at Simon's House	15
Wednesday 9th January Jesus Preaches in the Synagogues	17
Thursday 10th January Calling the Disciples	18
Friday 11th January Jesus Cleanses a Leper	20
Saturday 12th January Jesus Heals a Paralysed Man	21

Where is Good News? “We saw strange things today,” says the crowd. God is God of simple and strange. However illness happens, God brings wholeness – the physical result not always what we anticipate. However our lives are lived, God always forgives. Always. Jesus’ actions were indeed object lessons – each and every one. They are millennia old testimony to the power and love of God. God in Jesus doesn’t have to make sense; we need the faith to live in the mystery, prepared to be loved and forgiven, and be prepared to share the strangeness where we can.

Prayer

Awesome God,

We often want things to make sense and they don’t.

Let us live with your love and healing whether that makes sense to us or not.

Let us share your stories and let them make the difference they will make.

In our conversations about your Jesus life, open our eyes to new truth.

By your Holy Spirit, enliven our faith with no need for answers.

Amen and amen.

men came, carrying a paralysed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the one who was paralysed—'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'

Reflection

What a puzzling story. There is a crowd, Luke mentions Pharisees in his usual judgemental way, a man is dropped through a roof, and some political jostling conversations roll out alongside a miracle. What gives?

The forgiveness is a puzzle. Why forgive the paralysed man before healing? Is this the old chestnut about sin causing illness? We read in John's gospel that there is no connection, so what is going on with the earlier Luke? One reading is that Jesus was showing his power to his own Jewish community, by declaring forgiveness – something immediately interpreted as blasphemy. Another puzzle is those friends who worked this man to the centre of the crowd. Were they desperate for a friend, or wanting to join Jesus in demonstrating just who he was?

Often, I feel sorry for those healed by Jesus. Many people turn into object lessons: "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." The man is healed so that Jesus can demonstrate that he has authority. Were I the man, I'm not sure that I would mind, but it doesn't feel very personal. It doesn't feel loving in the particular, but we know that it's loving in the long run.

Tuesday 1st January Jesus' Baptism

The Rev'd John Proctor, General Secretary of the URC, member at Downing Place URC, Cambridge

St Luke 3: 21 - 22

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Reflection

The river Jordan was an ancient boundary. Between home and the wide world. Between the Holy Land and the wild and lonely country beyond. For the Exodus people of old, as they journeyed in from the wilderness, the Jordan had been a threshold, leading them from desert to promise. As they crossed the river, a new world was opening before them.

For Jesus too, baptism in the Jordan was a threshold. It took him from home in Nazareth to life on the wide open road. It sealed his relationship with heaven, with a word of assurance and approval. And it sent him, to use that relationship for others, to reach out in service, to share the Spirit's power, and to bring new wholeness and hope to many. As he came out of the water, a new calling was opening before him.

And for us, at the start of a new year? Is this a threshold? A new world? A new calling? Might this baptism, this Jordan, this place of new beginning, speak of a new phase in our living?

Jesus prayed, and the voice from heaven spoke. And God's word, given to us in Jesus, remains a word of acceptance and strength.

Jesus prayed, and the Holy Spirit came. And the Spirit, given so intimately to Jesus, is still alive and at large.

So by the Spirit we pray. When God says, 'Beloved child,' we respond in love and trust. When God invites, we step forward. When God empowers, we go ahead in confidence. When God touches our living, we reach out in service to others. May that be our experience, at the threshold of this new year.

Prayer

God of promise and presence,
in whom the world is ever alive
with newness and possibility,
we offer you the days and duties of this year,
our expectations and imaginings,
our hopes and our openness.
Surprise us, we ask,
with blessings we had not looked for,
opportunities to serve we had not expected,
and grace and goodness beyond our deserving,
by your Spirit, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

[Wednesday 2nd January Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea & Gregory of Nazianzus, Bishop of Constantinople](#)

Alex Clare-Young is on his final student-minister placement at St. Columba's with New Lendal URC, York.

