

and vigorous by the sap the Lord supplies. The cedar can mean an individual, who is wise if they offer their thanks and praise to God. The harsher verses point out a detailed contrast between the wise and the wicked and their respective fates. In particular, the brief sprouting ('like grass') of the latter is compared to the stability of a life entrusted to the 'steadfast love' of the Lord, 'my rock'.

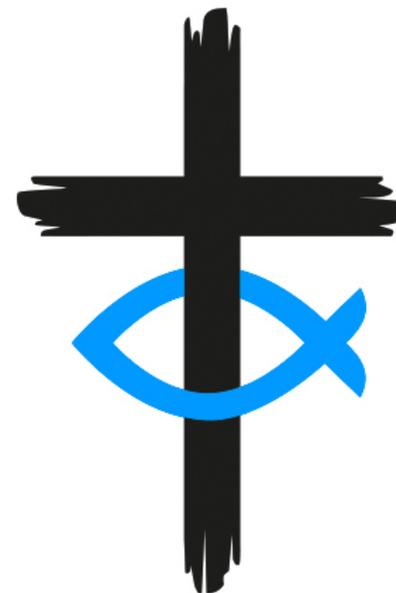
So, nothing can stop us praising God, whoever we are. When God is good to us, we can respond naturally, day or night. And formal praise is not all we do: when God is good, and we respond, we can respond by becoming more who we truly are, flourishing and bearing fruit, urged on in our journey by Christ.

Give us the music of your praise, Lord,
morning, noon and night,
that our lives may be fruitful
and our lips confess you as the true and only God;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Daily Devotions from the URC

17th – 31st March 2019

St Luke (7)



Introduction

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

Andy Braunston

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Sunday 31st March Lent 4 Psalm 92

The Rev'd Michael Hopkins is minister of Elstead URC and The Spire Church, Farnham (a Methodist and United Reformed Church), and Clerk of the General Assembly.

1 How good it is to praise you,
LORD Most High,
And to make music
to your holy name,
2 To sing about your love
when morning comes
And every night
your faithfulness proclaim.
3 With music of the lyre
my praise will sound
And to the harp's
sweet melody resound.

4 For by your deeds
you make me glad, O LORD;
With joy I praise
the works done by your hand.

5 How great your acts,
how deep your thoughts, O LORD!
6 Fools do not know,
they cannot understand,
7 That though the wicked flourish
like the grass
Yet to eternal ruin they will pass.

8 But LORD,
you are exalted evermore.
9 Surely your enemies
will be struck dead.
10 You made me
stronger than an untamed ox,
And you have poured fine oils
upon my head.
11 My eyes have seen
my wicked foes' defeat;
My ears have heard
the sound of their retreat.

12 The righteous ones
will flourish like the palm
and grow like cedar trees in Lebanon,
13 For, planted in God's house,
they flourish still
14 And, fresh and fruitful,
to old age go on.
15 They say, "The LORD excels
in uprightness—
My Rock, in whom
there is no wickedness."

Reflection

It would be very easy to read Psalm 92 as saying that God does wonderful things if you're good. However, many of us know in our lives that this isn't true: goodness does not always prosper, and it can seem very much as if the wicked are rewarded. If you don't believe me, read Psalm 73 or the book of Job.

In fact, this is a glorious celebration of the life of faith as something organic and growing, like cedars bearing cones even into old age, and palm trees kept green

written, rather than a message to comfort the disturbed, these challenging words of Jesus are more likely to disturb the comfortable.

In many of our churches we don't have the same luxury that Jesus had – that of having the opportunity to challenge large crowds of would-be followers to understand the true cost of discipleship. And even if we did, we're hardly likely to get very far by telling our spiritual seekers to turn their backs on their families and give up all their possessions! If we said it at all it would be saved until the later sessions of the Discipleship Development course which we hope will bring people closer to Christ.

