Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Luke's Gospel Part 3



Saturday 16th January – Monday 31st 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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care, it's as if he has a limitless supply of seed. It's on the path, in the weeds, in the pond, over the tarmac, on the shed roof and all over the decking. This parable farmer has no concern over where or how growth will happen, he just flings the seed with care-free abandon.

I like to think that growth will happen in the place I have chosen. That sprouts will grow here and beans will grow there. Tomatoes and cucumbers will grow in the polytunnel and potatoes are supposed to be in the special sacks that never work that well. Courgettes will ramble up the frame I have built rather than romp off over next door's fence!

God seems to put more value on growth simply being abundant, areas of fertility more than making up for fallow ground. If I'm to be God's gardener, maybe I need to learn to be more wasteful with the seeds he has given me, maybe I need to stop deciding where I think they will grow, instead letting them spill from my hands and my pockets as I walk in his footsteps.

Prayer

God of life and growth, I'm going out today with a bag of your seeds.
I know where they might grow best,
Which lives will be most receptive.
I also have a good idea where they will not take,
Which lives not to waste good seed on.

Guide me into places and situations and opportunities
Where I might see the abundance of your life flourishing,
In people and communities I never expected to find it. Amen.

O God of the darkness and the light,
of complete desperation and of sure and certain hope,
please don't forget me and do not let me forget you.
I pray also for …… known to me,
who is in trouble so deep they do not know what to do.
I remember them before you
and pray that they will know they are not forgotten.

Monday 31 January 2022 St Luke 8: 11 - 15

The Rev'd Phil Nevard, Minister of Sawston, Whittlesford & Castle Camps

'Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.

Reflection

I'm careful with my seeds, I hate to waste them. Instructions usually suggest that you scatter them and then thin-out the seedlings later. I'd rather plant them one by one at the appropriate distance because I don't want to throw away 50 seedlings to leave 10 plants. The problem is, this rarely works and I end up with only 4 germinating and a big gap of emptiness soon fills with weeds. Maybe I need to be more wasteful and less controlling.

This parable farmer is wanging his seeds everywhere, he doesn't seem to

Sunday 16 January 2022 Psalm 75

Michael RJ Topple is an ordinand at the Scottish College, Glasgow

O God, your deeds are unsurpassed;
no richer grace can earth impart.
Your Name is near;
you hold us fast.
Your love enfolds
each yearning heart,
your love enfolds
each yearning heart.

2: Remove our pride
lest we must taste
the judgment cup of bitter gall.
Let not our bold ambitions take
the praise from you,
who gives us all,
the praise from you,
who gives us all.

3: Help us to know humility,
to follow you in all your ways.
From self-conceit, Lord, set us free
to know ourselves and sing your praise,
to know ourselves and sing your praise.

Michael Morgan, William R. Bradbury © 2011 Faith Alive Christian Resources
You can hear a verse of this Psalm sung here
https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/152442

Reflection

When I lead worship I tend to begin with a prayer of approach and adoration, before moving into a contemplative period of confession. As we do this, I encourage the congregation to consider that 'we have come before the bright throne of God, and in His light our shadows fall all the more darkly behind us'. There is, I think, something of this in today's Psalm.

The Psalmist begins by magnifying God's deeds: they are 'unsurpassed' and abounding in grace, far beyond the things of earth; then s/he moves

on to consider the pride and ambitions which risk 'tak[ing] the praise from You [God], who gives us all'. How often have we been so caught up in our own abilities or achievements that we have failed to notice God's far greater deeds? Only the other week I was talking to a friend about an impressive piece of driving I had recently performed and, mid-sentence, realised I was rather forgetting the even greater achievement on God's part of creating the landscape through which I drove! So often considering our own achievements risks making us unaware of God's.

