

Daily Devotions from the URC

1st – 16th March 2019

St Luke (6)



Introduction

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

Andy Braunston

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So, when Jesus paints this picture of servants or slaves who have done all their chores, and now, with everything in order wait quietly for their master to come home, I feel a twinge of guilt. How might this insight into first century domesticity speak to disciples 2,000 years later?

Perhaps it's not about housework! Perhaps there have been fewer changes than we think...

Today if we are going away, we often ask someone reliable to pick up the post and check all is well – we don't expect to return to chaos, and the master of this first Century house was just the same - as was Jesus. As lord and master, Jesus asked his friends to look after the place when he'd gone.

Cast your mind back to yesterday's reading, Jesus urged his friends to "strive for [God's] kingdom"; a message that hasn't changed over the centuries. Jesus still calls us in the twenty first Century to strive for God's kingdom; building a world of caring, hospitality, inclusivity, justice, compassion, forgiveness, serving and celebrating diversity.

Right now, God's kingdom feels a long way away, and the news as I write is filled with chaos and greed, division and hurt, yet as disciples, we are still called to share those kingdom values. It's up to us to keep trying – Jesus didn't say it was going to be easy.

Eventually the world will be turned upside down; the master turned servant in this passage reminds us of Jesus washing the feet of his friends. Thieves will be foiled because we're alert and awake.

Today, Jesus trusts us, his disciples to look after the world, to strive for the kingdom, loving, serving and ready for the unexpected.

Are we ready?

Prayer

Lord, We pray that you will help us to live or lives in such a way that we are always ready to receive you.

Be with us as we strive to bring your kingdom values to a world that has largely forgotten to care for each other. Amen

Friday 1st March [Jesus visits Mary and Martha](#)

The Rev'd Peter Meek, Moderator, East Midlands Synod

St Luke 10: 38 - 42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

Reflection

I've often felt for Martha in this story and my sermons on the passage have reflected that. However, let's take a different tack today. It was Eugene Peterson, once described as Reformed Christianity's nearest thing to a saint, who said, in commenting on the work of full time ministry, that an unwillingness or inability to take time off is a lack of discipline. Work is something we can hide behind, and idolise. Hard for us Protestants to swallow, I know. Work is good, right? Not always it seems. Tony Burnham once wrote of his worries about "activist ministers" not spending enough time studying Scripture. He said "I fear ministers are selling their birthright for a potted message". Great word play, but I worry too about all of our people who don't give up enough busy-ness to spend time "with the Lord" in prayer and shared Bible study.

Prayer

Almighty God who is uniquely made known in Jesus the Christ, forgive us for making an idol of our busyness and indispensability.

Forgive us for starving ourselves,
and remind us that

"Human beings do not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from your mouth".

Renew in us a desire for you, your ways and your Word,
because you love us and your world.

In Jesus' precious name. Amen

Saturday 2nd March The Lord's Prayer

Gordon Woods, Elder, St. Columba's URC, Oxford

St Luke 11: 1 - 4

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

Reflection

One of my roles in my local church is to organise pulpit supply. In Oxford we are lucky to be able to draw on not only the talents of our congregation and the wider URC, but also a range of ecumenical friends. Working with people from other denominations can highlight ways we are different - for example, Baptist and Methodist colleagues are completely unfazed by our order of service (even though it differs in some details from their usual practice), but some Anglican and Roman Catholic preachers find the thought of the worship leader choosing or writing prayers week by week entirely alien! I often find myself suggesting hymns and songs for such visitors - and one chaplain did remark to me that leading worship for us had taught him the importance of hymns as a vital part of the service in our tradition, rather than just being a filler between the important bits of the service (as he caricatured the Anglican approach).