Information

Gregory and Basil were two friends bound together by their desire to promote and defend the divinity of Christ as proclaimed in the Nicene Creed. This was against the seemingly overwhelming pressure from both Church and State for the establishment of Arianism, which denied Christ's divinity and thus the whole Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Basil was renowned for being headstrong and forceful, in comparison to his friend Gregory, who would rather spend his days in prayer and living the simple, ascetic life. Gregory's brilliance in oratory and theological debate meant that a hidden life was virtually impossible and Basil drew him into the forefront of the controversy. Their joint persuasive eloquence convinced the first Council of Constantinople, meeting in 381, that their teaching was the truly orthodox one and the Council ratified the text of the

think of many, people who are sometimes seen as untouchables in the UK today might be asylum seekers, LGBT+ people, homeless people, those living with hidden disabilities or mental illness, those convicted of a crime or those who cannot work. Why do 'we', the powerful majority, *choose* not to reach out and touch these people? If we did, perhaps we could change lives. If we did, perhaps we would see miracles here, now. If we did, perhaps we would be relevant.

But, like Jesus, we are also human. We also need to rest. You see, it is a bit unreasonable of me to be annoyed at Jesus for withdrawing from the crowds, and it perhaps says something about my desire to fix everything in my own power! We are also human. We also need a break. Self-care is not selfish. So please, love the so-called 'untouchables' but, first, love yourself.

Jesus, teach me how to love myself,
help me to notice when I am working too hard,
to learn to delegate,
to trust others,
to rest.
Human God, help me to love my human self.

Spirit, teach me how to work miracles,
help me to notice the untouchables in my community,
to learn how to reach out,
to love,
to heal.

Creator, let my love be active,
caring for myself and for others, Amen.

[Saturday 12th January Jesus Heals a Paralysed Man](#)

The Rev'd Elizabeth Gray-King, URC Education & Learning Programme Officer, member St Columba's URC (Oxford)

St Luke 5: 17 - 26

One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some

and recognise how far we fall short of you.
Take from us our fears
and lead us on that we may be part of work today
drawing others into the net of grace. Amen.

Friday 11th January Jesus Cleanses a Leper

Alex Clare-Young is on his final student-minister placement at St. Columba's with New Lendal URC, York.

St Luke 5: 12 - 16

Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean.' Immediately the leprosy left him. And he ordered him to tell no one. 'Go', he said, 'and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them.' But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

Reflection

'Lord if you choose you can make me clean.'

I'm sometimes a little annoyed with the Jesus we meet at the end of this passage. He seems to disappear into selfishness, leaving behind the hurting; *choosing* not to heal them. Perhaps this is Jesus showing a bit of his humanity and, when I am stressed or tired, I don't like it; I struggle to accept it. I'll come back to that in a bit.

What of the leper who Jesus chose to make clean? We often focus on the miracle. Jesus acted and the leper was miraculously healed. We wish that we could do likewise, that we could reach out and change someone's life just by touching them. The thing is, we can.

Who is the leper today? Who looks, smells, acts different than we do? Who is pushed out to the fringes of society? Who would we rather not touch? I can

Nicene Creed in the form it is used in the East to this day. Basil died in 379 and Gregory ten years later.

St Matthew 5. 13-19

'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Reflection

Our focus on SS Basil and Gregory, combined with our reading from Matthew, raise seemingly paradoxical themes of divinity and humanity; these themes might not be as paradoxical as at first appears. One shines light on the other. Our Gospel reading challenges any over-focus on Christ's divinity and our humanity. Christ is not only divine but also human. We are not only human but also... divine? You may agree or disagree that our calling to image God is a form of divinity, that being the hands and feet of Christ implies that we are, in fact, part of God but, regardless, we are at least called to be holy. Similarly, you may agree or disagree that Jesus was, and Christ is, divine but, regardless, Christ was at least human for some time.

So let's focus on Matthew's words. How do they relate to the holiness of humanity and the human-ness of Christ?

Matthew asserts that *we* of the salt of the earth, light to the people, and our purpose is to further God's glory. We are not merely human, but also holy. In all of our fears and frailties, desires and flesh, we share something of God, something of divinity, something of mission. Then we read that Christ has come

to fulfil the law. We know that that fulfilment was, in part, a death. Jesus had to suffer and die as a human being, just like us.

Perhaps, then, we should also reconsider the divinity of our humanness. To be holy does not mean to set apart or overcome our fears, frailties, desires and flesh. Rather, it means to show that humanity is divine in as much as we love each other not despite, but precisely because of, our diverse human identities. Who are you? Who is God in you?