The Psalmist naturally then leads on to humility, praying that we may be helped to 'follow You [God] in all Your ways'. Barely a day goes by where I don't wish I was able to 'see Thee [God] more clearly, love Thee more dearly, follow Thee more nearly, day by day'. It is a prayer that I suspect I will be praying for the rest of my life but, like the Psalmist, I trust and pray that the ending will bring me to a place where we can 'know ourselves and sing Your [God's] praise.'

Prayer

Holy God,
On this day of rest and praise, help me to embrace Your love so that I can know You better than I know myself.
Give me the grace to see You in all things, and to worship You for Your great love and grace, in the power of Jesus' Name. Amen

Monday 17 January 2022 St Luke 6: 6 - 11

Pat Stannard, Elder, Muswell Hill URC

On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come and stand here.' He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, 'I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to

Reflection

Many, if not all, of us have known at some time in our lives the experience that the Psalmist so powerfully describes: bleak nights when some intractable trouble or grief would not let us sleep, moments when we could see no way through or imagine no bright future, times when we may not have doubted God's reality, but wondered why we've been abandoned. At such times we refuse easy comfort, and we should. There are troubles and griefs so awful in all our lives sometimes that it's hard to hear anything like the chipper voice from that Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, 'Everything will be all right in the end. If it's not all right, it is not yet the end.'

But the Psalmist here does not look forward to a happy ending, but back to what God has done in the past. 'Then at last I remembered all the things I'd forgotten, all the wonders you Lord had begun.' And so a healing sense of equilibrium begins to be restored, in the remembrance of things past.

A Roman Catholic colleague once told me how, for many Catholics, the immediate response to any crisis is to say Mass. She would illustrate this for ecumenical classes with a hilarious clip from Father Ted, with Mass being said on a milk float. This might seem as absurd as Dev Patel's glib optimism, but it is quite different. The gift of communion is the memory of what God has done and who God is. It makes the past action of God real and present for us, even in our deepest pain. God's faithfulness, from that last supper, to death on a cross and resurrection from the tomb, is made vivid in our own present moment. After any dark night of the soul there may come the morning of faithful remembrance. This is not easy comfort, but for times when our suffering is not funny, it is the food we need.

Prayer

Thank you for all those today who work for your kingdom, and whether they know it or not are bringing goodness into this troubled world. Amen

Sunday 30 January 2022 Psalm 77

The Rev'd Dr Susan Durber is Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches

In complete desperation
and in utter frustration,
I called out
and God listen to me.
Both by day and by night,
with hands raised and fists tight
I expressed and repeated my plea.

2: With my eyes shut in fright
and with no hope in sight,
I was much too distracted to speak;
I imagined times past
which I knew couldn't last
and my heart, will,
and body grew weak.

I refused to be comforted easily
and the tears of distress made me blind;
I turned faint when my thoughts went too deep for me
and I groaned when I called God to mind.

3: Will God always reject me?
Will He never respect me?
Has God's love for me
failed utterly?
Has His grace been forgotten,
has He grudged me compassion,
does His right hand
not strengthen or free?

4: Then at last I remembered
all the things I'd forgotten,
all the wonders you,
Lord, had begun.
And I saw how misfortune
had distracted attention
from your faithfulness
in all you've done.

Now I'm sure that your way is a holy way,
for its progress and path I can see;
and I now that your faithfulness in the past
will be real and be present for me.

John Bell © 2011 Wild Goose Resources Worship Group
you can hear this sung here https://bit.ly/3vrhaZX

save life or to destroy it?' After looking around at all of them, he said to him, 'Stretch out your hand.' He did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Reflection

A woman comes into the church service for help. She has fallen over in the street. Surely we wouldn't say: "Sorry, but we are too busy worshipping God. You have to go away. Now if it had been a Monday..." The scribes and Pharisees were in the synagogue, not for worship but in vengeful pursuit of Jesus who had infuriated them when his hungry disciples gathered grain to eat on the holy day. How dare he flout their Sabbath ban and claim that the "Son of Man" is master of the Sabbath! In the synagogue to learn from the scriptures was a man with a withered hand. He did not ask for help but caught the eye of the teacher. Jesus directly confronted the law as viewed by the Pharisees, asking: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" There was no answer forthcoming, so he performed a miracle of healing.