However, just as we learn about our differences when we have these encounters, we reinforce the things we have in common - and the Lord's Prayer must be one of the most fundamental. The version above from Luke is a little shorter than the prayer we usually say in church - no mention of the Kingdom coming on earth as is in Heaven, for example - and you'll find a longer version in Matthew 6. But the three key ideas of praying for the Kingdom to come, for daily needs, and for forgiveness are all there. In preparing this reflection I was struck by the modesty of the ask (daily bread rather than wealth and material success), allied to the personal commitment to forgive others, and the desire for the Kingdom to come. Does this reflect our own priorities and practice, or are we tempted to ask God for more, and to commit less?

calling or vocation "is where your greatest passion meets the world's greatest needs" (Frederick Buechner). So far from keeping calm, we are called to get passionate, and discover our place as co-workers and co-creators with God. Jesus showed us the Way of Passion - now we need to walk in it.

Prayer

Jesus - help us be seekers of everlasting treasure:
strivers for the kingdom,
people of passion,
sispellers of worry,
workers for justice,
co-creators of peace,
bearers of hope,
those who daily choose to
walk the way in love. Amen

Saturday 16th March Watchful Slaves

Linda Rayner is an elder at Bramhall URC and also the URC Coordinator for fresh expressions of Church

St Luke 12: 36-40

'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. 'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Reflection

I admit to days when my home office is cluttered, there's no milk in the fridge, and there isn't a tidy room for receiving friends, yet alone someone in authority.

they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Reflection

Allegedly there are 365 commands not to worry or 'fear not' in the Bible - one for each day of the year (random sermon fact - not verified by this author!) This is perhaps the closest God comes to nagging – which, as I always tell my family, is positive reinforcement through reminder and repetition.

We may feel we have much more to worry about today than in Biblical times - social media, climate change, homelessness, environmental destruction, Brexit, exam pressure, refugee crises, nuclear threat, food poverty, cyber attack, mental health issues - I could go on. Indeed Jesus' suggestion that we consider the wild birds and wild flowers might not bring much comfort as we record declining numbers in church and struggles to survive intensive farming and habitat destruction.

But of course Jesus is not telling us not to worry in the sense of "keep calm and carry on". He is challenging us to a radical change of focus. Seek first the kingdom - not our own needs. Trust that God already knows what we need (note - not what we think we need). And it turns out that what we need, which it is God's good pleasure to give us, is the kingdom of God.

Time to put our money where our mouth is, our time and energy where our heart is - to do all we can in partnership with the Spirit to usher in the kingdom. Your

Prayer

Lord, you taught your disciples to pray;
using simple words,
asking your disciples to commit themselves,
praying for the Kingdom to come.

If we are tempted to hide behind complicated language,
if we ask for more than we are prepared to give,
or tempted to focus on personal glory,
speak to us through the prayer you gave us.
Help us hear your call
and inspire us to serve you faithfully and make the Kingdom come.

Amen.

Sunday 3rd March Psalm 88

The Revd Fiona Thomas is a member of Christ Church, Bellingham and serves as the Secretary for Education & Learning of the URC.

1 Lord, you are the God
who saves me;
I entreat you night and day.
2 May my pleading come before you;
turn your ear to me, I pray.

3 For my soul is full of trouble
and my life draws near to death.
4 Counted with the ones who perish,
I have neither strength nor breath.

5 To the grave I am abandoned,
like the bodies lying there.
You remember them no longer;
they are cut off from your care.

6 In the lowest pit you cast me;
in the darkest depths am I.
7 For your wrath is heavy on me,

and beneath your waves I lie.

8 Closest friends
you've taken from me;
loathsome to them is my plight.
I am trapped—escape I cannot;
9 misery has dimmed my sight.

Daily, LORD, I call upon you;
in your sight my hands I spread.
10 In the grave do you show
wonders?
Are you worshipped by the dead?

11 Is your love shown in destruction
in the grave your faithfulness?
12 Are your wonders known in
darkness,
or in death your righteousness?