Suffering Christ,
help me to see you amidst the other,
to touch the scars in your hands,
to feel the wound in your side,
to focus on your humanity,
Your suffering, Your flesh,
in those whom I meet,
in those whom I touch,
in those whom I avoid meeting,
in those whom I avoid touching.

Creative Spirit,
help me to find the Creator in myself,
and to live as part of your body on earth.
Amen.

[Thursday 3rd January Jesus' Ancestors](#)

The Rev'd Peter Moth, retired minister Northern Synod, St Andrew's URC
Kenton, Newcastle upon Tyne

St Luke 3: 23 - 38

Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jannai, son of Joseph, son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esli, son of Naggai, son of Maath, son of Mattathias, son of Semein, son of Josech, son of Joda, son of Joanan, son of Rhesa, son of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, son of Neri, son of Melchi, son of Addi, son of Cosam, son of Elmadam, son of Er, son of Joshua, son of Eliezer, son of Jorim, son of Matthat,

they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Reflection

Luke gives a different picture of the calling of the fishermen to that in Mark's gospel, where Jesus calls them as he walks along the shore. Here the context is a great gathering of people, captivated by Jesus' words and pressing hard to hear and touch him. He sees the fishermen and asks to use one of the boats as an informal pulpit, from which to carry on speaking to the crowd. The fishermen at this point seem to be just bystanders, watching on as Jesus proclaims the word of God. But as he comes to the end of his teaching he turns to the fisherman Simon and invites him to take the boat out to catch fish. They have had an unsuccessful night and expect nothing, but the amazing catch stuns Simon (now named by Luke as Simon Peter) and brings him to his knees. He knows he is in the presence of holiness, is glimpsing God's glory, and he sees his own lack of grace and goodness in comparison. He tries to send Jesus away but Jesus persists, gently telling him not to be afraid and assuring him that he will have a part to play in Jesus' fishing work. Everything else fades into the background and Simon and his companions begin their journey with Jesus.

This amazing story of lives transformed has an echo at the very end of John's gospel where again Simon Peter and his fishermen friends go fishing and meet the now risen Lord Jesus. Having deserted and denied Jesus in the Temple courtyard, here Simon Peter is called back to love, to tend and to follow. We need to hear the call of Jesus more than once as we stumble along in our following; and those words of assurance, 'Do not be afraid'.

Lord Jesus,
we are drawn to your word of life,
longing for that word to take root within us.
We see in you the glory of God,
the light of love, the beauty of truth.
We glimpse what it means to be truly human

But would our local churches have come into existence if those who founded them had stayed put, conducting their ministry in known situations? Our church in Verwood was founded by “missionaries” from a town some five miles away who were concerned about the lawless, heathen people on the heath where there was no Christian community: are we as concerned? We may be less lawless but there are still plenty of heathen! Are you as concerned as Jesus was? He knew that he was sent for this purpose: is that also our purpose?

Prayer

Father, hear the prayer we offer:
not for ease that prayer shall be,
but for strength that we may ever
live our lives courageously.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,
in our wanderings be our guide;
through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be thou at our side.

Amen

Love Maria Willis

[Thursday 10th January](#) [Calling the Disciples](#)

The Rev'd Terry Hinks, minister of Trinity Church, High Wycombe and Cores End Church

St Luke 5: 1 - 11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that

son of Levi, son of Simeon, son of Judah, son of Joseph, son of Jonam, son of Eliakim, son of Melea, son of Menna, son of Mattatha, son of Nathan, son of David, son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, son of Amminadab, son of Admin, son of Arni, son of Hezron, son of Perez, son of Judah, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Terah, son of Nahor, son of Serug, son of Reu, son of Peleg, son of Eber, son of Shelah, son of Cainan, son of Arphaxad, son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.

Reflection

This is one of those passages you dread being given to read in church.

Alternatively, this is one of those passages you relish giving to someone to read when you want your revenge.