So that is why we must allow this passage, and others like it that contain those hard sayings of Jesus, the things that perhaps we wish he'd never said, to challenge and disturb us. What then should we do? In some senses only we can answer that. If we have ears to listen, we can examine ourselves, our motives, our priorities, the things that distract us. We can ask where our commitment really lies. As disciples of Jesus do we still offer to the world the distinctive savour, the healing presence, the ice-melting properties of salt? Do our lives of discipleship make a difference?

Prayer

God, you call us to be your disciples
which is both privilege, challenge and choice.

Set us along the right paths we pray,
that we might be given guidance to discover your way,
courage to step out in faith and strength to persevere.

For the sake of Christ our Lord, Amen

Sunday 17th March Lent 2 Psalm 90

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

1 Lord, you have ever
been our dwelling place.

2 Before you made
the world of time and space,
Before you made
the mountains and the earth,
You are eternal God;
you gave them birth.

3 You turn all people
back to dust and say,
"O human race, to dust again decay."

4 Because a thousand years
are in your sight
Like yesterday
or like a watch by night.

5 Into death's sleep
you sweep them all away,
For they are like the grass
at break of day—

6 Although it springs up
new with morning light,
It dries and perishes
before the night.

7 Your wrath consumes us;
we are terrified.

8 Before your gaze
our sins we cannot hide.

9 Under your anger
all our days pass by;
Our years come
to their finish with a sigh.

10 Our years amount
to seventy in length,
Or even eighty
if we have the strength.
And yet our days
in grief and pain are passed;
They quickly end; away we fly at last.

11 The power of your anger
who can know?

Your wrath's as great
as is the fear we owe.

12 Teach us to number
all our days aright;
So will our hearts be filled
with wisdom's light.

13 Return, O LORD!
How long will you delay?
Have mercy on your servants,
LORD, we pray.

14 O satisfy us with your love always,
That we may sing,
rejoicing all our days.

15 In place of our affliction,
make us glad;
Give joy for all the years
you made us sad.

16 To all your servants
may your deeds be shown,
And to their children
make your glory known.

17 Now may the favour of Almighty God
Abide on us—rich blessings of our Lord.
Establish every work our hands have done;
Yes, Lord, for us establish them each one.

Reflection

Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses. That association ought to alert us to its importance for the worshipping community.

This poem, a meditative prayer or a song of lament, contrasts the enduring life of God with our transient existence. Two themes, the greatness of God, steadfast in love and justice; and the pathos of human pretensions, fickle and feuding, are laid beside each other in devastating clarity.

Faced with this great gulf, what hope is there for the human race? 'Lord you have ever been our dwelling place' begins the Psalmist in an impassioned plea. The God who gave birth to all, our creator, our beginning and our end, is our only hope. Turning to God in penitence and humility may yet temper the divine wrath against us.

This is an uncomfortable psalm for those of us more accustomed to hear about the love, rather than the anger of God, but it may be a necessary corrective. To the view that it's impossible for love and anger to coexist, P.T. Forsyth responded "True love is quite capable of being angry, and must be angry and even sharp with its beloved children." "For He can be really angry only with those He loves."

Despite the chasm that exists between God and us, God portrayed in this Psalm is not remote, but very much in our world. Our lives are an open book to God, and God cares deeply about us. This poem is not so much about the brevity of life, as the way we conduct our lives in God's sight. That is wisdom. The 'sigh' with which we end life can be one of frustration and regret, or one of gratitude and of fulfilment. That it can be so is the gift of God's loving favour towards us.

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for the Psalmist's words reminding us that you care so deeply that our wilfulness moves you to anger. Help us never to lose heart but place our trust in you, for your loving has extended to the giving of your Son for our salvation. Amen

of justice and joy, compassion and peace:"

Community building God help me to see you in the other and show you in me to others. AMEN

Saturday 30th March The Cost of Discipleship

The Rev'd David Salisbury is a member of Horeb URC, Dyserth and Programme Manager for Stepwise.

St Luke 14: 25 - 35

Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. 'Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure heap; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

Reflection

This is one of those passages that can do nothing but challenge us.

In a few places in the Gospels we are told about the large crowds that followed Jesus and gathered around him as he taught. Here is one of those moments. Jesus didn't want a bunch of 'here today, gone tomorrow' admirers to be his disciples. True discipleship demanded more than just an eager following, and so Jesus lays it on thick, perhaps a little too thick for some. As one person has

into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.”