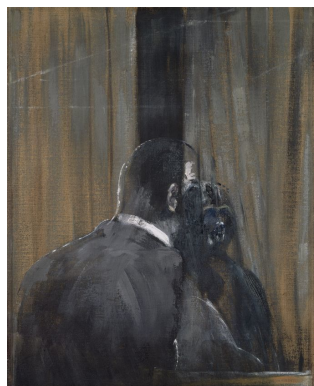
13 But I cry to you for help, LORD;
at the dawn to you I pray.
14 Why, O LORD, do you reject me,
and why turn your face away?

15 From my youth I've been afflicted;
death to me is always near.
I have undergone your terrors,
and I am in deep despair.

16 Your fierce anger
has engulfed me;
by your terrors I am crushed.
17 All day long they overwhelm me;
over me the flood has rushed.

18 You have taken my companions
and my loved ones far from me.
Now my closest friend is darkness;
not a ray of light I see.

Reflection



*Francis Bacon, Head IV, Arts Council collection,
Hayward Gallery, London*

Francis Bacon's art is not pretty or soothing, expressing the pain and cruelty of the human condition in works such as "Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion" or "Head VI" which started his series of "screaming popes". Yet there is something searingly honest in this art, speaking to people who know the depths of despair.

This is art which speaks the truth about the bottom of the pit. As does Psalm 88, with none of the happy ending that is found in many of the other Psalms where anger with God is resolved in defiant faith. Here instead there is the bewilderment of someone in solitary confinement, whether by the hand of others, or because they have isolated themselves. They are totally cut off from any encouraging presence, and feel hemmed in. Even God has deserted them, and they argue with God "What good is it if I die? Will that bring you any glory? I want to live and to know your love and wonders." Their plea is met with apparent silence.

Walter Breuggeman identifies this as one of the Psalms of disorientation, pointing out that life is "savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved asymmetry" yet observing the "curious fact that the church has, by and large, continued to sing songs of orientation in a world increasingly experienced as disoriented."

to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God' he was pointing our thinking in the same direction. Life in all its fullness (John 10.10) is not about being wealthy – albeit that poverty robs life of its abundance. An abundant life is one in which we know we are loved, and know that God cares what we do. It is an awareness of our dependence upon God and how blessed we are to be able to depend on God. That is the treasure in heaven (Matt 6.19-21) which Jesus introduced in his sermon on the mount. The thing it would be worth selling everything you have to own (Matt 13.45-46).

This rich man probably believed that his great wealth and the power it conferred were signs that God was pleased in him. But, as Spiderman, Churchill, and Roosevelt would have it: with great power comes great responsibility. The rich fool tries to hoard his money and power; to be able to manipulate the market by selling his grain only when the price is high. He plans to kick back and retire happy, living off the profits. But as God kindly points out, he cannot bring his wealth into heaven, and what good is it to him when seen from eternity? How we spend or hoard money affects our spirit, and changes our relationship to God. Better, then, to think of earthly wealth not as a treasure or a blessing, but as a responsibility, a stewardship task. Jesus cares what we do with our money, and what our money gets up to as it travels around the world.

Prayer

Generous God,
as I put my hand in my pocket today
may I be conscious that everything I have comes from you.
Let me test my spending against your words
and my saving against your intentions. Amen.

Friday 15th March Do Not Worry

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

St Luke 12: 22 - 34

He said to his disciples, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap,

Prayer

Loving God

Take away my fears and uncertainties;

give me the peace of knowing you.

Remind me of your power and unchanging love.

Remind me that you know me and care about me.

When I worry or fear,

help me to rely on, and trust in, you,

the unchanging God.

