

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

Baptism and Eucharist



Sunday 1st – Saturday 14th March

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Sunday 1st March Psalm 138	4
Monday 2nd March	6
Tuesday 3rd March	7
Wednesday 4th March.....	8
Thursday 5th March.....	9
Friday 6th March	10
Saturday 7th March	11
Sunday 8th March Psalm 139.....	12
Monday 9th March	15
Tuesday 10th March	16
Wednesday 11th March.....	18
Thursday 12th March.....	19
Friday 13th March	21
Saturday 14th March	22

closely follows that of paragraph 10 of section 5 of the 1956 Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church of England; but some of the ideas (and wording) are drawn from the third paragraph of section 5.8 of the 1967 Declaration of Faith of the Congregational Church in England and Wales. Note the balance between Christ's sacrifice on the cross in the second sentence and the people's sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in the last, the link between what the United Reformed Church does and what the whole Church on earth and in heaven does, and the way that the statement culminates in Christ's coming in glory at the end.

A Challenge

When you reflect after Communion, 'What have I done today?', say to yourself, 'I have done more than on any day in the week. I have yielded myself to take part with the Church in Christ's finished Act of Redemption, which is greater than the making of the world.'

P.T.FORSYTH, The Church and the Sacraments.

Paul did not (see Monday's Reflection). But it was an act of Thanksgiving (which is what the Greek word 'Eucharist' means); even more it was an act of Faith, since they threw the wheat overboard after they had finished.

Prayer

God of all times and places, give us grace to see our everyday meals, for which we should always give you thanks, as signs of your presence with us in all we do; and may we remember in the humblest things of life, what you have done for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Saturday 14th March

Reading: Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church (1972) section 15

The United Reformed Church celebrates the gospel sacrament of the Lord's Supper. When in obedience to the Lord's command his people show forth his sacrifice on the cross by the bread broken and the wine outpoured for them to eat and drink, he himself, risen and ascended, is present and gives himself to them for their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. United with him and with the whole Church on earth and in heaven, his people gathered at his table present their sacrifice of thanksgiving and renew themselves, and rejoice in the promise of his coming in glory.

Reflection

By including this paragraph on the Lord's Supper from the Basis of Union, I do not in any way claim that this has for us the status of Holy Scripture. But, since I do not suppose that this is the bedtime reading for many of us, it is useful to be reminded from time to time of what we regard as the authoritative statement in our tradition of the meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper. It deserves to be better known. Its structure most

Introduction

For the next two weeks we will look, between Mondays and Saturdays, at the two Sacraments we celebrate in the United Reformed Church – Baptism and Eucharist. We've asked the Rev'd Professor David Thompson to write these reflections. David is a retired minister and Professor of Church History at Cambridge – he attends Downing Place URC in the city. David is one of our premier theologians and was a Churches of Christ observer at the talks which formed the union of the Presbyterian Church of England and the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1972. Later he helped steer the majority of the Churches of Christ into the URC and has been used by the Disciples of Christ – in America – in their dialogue with the Catholic Church. David is one of our sharpest minds and brings the Churches of Christ commitment to weekly celebrations of Holy Communion (something Calvin himself wanted) and a keen commitment to believer's baptism to his reflections.

Sunday 1st March Psalm 138

Ann Barton, member of Whittlesford URC in the Eastern Synod

1 I'll praise you, LORD, with all my heart; Before the gods I'll sing your praise.	For great's the glory of the LORD.
2 I'll bow towards your holy place And bless your holy name always.	6 Although the LORD God dwells on high, The lowly person he protects, Whereas the proud and haughty one He knows afar off and rejects.
I'll praise you for your faithfulness And for your cov'nant love, O LORD, For over all things you have raised Your holy name and faithful word.	7 Although I walk a troubled path, Your tender care preserves my life. You raise your hand against my foes; Your right hand saves me from their strife.
3 The very day I called to you, You gave an answer to my plea. You made me bold within myself; With new resolve you strengthened me.	8 The LORD will certainly fulfil For me the purpose he commands. Your love endures for ever, LORD; Preserve the works of your own hands.
4 O LORD, let all earth's kings give praise, When from your mouth they hear your word.	
5 Let them extol the ways of God,	

Reflection

This Psalm is a huge outpouring of a thankful heart for a recent great blessing, which apparently has been the fulfilment of a divine promise. The singer is so absorbed in his blessedness that he neither names the Lord as the one he is thanking, nor specifies what has set his heart vibrating.

words, when describing the teaching of Jesus – what Jesus means when he says that we must abide in him, and therefore in God.