The Pharisees were left frothing at the mouth and determined to bring down this upstart. They couldn't care less about the man's deformity, the discomforts he had suffered or his delight in being "whole" again. They could not admit that healing was more important than restrictive rules.

Of course we would come to the aid of the injured woman coming into church. But are we always so forthcoming, and in all circumstances, whether as a church community or as Christian individuals?
Some regulations and duties are necessary for the smooth running of a healthy society, but there are times when action in situations of need overrides our other priorities. Compassion comes first. And, if in doubt, just think of the joy of the man in the synagogue when Jesus, whose very life was on the line, broke the law to help him.

Prayer

Dear God, grant us the humility to recognize our need for rules,
the wisdom to know when life calls us to move beyond the ordinary rules,and the courage to break them when such occasions arise.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

Tuesday 18 January 2022 St Luke 6: 12 - 16

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

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

Reflection

In his book My First Summer in the Sierra,1 the naturalist John Muir writes "Oh, these vast, calm, mea-sureless mountain days, inciting at once to work and rest! Days in whose light every-thing seems equally divine, opening a thou-sand windows to show us God. Nevermore, however weary, should one faint by the way who gains the blessings of one mountain day; whatever his fate, long life, short life, stormy or calm, he is rich forever."

Perhaps it was a sense of needing to peer through, to open one of those thousand windows which disclose God that took Jesus up a mountain or into the wilderness when he wanted to or had to make a major decision:

they'd have specific diagnoses and diseases that could be treated, both physical and mental: but even today there are conditions we live with rather than cure. Here we have three named women and others unnamed but touched by Jesus in some way so they trusted him, remained loyal to him and provided for the whole group, in gratitude and recognition both of their own healing and all of Jesus' teaching and ministry.

Joanna is interesting. The wife of a powerful official, she had been healed by Jesus and followed him. She stayed faithful long-term, as Luke also names her as present at the cross with Mary Magdalene, and as one of the women who went to the tomb on Easter day, thus one of the first witnesses to the resurrection who went to tell the disciples. Apostellein in Greek means 'go and tell' so we can establish her as an apostle. Luke may be working to correct the impression of Jesus' followers as a rebel mob by showing that he was supported by well-connected, law-abiding people such as Joanna as well. Some commentators think she may have helped Luke with his research about Jesus' trial, as a woman of status who could have had access to information. Surely she and the other faithful women are examples of the good soil that produced a hundredfold.

There are countless 'Joanna's in the world, women and men who keep on faithfully supporting, being there, giving their love, time, energy and money in myriad ways, and perhaps not even recognising that they are the good soil of the parable. Let's encourage and be thankful for them today.

Prayer

Lord Jesus who said 'Just as you helped one of the least of those in need, you did it to me'

Thank you for the women and men who supported your mission

God of mercy,
Forgive us when we shut You out of our lives
and when we build barriers to keep others away from You.
Help us to remember that we are in no place to judge,
for we too rely wholly on Your grace. Amen.

Saturday 29 January 2022 St Luke 8: 1 - 10

Ruth Tompsett is an elder at Newport Pagnell URC

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

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: 'A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.' As he said this, he called out, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that "looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand."

Reflection

Women healed of 'evil spirits and infirmities' figure regularly in the Gospels – the woman with an issue of blood, Peter's mother in-law, the woman who'd had seven husbands, the girl who'd died. Probably today

to spend time in prayer in solitude.

The decision for Jesus in this passage as he faced the hostility of the Pharisees, was whether or not he should symbolically reveal to them the new Israel. The answer was yes, and he does this by selecting twelve of his disciples, who, according to Luke, he called apostles, corresponding to the twelve tribes of the old Israel.

Although Jesus often withdrew from the everyday it was always to return and act. Muir postulates that the wilderness experience provides the riches to face the tribulations of the world, enabling the action.

