

Prayer

Loving God, you created us all as your children, male and female alike. You love us equally, no matter our gender. Inspire us to do the same.

Faithful God, as we strive to be your disciples, enable us to work together to share your good news.

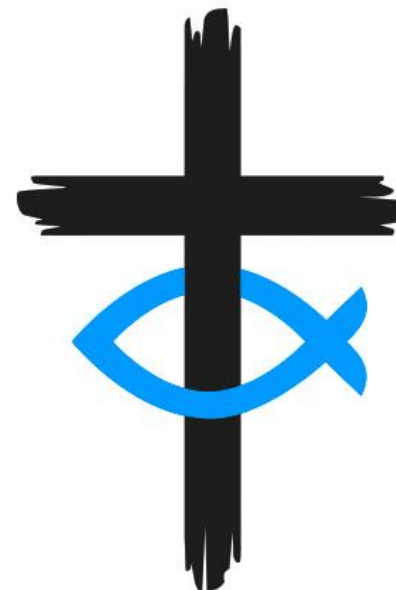
May we stand up to injustice and speak for those with no voice that all may be heard.

In your name we pray. Amen

Daily Devotions from the URC

13th – 31st January 2019

St Luke (3)



Introduction

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

Andy Braunston

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Sunday 13th January Psalm 81

The Rev’d Jenny Mills, Minister at Newport Pagnell URC and West End United Church, Wolverton. Convenor of the URC Children’s and Youth Work Committee.

1 Sing for joy to God our Saviour;
shout aloud to Jacob’s Lord!

2 Start the music; strike the timbrel;
play on strings a pleasing chord.

3 Sound the trumpet at the New Moon
and at the full moon as well,

4 At the feast by God appointed
and decreed for Israel.

Thursday 31st January Women who Followed Jesus

The Rev’d Ruth Watson Minister of Patricroft and Worsley Road URCs

St Luke 8: 1-3

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Reflection

“This is a man’s world” sang James Brown “But it would be nothing without a woman or a girl” In my house I am surrounded by men. Of the 5 people that live there, 4 are male. Throughout my career, as a science teacher and as a minister, I have taken on roles traditionally seen as male. And yet my sixth form was mainly women. The science department where I worked is now predominantly female. At both of my churches, the Elders are almost all women. How things have changed since that one verse in Luke.

Much has been made recently about the role of women and the equality sought in their treatment, pay and their right to say no. We have come a long way since women were “given away” at their wedding to a random stranger chosen by their parents in some sort of “deal”. But not everywhere. Forced marriages, trafficking and slavery are still a huge problem.

There is still a danger, however, that, while the majority of women want equality – to be treated fairly, to be given the same opportunities, to have the same rights – there are some women who want everything and try to oppress men as much as possible.

Jesus challenged social norms by accepting women among his followers as readily as he accepted men. He did not consider them anymore, or less, important than his male disciples – he treated them all the same. He acknowledged their worth and embraced them all as equals. As disciples and followers ourselves, may we do the same.

head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Reflection

I suspect I would have enjoyed Simon's embarrassment if I had been invited to dine at his house. He probably got what he deserved by having let the wretched women into the house in the first place. As for forgiveness...? None of my business. God forgives, not me.

But I doubt whether I would have laughed for long. We are all Simon the Pharisee at heart. Perhaps Simon at his best, would have accepted that the woman wanted to be forgiven and that proper penitence and a change of life as a consequence, was something to rejoice about. But it's irrelevant; Jesus had already forgiven her.

When Mary does the same thing in another gospel story, Jesus takes her action as a token of her love and tells Judas and the others to "leave her alone." He knows what is coming and so, it would seem, does Mary; myrrh, the oil of burial. But how could Luke's harlot know that? She anoints his head with myrrh, and although Jesus tells her that she is forgiven, it is not her penitence which moves him, but her love. "Her great love proves that her many sins have been forgiven". The woman comes to Jesus to show him love and respect because she already knows that she has been forgiven, and her foot washing is an act of thanksgiving and love. What Jesus says next pierces all our hearts and the Simon that lurks in them: "Where little has been forgiven, little love is shown". We can only love truly, when we know that we need to be forgiven and accepted by God, regardless of whatever judgment the world may choose to pass.

Prayer

When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.

God be merciful to me, a sinner. Amen

5 God ordained this law for Joseph when he ravaged Egypt's land; There we listened to a language which we did not understand.

6 He said: "I removed their burdens and their aching hands set free.
7 I delivered you from trouble when you called for help to me.

"From the thundercloud of Sinai all your people I addressed; When at Meribah you murmured, there I put you to the test.