Reflection

We are given a space today to reflect upon 24 verses from Luke’s Gospel. As we read the verses we find that they outline four stories which are linked by shared meals and that which is generally understood to be good etiquette by, as a minimum, the Jewish community of the time.

It is easy, and legitimate, to take and explore each segment however I am minded to explore why they may have been placed together or is it simply a reflection of historic accuracy? That does not seem likely to me - rather I believe that the passage discloses some fundamental truths about identity both Jesus’ and ours as disciples. It is also the first text which I began to understand as a manifesto or the Jesus Manifesto.

Healing on the Sabbath is no big issue when seen as part of a fulfilment of the Messianic hope. It is a statement of the nature of the Messiah and the Realm of God and points forward to that great feast where all are welcome.

And so we are led to explore and reflect on guidelines for hospitality both for the host and the guest; the message being that all must be included and made welcome.

One of my most significant role models and mentors, through her writing, is the late Dr Letty M Russell with her emphasis on a just hospitality and thus welcome and inclusion being marks of such a community. I believe that the Jesus Manifesto demands an understanding of mutuality which calls for a community being created and sustained built on respect for diversity recognising that without the presence of the other we are all diminished.

Let us pray using the words of Shirley Erena Murray’s hymn

“For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead,
and God will delight when we are creators

Monday 18th March Faithful and Unfaithful Slaves

The Rev’d Andy Braunston is a Minister in the Synod of Scotland’s Southside Cluster serving Barrhead, Shawlands and Stewarton URCs.

St Luke 12: 41 - 48

Peter said, ‘Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?’ And the Lord said, ‘Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says to himself, “My master is delayed in coming”, and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful. That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Reflection

One of the problems in our world is that justice doesn’t come. The legal maxim justice delayed is justice denied reminds us of the consequences of kicking things into the long grass. Dictators, in the words of the hymn by Michael Forster, stay in a guarded palace-tomb, condemned to live and die alone abusing the wealth of their people. Foreign policy is dictated by who we can sell arms to rather than what is right. Day by day men abuse women and children assuming they won’t be called to account.

Jesus’ words in today’s passage remind us that we are stewards who, one day, will have to give account. One day we will either be praised or found wanting. It’s a salutary warning that justice is coming, that judgment is real.

Often we don’t like to think about these themes of justice and judgement preferring to think of a softer, kinder more gentle God; one made in our own image and born out of an understandable rejection of previous generations’

obsession with Hellfire. Yet there has to be justice; the world's poor and downtrodden demand it, the Bible promises it, we need to work for it.

Prayer

O God of justice, do not wait whilst your people suffer.
O God of justice, bring to repentance the dictator, torturer and abuser.
O God of justice, be merciful to me, a sinner. Amen.

Tuesday 19th March Jesus, Cause of Division

The Rev'd Stuart Nixon, SCM Pioneer minister, MediaCityUK Church

St Luke 12: 49 - 53

'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'

Reflection

This is, no doubt, a tricky passage and there are many commentaries which cover what people think Jesus was saying here. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and he is in full prophet mode. He is speaking about how he would bring people to make a choice. The Pharisees had made their choice not to follow, even some of Jesus' own family had chosen not to follow him (Mark 3:21). Jesus was saying a time is coming when all people will need to make a choice, for him or against. We know that even the disciples, when faced with possible persecution or crucifixion, found this choice a hard one (John 6:60-66).

Making a choice to follow Jesus may result in being at odds with the rest of your family, friends or even nation. We see this most acutely when people in countries where Christianity is banned become followers of Christ. This often brings the threat of being imprisoned or worse. Sometimes it is even family members who

Friday 29th March Jesus at Dinner

The Rev'd Helen M Mee, Synod of Scotland

St Luke 14: 1 - 24

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, 'Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?' But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, 'If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?' And they could not reply to this. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place", and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.' One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the slave, "Go out

In our passage, Jesus calls Herod 'that fox' - not a flattering allusion. Many of us, accustomed to the urban fox, have, perhaps, more ambivalence to the creature. We know the unattractive features that are commonly attributed to the fox - cunning, quick-witted, ruthless, deceptive, self-centred, predatory. Machiavelli employs the metaphor of the fox and the lion to emphasise the need for the prince to combine cunning and strength. The legendary Japanese fox, kitsune, was said to have the magical capacity for shape-shifting; perhaps Herod too showed the ability to be whatever self-interest seemed to demand.