Prayer

Ever-loving God, if we abide in you, we enjoy the closest relationship possible with you. Save us from stumbling over words, lest the reality of your self-giving love escape us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, your word made flesh. Amen.

Friday 13th March

Reading: Acts 27:33-38

Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, 'Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.' After he had said this, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves. (We were in all two hundred and seventy-six persons in the ship.) After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea.

Reflection

This passage struck me during this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity services which, you may remember, were based on material produced by the Churches in Malta – the island where the ship that Paul and others were on ran aground. It is not clear whether this action was regarded by Paul as equivalent to Communion; possibly it was not – just as the better-known story of the two disciples at Emmaus at the end of Luke's Gospel probably was not. But probably we would not have regarded the actions of the Christians at Corinth as a Communion – as

will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day. ... The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

Reflection

This is the passage where Protestants have to ask themselves how much they believe in the Bible after all, and the most surprising people find themselves trying to avoid a literal interpretation of the words. Thanksgiving prayers in nonconformist liturgies suddenly take refuge in metaphorical words and phrases to avoid praying that the bread and wine may become the body and blood of Christ, lest transubstantiation be found lurking at the door; and Christians suddenly find it easy to identify with 'the Jews', who asked 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' In fact, it is a challenge to us over whether we believe in the Incarnation or not; and English theology has always had difficulty in believing in the Incarnation. In the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ, of which I was a member for over thirty years, we discovered that both sides found it acceptable to use St Augustine's language of 'transformation'; and all Thomas Aquinas was doing with his new word 'transubstantiation' was substituting Aristotle's understanding of matter for the older language, which he regarded as Platonic and therefore less precise. Today we do not regard the nature of matter in either of those ways; and therefore are easily left stranded between different schools of philosophy. What St John is trying to get across is the significance of one of his favourite

We do not know what the Psalmist is praising the Lord for. If David is the Psalmist then it can only have been the fulfilment of the monarchy and the Lord's promise to restore Israel to their land.

The second part (4-6) resembles many earlier Psalms in connecting the singer's deliverance with a world-wide spreading of God's name. This great lesson of the Lord's providence, care for the lowly, faithfulness to His word, so clearly demonstrated in the Psalmist's recent history will become known and those who think of themselves as 'great', shall learn the principles of the Lord's ways and become lowly receivers of His attention and adoring singers of His great glory. The glowing vision is not yet fulfilled; but the singer clearly holds no illusions when he sings. Could this be a foretelling of God's manifestation of Himself in Christ?

In verses 6 to 8, the Psalmist returns to his own needs, and takes to his heart the calming assurance of his recent experience, that he bears a charmed life. He may be surrounded by troubles but he is now in God's protection. He may walk in the valley of the shadow of death unafraid, for God will hold his soul in life. So was the Psalmist assured; and so will those also be who will have wonders to thank the Lord for.

That last prayer of the Psalm blends confidence and petition beautifully. Because the Lord's loving kindness endures forever, everyone on whom His shaping Spirit has begun to work can be sure that they will come to fruition. He never stops till He has completed His work. We would do well to remember this.

Prayer

Faithful God,
We are grateful for the unfailing love and faithfulness
You have shown toward us:
you answer when we call;
you give us strength when we are exhausted;
You stand with us in times of trouble.

Open our eyes to see and know you.
Open our ears to hear your voice.
Give us what we need to we live and work
in the world as your faithful disciples. Amen.

Monday 2nd March

St Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'.

Reflection.

Of the four stories of the baptism of Jesus in the Gospels (although John does not actually say that the Baptist baptized Jesus), Matthew is the only one to suggest any hesitation on John's part. Jesus's reply, 'It is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness', suggests that he understood John's reluctance; but a greater good was to be shown, namely Jesus's total identification with the humanity he had assumed, and whom he was to save. Moreover, although the Biblical text does not suggest the presence of any women in the crowd, in the light of later events it would be surprising if they had been absent. From the beginning baptism was available to Christian women (see Lydia in Acts 16:14). Unlike circumcision that was for boys, baptism was for all as God created us.