8 "Hear, my people, let me warn you if you would but listen now!
9 No strange god shall be among you; to a false god do not bow.

10 "I, who brought you up from Egypt, your own God, the LORD, am I; Open wide your mouth towards me, and your food I will supply.

Reflection

So often we think, in churches, that if we changed the music, and made it a bit more upbeat and modern, that our problems would be solved; people would come flocking to Sunday worship. Would that it were so simple! The honest answer to our churches' dilemmas over attracting people to Sunday worship is that it struggles to have any relevance to many. It is out normal experience of so many: sitting for an hour and listening, singing, sharing a text - often with no explanation or context - and having to learn how to behave in a strange setting.

Today's reading encourages us, however, to sing God's praises. (It even has "Selah", meaning a space in the reading for a musical interlude!) It goes on to remind the people that they have chosen a path that separates them from God and calls them to turn back.

11 "But my people would not listen— would not do what I required.
12 So I gave them up to follow what their stubborn hearts desired.

13 "If my people would but heed me, Isr'el follow my command,
14 I would soon subdue their enemies, and against them turn my hand.

15 "Those who hate the LORD would cower, and their doom would never end.
16 But with finest wheat I'd feed you, honey from the rock I'd send."

As churches we are encouraged to share the Gospel, sing God's praises and help people to hear God's call on their lives. So often our solutions are to tinker around the edges trying to make worship appealing to those who currently do not attend.

The world has changed and moved on and people still need to hear the Gospel message of love, but we need to be brave, radical and authentic, making it audible and accessible to those we walk with in life. We need to ask ourselves: What is it we believe? Why? How does that affect how we live? How can we more effectively communicate what Church is (not just a place where we have to fit in, hoop jump or sing the right songs)? How can our actions and words speak of Jesus and his radical and transformational ministry? Then the Kingdom comes and all of creation sings!

Loving God,
We know we encounter you in worship
which makes sense to us,
helping us to feel safe and close to you.
We also know, for many,
there is no connection with you until a relationship has developed.
Help us to be your hands and feet in the world,
living the Gospel, sharing blessings and telling others of you,
beyond the safety of our church walls. Amen.

[Monday 14th January Jesus Calls Levi](#)

The Rev'd David Coaker, minister of Grays URC and a chaplain to the Moderators of General Assembly.

Luke 5: 27 - 32

After this he went out and saw a tax-collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up, left everything, and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax-collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax-collectors and sinners?' Jesus answered, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.'

point to a Kingdom which are more radical - and bigger - than our questioners and even we ourselves seem to realise.

Prayer

Every time I hear that someone is healed, may I rejoice.

Every time I hear of new life coming to an individual, a family, a community which seemed to have died, may I rejoice.

Every time I worry about the church's falling numbers, declining income or failing structures, remind me of the signs of the Kingdom which you showed to John, and may I rejoice. Amen.

[Wednesday 30th January A Sinful Woman Forgiven](#)

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

St Luke 7: 36 – 50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my

God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.) 'To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep."

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.'

Reflection

Many church officers will know the feeling that 'You can't win!' The congregation ask for young people to be brought into the church. So we set up a messy church, and it makes a mess; or a cafe church, and people behave like gluttons (and perhaps even drunkards). The congregation says 'we must reach out into the community', and we create a church full of tax-collectors and sinners. And the poor church officers get it in the neck. It is reassuring to know that Jesus himself knew the feeling.

Apparently, even John the Baptist had his doubts about the way things were going. Perhaps he expected more young people or families or 'members of the community' to be joining the Jesus movement. But Jesus's own criteria for success are different. He is not in the business of counting his followers. He instead rejoices each time the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them. John, says Jesus, preached about all this. At one level John knew that these were the fruits of God's Spirit, the true signs of God's presence. But at another level he was prophesying something the true enormity of which even John himself did not really grasp.

I wonder if the same is true in today's United Reformed Church. If we really believed Jesus's definition of 'success' for the Church, would we not make Church Related Community Ministry our primary ministry, and remove from our Yearbook the obsessive counting of members, children, ministers and churches? People may come to us asking about these things, but we have a message and

Reflection

'... he got up, left everything, and followed'. Well, he definitely got up and followed. But leave everything? As in most cases, when you actually read the Biblical text it does get more complicated. Levi left 'everything', but that 'everything' clearly did not include the house he owned, the food in his larder, his slaves or the money he had to pay servants.

Maybe a clue to the 'everything' he did give up is in the story that follows. Immediately after his decision to follow Jesus Levi throws a 'great banquet', with Jesus as the guest of honour, and the other guests are a 'large crowd' of tax-collectors and others – who the Pharisees and scribes helpfully categorize as sinners.