Isaiah Berlin wrote of The Fox and the Hedgehog in which he categorised his friends and others; the fox knows many things (perhaps the one who suspects meta-narratives) and the hedgehog holds to a single defining idea.

There is much of the fox in Herod – political cunning and ruthlessness and preying on others, but he is also a hedgehog – he has but one lens through which he views the world - self-interest and self-aggrandisement.

Jesus challenges that perspective and brings another animal into play – the mother hen who opposes cunning cruelty and deadly violence. If Herod is focused only on his self-ambition, Jesus too has a single lens: love. Herod and Jesus stand on opposite sides of a great divide and on the verge of decisive events. The challenge, the agonised call of Jesus, is to all who would hear. Where do our instincts, our commitment, our loyalties, lie? – with the cleverness, power, 'success', and exploitative achievements of those who follow in Herod's path, or with the compassionate, gently giving, open-heartedness of God?

Prayer

Mothering God, you long to shelter and protect us,
to hold us closely within your love, not that we might
be held apart from the world
but that we might know that we are secure in your care
no matter the risks to which we are called.

betray their Christian family members. Closer to home, Jesus calls us to make a choice, do we follow him and bear the consequences from our family, friends and work colleagues or do we hide our faith to keep us safe? Jesus, in this passage, makes it clear that "fence-sitting" and neutrality are not an option when it comes to following him.

Prayer

Lord God,
We pray today for our persecuted sisters and brothers across the world,
surround them with your love, protection
and give them courage to stand for you.
As we see their faithful example,
help us to make the right choices for you and your Kingdom
for Jesus sake we pray. Amen

[Wednesday 20th March Interpreting the Times](#)

The Rev'd Ron Reid is a retired minister in the Mersey Synod serving as Link Minister at Rock Chapel, Farndon. He is a member at Upton-by-Chester URC

St Luke 12: 54 - 56

He also said to the crowds, 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat"; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Reflection

Britons, it is said, are obsessed by weather. It has been suggested that this is because the British weather is inherently unpredictable, making forecasting a risky activity. Recent advances in observational capability and especially in computer power, together with a strong dash of understanding of how chaotic systems behave, have led to greater certainty in weather forecasts. Yet we are still caught out with no umbrella when it rains.

Two hallmarks of a good scientific theory are that it should be falsifiable and that it should make predictions which are verifiable. When Lord Kelvin calculated the age of the earth as 100 million years, like his Victorian scientific colleagues, he assumed that basic mechanics and thermodynamics were all that was needed to describe the past and future behaviour of the universe. Indeed, they thought the future of physics was reduced to boring, more detailed, calculations. It was just a few years later that radioactivity was discovered and quantum theory was developed, blowing away their assumptions and opening up a whole new, exciting world. The signs had been there, but they did not understand them.

When we seek to make predictions and read the signs of the times, we do so through the lens of our current understanding and blinkered by the assumptions behind that understanding. Thus Jesus repudiates, to the disciples and the crowds, their assumption that what they see in him, and in his message of the supremacy of love, is inconsistent with the notion of a Messiah. Confining their observation to the most obvious and trivial blinkers their view of the troubled times to come. Yet the signs were there to be seen and when (as in Matthew and Mark) clearer signs were asked for, they were refused.

How clearly do we read the signs of these times?

Prayer

God, when clarity of vision not just through eye but also with brain eludes us: enlighten us.

When the obvious, clouds massing and winds blowing, evokes simplistic conclusions misdirecting us: restrain us.