Thank you for sending your Jesus, your son

who was willing to come;

I pray in His name. Amen

Thursday 14th March The Rich Fool

The Revd Dr 'frin Lewis-Smith is minister to the URCs in Darwen and Tockholes

St Luke 12: 13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

Reflection

Blessings are not earned. Nothing we can do can make God love us more, and we cannot force a blessing out of God however amazing our actions or attitudes. The same with forgiveness – we do not earn it, but receive it because God is good and the divine nature is always to show kindness. When Jesus said 'a person is a fool

This Psalm speaks of experiencing the world when it is at its most painful, and refusing to give up entirely on a relationship with God. For only the God who can stand our screamed out questions and demands for answers is worth believing in.

*God who is beyond knowing,
deeper than pain,
holder of desolation,
when the way meets a prison wall
stay with us.*

Monday 4th March Perseverance in Prayer

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

St Luke 11: 5 - 13

And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Reflection

In Luke's telling this passage follows on from Jesus teaching the disciples how to pray by offering them the words we call the Lord's prayer. In this way we have a contrast between how God relates to us, and how we relate to each other. We

are reminded that God provides 'our daily bread' but it takes real persistence for us to share our bread with each other. We are blessed by God's willingness to forgive but we need to be challenged to forgive others.

God's relationship to us is paralleled with that of good parents who respond to the simple and reasonable request for a fish and an egg by doing so, and not giving a snake and a scorpion. The basic needs are fulfilled, not arbitrary punishment. A good parent strives for the wholeness of their child and requests that build towards that are affirmed. We are reminded that this is even more true when it comes to God.

Ask, search and knock – be open to Christ in the world around you.
Give, find, and open – be open to Christ acting through you.
In all things, place yourself before God in prayer.

Prayer

Living God, we live pressured with demands on our time, energy, resources, and attention. We try to prioritise, but are pressed by the loudest voices, the strongest obligations; often all we can do is deal with what is before us. We crave an all-embracing vision to inspire, direct, and empower us, yet your 'still small voice' is often heard in the request for help, the search for meaning, and the knock at the door. Amen

Tuesday 5th March Jesus and Beelzebul

The Rev'd Nicola Furley-Smith, Moderator of Southern Synod

St Luke 11: 14 - 23-26

Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.' Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? —for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully

'And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.'

Reflection

"Even the hairs of your head are all counted." I've reached an age when I've made it relatively easy for God to count the hairs on my almost bald head. This statement both amazes and encourages me. It tells me that God knows every detail about me and cares enough to bother about every detail. To me it means that the God who created everything does not ignore insignificant me.

What is significant in this world that can sometimes seem to be dominated and controlled by social media? One person's thoughts can be passed on and shared time and time again until the reasons it was said are no longer clear and it can easily become false news.

It is good to remind ourselves that God knows us and knows what matters. When we wonder what is true or what is false, we can be sure that we have the Holy Spirit to guide us.

"Do not be afraid." Those words must reassure us. You will be reading this in mid-March and I am writing it in November, so I can only guess that Brexit will still be a big issue as you read. As I write many people are afraid of losing their jobs or losing power, afraid of the uncertainty that looms. No matter what is decided in Westminster and Europe we need to hang onto the certainty that we should not be afraid if we put our whole trust in God. The one certainty is God who says, "I the Lord do not change" (Malachi 3:6) and the writer to the Hebrews confirms that Jesus is unchanging in 13:8 "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

We can rejoice that no matter what is happening, our God knows us and cares about us and will never change.

However, it seems less of a given these days, where instead of denying or explaining, they cry 'Fake News!' and hope it will just go away. An alternative approach seems to simply ignore the hoo-ha on the grounds that your supporters actually don't care if you are a racist (perhaps they are too?) or if you slept with a porn actor (perhaps they wish they had?)

Nevertheless there is a general first reaction to such accusations of people and institutions to 'cover-up' or at least to seek damage limitation. Which at least indicates a recognition that the actions were in some way wrong in the first place? Then again, maybe the instinct to 'go defensive' is so strong that, regardless of whether they believe themselves wrong, they will seek to hide any evidence, simply because the consequences of being found out are so severe?