Levi is generous in his invitation, places Jesus in pride of place (not himself), and the guests are those who need to hear Jesus' message rather than those who would improve Levi's social-standing. So, we have the Pharisees and scribes left outside complaining that they aren't invited along for a religious debate or a free meal.

The 'everything' Levi left behind was himself. He still retained the trappings of his life, but he placed Jesus, and the people that Jesus was interested in, first.

Prayer

Brother Christ, remind us that your call to follow is a challenge to re-orientate our lives.

To turn from our own desires to strive after yours.

To share the joy and affirmation of the good news with those that need to hear and experience it, not just with those who are comfortably like us.

Help us to look beyond ourselves.

Hold before us the gift and the grace of God's Kingdom. Amen

[Tuesday 15th January The Question About Fasting](#)

The Rev'd John A Young, retired minister of the Scottish Synod, member of Giffnock URC

St Luke 5: 33 - 39

Then they said to him, 'John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.' Jesus said to them, 'You cannot make wedding-guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.' He also told them a parable: 'No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, "The old is good."'"

Reflection

Writing in September 2018, I cannot know at what stage Brexit will be when this reflection is published. However, I can see similarities between the Brexiteers (new wineskins for new wine), and the Remainers (old wineskins for good old wine). Not a perfect parallel admittedly, nor is the notion of the EU as a rather overbearing husband dealing very strictly with Britain, the reluctant wife seeking a divorce. However, let us hope that the outcome will mean a good separation (if separate we must), rather than a prolonged 'fast'.

Appearing in Matthew Mark and Luke, this Parable points up the relationship of the new to the old, a recurring theme in the Gospels, and, indeed, throughout the New Testament. If a seamless progression between the old and the new (the evolutionary approach) seems desirable, there always appears to be a tension between the two. In the Church, tradition is the natural habitat of some, and adventurousness the temperament of others. Reconciling the two is never going to be easy. Faith incorporates both tradition and adventure, with their strengths, and weaknesses.

Jesus acknowledges the religious tradition of his upbringing, but opens it up to new understandings. So it must be for us. The missionary impulse which beats at the heart of our faith imbues us with a questing spirit, convincing us that God 'has yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word'. Faith as a pilgrimage takes us on new paths and on to new expressions.

Faith has many definitions, but 'faith as risk' is the one that seems to incorporate the sense of adventure without which our faith becomes a past

But into that same darkness steps Jesus. He's right with us always, meeting us at the point of our greatest need and He has the power to help us through it in whichever way is best for us. Yes, there might not be an immediate resurrection and restoration as there was in the case of this most blessed mother, but we can still trust that God's love can make a way through our most terrible difficulties and bring us out into His glorious hope. Because, in God's story, grief and pain are never the end.

Prayer

Dear God, help us to open ourselves to You when we are at our most despairing and give us hope enough to trust in Your resurrection promises. Amen.

[Tuesday 29th January Messengers from John the Baptist](#)

The Rev'd Gethin Rhys is National Assembly Policy Officer for Cytun (Churches Together in Wales) and a member of Parkminster URC, Cardiff.

St Luke 7: 18 - 35

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' When the men had come to him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"' Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.' When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.' (And all the people who heard this, including the tax-collectors, acknowledged the justice of

As we exhaust ourselves with our outburst, hold us
As we encounter the silence, enfold us
Wrap your love and tenderness around us
and grant us your peace. Amen

Monday 28th January [The Widow's Son at Nain](#)
Anne Brooke, Attender at Elstead URC

St Luke 7: 11 - 17

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favourably on his people!' This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Reflection

I can't ever truly imagine how that mother must have felt. Not being a mother myself, I can't begin to fathom the depths of despair and grief she must have been feeling at the traumatic death of her only son. Alongside her terrible agony was the harsh knowledge that she has nobody to help her and nobody she can love. She's a widow, the wife of a dead husband, and now the mother of a dead son. There is surely no greater level of pain and tragedy she can possibly experience.

Into this bleak and despairing scenario steps Jesus. It's possible that the grieving mother doesn't even notice Him, although He does speak to her and try to provide comfort. There's no record of any reply she might have given. Perhaps she's in so much pain that she cannot respond to anything going on around her. And in a far less traumatic way, we've surely all been there. Sometimes we're so lost in grief, pain or depression that we can't see anything else but the darkness we're trapped by.

experience rather than a living thing. Adventuring out in Christ's name seems a fit response from us to the one who risked his all for us.