When our favourite theories no longer hold water or when incorrect deductions confuse us: correct us.

you enjoy a church supper, or a meal with friends or family, you are eating in the Kingdom of God which was and is and will come.

*See footnote New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV) p1896

Prayer

God of all creation you call us to share in your work of making and growing and praying for a world where all may flourish, and your will of peace and justice, healing and joy be not only prayed for, but done.

Show us where you need us to tend new growth, to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger, and build your Kingdom, as Jesus taught us on earth as it is in heaven. Amen

[Thursday 28th March The Lament Over Jerusalem](#)

The Rev'd Dr Jack Dyce, Emeritus Professor of Nordic Theology, Scottish United Reformed and Congregational College, retired minister, and member of Port Glasgow URC

St Luke 13: 31 - 35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."'

Reflection

There's something about an anthropomorphic story that most of us love – in fables, fairy tales, cartoons and children's books where humans become animal characters. Perhaps it's the sheer adorability, but some characters are far from being cuddly bunnies and cute kittens.

leavened.' Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, 'Lord, will only a few be saved?' He said to them, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us", then in reply he will say to you, "I do not know where you come from." Then you will begin to say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." But he will say, "I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!" There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.'

Reflection

What is the kingdom of God like? If you lived in Judaea at the time of Jesus, and were Jewish, you might have a notion of religious authority, order kept by demanding that the Law of God is observed to the letter. If you were a Roman soldier posted to Judaea, you would enforce Roman Law on the local populace – pax romana, was based on brutal conquest followed by oppression of the conquered – that's how the Roman Empire operated. It was all about power.

God's rule is different, Jesus says. It's not about power – it's about something much bigger. Which starts small. Mustard seed. Yeast. Ordinary things found in fields or gardens or kitchens. The tiny mustard seed grows big enough to support the nesting birds – it only needs "someone" to plant the seed and tend the young plant. The yeast causes 69 litres* of flour to rise, and many people eat. It only needs "a woman" to mix the dough, knead and bake it. The reign of God is about the nurturing and blossoming of all creation in the present and in time to come.

Jesus moves on towards Jerusalem teaching the message of God's hidden kingdom which works through human hands and hearts. "Will only a few be saved?" someone asks – thinking perhaps that such an "ordinary" kind of kingdom is not what s/he'd hoped for. "Try, but the door is narrow" – is the surprising answer! "And once the door is shut you will not be recognised." The feast of the Kingdom of God is for those who follow God's way – patriarchs and prophets and makers of bread and growers of mustard and many more. Next time

Thursday 21st March Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, Reformation Martyr

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

Information

Born in Aslockton in Nottinghamshire in 1489, Thomas Cranmer, from an unspectacular Cambridge academic career, was recruited for diplomatic service in 1527. Two years later he joined the team working to annul Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. He was made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533 and duly pronounced the Aragon marriage annulled. By now a convinced Church reformer, he married in 1532 while clerical marriage was still illegal in England. He worked closely with Thomas Cromwell to further reformation, but survived Henry's final, unpredictable years to become a chief architect of Edward VI's religious change, constructing two editions of The Book of Common Prayer, in 1549 and 1552, the Ordinal in 1550 and the original version of the later Thirty-Nine Articles.

Cranmer acquiesced in the unsuccessful attempt to make Lady Jane Grey Queen of England. Queen Mary's regime convicted him of treason in 1553 and of heresy in 1554. Demoralised by imprisonment, he signed six recantations, but was still condemned to the stake at Oxford. Struggling with his conscience, he made a final, bold statement of Protestant faith. Perhaps too fair-minded and cautious to be a ready-made hero in Reformation disputes, he was an impressively learned scholar, and his genius for formal prose has left a lasting mark on Anglican liturgy. He was burnt at the stake on this day in the year 1556.

Reading: 2 Timothy 2. 8-15

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself. Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

Reflection

This passage reflects the opening themes of the letter - not to be ashamed of the Gospel and to share with Paul whatever suffering such faith brings. The anchor for such faithfulness is the reality of the resurrection and the salvation that Christ makes possible for those who believe. Paul is writing from prison and living daily with the brutal realities of discipleship. He reaches into the traditions already forming within the Church to find a creedal saying that makes his point; our obedience, even in suffering, binds us to Christ and to the promise of new life. Our denying of him means he will deny us even as he continues his ministry in and through others.

