David and his men, he is sharing his own food with someone in need. The heart of the Law allowed the priest to do that. The bread was part of the priestly duties on the Sabbath.

Similarly, Jesus calls people back to the heart of the Sabbath. There was nothing illegal about Jesus plucking grain, separating the chaff and wheat in his hands, and eating it as they walked along. The only issue was that threshing and winnowing wheat on the sabbath wasn't allowed. So surely winnowing wheat in your hands was also not allowed? Like the priests in the Temple baking bread, Jesus and his disciples were doing God's work and serving God's people. Like priests, they needed to be able to eat to continue to serve God and God's people.

As part of the "priesthood of all believers", how would you apply this teaching in your life?

Prayer

God, in this world that demands our attention, help us to develop a sustaining Sabbath rest rhythm that refreshes and energises us. Amen

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Luke's Gospel Part 2



Saturday 1st January – Saturday 15th January

Introduction

For the church year which started in Advent and runs through to November the Gospel of Luke will be the main Gospel that is read in church on Sundays. The Gospel itself is anonymous but early on in the Church's life it was attributed to Luke, the companion of St Paul – but there's no evidence that he wrote it. Scholars think it might have been written as early as the 30 years between 80 and 110 whilst other scholars argue for a later date well into the 2nd Century. As in other Biblical texts we don't have the original manuscripts – the earliest documents we have date back to the 3rd Century and these are fragments – the earliest complete text we have dates to the 4th Century. The writer used St

Mark's Gospel (it's almost entirely included) and some other sources – one which looks like it is also used in Matthew (but not in Mark) and his own sources for material which doesn't appear in any of the other Gospels. Luke was written to be read aloud to early meetings of the Church gathered in peoples' homes. The author writes that his purpose is to present "an orderly account" of "the events that have been fulfilled among us" ie Jesus' life and ministry. Luke's purpose is not to justify the faith but to encourage it – to answer the questions: what happened and what did it all mean?

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May my days be lived renewed, not patched with the old.
May my ways be alive and strengthened by the Spirit I hold.
May what I say be a reflection of your life in me, fresh and bold.
May I always know who I am in you and live in your joy every day. Amen

Saturday 15 January 2022 St Luke 6: 1 - 5

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

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

Reflection

What do you do on the Sabbath? Drive or cycle somewhere? Walk your dog? Phone a friend? Skype family? Cook dinner? Watch or play sport? Knit? Play Minecraft? Some people would say that these activities violate the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. "Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God." (Exodus 20:9-10a NIV) In an effort to keep this commandment, a lot of thought has been put into describing what exactly is "work." For some, anything that requires physical effort on your part or use of electricity violates this commandment. But Jesus challenged this view.

The story about David and the bread comes from 1 Samuel 21. Every Sabbath, the priests baked 12 loaves and placed them on a table. The old loaves would then be for the priests to eat. This Torah law was about ensuring the priests had food. So when the priest gives this bread to

wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, "The old is good."'

Reflection

This passage talks about the question of identity. In the first few lines Jesus describes who he is; the bridegroom. He knows with certainty his role, what that means for now and the future. He is not afraid to voice who he is and in speaking his identity, he silences his critics.

He then tells a parable to teach us about our identity. We are made new in Christ. We have new natures of righteousness and holiness through the death of Christ on the Cross. He died and took all our sin and our old ways with Him and now we live new lives.

Christ is our new garment of righteousness and the wineskin is our new life. We shouldn't just try to patch up the old using the new life we have been given. Being saved is about having a whole new identity instead of taking pieces of new life and placing it over the holes in the old life. As Christians we move forwards completely. The Spirit (the new wine) fills our new life in Christ and everything is good, new and fresh.

The mystery of life with Christ is that we are constantly renewed and His mercies are new every morning. So when we fail and we try to patch up mistakes with new ways, it doesn't work well. We cannot make ourselves righteous, only Christ can do that. We are continually working out our salvation and learning our new identity in Jesus. Instead of constantly looking back and saying the old ways are better we have to stop, taste, drink, have our thirst quenched and our lives filled by the fresh and new life that Jesus has given us every day. Then we can move forward, full of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer

Lord, help me to live in the newness of life that you give.