Prayer

Gracious God my faith is so cautious,
measured out carefully to be in control.
Generous beyond measure your Son risked all for me
to show what love means.
Forgive me for the poverty of my response to your goodness.
Open me out to your Spirit's promptings, that your Son's
ways may become my ways.

Wednesday 16th January [The Question About the Sabbath](#)
The Rev'd Sheila Coop, Minister at Macedonia URC, Failsworth

St Luke 6: 1 - 5

One sabbath while Jesus was going through the cornfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. But some of the Pharisees said, 'Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' Jesus answered, 'Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?' Then he said to them, 'The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.'

Reflection

What's so special about Sunday? And should it be Saturday or Sunday as the Sabbath?

For those of us somewhat long in years, we remember when the world slowed down on Sundays, no shops, no entertainment, sometimes no fun! But society has changed. We live in a 24/7 world - nothing stops, and we have to rush around just to keep up. So why do we need a Sabbath? Surely our time is our own - to use as we see fit and if that means using Sunday as a way of getting a headstart on Monday, then what's wrong with that?

The trouble is we love boundaries, we love to know who is in and who is not, and largely the reason is so that we can measure ourselves against other folk. And sometimes the rule-making gets out of hand and there's a feeling that the only way to protect people from doing the wrong thing is to make rules and laws against it – and that was what the Pharisees and their 613 laws of Moses were trying to do.

Apparently Billy Graham once said, “Jesus tells us it is OK to help our ox out of the ditch on the Sabbath. But, if your ox gets in the ditch every Sabbath, you need to either get rid of the ox or fill up the ditch.”

God gave us the Sabbath, a day of rest, a day to spend with God, and the gift is not for God's sake, but for our sake (see Mark 2:27). We need time away from 'work', time to enjoy the world we live in, time set aside to enjoy being with the world's creator and receiving God's blessing.

Does it have to be Sunday – well that's a debate for another day!

Prayer

Creator God, we thank you that you gave us the Sabbath, a day to rest from the everyday, a day to spend with you. We are sorry that we find so much else that 'needs to be done' in that short window in our week. Bless each one of us but bless, especially, those who do not have the luxury of control over their own lives as they battle for survival against violence, hardship and danger. Amen.

[Thursday 17th January The Man with a Withered Hand](#)

The Rev'd Andy Braunston is minister of Barrhead, Shawlands and Stewarton URCs in the Synod of Scotland.

St Luke 6: 6 - 11

On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said

show that you alone are God—
That you are the Most High, ruling
over all the earth abroad.

Reflection

This is one of the most challenging things I have ever had to write.

Both in its Biblical form, and in this metrical version, this Psalm is one of the most violent, vengeful pieces of writing in the whole of the Bible. Indeed it reminds its readers that there are many times when the nation has been in peril but that warriors have come to the nation's rescue. It lists the ten ancient enemies and provides the people with the words to ask God to raise up such champions again - or even better - destroy them yourself God! It is your reputation that is really at stake, implies the writer, God you need to show your power and majesty, and we will be vindicated because you will have won.

Like so many people, the people of God fall into the trap when faced with threats, especially violent threats, that they seek to look to an heroic past when they were great and victorious and they assume that is where they should be now. What they don't see is their part in creating the situation they are in. It is everyone else's fault not ours. The opening of the Psalm recognises that God is silent and there is a reason for that; the silence, if allowed, begins to give the space for self-reflection and self-examination and if the vengeful thoughts can run their angry course; only then perhaps the voice of God might be heard. A child in a tantrum is best left to exhaust his or her self so that the parent can step in and scoop them up in their arms and show love and tenderness. So this Psalm/hymn can be left to exhaust itself out too so that God can come with the words of tenderness and care. Perhaps it reminds us that we sometimes need to let out all our anger and frustration so that we can again be scooped up by God and embrace by his love.

Prayer

God
When we are angry with the world,
with you, with our own self
and shout out our pain, watch over us

2 See how all your foes are stirring,
eager to move in and kill.
3 For they plot against your loved ones,
make their cunning plans, and say,
4 “Come, let us destroy their nation;
Israel’s name we’ll sweep away.”

5 With one mind they plot against you;
they are allies for the fight—
6 Tents of Hagar and of Moab,
Edom and the Ishmaelite,
7 Gebal, Amalek and Ammon,
Philistines with men of Tyre.
8 Now Assyria has joined them;
Lot’s descendants strength acquire.

9 Treat them as you treated Midian
at the river Kishon drowned—
10 Sisera and Jabin slaughtered,
left like refuse on the ground.
11 Make their chiefs like Zeeb and Oreb,
Zeba and Zalmunna too,
12 When they said, “We’ll take possession
of God’s pasture-lands from you.”