Prayer

truly. I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'

Reflection

We all realise that there is no description of the institution of the Lord's Supper in John's Gospel. Instead there is an acted parable of the relationship between Teacher and Disciple, Lord and Servant. By taking upon himself the most menial task for anyone is a host's household, Jesus powerfully illustrates the changed relationships in the Kingdom of God. Furthermore in the final verse of this passage, the image of this new relationship is extended to that between the Father and the Son in a way which fits uneasily with the equality of the three persons in God, as expounded by the Council of Chalcedon (451) – though that should not worry us too much. The point here is the equal standing of each of us at the Lord's Table, with none of us daring to claim the role of the host.

Prayer

Strengthen for service, Lord, the hands that have taken holy things; may the ears that have heard your word be deaf to clamour and dispute; may the tongues that have sung your praise be free from deceit; may the eyes that have seen the tokens of your love shine with the light of hope; and may the bodies which have been fed with your body be refreshed with the fullness of your life; glory to you for ever. Amen. (*Liturgy of Malabar*)

Thursday 12th March

Reading: St John 6:35-43, 52-57

Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I

one who is to betray Jesus being present with them. Participation in the Lord's Supper, however regular, is no guarantee of ultimate loyalty; so we must continue to remember and renew our commitment, particularly in the testing times of life.

Prayer

Most gracious God, we praise you for what you have given and for what you have promised us in Communion. You have made us one with all your people in heaven and on earth. You have fed us with the bread of life, and renewed us for your service. Now we give ourselves to you; and we ask that our daily living may be part of the life of your kingdom, and that our love may be your love reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Wednesday 11th March

Reading: St John 13:1-5; 12-17, 20

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end...And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him ... After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ... Very

Holy Lord God, we thank you that baptism is for everyone. We give thanks for our own baptism into Christ, and we pray that the life of Christ may be made known in and through us, so that we may be faithful witnesses and disciples; for the sake of his holy name. Amen.

Tuesday 3rd March

St Luke 12:49-50

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish that it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed.

Reflection

In Acts, Luke distinguishes between baptism with water and baptism with fire, which may have meant the Holy Spirit, especially as a distinction between John's baptism and Jesus's baptism. In this passage from Luke's Gospel Jesus is clearly referring to the ordeal of his forthcoming death, to which he frequently refers during his ministry, though never quite so strikingly as here. But it makes sense of the Church's later references to being baptized into Christ, or into Christ's death. Only occasionally does Jesus reveal anything like emotion at the thought of his forthcoming death: this is one such place. It encourages us to take very seriously the implications of our own baptism, whether we remember it or not.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, as we think about your passion and death, we cannot but be amazed by your courage and the faith in God that sustained you. Give us the same courage when we face challenges and difficulties in our own lives, and finally at the end when we face death alone. Fill us with your grace that we may remember that you have been through all of this before for our sake. In your name, we pray. Amen.

St Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember that I am with you always, to the end of the age'.

Reflection

Matthew's Gospel ends where it began, with the assurance that Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. It is interesting that at this climax, Matthew still observes that some doubted, but there is no suggestion of efforts made to persuade them otherwise. Perhaps not everyone will be persuaded. The emphasis lies on the task of the disciples to baptize disciples of all nations, and to teach them what Jesus has commanded. This became the established strategy of the missionaries of the Church, before the later Protestant emphasis on preaching rather than baptism.

Prayer

Gracious God we thank you that by baptism we are made members of a world-wide Church – a fellowship of believers, all different, each with their own contribution to make. May we be ready to play our part. May we remember that Jesus challenged us to make disciples of all nations, not just individuals, in order to show more clearly that baptism makes us a diverse body of believers. Teach us to enjoy and appreciate our differences, without wanting to make everyone the same; in the name of the one who died for all, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. When the hour had come (Jesus) took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' Then he took the cup and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see the one who betrays me is with me and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!'