Over the past couple of years most of us have been in a wilderness to a greater or lesser degree. We are now returning to the everyday and the fundamental question is how to manage that return. Maybe part of the returning is to wait until we see God through a window. For as T.S. Eliot wrote "The faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting. Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought: so the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing."2

Prayer

God of the infinite, grant us patience to wait
God of the mountains, incite us to work and rest
God of the wilderness, inspire us to act
God of the world, grant us the capacity to be. Amen

1. Muir, J. (2003). My First Summer in the Sierra. New York: Random House Inc.
2. Eliot, T S. (1940) East Coker, https://www.best-poems.net/t_s_eliot/four_quartets_2_east_coker.html

Wednesday 19 January 2022 St Luke 6: 17 - 26

The Rev'd Peter Clark, Retired Minister, member of Bridport United Church read by Graham Handscomb

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

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 'Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

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

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

Reflection

My brain tells me to point to the context of this text but I read the words and my every instinct is to scream "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping etc? Really? Is Jesus seriously asking me to say that to such folk in such circumstances?"

And yet, through 18 years as a Minster (I write this in my last week in post) I have consistently and with integrity said at funerals "Blessed are those who mourn," knowing that at that moment they clearly aren't likely to feel one iota of blessing. Though interestingly and obtusely, at that moment, they have seemed reassured and encouraged by the

Sometimes we get it wrong. Those of us in the Church often bind ourselves in with rules and processes and procedures, and the more tightly we define our "in group", the harder it is for those who most need to be in Church to actually get in.

We see it in our "very friendly church that's like a family," which is then experienced by the newcomer as cliquey (do remember not just to talk to your friends on Sunday morning – make an effort to find someone you don't yet know well!)

We see it in complex rules and culture that is impenetrable to those trying to join us (why do we stand at that point and sit at the next; why do we expect people to know we sing Amen three times at the end of some hymns, and to which music?)

We see it in unspoken attitudes – here's a person of different ethnicity, a single parent, a parent with a child who makes a noise in church, a person with a different gender identity: they are not like us…!

Don't get me wrong: good church order is essential, and culture ("the way we do things around here") is inescapable. But are we open to learning from the Other, to welcome them into our circle and embrace them, and maybe even learn from them?

The Pharisee could only see the woman's sinfulness and was blind to the plank in his own eye. Jesus showed him there was more to it: she knew how much she needed Jesus and how great the forgiveness he offered; the Pharisee thought he was already right with God.

Whose opinion and approach mattered most? That of the Pharisee or the forgiven woman? How shall we respond to the great love of God in Christ Jesus?

Prayer

*R&S 53 To thee O Lord, our hearts we raise. Verse 2

Friday 28 January 2022 St Luke 7: 36 - 50

The Revd Steve Faber is Moderator of the West Midlands Synod Read by Sue Cresswell

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

Reflection

words.

Which is, perhaps, the point Jesus is making with his hope-filled message? This isn't as Rev'd Ed Loring, the leader of the Open Door Community then in Atlanta, GA, used to say (in a wonderful Southern USA drawl) "Pie in the sky, by and by, when you die!" This is surely something about hope, promise and encouragement? Haven't I spent 18 months of this pandemic period encouraging, cajoling and comforting folk, saying, "It's bad, but it'll be better"?
And it will be!

We are, if nothing else, the People of Hope? The 'Leap for Joy' People? The folk who currently weep ... but will soon be laughing?

Prayer

Jesus, healer, teacher, pastor, remind us when we are hungry, poor or weeping that you are there beside us, holding, encouraging, feeding, enriching and wiping our tears.

Hold us in the depths of our darknesses and re-fill us with your spirit of hope and blessings, enabling us to once again leap for joy. Amen

Thursday 20 January 2022 St Luke 6: 27 - 36

The Rev'd Julian Macro, retired Minister, member of Verwood URC

'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even

sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Reflection

Oh dear! When I read this teaching of Jesus I so relate to what the Apostle Paul wrote, "I do not understand my own actions…. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 7. 15a & 19) – how about you?