13 Like the tumble-weed disperse them,
like the chaff before the breeze.
14 As the flames lay waste the mountains
or the fire consumes the trees,
15 So pursue them with your tempest;
may your storm bring fear and shame.
16 LORD, bring them humiliation,
so that they may seek your name.

17 May they be ashamed for ever;
let dismay be on their face.
May they be destroyed completely;
let them perish in disgrace.
18 LORD, make known your name among them;

to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come and stand here.’ He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, ‘I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?’ After looking around at all of them, he said to him, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Reflection

We read this confident in the knowledge that the scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites, that we’re not like that as we’re set free from legalism, and we’d never get furious with people who don’t confirm to our own expectations...

Religious people have a tendency toward legalism. We don’t mean to, but it’s an effective way of keeping us from breaching sacred boundaries. The Commandment to observe the Sabbath is pretty strong (most of us don’t follow it with anything like the rigour that our Orthodox Jewish sisters and brothers, or some of our co-religionists, do).

To refrain from work is a good thing, it ensures we rest, spend time with those we love, and devote some of our week to God. Yet these worthy aims became bogged down in legalism to the point where there was a debate about whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Of course Jesus turning the table on the religious folk made them furious.

Yet so many of us can become furious when things don’t conform to what we think is right. We get angry, or disparaging, about the wrong type of hymnody or liturgy; sniffy about whether the minister does, or doesn’t, vest in liturgical garb. We can become very patronising about other churches which do things differently - despite the off quoted myth that the URC is terribly ecumenical in outlook.

Instead of reading this passage with smug satisfaction that we’d be like the Pharisees, pray that God will open our eyes to see the aspects of our lives that we miss, blot out or ignore.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us to turn away from our righteous indignation, to see ourselves as you see us, to recognise our weaknesses and imperfections, that, even as you call us to be holy, we may not be sanctimonious. Amen.

[Friday 18th January Jesus Chooses the Twelve Apostles](#)

Daniel Harris, Ordinand, Westminster College.

St Luke 6: 12 - 16

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Reflection - Who Do You Think You Are?

What is in a name? Today is a significant day for me, for it is the 51st anniversary of the day that my mother and father first named me. I remember the amount of thinking that went into naming my own children. This is the first significant act of parenthood.



Today's Scripture reading is significant for several reasons. Initially, it reads as a Who's Who of Jesus' disciples. This is the road-crew who supported Jesus through three years of ministry. Everyone is mentioned by name, bringing in their family histories - largely unknown to us - into the mix of relationships. Some of these relationships were already established, while other relationships were starting to crystallize. By listing each disciple by

name, it is as if the Gospel writer, and Jesus himself, is recognising the significance of each person's family background.

Here the centurion sends Jewish elders to Jesus, asking him to come and heal his slave. Then he sends a second lot of messengers telling Jesus not to trouble himself, but just speak and the slave will be healed. The actual healing seems almost incidental to the story, the story seems to have more to do with Jesus' reaction.

In the Gospels there is plenty of astonishment and amazement but it is usually astonishment at what Jesus has done or amazement at the authority with which he speaks. Here it is Jesus who is amazed at the centurion's faith. We, the readers, may be equally amazed and astonished at this long distance healing, but Luke's focus in telling the story is upon the faith of the centurion which unlocks the healing of the slave.

What do we learn? Firstly, the centurion didn't actually meet with Jesus, perhaps he represents the readers of the Gospel, today it is you and me, who have never met Jesus in person, Jesus Christ is, however, with us and his word is effective.

Secondly, the reading seems to point to bridges being built between Jews and Gentiles. For us, maybe, it points to the inclusivity of our Faith where there is no division on the basis of race, or any other barrier that we erect.

Prayer

Gracious God,
we give thanks that Christ is present with us,
present, in the here and now,
present, through your Holy Spirit.
May we never be afraid,
of bringing our needs
and the needs of others to you.
In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

[Sunday 27th January Psalm 83](#)

The Rev'd Hilary Collinson a minister in the Tees and Swale Pastorate

1 O my God, do not keep silent;
be not quiet, be not still.

Help us to see clearly what you are asking us to do
Help us to follow you,
And to do what you say
For we ask it in your name, Amen.