All those names! Not a full-stop in sight until you get to the very end. It’s a minefield. But what names! There they are: some we recognise, some we don’t, but tucked away in the genealogy of Jesus are the stories we have been reading and reflecting on in these Devotions – such celebrities, such heroes of the faith, all bearing testimony to the extraordinary experience of humanity’s experience of God’s grace, over-arching our lives like Noah’s rainbow. There they are: Joseph the carpenter, David the king, Jesse the father, Boaz the loving husband of Ruth, Judah the brother of another Joseph and the son of Jacob whose name became Israel, Abraham, Noah, Methuselah who lived for centuries and Enoch who walked with God, and at the end Adam, our ancestor who was son of God. The whole amazing story wrapped up in a list of names. It’s humbling to read it and reflect that you and I have a place in it. It is the story of the family of the God whom Jesus called “Father”.

There are omissions, of course: it’s all men; there’s no Marys or Elizabeth, no Ruth or Rachel or Sarah, no Miriam or Deborah – but men are notoriously bad at making lists, and you can be sure that this was a man’s list. Whether his name was Luke or not doesn’t really matter. It is the knowledge that we are all children of God which matters, and share that one same story which runs through all our experience. It is the story of our homeward pilgrimage back to the Creator’s love.

Prayer

Loving God, teach us to fear not,
for you have called us by name, and we are yours.
When we pass through the waters you will be with us,
When we walk through the fire, we shall not be burned,
For you are the Lord our God, and we are created for your glory. Amen

Friday 4th January Temptation

The Rev'd Neil Thorogood, Principal of Westminster College, Cambridge

St Luke 4: 1 - 13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Reflection

Temptation comes more than once; notice this ending of: "until an opportune time." We're overly familiar with temptation, are we not? A time of misunderstanding and frustration brings a deep rift to a relationship and unforgiveness becomes normal to us perhaps. But, more often for most of us, temptations slide gently into and out of our routines. We can be a little less

Wednesday 9th January Jesus Preaches in the Synagogues

The Rev'd Julian Macro, retired minister, member of Verwood United Reformed Church

St Luke 4: 42 - 43

At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.' So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea.

Reflection

"Not for ever in green pastures
do we ask our way to be;
but the steep and rugged pathway
may we tread rejoicingly."

Perhaps we mean the words of Rejoice & Sing 495 as we sing them, but how enthusiastic are we to act upon them?

Jesus had felt at home in Capernaum, a far more welcoming, interesting and cosmopolitan town than Nazareth which was tucked away in the hills, and where people had rejected him: at the crossroads town on the Lake people responded positively to him and his ministry had been so effective that they wanted him to stay. Surely Jesus could have found good reasons to prolong his time in Capernaum and build on success, with a witness not only to the local inhabitants but to all the traders and merchants who passed through on a major trading route.

But the response of Jesus was, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." No matter how sincere we are in our congregations about reaching out to people in the wider community, how much more comfortable it is to pray for them rather than reach out to them.

and began to serve them. As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them. Demons also came out of many, shouting, 'You are the Son of God!' But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

Reflection

This is the first healing miracle that Luke records and comes shortly after his declaration in the synagogue. Jesus responds to his new disciple's family and the recovery of Simon's mother in law is so rapid that she is back in the kitchen immediately. Just in time to give hospitality not only to the friends her son brings home, but also the crowds that are drawn to his new friend Jesus.

Meanwhile news of her healing and the previous miracles has spread. The message in Nazareth was rejected by the religious - they wanted to throw Jesus over a cliff (4:29). However here in Capernaum those who might be excluded from their congregation, out of fear of contamination, not only seek the healing this new teacher can provide but also the demons which had afflicted them respond too recognising the source of Jesus's powers to heal and release. The demonic voices are silenced so Jesus ministry is not side-tracked.

It must have been a challenging day for Jesus - a roller coaster of rejection and acceptance, of recognition but also challenge regarding what might result - maybe in these days as we recover from the Christmas season your work and witness has brought you surprises too.

May your sense the Spirit's leading as the new year unfolds.

Prayer

Open our eyes of our hearts Lord
that we may respond in love to those who seek your healing and acceptance
May our fellowships be outward looking to welcome the stranger
May they be sanctuaries
for those caught up in the storms and troubles
Lead us Lord as we discern where the spirit is calling us to act
Help us Lord to be your holy people
as we seek to show your love to the communities we serve. Amen.

than absolutely honest here, we can be a bit less generous there, we can turn a bit nastier with that person. Temptation is the tug that slightly shifts our lives away from God; give in often enough and we're set upon a different course altogether. God loves us to be free. Freedom means we have choices. Choices can go wrong.