Saturday 1 January 2022 St Luke 3: 21 - 22

The Rev'd Sue Cossey, NSM and Synod Pastoral Advisor, Bristol Area.
Member of Zion United Church, Frampton Cotterell

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

Reflection

Happy New Year!

A time for new beginnings and possibly for New Year resolutions.

John the Baptist was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and the people had flocked into the wilderness to hear him and to be baptised. We hear today about the last of these – Jesus, son of a carpenter from Nazareth. Luke tells us that after he was baptised, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Him. The words of the voice from heaven are so significant. 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.'

Those of us who have grown up expecting to have to earn respect might wonder what Jesus has done for God to be pleased with him. And the answer is (according to Luke's account) – nothing! Jesus has not started his ministry, and all that Luke tells us before this incident are his birth, and an incident when he got left behind at the temple, age 12.

But this 'nothing' is a wonderful insight into God's love – for Jesus, and by extension, for us. God is pleased with Jesus, because God loves him – no conditions, no demands, no judgement. God loves Jesus for who he is. So often we try and earn God's love – perhaps your new year resolution is to pray more or to read your Bible more often. But while these things

will help us in our discipleship, God still loves us no matter what, and God is pleased with us.

We cannot fully understand such unconditional love, as we ourselves often struggle to love others and ourselves and to accept being loved. The closest I feel I might have come is love for my grandchild – too young to try and earn love, but loved to bursting nevertheless!

So this year, if you feel the need to make a resolution, consider resolving to take time each day to remember that God loves you, and is pleased with you.

Prayer

Father, thank you for loving us, and for being pleased with us. Help us to live our lives in the knowledge of that love, and to share it with all whom we meet. Amen

Sunday 2 January 2022 Psalm 73

The Rev'd Nicola Furley-Smith, URC Secretary for Ministries

In sweet communion,
Lord, with thee
I constantly abide;
my hand thou holdest in thine own
to keep me near thy side.

2 Thy counsel through
my earthly way
shall guide me and control,
and then to glory afterward
thou wilt receive my soul.

3 Whom have I, Lord,
in heav'n but thee,
to whom my thoughts aspire?
And, having thee,
on earth is naught
that I can yet desire?

4 Though flesh and heart should
faint and fail,
the Lord will ever be
the strength and portion
of my heart, my God eternally.

with Him we will be changed, as we meet with God and grow in His ways, Kingdom ways, to become saved and restored but still recognisable as ourselves.

The same is true of our churches. Inviting people who are different from us, who don't know how to do 'church', doesn't change us as the Body. We are still the Church but our calendars may look different. We mustn't back away but embrace those who are not yet Christians, and gently ask them to hold our hand and together we will look for God, because He is all around and present in everything.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that you look for each one of us and you take us by the hand, gently leading us through difficulties and joys, to teach us and guide us.
Thank you for your never ending patience
Thank you for your everlasting love
Thank you for your unexplainable peace
Thank you that you don't change who I am but you continue the creation work you started until I am perfectly restored in you. Amen

Friday 14 January 2022 St Luke 5: 33 - 39

Jo Patel, Local Church Leader, Wattisfield URC

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

Thursday 13 January 2022 St Luke 5: 27 - 32
Jo Patel, Local Church Leader, Wattisfield URC

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

Reflection

In Luke's Gospel we hear about barriers being broken down, about the humanity of Jesus and His love for everyone. Jew, gentile, men, women, rich, poor, elders and children, religious leaders and tax-collectors. Jesus came for all and He is the Saviour of us all. Luke shares about our obligation to demonstrate compassion, mercy and grace towards everybody. To the Pharisees and Scribes in this passage Jesus is teaching that every person is to be treated the same, no matter their job, their background or their religion. He is turning the tables of the religious law upside down and showing them the Kingdom way, where everyone eats and drinks together and homes are open to all.