[Saturday 26th January Jesus Heals a Centurion's Slave](#)

The Rev'd Dr David Whiting, Minister. Sunderland and Boldon URC Partnership

St Luke 7: 1 - 10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.' And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it.' When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Reflection

We are introduced to a centurion, who is clearly sympathetic to his Jewish neighbours. Centurions were professional soldiers in the Roman military, in this case he was probably a non-Jew serving Herod Antipas' army. Centurions turn up rather a lot in the Gospels, and in the Acts of the Apostles, and, maybe surprisingly, they are often portrayed in positive ways. Think of the centurion watching Jesus' crucifixion, praising God and declaring 'certainly this man was innocent (Luke 23:47) or Cornelius who Peter encounters in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 10:1-48).

But this list of motley disciples takes shape in other ways. Jesus called them into a specific sort of relationship, one of new sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers brought together in the unique union as family bound together in the union and love of Christ. The old family history is still significant, but is complimented by this new layering of family.

Therefore, to simply see this list as some form of management hierarchy does it a disservice. Instead, it reshapes itself as a new family tree, with different people organically coming together through Jesus acting as its trunk.

So, Jesus calls us also to join this family. He calls us by the name of our birth and family. In some cases, he will even give us a new name. But he calls us to join this new family - defined by faith, hope and love - with its unique heritage and mission to carry on branching out.

Prayer:

Thank-you, Jesus, for being the source of our growth
Wherever we reside in this world, we can spread out and flourish.
You call us by name and family,
and invite us into new family relationships.
You knows our background story.
By the power of the Spirit, that story can flourish.
So spread us out to catch the sun.
Help us to reach into every nook and cranny of this good Earth,
to bring news of your presence and reign. Amen.

[Saturday 19th January Jesus Teaches and Heals](#)

The Rev'd Elizabeth Welch, Minister at Clapton Park URC, Hackney

St Luke 6: 17-19

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Reflection

I remember, in the early years of my ministry, being approached by a member of the congregation who asked me to pray for her healing. I laid hands on her and prayed. Two or three weeks later she came up to me and thanked me for my prayer, and for her healing. I have to confess that my initial response, which I kept hidden from her, was that of astonishment. Although in my teenage years we'd had a ministerial friend of the family who exercised a healing ministry, I hadn't imagined that I might follow in her footsteps, even in a very small way.

In Jesus' day, the power of the healing that he made possible drew crowds of people. Over the centuries people have debated about the role of healing in the Church. In some places the emphasis on healing has led to the provision of hospitals, health care centres and healing missions in different parts of the world. Healing has been seen as embracing the whole person and the whole of creation.

In today's passage the healing Jesus offers is freely available for people who come from a variety of different places. They come knowing their need and looking for a word of promise. Healing and teaching are drawn together in the power of Jesus' ministry. He speaks words that heal the broken human condition and comes with power that touches people's lives.

There are many different ways in which God opens up healing – in personal lives, in relationships, through communities, in the work of nurses and doctors, through the National Health Service. Healing begins with recognising our need, whether personal or social, trusting in God's desire for healing and wholeness, and prayerfully seeking the ways in which that desire can be lived out in ministries of healing.

Prayer:

O God, giver of healing and wholeness,
may I see my own need for healing,
and receive the touch of your presence in my life.

As I receive from you,
so may I reach out to others.

is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.'

Reflection

Today's reading comes from the end of what some folk call Jesus' sermon on the plain - Luke's equivalent of Matthew's sermon on the mount. These include some of Jesus' most challenging teaching, so it's doubly challenging that it's at this point that Jesus asks those listening, 'Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' but not do what I say?'

Luke tells us that those listening to Jesus' sermon on the plain included not only the newly appointed twelve Apostles, but also 'a large crowd of his disciples and a great number of people from all over'. Jesus tells all of them that everyone who comes to him, as they have done, and puts his words into practice is building their lives on a firm foundation. The sort of foundation that can stand up to the storms of life.

So Jesus is clear that the possibility of a life built on this rock-like foundation is open to everyone from the moment that they first encounter him. However, those of us who have tried to do this and are honest about the results will have found ourselves too often in the same position as Paul – recognising that 'what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do'.

Nevertheless, we are called to put Jesus' teaching into practice in all aspects of our lives. In our actions and in how we do them, in our words and in how we say them, in our souls and in how we relate to God. To do this, we need to keep returning to the sermon on the plain and to reflect more critically on what it could mean to more nearly live out Jesus' words.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
We dare to call out to you today.
We dare to acknowledge you as our Lord and our God.
And yet we know that too often we do not do what you say.
Too many times we fall short of what you ask of us.
Forgive us.
Show us once more your will and your way

Reflection

I don't know - but this all seems to be a bit 'black and white' for me. It's as though there's something of a binary position here and surely that can't be right? It seems too simplistic for me. I mean, can a good person not do bad things? Can a bad person not do good things? Can you not do the right thing but for the wrong reasons? Or vice versa?