No sooner has Jesus rejoiced in heaven opened and the Spirit descending with a word from God, then that same Spirit sends him into a place of temptation. Isn't that worth noticing? Jesus doesn't stumble upon the wilderness by accident. His time of temptation and testing is as much the work and will of God as his baptism. Maybe there are times when God is refining us through putting us in places where we have choices to make. Maybe a new phase of discipleship brings temptations to trust in our own skills and strength, even to become arrogant in our serving? Maybe you find yourself in such a wilderness right now.

But God doesn't leave Jesus defenceless. He has his deep knowledge of the purpose and love of God revealed to him in Hebrew scripture as protection. He knows God's character and call. His bible is his companion even as the waves of temptation break, offering the true direction amidst the ways of power and glory the devil offers. Temptation need not turn us after all.

Prayer

In the midst of it all, when our guard is down,
does a little voice whisper?
Does a word come
an act unfold
a choice approach?
Dear God, hear us when temptation hovers,
lead us when temptation loiters.
In the footsteps of Jesus Christ,
in the wild wilderness where choices churn,
give us courage, grant us strength, guide us into wisdom.
Help us.
In Jesus' name we beg you.
In the Spirit's power we trust you. Amen.

St Luke 4: 14 - 30

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum."' And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Reflection

It was mid-morning, the volunteers inside the church were preparing to open the Food Bank. In the graveyard outside, Frederick (not his real name), was shouting incoherently. Some of the volunteers were concerned that he would put people off coming into the Food Bank, others were glad that at least he was in a safe place. Frederick is known in the town, he is not a drug user or alcohol dependent he is mentally ill. A member of the Neighbourhood Response Team happened by. Soon she was inside the church saying 'I can't do anything with him when he is in this state'. Not long afterwards, three police officers appeared at the door of the church, equally unable to 'do anything with him'. They could arrest him but they (and we) knew that was not the answer. The Food Bank operated and was very busy, the rest of the world carried on with their daily business and Frederick continued to shout. I cannot be the only person who, in such situations as this, pray for Jesus' wisdom, power and authority to bring peace to a troubled individual.

Prayer

Compassionate God,
there are times when we feel so helpless.
We see pain and fear,
vulnerability and dependence
and we know no way to heal.
Give us wisdom and courage
and above all faith
in your power and authority to act
even in life's darkest places. Amen

Tuesday 8th January Healings at Simon's House

The Rev'd Viv Henderson, Minister, Minehead URC & Chaplain, Wellesley Hospital, Wellington

St Luke 4: 38 - 41

After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up

reputation suffers, status dwindles and numbers decline. Adopting this Psalm, we acknowledge our need of turning back to God, but that we can only do so as God first turns to us. And that is what God does in Jesus of Nazareth, remaining forever in the Spirit of Pentecost. Thanks be to God!

Prayer of William Laud 1573-1645

Most gracious Father,
we humbly pray for your church.
Fill it with all truth; in all truth with all peace.
Where it is corrupt, purge it;
where it is in error, direct it;
where anything is amiss, reform it;
where it is right, strengthen and confirm it;
where it is in want, furnish it;
where it is divided, heal it;
and unite it in your love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

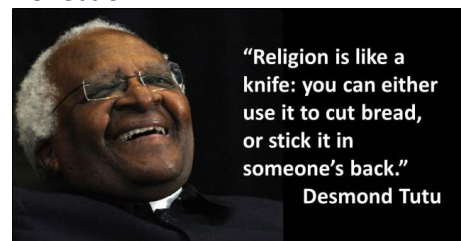
[Monday 7th January The Man with an Unclean Spirit](#)

Val Morrison Hall Gate, Doncaster, Former Moderator of General Assembly

St Luke 4: 31 - 37

He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the sabbath. They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority. In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, 'Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' When the demon had thrown him down before them, he came out of him without having done him any harm. They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, 'What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!' And a report about him began to reach every place in the region.

Reflection



Jesus came to cut bread, not to stick a religious knife into the backs of a common enemy, and the good citizens of Nazareth didn't like it one bit! They'd come to the synagogue, eager to hear their "local-boy-done-good" celebrity. They expected – and needed – him to

confirm their world view and their God-view: to ring the same old bells, baptise their prejudices and assumptions, assure them that the Good News of the Kingdom was first and foremost for them. If Jesus was special to God, then, by extension, so were they. After all, they'd shaped his thinking and faith! They didn't mind the idea of God being a little bit biased, because, deep down, they knew it was towards them.