Jesus deliberately chose His disciples because they were the most unlikely, unreligious band of followers, who represented all of society in their number. When He called Levi (the Greek for Matthew) Jesus didn't say 'Come and I will convert you and you will change your ways and become exactly like me and each other'. His words were always gentle, calm and wise. What He was actually saying to Matthew, through the words 'follow me', was 'come, take my hand and together we will get to know God'. Jesus wasn't and still isn't wanting to change our personality. He loves us as we were created but He knows that through relationship

5 To live apart from God is death, 'tis good his face to seek;
my refuge is the living God, his praise I long to speak.

public domain. You can hear some of the verses sung here https://bit.ly/3gAfcRG

Reflection

How do we find confidence to live faithfully in a corrupt and unfair world where the wicked appear to prosper whilst the good suffer and where God seems absent? Through a journey of emotions, the Psalmist invites us to share with him in his experience of God. He moves from plain ignorance, to angry frustration, to experiencing a new, radical outlook on life to discovering an enlightened confidence. He renews his relationship with God in spite of his circumstances. God is good!

Yet, for the Psalmist, like many of us, it has not always felt that God is good. Faced with suffering, affliction and new punishments every day, he sees the wicked prosper, increasing in riches. There are so many questions left unanswered and his heart is pierced. We have sympathy with him for there is a mystery about evil which remains unresolved even with the light of resurrection hope. This shakes the Psalmist's faith to the very core - bringing him to despair until…until he goes into God's sanctuary, into the place where he can think and pray and get proper perspective on his situation and the situation of the wicked. He sees evil for what it is. The wicked have no future. Against this puzzling backdrop, the Psalmist enters the reality of religious experience. Rekindling a relationship with God so intimate, he realises that, despite his own feet slipping, God has always remained near, holding his right hand and guiding him with counsel. God is his rock, the strength of his heart. God is his constant. When we falter and stumble and retreat into self-pity, God will not give it up on us until what he has begun in us is completed. A hopeful message at the start of the New Year.

Prayer

Let my heart, O God, always recognise
you are there in the midst of my life.
Direct all that is me toward your praise.
May nothing ever distract me from your love,
neither health nor sickness, wealth nor poverty, happiness nor despair.
Energise me in your service
so that I may always be the person you intend me to be. Amen.

Monday 3 January 2022 St Luke 3: 23 - 38

The Rev'd Trevor Jamison, Saint Columba's United Reformed Church, North Shields

Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jannai, son of Joseph, son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esli, son of Naggai, son of Maath, son of Mattathias, son of Semein, son of Josech, son of Joda, son of Joanan, son of Rhesa, son of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, son of Neri, son of Melchi, son of Addi, son of Cosam, son of Elmadam, son of Er, son of Joshua, son of Eliezer, son of Jorim, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Simeon, son of Judah, son of Joseph, son of Jonam, son of Eliakim, son of Melea, son of Menna, son of Mattatha, son of Nathan, son of David, son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, son of Amminadab, son of Admin, son of Arni, son of Hezron, son of Perez, son of Judah, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Terah, son of Nahor, son of Serug, son of Reu, son of Peleg, son of Eber, son of Shelah, son of Cainan, son of Arphaxad, son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.

Reflection

Just imagine the makers of television's Who Do You Think You Are trying reasons not to be convinced. The other group are moving, looking for solutions and already have faith.

Somehow, they know that if they can only enable their friend (who we only know as the paralysed man) to encounter Jesus his life will be transformed. Their belief leads to drastic action: removing the roof tiles to make an entrance, lowering the bed into the midst of everything and right in front of Jesus. The remarkable thing is that Jesus looks at them and their faith and that seems to be the catalyst for his intervention 'Friend, your sins are forgiven'. It is the disbelief of the scribes and Pharisees that prompts the physical healing so Jesus can prove his authority. None of this happens in a 'sacred' space or place of worship – the whole scene takes place in an ordinary house on an ordinary street. Mission at its simplest is finding a way to enable someone to encounter Jesus so that their life may be transformed. The good news is that if we faithfully find crazy, innovative, determined ways to bring people we know of all ages, stages and dispositions into the presence of Jesus, he will respond in gracious love and call them 'Friend'. Our faith should inspire us to be way-makers. The rest is up to Jesus. Then one day we can all go to our ultimate home glorifying God and filled with awe at the life-transforming things we have seen.