I do wonder how Jesus, so critical of the Pharisees, would describe the hypocrisy of those in positions of authority, influence and power today? Then I wonder what he'd say about all mistakes that I have made that nobody ever found out about? Then I wonder if you wonder likewise?

Prayer

God of light, who sees all, even in the dark,
Lead us to acknowledge our faults, fears and, yes, our own hypocrisies.
Shine that cleansing light upon us and upon all those whose actions, errors and inactions that have led to pain, hurt and damage.
Heal those hurts, we pray and leave us cleansed, renewed and ready to try again. Amen

Wednesday 13th March Exhortation to Fearless Confession

John Collings is a Lay Preacher and member of Rutherglen URC

St Luke 12: 4 - 12

'I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Demons come in all shapes and sizes. Most of us assign the word 'demon' to those things, or those parts of our lives, over which we have no control. The same might be said of what we see in this passage with opposition to Jesus at its best. As some respond in faithful discipleship, others challenge Jesus pointing towards his final rejection.

The event that leads to the discussion is an exorcism of a demon that had caused a man to be struck dumb. The man is able to speak again. The crowd is amazed and start speculating about what kind of power Jesus possesses. But they don't understand. Some call Jesus out for being controlled by Beelzebub, others suggest waiting for a sign from heaven.

Jesus, knowing their thoughts, responds. He argues that it is foolish to think that Satan has sent one of his minions to undo his own work of destruction. So, he offers them an alternative thought: If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you." In other words, this miracle is evidence of the arrival of God's promised, redemptive rule. He goes on to teach them a parable about a strong man being defeated by an even stronger man. Here is the ultimate cosmic civil war, then, and we must decide: do we follow Jesus or follow Satan? One will be the agent of God's deliverance, the other will not.

Jesus gives us a clue as to what we should do. The exorcised man is compared to a house that is swept clean and is ready to be inhabited, this time by seven other spirits so that the man's situation is now worse than it was before. Jesus' point is simple: do not leave your inner "house" empty but take control of the things of the kingdom.

*When I lack control over my demons and all around me rages, O God,
let me trust in your protecting love and strengthening power
that I may be wholly filled with the things of the kingdom:
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
goodness, gentleness, self-control and faithfulness,
giving thanks that your grace is sufficient for all I need. Amen.*

Wednesday 6th March Ash Wednesday The return of the unclean spirit

The Rev'd Lis Mullen Retired Minister Member Kendal URC

St Luke 11: 24 - 26

'When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting-place, but not finding any, it says, "I will return to my house from which I came." When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first.'

Reflection

Today marks the start of Lent, the season of penitential fasting which leads through a time of self-denial and self-discipline as we walk on our way towards the Cross. Some mark Today with a ritual of 'Ashing', when the sign of the Cross is marked on our foreheads with ash, representing that which is burnt out and wasted. This ancient emblem of grief and mourning has been adopted by the Church as both a symbol of sin and to warn of the coming dark days for Jesus.

Whilst I love the ritual and symbolism of Ashing, I am rather conflicted about some of the self-debasement and self-advertisement that goes with it. I don't think penitence is really about that, hence the mark of the ashes is easily hidden or rubbed off. But what is it about?

Lent has become a time to adopt some 'penitent fasting'. We can, for example, 'sweep ourselves clean' of the impurities of sugar or alcohol. If we effectively cleanse our bodies, does this mean it is just a temporary state of 'putting in order'? Many of us welcome the end of our deprivation on Easter Sunday with a return to our old ways of over-indulgence; it has merely been a 6 week exercise to lose weight and give our livers a rest!

Perhaps this is a flippant interpretation of Jesus' words but maybe it gives us notice that unless we fast in a way that will help us act permanently in a state of repentance of greed, repentance of injustice and the unfairness of having too much when so many have too little, repentance for not living simply so that others might simply live - then are we leaving ourselves vulnerable to returning to our 'old ways' and more?

a meal had been listening to Jesus talk about being a light – about not hiding the light which floods our bodies. This hearty dinner conversation is a significantly more blunt and graphic version of the same. How can we say we love God if there is faint sign of it in our lives? We may as well be that unmarked grave (v44) in early Jewish tradition, whitewashed to keep the corpse clean, but noticed by no-one.