And where does this passage leave me? A human being with faults and failings but, also I like to think, some good points too. I've done wrong things - does that mean I'm all bad? What about the good things I've done?

There's a lot of talk about companies being 'carbon neutral' - they'll plant trees to offset some of the environmental damage their operations have caused or something similar.

To be honest; that's the best I can hope for. To be 'neutral' with the good counterbalancing the bad. If I can tip the scales on the side of 'good' then so much the better.

Just try not to catch me on an off-day, eh?

Prayer

Lord,
I'm going to make mistakes. So forgive me when they happen. My life can't be black and white, help me to be a lighter shade of grey. Amen

Friday 25th January [The Two Foundations](#)

The Rev'd Jacky Embrey, Moderator, Mersey Synod

St Luke 6: 46 - 49

'Why do you call me "Lord, Lord", and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act

I give thanks for places and people of healing, individuals, communities, churches, the NHS...

I pray for your healing to be present in the lives of hurting people and in the midst of a broken world. Amen.

[Sunday 20th January Psalm 82](#)

The Rev'd Angela Rigby is minister at Christ Church URC Tonbridge and St Johns Hill URC Sevenoaks

1 God stands in the great assembly,
judging gods who gather there:

2 "How long will you clear the wicked
with the judgments you declare?"

5 They are void of understanding;
no right judgment can they make.
On they walk in utter darkness;
all of earth's foundations shake.

3 "Vindicate the weak and orphans,
and the rights of those oppressed.

4 Save the weak, support the needy;
from the wicked give them rest."

6 "You are gods," - so I addressed them
"you are sons of God Most High.

7 But like mortal men you'll perish,
and like other rulers die."

8 Rise, O God, and come in judgment;
justice for the earth command,
For you hold as your possession
every race and every land.

Reflection

This Psalm reminds me of the scene in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix when Harry is on trial at the Ministry of Magic. Unjustly accused, Harry is sat on a small wooden chair, while the Ministry's judges are sat 'on high', ready to protect their interests. But despite how mighty and judicial they all look, there is another one who is judging the situation. Dumbledore steps in dramatically, and at that point true justice enters the room. This justice seeks the truth and protects the vulnerable.

Some leaders today operate to protect their own interests, and some will point to Romans 13 if one complained. Psalm 82 gives an important balance to Romans 13. Psalm 82 puts world leaders in their proper place - under God,

working on God's Kin-dom building project. God stands in the UN assembly, judging the human 'gods' who are gathered there. "So-called leaders, when will you defend the first peoples from corporate greed? When will you help the people fleeing war instead of closing your borders and stoking racism and fear? When will you help those oppressed because of gender, sexuality, religion or ethnicity?"

Leadership comes with responsibility to God, but the Psalmist tells us that the leaders don't get it. They are oblivious to how their actions shake the foundations of the earth to its core. Their actions are like earthquakes working against what God is building.

The Psalmist admits that, yes, they are leaders, but God will judge their actions. Leaders are human, not divine. They will not live forever. God will. God will continue to seek justice for all the peoples of Creation. If you are a leader who wants to work with God and not against, the Psalmist believes that your divine orders are clear. (See verses 3 & 4).

God,

We pray for those in leadership – international, national and local. We pray that they will work with God and God's kin-dom building project.

Help the leaders work together for a world that: "Vindicates the weak and orphans, and the rights of those oppressed. Saves the weak, supports the needy; from the wicked gives them rest." Amen

[Monday 21st January Blessings and Woes](#)
Ed Strachan, Lay Preacher, Heald Green URC

St Luke 6: 20 - 26

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

'Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. 'But woe to you

unencumbered is perhaps most difficult for those of us who have much, like the rich young man.

I once cautioned my daughter against giving away all her saved pocket money to a cause that had moved her, suggesting she could give some, rather than all. She confounded me by saying 'it's ok Mummy - I know I will be given more next week'. I was confronted with the reality that I do not live with the same measure of faith in God's provision as she does in mine.

Generosity, Jesus tells us, is a mirror. It reflects back on us. The measure we use is the measure we will receive. We limit what we expect to be the generosity of others. When someone teaches us something or points out a problem or issue we have, do we receive this as a gift of generosity or as a put down, even an attack?

Thank God we can be saved from the meanness of our own minds, hearts and hands, by the overwhelming measure of generosity of God in Christ. Freely we have received – now freely give.

Prayer

Lord, help us to be true children of our generous Father.

You came not to condemn but to save,
help us reflect more of your likeness.

Help us so live in your abundance that our first impulse is to share.

May we love in good measure, being filled to overflowing by your Spirit. Amen.