Prayer

Jesus – help us put faith into action.
Show us the companions who, together with us,
can make a way to you for people who have none.
Give us determination, vision, courage and faith.
Call us onwards as pioneers and pathfinders,
trusting your love to sustain and embrace us,
until we can celebrate all the strange
and wonderful things we see you do. Amen.

Here is grace, compassion, love beyond words,
in your choice for the life of this world. Amen.

Wednesday 12 January 2022 St Luke 5: 17 - 26

Dr Sam Richards, serving as Head of Children's and Youth Work, member of mayBe community, Oxford.

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

Reflection

This is such a wonderful story from Luke's gospel, a firm favourite to act out with children and young people (who doesn't like lifting the roof?). I am struck by the contrast between the Pharisees and teachers of the law on the one hand, and the men bringing the paralysed man on the other. One group is in the way, the other group finds a way. One group is sitting down, blocking access to Jesus for others, looking for problems and

to put together a programme about Jesus, based on the genealogy Luke provides. It seems full of possibilities. Lots of material to explore – seventy-plus names, some of them famous, though sadly information on female ancestors is lacking.

It wouldn't be long before other problems arose either. Researchers would point out that this list and Matthew's don't tally. What about those names on Luke's list that nobody else mentions? Where did they come from? Then there's the lack of written records for the time of Noah and Methuselah, to say nothing of Adam.

When they get to the end of the list the wheels really come off: Adam, son of God? What are they to do with that? It's time to give up, and hand over the material to their colleagues at Songs of Praise. In fact, that's the better way to read this list; primarily as praise.

Jesus, about thirty years of age, ready to start out on his work, is thought to be the son of Joseph. Look back further, however, and you discover he is child of Adam who is child of God. Jesus is a human child of humankind, who right from the start are created by God to be in God's image.

Jesus is just like you and me, living life as a fellow family member of the human race; a child of Adam. Luke's good news, though, is that this child of Adam is setting out on his public work as Son of God. He'll do that in a way we fellow children of Adam, and God, have never matched. This will have such a positive effect on our family relationship with God that it's worthy of our songs of praise.

Prayer

O God, thank you for allowing me to be your child. Thank you that you have included me within the human family. Thank you for the work of your Son, Jesus; child of Adam, child of yours. For all of this, I sing your praise. Amen.

Tuesday 4 January 2022 St Luke 4: 1 - 13

Kirsty-Ann Mabbott, Church Related Community Worker, Coventry, West Midlands

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."'

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you",and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."'

Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Reflection

I've always found this passage interesting because we hear how Jesus had well formed and quick responses to the Devil, but I have always wondered if it really was that clear cut? I don't want to debate whether the Devil is real or not, or where people might stand in regard to spiritual attacks because I suspect that they would be debates that would surpass

Reflection

A desperate man presents Jesus with a choice, 'Lord if you choose, you can make me clean.' He clearly believes Jesus has the power to do so and he hopes desperately that Jesus has the desire too. But it is a choice. Jesus can risk contamination in the eyes of his society, can risk failure, or he can stretch out his healing hands to this man covered in wounds and sores. It is a choice, not without cost, but Jesus does not hesitate. 'I do choose' are wondrous words, full of grace and compassion.

Jesus has so many choices to make in his journeys, as he meets crowds of people with all their different needs. The expectations placed on him are enormous and to begin with he tells those healed not to tell others. But word gets out and the crowds come. The excitement that this might be the longed-for Messiah begins to bubble up.

Jesus chooses not to be manipulated by the crowd, moulded by his people's picture of what God's Messiah should look like. He chooses to withdraw to the wilderness to pray to the One who sent him, the One who calls him beloved child. He chooses to journey to Jerusalem, to face rejection. In the garden he chooses to accept the cup of suffering and allows himself to be arrested and taken away. 'I do choose' are such powerful words – Jesus' choice to give his life, to reach out and touch the untouchable ones and love the unlovable ones. His choice includes you and me – his choice to make us clean, forgiven, new, able to live again and live life, abundantly and generously.