Reflection

The accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke differ in detail, and there is no account as such in John. Luke's version is slightly puzzling because of its inclusion of a cup before and after the bread (although the marginal note in NRSV indicates that 'other ancient authorities lack, in whole or in part verses 19b-20 [which is given ... in my blood]')'. Whether 'those authorities' did that to make the text match Matthew and Mark, or whether they represent an earlier tradition, is something scholars will doubtless continue to debate. Either way it suggests that those verses are either a scribal insertion into an original text, or a deliberate omission to match the other Gospels. That has not been debated as much as the clear statement that the Last Supper was a Passover Meal, whereas the chronology of John's account seems to suggest that it was not. I will not seek to resolve either dispute here, but it is only right to draw them to your attention, particularly as Luke's version (tidied up) has become more widely used in newer liturgies. (I was brought up on the invariable use of Paul.) What is different in Luke, however, is the reference to the

We begin this week of reflection on the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist, or Holy Communion (which ever term you prefer to use) with the earliest account we have of the origin of the service; for Paul's Letters were written some years before any of the Gospels. The Church at Corinth seems to have been a largely Gentile congregation, so there is no reference to the Passover, which features markedly in the Gospel accounts. In any case, the reason Paul gives us any account at all is that he wishes to contrast the divisions among the Corinthians with the intention of Communion to manifest the unity of Jesus and his disciples, as they share in the bread and wine he gives them. Indeed v 21 says the Corinthians eat their supper separately, so one goes hungry and another becomes drunk: such behaviour is not the Lord's Supper. As a result every celebration of the Lord's Supper includes these 'Words of Institution' (as they are called) to remind everyone present that this is a very special occasion, not only as a way to remember Jesus, but also to proclaim the significance of his death: it is a new covenant in (or sealed by) his blood. Many of those who became leaders in the 18th century Evangelical Revival rediscovered their faith by prayer and preparation for Communion on Easter Day.

Prayer

Loving and gracious God, we struggle to understand why Jesus taught his disciples that he had to die on a cross in Jerusalem; and yet we believe that he died for us. As we come to Communion and share the bread and wine, which Jesus gave to us, and for us, so that we would remember him, make that memory really present in our lives, through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tuesday 10th March

Reading: St Luke 22:13-23

Thursday 5th March

Acts 19:1-6

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul ... came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we had not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism'. Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied...

Reflection

The early Church clearly had some difficulty with the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus, not least in the significance of John's baptism by comparison with Christian baptism. So long as this was confined to Palestine, it was usually manageable. But Jews were not just confined to Palestine: the Jewish diaspora was spread around the whole eastern Mediterranean from Alexandria into Asia Minor (modern Turkey). This passage from Acts is evidence that the baptism of John had spread at least as far north as Ephesus. The distinction drawn by Paul became the standard one, although he does not mention fire which some other references do and which fits with Luke 12:49-50 (see last Tuesday), and is one characteristic of the Pentecost experience, linked also to 'tongues' as a sign of the universal nature of the Church. Since the gift of tongues caused divisions at Corinth, there has been a tendency to ignore these further aspects of the baptismal experience until the Pentecostal revival of the late 19th and 20th century. If we do so, we narrow the significance of baptism, confining it simply to our understanding. We do not need to understand everything; and we can learn from what we do not.

Prayer

Teach us, Lord, to learn from what we do not understand; humble us to appreciate the fullness of yourself, which you offer to us when we are baptized. Set us on fire with enthusiasm for the proclamation of the Good News of your eternal kingdom, that we may be faithful to the preaching of your Son, Jesus Christ; in his name we pray. Amen.

Friday 6th March

Romans 6:3-5

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (See also Colossians 2:10-14.)

Reflection

If you were asked whether baptism was central to the teaching of Paul, what would you say? Probably the word would not top a word search on a modern computer. But if you look at the inner logic of Paul's 'letters to young churches' (as J.B. Phillips memorably entitled his translation of the New Testament letters), you may reach a different conclusion. For baptism is the link between the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our baptism shows in our own lives our birth into a new life, the end of the old life, and our being raised to a new life by God. This passage is loved by those who practise baptism by total immersion, but its forcefulness does not depend on that practice alone. These words cover a remarkable range of themes, and provide a reading for a wide variety of occasions from baptism itself, to weddings, to funerals; and

So, even in the part of this Psalm which we might find difficult, where David wants ill to fall on his enemies, it is their hate for God that he wants to see judged – to him, God's enemies are his enemies too. David is happy to be searched by God, to have wicked thoughts removed and to be set upon the right path. Are we also happy to undergo that examination and to walk the way that God chooses with Jesus at our side?