Prayer

Dear God, how many times do we hear the message to join our faith with our lived lives? That everything we do should show your love?

But I do! Or do I?

Give us deep grace to know our lives and motivations.

Forgive us again for hiding your light for our own reasons.

Allow us to hear clearly: what I do is who I am. Give me courage to see if it shares you. Alleluia, Amen.

Tuesday 12th March Warning Against Hypocrisy

The Rev'd Peter Clark is a Minister in the Bridport & Dorchester Joint Pastorate (Methodist & URC)

St Luke 12: 1 - 3

Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered in thousands, so that they trampled on one another, he began to speak first to his disciples, 'Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops.

Reflection

There was a time when people in the public eye, on being caught out as having lied, deceived, cheated or having done something disastrous, were instantly pilloried, often losing their post in the process. Some, subsequently, made their way back up the political or celebrity greasy pole, but it was usually a struggle and their reputations tended to remain somewhat tarnished.

seat of honour in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the market-places. Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it.'

One of the lawyers answered him, 'Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too.' And he said, 'Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them. Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, "I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute", so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation. Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.' When he went outside, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile towards him and to cross-examine him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.

Reflection

Luke is like/loathe with Pharisees. In this scene, Luke paints Jesus in the way Luke might want; anything but meek and mild. This is a critical Jesus, no kindness on show, an angry Jesus. This is the kind of Jesus we don't see in Victorian blue-eyed blond images.

Then the lawyers - the scribes - have a go. Jesus comes right back even stronger. "...this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world" is a bit harsh to say the least. For those who want to see Jesus as the critical prophet, naming what is wrong and detailing the consequences, it feels like a breath of fresh air to read this passage. To those who want to interpret a loving Jesus as a nice Jesus, this is a very difficult read.

Jesus was a Jew. He was speaking to his own as a critical insider, not an outsider. It's not unusual for rabbis to be blunt, and those gathered at this table, who called Jesus teacher, might very well have expected no less. What Jesus the critic is saying to us all is simply to match our actions with our words. If we say we love God, what does that look like in our lives? The Pharisee who asked Jesus over for

Penitence is about sweeping our own house clean but surely it shouldn't be temporary and must include the world too?

Lent is as good a time as any to begin, but it doesn't end at Easter.

Prayer

As we walk with Jesus,
we remember all those in our world who are crucified today.....
As we deny ourselves,
we remember those who go without all the time....
As we repent our wrongdoing,
we remember those who are unable to forgive....
We pray for ourselves, and others,
as we walk the path of discipleship through Lent
towards the Cross. Amen

Thursday 7th March True Blessedness

The Rev'd Fiona Bennett minister at Augustine United Church Edinburgh

St Luke 11: 27 - 28

While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!' But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!'

Reflection

'While he was saying this' refers to a rebuke Jesus is giving to people who try to spin and twist the story of his healing a man (who could not speak), by suggesting that Jesus casts out demons by the power of stronger demons. At the end of this rebuke, a woman tries to offer Jesus and his family praise by blessing his mother. Jesus' response is that it would be a greater blessing all round, if folk simply got on with obeying God's word.

I hear his words as frustration spoken through gritted teeth to everyone present. Frustration that through him God has just freely transformed the life of a man who could not speak, (they should be glorifying God!)...yet some take this as an

opportunity to twist and pervert Jesus' intention and ability, while another focuses honour on Jesus' family. Jesus is not interested in the spins of shame or glory about himself, he just wants folk to get on with obeying the word of God; in this instance to get on with healing and setting people free.