Prayer

Here is grace, compassion, love beyond words,
Jesus, in your choice, not ours:
your choice to heal our hearts;
your choice to give your life;
your choice to meet us now;
your choice to call us to share your work and your ways.

everyday world. Jesus wants to lay open to the world the way of salvation; the way back to the heart of God. He does so, supremely, upon the cross. But he does so in countless other ways depending upon what each of us might need as he nudges us towards trust. Simon is nudged by an incredible catch; a fisherman's world rewritten by a fishing tale. It sends Simon to his knees. Salvation has broken in and he knows that he isn't worthy. We never are. And then it comes, that word of grace and mercy that lifts us up and enfolds us within the saving, calling, transforming love of God: "Do not be afraid…"

Prayer

Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.
Then, in your mercy, lift me up that I might sing and serve,
pray and praise, follow and forgive, challenge and care, in your name.
Let Simon's meeting with you find echo in my meeting with you
as today unfolds. Amen.

Tuesday 11 January 2022 St Luke 5: 12 - 16

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

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

the length of this reflection. What I want to focus on, is temptation.

Let's be honest, even those with the most iron wills, have faced temptation in life. As children, teenagers, young adults and older adults we have been tempted to do things that we shouldn't; to take short-cuts that if discovered, cause us more problems than they have solved; to eat, drink, imbibe things that we know are not good for us, or even do us harm; yet we still fall for temptation.

Jesus didn't fall for the temptations, but if it were really as easy as it is sometimes made to sound, would it really have been much of a tempting? I suspect that all of these temptations would have been things that Jesus would have wrestled with, they may have been things that Jesus had to go back and forth on before giving his final answers and overcoming the temptations.

That's the crux of it, if the things that tempt us were easy to ignore, they wouldn't be the things that tempt us, but the reason we are tempted is because we have a weakness for those things. I doubt that any of us will ever face temptation to the level of Jesus, which is a good thing, but struggling and wrestling with temptation is part of the faith journey, what we should aim for is leaning on God when we are tempted and following the example of Jesus, but also remember that we are not Jesus and we are not always going overcome temptation and that is also part of life and that is why we continue to strive to follow Jesus.

Prayer

God of life and living,
We face temptations in life more often than we would be prepared to admit.
Help us as we try to live as Jesus' followers on the Way to stand firm against temptation.
Enable us to become stronger day by day to overcome the tests and trials that enter our lives.

Create in us compassionate hearts towards ourselves and others when we and they are tempted and fail to resist. Amen.

Wednesday 5 January 2022 St Luke 4: 14 - 30

The Rev'd George Watt, Moderator of Thames North Synod

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum."' And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time

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

Reflection

Leaving everything to follow Jesus remains, it might seem, the preserve of a very few who manage to scale the loftiest heights of holiness. Some make their holy vows and offer themselves entirely into the hands of God to serve and live as God directs, abandoning all else. Thank God for such calling heard and accepted, and for the religious communities they sustain.

What of the rest of us? Do we simply stand upon the shore and watch it happen for Simon and his fishing partners James and John? As they head off with Jesus into lives changed for ever, do we just quietly walk away? I think not. The details here matter because they are the unique story of how Simon, James and John became disciples. But, behind their story, might we not find our own? I think we can. Perhaps it goes a little like this…

Knowing something about Jesus can be interesting, but not yet truly life-changing. Luke's narrative is suggestive that Simon and Jesus already know each other well enough for Jesus to visit Simon's home and for Simon to willingly lend his boat as offshore pulpit. Many become fascinated by the story of Jesus and, perhaps, admire him as a great moral leader. But Jesus, always, wants more.

Jesus wants to demonstrate, through and beyond the teaching, that he brings the very power of God into the complicated contexts of the

It wasn't just that Asaph felt that God had stopped caring for Israel, he sensed that God was angry at them, and in some sense working against them.