All of this is hard and echoes Cranmer's story. It might feel remote from us until we let its words sink in. This very day Christians in many parts of the world are suffering deeply for their faith. At the start of 2018, the charity Open Doors identified the 50 countries where Christians face the most severe persecution. North Korea, Afghanistan and Pakistan top the list. The report suggested that 215,000,000 Christians face persecution. The recent case of Asia Bibi brought these stark facts to wider attention.

Such risk is far from most of us. This passage, however, still speaks. It highlights the demands of discipleship. It challenges us, as Paul challenges Timothy, to let Jesus be Lord come what may. As the letter says, we are each to be: "...a worker who does not need to be ashamed..." Which begs some vital questions, doesn't it? As today unfolds, what sort of witness am I to the good news revealed through Jesus Christ? Are my words worthy and are my decisions suitable as a follower of Jesus? Can people see, in my living today, God's worker?

Prayer

Living God, hear our prayers for those suffering for their faith.
Give courage to all who risk much in following Christ.
Give hope to all who fear their faith will bring them harm.
Give wisdom to communities and leaders facing hostility.
Grant to us, as pressures come our way,
the courage, hope and wisdom we might need.
Help us to witness well, in the name of our risen Lord
and in your Spirit's power. Amen.

over. Then he releases her from her spiritual bondage and instant physical healing results.

After eighteen years, more than half her expected lifespan, she is able to stand straight, physically, socially and spiritually. She no longer has to hide away or continue coping with what had oppressed her. She is free.

This woman did not ask for healing but, in breaking the taboo which would kept her away from the synagogue, had maybe come in hope of a quiet encounter. Her healing makes her centre stage and subject of attention - how embarrassing.

Jesus, in challenging the leader's understanding, draws comparisons with the routine compassion for working animal whose needs for water and fresh air are met even on Sabbath. The underlying challenge to the leader is that he should have held the suffering woman in higher regard than his livestock. This incident increases his popularity with those who felt oppressed and excluded from religious life by the 'high and mighty' - the liberation he is bringing is not just words but action.

Prayer

Heavenly Father
help us to be change makers acting against oppression and injustice.
Help us to be open to your ways of transforming the world.
May your spirit be alive and active in our lives,
making our faith in your Son both real and liberating. Amen

[Wednesday 27th March 2 Parables and the Narrow Door](#)

The Rev'd Heather Pencavel, Retired Minister, member of Thornbury URC in Gloucestershire

St Luke 13: 18 - 30

He said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.' And again he said, 'To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was

Tuesday 26th March Jesus heals a woman

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

St Luke 13: 10 - 17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Reflection

In this passage Luke continues to show Jesus living out his commission in Luke 4 to proclaim, heal and deliver.

The reading raised several questions for me. Why is the leader of the synagogue so indignant that this is happening on the Sabbath? Is healing really work? Isn't spending time in synagogue not meant to bring about change? What is going on here? Maybe the woman, with her crippling diagnosis, shouldn't even have been there. I wonder who had let her in?

Maybe the leader is embarrassed about her being there. The presence of Jesus spotlights the ineffectiveness of the regime the leader represents to bring about transformation.

However Jesus is not so concerned about keeping up the rules about who can come to worship and what should happen when. Jesus's concern is with the suffering woman. He notices her, discerns the root of her condition and calls her

Friday 22nd March Settling with an Opponent

Walt Johnson, Elder; Wilbraham St Ninian's, Chorlton, Manchester

St Luke 12: 58-59

'And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.'

Reflection

In many Bibles, this short section carries the heading "Settling With An Opponent"; however, sectioning it off can detract from the larger context of Jesus' teaching about the coming Kingdom, which we have read though in recent days.

Jesus' words here recognise that there are disagreements between people, and He exhorts us to resolve matters before they become too serious. One way I have always found helpful to understand this passage is that we should keep 'short accounts' with one another.