I am reminded of the story of the temptation in the wilderness where Jesus is offered all authority and glory of the Kingdoms of the earth if only he will bow down and worship the devil, but Jesus recognises that his life is not about glorifying his own image and prestige, it is about glorifying God. God is glorified and the earth is blessed when humans are less concerned with how they are perceived and more active in obeying God's word and enabling God's freedom and wholeness for all life.

Holy One,
In each encounter and action I face today
May I hear and obey your Word
To find freedom and wholeness for all life.
Help me not to be persuaded or distracted by notions of shame or self glory
But to focus on and celebrate the abundant life you bring.
Amen

Friday 8th March The Sign of Jonah

The Rev'd Dr Rosalind Selby is Principal of Northern College and a member of Didsbury URC.

St Luke 11: 29-32

When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, 'This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise at the judgement with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here! The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

if God had repudiated the covenant: 'what [now] of those pledges of faithful love?' (89.49)

The Psalm doesn't really hold out an answer. It's a frank expression of the paradox of faith and doubt so many of us know. Yet we live within the new covenant. For us, Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God's chesed and berit and the resurrection represents the reliability of God's pledges of faithful love. So as 29th March beckons, we are invited to complement our political opinion with our religious faith; to trust God's covenant, of which the Psalmist enables us to sing: 'your throne is built on righteousness and justice; in front of you go faithfulness and love.' (89.14)

That being so, maybe we should meet Brexit with berit, saying with Psalmist 'Blessed be God for ever, Amen, amen.' (89.52)

Prayer

Eternal God,
whose covenant love is resilient and trustworthy,
we pray for the qualities of your Kingdom
to be the hallmarks of our nations,
that all may live in peace, prosperity and hope,
because of Jesus Christ, Amen

Monday 11th March Conflict

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

St Luke 11: 37 - 54

While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. Then the Lord said to him, 'Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you. 'But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe the mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practised, without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the

13 Your arm, O LORD,
is filled with mighty power;
your hand is strong,
exalted high above.
14 Your throne is built on
righteousness and justice;
in front of you go faithfulness and
love.

15 How blessed are those
who learn to sing your praises,
who walk before you
in your light, O LORD!
16 All day in your great name
they are rejoicing;
they praise your righteousness with
one accord.

Reflection

Nations pass through political upheaval. Even well-ordered countries know periods of flux and uncertainty – leaders die, other nations' crises have knock-on effects, the electorate votes for a change which some long for and others abhor. 'Twas ever thus, and certainly for Israel and Judah. When King David ruled, all was relatively well. But then he died, and, in due course, the people were taken off into exile, robbed of religious and political identity.

At such a time perhaps Psalm 89 speaks for more than its authors. Might it even say something pertinent in this 'Brexit month'?

In its opening verses, two of the key words of all Jewish and Christian theology appear: God's 'great love' (chesed) and 'covenant' (berit). Chesed tells us about God's inward nature, God's disposition towards us, and berit speaks of God's outward actions, keeping faith with the promises God makes.

For Israel, these qualities of God were given particular expression in King David, whom no enemy will outwit (89.22). When David dies, therefore, their national equilibrium feels vulnerable. Later in the Psalm we would even hear them wonder

17 For you, LORD, are your people's
strength and glory,
and honour to our sovereign
you bring.
18 Indeed, from God the LORD
comes our protection;
to Israel's Holy One belongs our king.

19 There was a time
you told us in a vision;
this to your faithful people
you made known:
"I have bestowed my strength
upon a warrior,
a young man whom
I raised up to the throne.

Reflection

Why it is 'evil' to ask for a sign? The Gospels show us Jesus responding to pleas for a miracle: have mercy! make me clean! and so on. There's something more here. Scholars haven't agreed what 'the sign of Jonah' is; many say it's his miraculous escape from death which might be compared with Jesus' resurrection; others add that Jonah was in the 'tomb' of the body of the fish before that escape just as Jesus' was in the tomb. But then comparing Jonah to the queen doesn't make sense. What those stories DO have in common is the people (Ninevites, the queen) who are open to hearing and seeing the things of God.