Jesus had no such intention. The new world of the Kingdom is, if anything, the polar opposite of their own vision of "Nazareth-writ-large". God, Jesus tells them, is not in the business of giving everyone what they deserve, but what they need. It's called "grace", and it's God's version of fairness – of treating everyone equally. Which means that the people who always miss out – the people who can safely be relegated to the "don't need to worry about them!" category – go to the head of the queue. Worse still, "everyone" isn't defined narrowly in terms of "Israel", but the whole world!

When discipleship becomes "religion", rather than a Jesus-shaped way of living and acting, we're in very dangerous territory. That's when we're lulled into assuming that God's intention is to make the world into a global version of the church, instead of hearing Jesus' constant call and challenge to create church communities that are more and more like the transformed world of the Kingdom that God promises – a world in which the neediest, not the most religious, are God's first priority.

Prayer

Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair:
Lord, in the suffering this is our prayer.
Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace
Sunrise to sunset, Your kingdom increase!

God of the poor, friend of the weak,
Give us compassion, we pray:
Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain.
Come turn our love from a spark to a flame! Amen.

(Graham Kendrick)

Sunday 6th January Psalm 80

The Rev'd Nigel Uden, Downing Place and Fulbourn United Reformed Churches,
Cambridge

1 Hear us, O Israel's Shepherd, Joseph's guide,
The one enthroned between the cherubim.
2 Show forth your splendour to the threatened tribes,
Manasseh, Benjamin and Ephraim.
Come to our aid, O God, stir up your might;
3 Restore and save us! Shed on us your light!

4 LORD God of hosts, when will your anger cease
To burn against the prayers of your folk?
5 For food and drink you give them endless tears;
6 You make our neighbours rage and enemies mock.
7 Come to our aid, O sovereign God of might;
Restore and save us! Shed on us your light!

8 You brought a vine from Egypt to this land;
You drove the nations out and cleared the ground.
9 You planted it, and it took root and grew;
10 It filled the land and spread its branches round.
11 Its boughs extended, shading hill and tree,
To the Euphrates and to the Great Sea.

12 Why have you broken down its shielding walls,
So that all passers-by can pluck its fruit?
13 All creatures of the field make it their food;
Boars from the forest tear it from the root.
14 Return to us, Almighty God, and shine:
Look down from heav'n upon your ravaged vine!

15 This vine, this root, which by your own right hand
You planted for yourself, you now have spurned.
This branch, this son, whom you raised for yourself,
16 Has been cut down and in the fire is burned.
Your people—those whom for yourself you took—
Are perishing because of your rebuke.

17 Your hand place on the man at your right hand—
The son of man you raised up strong and true.
18 Revive us; then we'll call upon your name,
And we will never turn away from you.
19 Come to our aid, O sovereign God of might;
Restore and save us! Shed on us your light!

Reflection

Sometimes the Bible feels as if it was written for a different people, moment and place. At other times it's obviously for us, here and now. I wonder if Psalm 80 strikes you like that? However much it emerges from history, it could be by/for us.

Possibly reflecting a faith community that is going through hard times, it is like a hymn with a refrain. This metrical version thrice says, 'Come to our aid, O sovereign God of might' and punctuates that with a 'Return to us' and a 'Revive us'. It's not that they don't think they belong to God. Indeed, they speak of God as the 'Israel's Shepherd' – 'Shepherd' is never a negative name for God in the Bible. What is more, they are a 'vine' – another Biblical metaphor for those connected God; they speak of the Lord bringing them from Egypt and planting them where they took root and grew.

But something is amiss. They feel spurned and rebuked by God; the vine is ravaged. Nor do they feel able to restore the relationship themselves. They plead with God to do so; 'return to us' isn't so much a bargain - 'if you return to us, we'll return to you'. It's more a recognition of dependence upon the grace of God, at once both Sovereign and Shepherd.

Is some of today's Church a ravaged vine? Do we ever wonder if we are spurned and rebuked by God? These can be bewildering times, as our confidence drains,