Prayer

Jesus be beside me as I walk the way. Walk on my left and my right to keep me on the path, walk in front of me to lead the way, and behind me to stop me falling behind.
Be within me as I live out my day, and within those whom I meet.
Let your love shine through me in all that I do. Amen

Monday 9th March

Reading: 1 Corinthians, 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Reflection

20 With an evil mind they speak against you;
your foes take your name in vain, O God.

21 Do not I, O LORD, your foes despise?

22 I abhor them as my enemies.

23 Search me, LORD, and know my inmost feelings;
test me now and know my anxious mind.

24 See if there is anything offensive
in my way of life that you can find;
And direct me, O my God, I pray,
in your good and everlasting way.

Reflection

This most intimate Psalm shows how much God loves each one of us – from the inside out, and in every moment of our lives, however far we may travel – both geographically and from God.

The level of knowledge that God has about us is so deep that it is hard to comprehend. A long-married couple know each other well, but that knowledge is nothing compared to the knowledge of us, and the love for us, that God has.

That knowledge extends to the time before we were born, when we were formed in the womb. A friend who recently became a great grandmother explained how she was meeting her great grandson for the first time, but yet she had known him for months – and indeed with modern scanning, we can perhaps feel closer to the unborn child than could previous generations.

This knowledge that God has of us means that we must never be afraid to confess when we get it wrong – God already knows, and is ready to forgive and move on. God is happy to surround us with love and to accept our thankful praise.

what a range of possibilities is implied in that simple phrase ‘so that we too might walk in newness of life’!

Prayer

Loving Lord, you have united all people by our baptism in your name. Give us grace to live out our baptism continually in our daily lives, that we may experience the power of your resurrection at the end of our days, and enter into your eternal joy; for Jesus Christ’s sake. Amen.

Saturday 7th March

St John 15:12-16

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any long, because the servant does not know what the master is doing: but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

Reflection

At the end of his Gospel, John writes, ‘Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (Jn 20:30-31). In other words, John has written what he regards as fundamental to his story. So there are three essential points in this short reading. We (the disciples) are Jesus’s friends if we do what he commands; we did not choose him, but Jesus chose us; we are appointed to go and bear fruit that will last. Jesus’s friendship involves obedience. Jesus chooses us, not the other way around, as we so often suppose –

encouraged by much late-19th century hymnody, e.g. 'Who is on the Lord's side', 'Once to every man and nation/comes the moment to decide' etc. We are expected to bear lasting fruit. These are three counter-cultural challenges in two verses. In today's world we like to think we are in charge, but in baptism, whether as a child or an adult, we give ourselves up to others – as Jesus did on the night of his arrest – and thereafter we have surrendered ourselves to him. What more need we say?

Prayer

May the God of all grace, who has called us to Christian faith and service, confirm and strengthen us with the Holy Spirit and keep us faithful to Christ all our days. Amen.

Sunday 8th March Psalm 139

The Rev'd Sue Cossey, NSM and Synod Pastoral Advisor, Bristol

1 You, O LORD, have searched me and you know me;

2 when I sit or rise, to you is known.

From afar my inner thoughts you ponder—

3 both my going out and lying down.

4 All my ways you know; I speak no word

but you know it perfectly, O LORD.

5 For you hem me in before and after,
and upon me you have laid your hand.

6 Such a knowledge is beyond my grasping,
higher far than I can understand.

7 From your Spirit where can I be free?

From your presence whither can I flee?

8 If I fly to heaven, you are present;
or if in the depths I make my home.¹²

9 If I rise up on the wings of morning,
or beyond the farthest sea I roam,
10 Even there your hand will guide my way;
your right hand will never let me stray.

11 If I say, "The dark will surely hide me,
and the light around me will be night,"

12 Even night would not be dark before you,
and the dark would shine for you as light.

Darkness can hide nothing from your view,
and the blackness is as light to you.

13 For you made and formed my inmost being;
in my mother's womb you moulded me.

14 I will praise you, for I have been fashioned
by you fearfully and wondrously.

All your works are wonderful, I know—

I acknowledge this and stand in awe.

15 From your sight my frame was never hidden
in the secret place before my birth,

16 For your eyes beheld my unformed body
when I was conceived in depths of earth.

You wrote all the days ordained for me
in your book before one came to be.

17 Precious are your thoughts, O God, about me!
they exceed my power to understand.

18 If I were to try to count their number,
they are more than all the grains of sand.

When I waken in the morn anew,
I continue still, O LORD, with you.

19 O that you, my God, would slay the wicked!
Go from me, all you who thirst for blood!