If we allow our disagreements with others to fester within us, they will begin to consume us; and, in the context of the greater theme of Luke's discourse here, we will lose sight of the coming Kingdom.

As the winter ends, we may have had the experience of building a snow-person. We roll a ball of snow, and as it rolls it picks up more snow and grows, but it also picks up bits of stone, twigs and leaves. Those bits are like our small disagreements which we need to stop and deal with as they arise.

Jesus' advice to resolve matters sooner is sound. His warning to avoid going to court is wise! As a magistrate, I have had the experience of hearing many cases where a dispute has gone badly wrong. Neighbours or (ex-)friends/lovers, where a small matter – usually, possessions or bad parking – has 'snowballed' and ended in harassment, damage and even physical violence.

Trying to keep 'short accounts' and stop things 'snowballing' does require both sides' co-operation. Yet, Christ's call to us is: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9)

The late Brother Roger of Taizé wrote: "Reconciliation is a springtime of the heart. Yes, to become reconciled without delay leads to an amazing discovery that our own hearts are changed by it."

Prayer

Christ, Saviour of every life,
You come to us always.
Welcoming You in the peace of our nights,
In the silence of our days,
In the beauty of creation,
In the hours of intense inner struggle,
Welcoming You means
knowing that You will be with us
in every situation, always. Amen.

(Prayer by Brother Roger of Taizé)

[Saturday 23rd March Repent or Perish](#)

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

St Luke 13: 1 - 5

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

This parable about a barren fig tree follows hard on the heels of Jesus telling stories which feature sudden, fatal calamity. He warns of the urgent need to turn lives around (to repent) before death and destruction comes. The possibility of destruction remains: 'Cut it down! Why should it be wasting soil?' Yet, the threat of judgement, which brings this destruction, goes hand in hand with a stay of execution: give it another year and a load of manure and we'll see what happens.

Is the negotiation between the landowner and the gardener indicative of the conversation that goes on within the mind of God concerning me? If so, that's unsettling. I wouldn't like to think that anyone regards me as a "waste of space", especially not God. Jesus does not let me off the hook concerning the lack of fruitfulness in my life; judgement is still due next year. Yet, fruitfulness before then remains a real possibility, as long as sufficient manure is applied.

What's the life-giving manure that enables me to grow and be fruitful? Reading, hearing, and discussing the scripture that tells the story of God's dealing with this world? The practice of prayer, by myself and in the company of others? Participating in worshipping God, as part of faithful, fruitful congregation? Putting into action loving my neighbour like I would want to be loved myself?

Whether it is one, some, all, or more than these, please, God, pile it higher and dig it deeper.

Prayer

O God who creates the conditions for fruitful life,
and who through your Son, Jesus,
calls on us to turn our lives around,
be patient with our shortcomings,
and encourage us to grow. Amen.

Prayer

Our God of help through times gone by,
our help in times of storm, difficulty and
overwhelming odds.

Thank you that you are always with us
to be our defence, strength, and shelter
when the going gets tough.

Thank you for the undying truth
that when we abide in you we will never
feel disappointed or let down.

You alone are the One in Whom
we can truly shelter,
safe and secure from all harm.

Amen.

Monday 25th March The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

The Rev'd Trevor Jamison, Minister, St Columba's URC, North Shields

St Luke 13: 6 - 9

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Reflection

Manure (to use the polite term) is useful stuff. It increases the crop yield on poor soils. On barren soil, it enables fruitful growth where there was none before. And manure features prominently in this story, Jesus's parable about a tree in need of help.

Reflection

This reading highlights two common thought patterns. 1. "What happened to those people won't happen to me, because I am not as sinful as they must have been." (story of Galileans) 2. "Accidents happen to bad people." (story of tower) These were the implied responses to the "trending news". Is it any different today? We still look for comfort in thinking that there must be something different about me or us. "They must have done something to deserve that."

Jesus challenges this thinking. "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." That word "repent" in the Greek is from the Greek word metanoeo, comprised of meta meaning 'changed after' and noeo meaning 'to think'. To repent here is quite literally 'to think differently afterwards'. Jesus is calling them to rethink their thinking.