Is the problem with sign-seeking then, the refusal to be open to what God is already offering through Jesus and demanding proof ON OUR TERMS? Questioners came from John the Baptist asking, 'ARE YOU the Messiah?' and Jesus replies 'go and tell John what you see and hear ...'. God is already working around us, in our communities and in the world; do we make the same efforts as the queen to go and find out what that is?

I don't doubt prayer is hugely important, but I sometimes wonder if we use 'taking time for prayer' as an excuse for not joining in where God is already acting. Let's pay attention outside our normal expectations and not, as Jonah did, have expectations of how others should engage with God. Maybe we shouldn't fall into the trap of ignoring the good things of the Kingdom happening NOW outside the Church's influence.

Prayer

Surprising God, open our eyes to see where you are already present and active, and humble us if we need to acknowledge the Church does not have all the answers. Amen

Saturday 9th March The Light of the Body

The Rev'd Colin Hunt, worshipping at Hutton & Shenfield Union Church. Essex

St Luke 11: 33 - 36

'No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar,[h] but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.'

Reflection

There are in South Wales disused coal mines that have become museums. Visitors are kitted out with overalls and hard hats fitted with a light. In one such mine visitors are taken in 'the cage' below ground and after walking along the tramways away from the shaft they have just descended they are asked to turn their lamps off. The experience of that total darkness has been described as velvet black. Most visitors are relieved when they are told to turn their lights back on, even though the darkness was only for less than a minute.

Luke uses the domestic scene of lighting the home of his day. The oil lamps used at that time were not known for the brilliance of the light they provided. In this respect, Luke's recording of Jesus' teaching would probably be dismissed as common sense. Yet the message is still relevant today despite the wonders of modern technology. For the believer needs to ask him/herself what is it that darkens their heart, what extinguishes the light of Jesus, the Light of the World? There are some elements of our lives that we know are wrong, yet we continue to be attracted to them. This hardening of our hearts and minds is similar to turning the light off. In that condition the distraction from the light, if it becomes frequent, normalises the situation. The conscience takes a back seat or is even confined to the refuse bin. We know that our nature is to be rebellious, and that is at the heart of the problem. We may know the right way to live but still choose the exact opposite. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves, 'Why?' Many years ago the Children's Special Service Mission published a hymnal called "Golden Bells". In it Susan Warner wrote a hymn for younger children the first verse of which is our prayer.

Prayer

Jesus bids us shine With a pure clear light;
Like a little candle Burning in the night,
In this world of darkness,
So we must shine -
You in your small corner, And I in mine. Amen

Sunday 10th March Lent 1 Psalm 89 : 1-19

The Rev'd Nigel Uden, Fulbourn and Downing Place United Reformed Churches, Cambridge; Moderator of the General Assembly

1 I will extol the LORD's
great love for ever;
your faithfulness to all I will proclaim.
2 I will declare your love
stands firm for ever;
your faithfulness in heaven you
maintain.

3 You said, "I made a cov'nant
with my chosen,
and to my servant David
I have sworn:
4 'I will ensure your line
shall last for ever,
your throne to generations
yet unborn'."

5 O LORD, the heavens
praise your mighty wonders
and to your saints
your faithfulness declare.
6 For who is like the LORD
among the angels,
or who in heaven
can with him compare?
7 For God is feared

within his holy council,
more awesome
than the angels all around.
8 O God, the LORD Almighty,
who is like you
whom such great might
and faithfulness surround?

9 O LORD, your rule controls
the surging ocean;
you still the raging waves
upon the seas.
10 You crushed to death
the great sea monster Rahab;
with your strong arm
you rout your enemies.

11 The earth is yours,
to you belong the heavens;
you made the world
and everything therein.
12 By you the north and south were
both created; Tabor and Hermon
praise your name and sing.