[Thursday 24th January A Tree and Its Fruit](#)

Leo Roberts is the Children and Youth Development Officer for the North Western Synod

St Luke 6: 43 - 45

'No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

Dr Sam Richards, Head of URC Children's and Youth Work, member of mayBe Community - a fresh expression of Church in Oxford.

St Luke 6: 37 - 42

'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'

He also told them a parable: 'Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye", when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.'

Reflection

Generosity is a quality we admire - no Scrooges here! This passage challenges us to be generous in mind (judgement), heart (forgiveness), and hands (resources).

Which is most challenging?

To be generous in our judgements of others. Not to condemn or criticise - but instead making the effort to understand others and their different experience of the world. The call to be inclusive, intercultural and intergenerational as followers of the Jesus requires such generosity of mind.

To be generous in our forgiveness. Not holding onto hurt and offence. The call to be ministers of reconciliation starts with valuing restoration of relationship in all areas of our lives.

To be generous with our resources. Not saving for our own rainy day but attending to the immediate needs of others. The call to follow Jesus

who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 'Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. 'Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. 'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Reflection

We hear a lot about mental health these days, about people with a calm and cheerful exterior, but who are hurting inside. We hear a lot about people whose mental state would benefit enormously from a timely therapeutic intervention. But this is different - it's about the blessedness of those who are not necessarily on top of their world.

Being citizens of the Kingdom is certainly not about cakes and ale - it can well be about personal sacrifice, as we seek to live the life of the Kingdom. We may even experience suffering - that can be the price of witness. On the other hand, the passage tells us about a great day which will come to those whose steadfastness in faith has carried them through - the spiritual reward of perseverance.

On the other hand, life may be treating you OK. You may be rich in this world's goods, you may stand high in the opinion of others, but that is not what finally matters.

It's the perfect riposte to those who rejoice in what has come to be called the prosperity gospel - the view that it you are living a good life, God's will reward you in this world's goods. It's the perfect answer to self-righteous smugness.

It's a reflection that you don't have to be always cheerful to be healthy, but we are certainly not invited to immerse ourselves in chronic anxiety and depression. There is a blessing on those who are moved by the state of the world. There is an endorsement of the thoughtful and devout attitude. We are brought up short by the consideration that discipleship involves penetrating vision, deep thought and prayer, and sometimes perplexity about the way ahead. We are encouraged on our spiritual journey.

Prayer

Proof us against the seduction of instant gratification

But block for us the path down to masochistic gloom.
Guide us along the pathway of perceptive sobriety
And grant us the uncluttered perspective of wisdom and vision

Give us the vision to understand what we see
And to discern others of like inclination
May we pick out those whom it is right for us to follow
And may we be empowered to lead those who seek to follow us.

[Tuesday 22nd January Love for Enemies](#)

The Rev'd Matt Stone, minister at Herringthorpe URC, Rotherham

St Luke 6: 27 - 36

‘But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. ‘If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Reflection

Here in Luke’s Gospel we get only a few snippets of the Sermon on the Mount, but in Matthew’s Gospel it runs for three whole chapters. How are we to make sense of it? Is it just as a list of moralistic teaching, or is there a key to unlocking a deeper understanding?

I heard a sermon a few years ago that suggested a key: Matthew 5:47, which reads, “And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not

the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (ESV).

That word ‘unusual’, sometimes translated ‘extraordinary’, is the Greek word *perisson*. It’s the same word Jesus uses in John 10:10 when he offered life in all its fullness. It has a sense of abundance, of surplus, of excessive extravagance about it. And it seems to have been viewed by Jesus as a crucial quality of the Christian life. Jesus expects, wants, yearns for us to go far beyond the norm, far beyond what might be expected as reasonable and ‘enough’. This is how Jesus expects us to go beyond the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. Anyone can follow rules, but to have a heart that overflows with a desire to bless and serve others is extraordinary.

It is the *perisson* that refuses to settle an eye for an eye, and pushes us into the uncharted territories of grace where cheeks are turned and shirts are pressed into oppressor’s hands. In the land of *perisson*, enemies are loved and persecutors prayed for. And the basis of all of this is the very nature of God: God is extraordinary; God is *perissonic*, to coin a term – and if we want to live in His kingdom we have to be exactly like Him.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
You suffered the cross to show love for your enemies.
Help us:
to do good to those who hate us...
to bless those that curse us...
to do to others as we would have them do to us...
to love our enemies...
to do good and expect nothing in return...
to be merciful, as our Father is merciful...
Help us to be extraordinary, not in our own strength,
but empowered by your life-giving Spirit. Amen