It's easy to point to extremes of belief here. Prosperity gospel or extreme forms of conservative or liberal/progressive theologies contain some easy pickings. "Look at them being all judgemental!" we might be tempted to say. But that's exactly what Jesus is telling folks NOT to do. He challenges us to rethink our thinking – mine and yours – about others and about ourselves.

About others? When bad things happen, our first instinct should be to respond in love and mercy, not judgement or ridicule. That could happen to us. How would we want people to respond?

About ourselves? God deals graciously with us, so simply live in thanks for that. For some of us, it's all too easy to fall into the trap of thinking "I'm not good enough." No, we aren't good enough. That is why Jesus came.

To both the finger-pointing and the self-blaming, Christ calls "Repent! Think again! Come see things the way God does."

Prayer

Holy God,

I know I see only 'in part' and you see everything. God, check my heart and mind. If there are any thought patterns that I have that don't please you, make

me aware of them. By your spirit, help me to change them. Help me to repent and to rethink my thinking.
In Jesus' name, Amen

Sunday 24th March Lent 3 Psalm 91

Verena Walder Lay Preacher and Elder Tabernacle URC Mumbles

1 The one whose dwelling
is with God Most High
In the Almighty's shadow
safe will rest.

2 "He is my refuge,"
I say of the LORD,
"My fortress and my God;
in him I trust."

3 Surely he saves you
from the fowler's snare
And rescues you
from deadly pestilence.

4 Under his wings
a refuge you will find;
His faithfulness will be
your strong defence.

5 You will not fear
the terror of the night,
Or dread the arrow flying in the day,
6 Or pestilence
that in the darkness stalks,
Or plague at noon
that carries all away.

7 No harm will touch you
though a thousand fall,
Or yet ten thousand die
at your right hand.

8 Your eyes will then look on,
and you will see
The wicked punished
as their ways demand.

9 If you make God Most High
your dwelling-place—
Even the LORD,
who is my refuge sure—

10 No evil then will ever fall on you,
Nor dire calamity come
near your door.

11 For he will charge his angels
with your care,
To guard you in your footsteps
every one;

12 They will uphold
and bear you in their hands,
Lest you should strike your foot
against a stone.

13 Upon the mighty lion
you will tread;
The cobra you will overcome and kill.
Your feet will trample down
the king of beasts;
The serpent will be crushed
beneath your heel.

14 "Because he loves me,"
says the Sovereign LORD,
"I'll rescue and deliver
him from harm.
Since he acknowledges
my holy name,
I will protect him
with my mighty arm.

15 "He'll call on me,
and I will answer him;
With him in time of trouble I will be.
I will deliver him and honour him.
16 Long will he live,
and my salvation see."

Reflection

Looking back to November 2018 we all probably took part in the centenary Remembrance Day observance of the Armistice, with which this Psalm is often entwined. Known as "The Soldier's Psalm" these verses hold much assurance and promise, of the Lord's protection in the myriad scenarios in which life may present itself to us as well as in those more extreme circumstances of war.

However despite the seeming lukewarm faith which we feel there is within society, this Psalm is still offered to those who serve within Armed Forces of the world, even if this is little publicised.

These words hold much personal meaning for me, because, as an eleven-year old on the point of going to Secondary School our class teacher made us memorise these verses. In these he told us we would find everything that we needed for the rest of our lives, in the "big school" and beyond. Obediently, as also the other children did, these words were committed to memory and although they perhaps did not mean a great deal at the time, they have given much strength throughout the years. These days knowing the climate of education this particular teacher might have been given a stern warning at the least, or, in the extreme, a sacking for so indoctrinating his class!

However the truth of being able to dwell in the shelter of the Most High God and to abide in the shadow of the Almighty has been the strength and truth upon which my life at times of trouble, has held together. Later on the words of the Psalmist were of power to Jesus in the wilderness when He sent the Devil packing with them, so is it any wonder that these words can be all the protection, shelter and strength which we require in any time of trouble? I will let you be the judge of that thought!