I think we can all remember times in our own lives when we have felt that God has abandoned us but even in our own sorrow and desperation, we know that Christ is with us, walking every step – and I am reminded of the poem entitled the 'The Footprints in the Sand' where Christ carries all whose burden is too heavy for them to carry alone.

Prayer

Lord, when we feel abandoned and alone, and we can no longer hear you speaking to us, guiding us and comforting us, help us to know that even though we walk 'through the valley of the shadow of death', you are there with us in the midst of our sorrow and will bring us out into the sunshine again, re-made and rededicated to you, as a child of Christ our Saviour. Amen

Monday 10 January 2022 St Luke 5: 1 - 11

The Rev'd Neil Thorogood, Minister, Thornbury URC and Trinity-Henleaze URC (Bristol)

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

of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Reflection

It was the 25th anniversary year of my ordination before I returned to my childhood church to preach. I suppose it never occurred to them to ask, or for me to offer to lead worship. 600 miles is a long way to travel to fill the pulpit and when I returned I was usually ready for a rest and a break. There was of course the issue of what to preach. Do you just 'tickle ears' so they heard what they want to hear or do you pose a challenge? I usually try to preach 'to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable' - in a positive way of course! It seemed to go well since they asked me if I would consider becoming their minister because they were in vacancy.

So at least I wasn't run out of town and I have returned to preach a number of times.

It was important for me to preach there because it was in that church, and through the work of Scripture Union, that I came to faith. It was also in that church as a teenager that I first spoke, taking on the responsibility of doing the children's address when the Youth Fellowship led the service. Just as Jesus was handed the scroll I felt that as a youngster I had been handed the gift of faith, not to be kept rolled up but to be opened and proclaimed in my words and actions.

When Jesus had finished he rolled the scroll back up again and handed it over. Symbolically it reminds us that the Word of God isn't just to be kept for ourselves but to be passed on to others and future generations. I wonder who was the next person in the Synagogue in Nazareth to unroll that scroll and how under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they interpreted the words they read. How is God speaking to us through his

Word today?

Prayer

Dear God,
as we receive your Word
may we hear the words of challenge
as well as those of comfort.
May we be faithful as we live it,
speak it out and pass it on to others. Amen

Thursday 6 January 2022 St Luke 4: 31 - 37

The Rev'd Mike Walsh, Pioneer Minister, Chorlton, Manchester

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

Reflection

It happens every now and again. A prominent cleric overtly criticises the government and the story briefly makes the news. A junior government minister then appears to trot out the line, 'The Rev'd so-and-so should stick to religion and leave politics to the politicians'.

When God's truth speaks to power, an immediate push back is inevitable.

Remember Thou Thy people in Thy love,
Thy heritage, of old by Thee selected,
The congregation which Thou hast elected
In Thy good pleasure, shown from heaven above.

Remember Zion's mount, where Thou hast dwelt,
And see Thou its perpetual desolations.
See the destruction which the hostile nations
Brought to the place where once Thy children knelt.

W. W. J. VanOene, 1972
You can hear this sung to the Genevan tune here
https://bit.ly/2TvjhP6

Reflection

The puzzlement, pain and desperation that exudes from this Psalm is palpable. The writer (attributed to Asaph) just cannot believe that his God would allow this to happen to His people. This is a desperate Psalm, but not the song of someone who does not believe in God, but the wail of a believer.

Historically, this Psalm seems to describe the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by an unknown enemy. The writer beseeches God for an explanation. He reminds God of all the great things He had done for them. They had come to rely and depend upon God to protect them.

He asks how God can be angry with his own people forever. He does not question the correctness of his judgment but uses the question and the lament as the basis for an appeal to God's fatherly heart. He points out that their enemy has completely destroyed Mount Zion for all time– God's house on earth, where His people came to kneel. The people who He himself had chosen.

are reasonable and perhaps even do-able. We could easily fit them if we tried, couldn't we?

But are these demands actually for us? And are they what God is calling us to do, right here and right now? Could it even be that it would be better for us to pass by on the request and to empower someone else to do it?

In this passage, Jesus is facing lots of demands on his time. He'd tried to escape and get away for some alone time, but the crowds kept following him and presenting their demands to him. All their requests were reasonable. He could easily have stayed to help them and continue the good work He'd started in their area. It would have been the obvious thing to do.

But the plans of Jesus were different to the plans of the crowd. He knew what His purpose under God was and He stuck to it. May God be praised for that.

Prayer

Dear God, thank You that You have a purpose for each one of us right here and right now. You even have a purpose for us in the day ahead. Give us grace to see what You are graciously calling us to do and to respond with joy to Your call. Amen.

Sunday 9 January 2022 Psalm 74

Ann Barton, Lay Leader at Whittlesford URC in the Eastern Synod

O God, why dost Thou cast us off for aye?
Why does Thy anger smoke in indignation
Against Thy sheep? O come with Thy salvation!
Bestow Thy grace on them and be their stay.

When God's truth speaks to power, if that voice is not silenced - the powerful are in trouble!

We see this of course in the overarching story of the Gospels. Jesus' whole ministry challenged and subverted the powers of religion and state to the point where it was inevitable they would join forces to silence him once and for all, or so they thought!

Here in this story, and in many others, we see an example of one small interchange in this growing confrontation, which contributes to Jesus' increasing reputation.

The demon plays the role of the one in control of the life of another, and Jesus' very presence challenges that oppression - that God's truth is that all should have life in all its fullness.

The demon cries out, and reveals the fear of being treated as it would treat those it seeks to overcome, saying 'have you come to destroy us?' Jesus responds, 'shut up, and leave them alone'. He need say no more for both know the truth of God sees right through this demon who now no longer has any hold here. It has no moral authority here!

There is no demonisation of this demon! It departs, and no one comes to any further harm.

A church unable to speak God's truth to power, by their mere reputation and presence, for fear of being seen to be aggressive, or rude. Unwilling to risk disrupting the status quo, or embarrassing the elite, or meddling in things which don't concern it; is a church which would never have known the demon was there, as it would have had no need to cry out.

Prayer

God of love, in your truth we have the power to change the world.
Not by argument or coercion, nor by force or violence.

But by confronting the powers with your truth and love for all people. Amen.

Friday 7 January 2022 St Luke 4: 38 - 41

John Collings, Lay Preacher, Rutherglen URC

After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them. As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them. Demons also came out of many, shouting, 'You are the Son of God!' But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

Reflection

As we are, hopefully, emerging from the pandemic we are used to hearing reports of people with a high fever. We read of people spending weeks seriously ill in hospital and then taking months to fully recover. What a contrast to this report of Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law. As soon as Jesus spoke the fever left her and she was immediately fit and well able to serve food to Jesus and the disciples.

This did not go unnoticed and later it seems that crowds came, and Jesus healed them all. He showed His power over demons by not allowing them to speak.

Today we rely upon the NHS and the skills of doctors, nurses and others to heal us but we still need the touch of Jesus in our lives. While we can have medical experts deal with our physical and mental ailments, we need Jesus to touch us for inner healing and strength. We may be feeling overwhelmed with all the suffering that we see around us, and we need

the touch of Jesus to calm us and lead us to do what we should. We may be feeling helpless in light of some situation, but we must remember that Jesus still cares about us and that the Holy Spirit is with us today. If we feel alone and helpless, we need to remember accounts of the miracles and healings that Jesus performed and ask for changes in our lives to make us feel secure and complete. What are the demons that mess with your life? No matter what they are, Jesus can, and will, deal with them.

Prayer

Loving God thank you that Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law and restored her strength so she could serve the disciples.

I ask that you take away all my worries and weaknesses and restore me so I can live my life fully for you.

Just as the disciples followed Jesus, help me to live a life of discipleship leaning on your strength and relying on your Holy Spirit to guide me. Amen

Saturday 8 January 2022 St Luke 4: 42 - 44

Anne Brooke, regular worshipper at Elstead URC

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

Reflection

There are many demands on our time. Demands from family, from friends, from neighbours, from bosses and from colleagues. It's just the way life is. There are even demands from church. Most of these demands