The teaching of Jesus is challenging, setting a very high standard for his followers, a standard that too many of us fail to reach. Yes, there are those who do set an example in the way they live which attracts others to Jesus, but are you among them? I know that I can make no such claim.

Two quotations from Mahatma Gandhi also come to mind, "If I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, 'O yes, I am a Christian.'" (quoted by Homer A Jack) and, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." (quoted by William Rees-Mogg).

Our passage today is about "love" and it is helpful to remember that "the Greek language has three words for love, which enable us to distinguish Christian love (agapé) from passionate love (eros) and warm affection (philia). Jesus did not tell his disciples to fall in love with their enemies or to feel for them as they felt for their families and friends." (G B Caird, Commentary on Luke). Christian love is a positive concern for the true welfare of others, "We love because (God) first loved us." (1 John 4. 19)

He considers the Greek word for both chronic and acute diseases: 'nosos' (a long, ongoing illness or infirmity) or the work of evil spirits 'poneros'. The second century physician, Galen of Pergamon, described 'poneros' as the quick onset of poison and the need to act fast with a remedy.

All the conversations about 'Are you the one?' and discussions on how to report back to John and those tripping over themselves wondering what they should do next, are distractions. For the poor referenced in the text, just staying alive was hard enough without the expectation of eight hours of study that the rabbis had to undertake. Jesus here is the renowned Torah teacher who brings good news - and they need that now.

For us there is no time to debate and discuss. It is time to act quickly and make a practical difference to people's lives. There is a feeling of being tossed about: 'A reed shaken by the wind' or like being in a boat. Paul talks about being: 'tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine' (Ephesians 4:14).

Jesus spoke up for the poor and the vulnerable. It is urgent. There is no time to faff about in our debates and discussions. News of energy companies collapsing and wholesale prices rising is a crisis situation. Many won't be able to switch suppliers let alone afford to heat their homes this winter or even afford basic foodstuffs!

Prayer

Gracious God, time isn't on the side of the poor and vulnerable.
Time does not stand still for those who need support now.
We remember those who cannot wait,
who are just staying alive, day by day,
whether blown about or standing still.
May they be able to experience the abundance they deserve.
The harvest should be for all to enjoy.
'The valleys stand so thick with corn that even they are singing'* Amen.

shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.' (And all the people who heard this, including the tax-collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.)

'To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep."

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

Reflection

I was gripped by the BBC series HMS Vigil shown last autumn. It was based on a submarine that was being pursued, had been infiltrated by a spy, and where poison was found on board. Those with a naval background may well have picked holes in the plot: it's not real, it couldn't happen, it's a drama for TV!

In his commentary 'The Medical Gospel of Luke' NHS doctor A.T Bradford writes about the different healing miracles that Jesus performs.

Even as we are honest about our failure to be the people we should be, we must still remember that God loves us and that our sins are forgiven as we forgive those who sin against us.

Prayer

Gracious God: you know us as we truly are, and still love us! Help us, we pray, to be honest with you and with ourselves so that we may be released from past failures and enabled to be more and more the people you want us to be; in our Saviour's name and power - Amen

Friday 21 January 2022 St Luke 6: 37 - 42

Michael RJ Topple is an ordinand at the Scottish College, Glasgow

'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.' He also told them a parable: 'Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye", when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.

Reflection

Jesus certainly had a way with words, didn't He? A phrase which is so simple to read, we all know, can be so difficult to live out: 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged'.

I am sure we all know people in life who, it feels, spend all their time

pointing out various peoples' specks while remaining oblivious to the great logs that they carry about with them. Surely not in any of our churches though(!)

While, on the one hand, to be accused of forgetting the log in your own eye can be greatly offensive, I can't help feeling sorry for the poor folk about whom Jesus was thinking. These poor people with the hypothetical log in their hypothetical eye must find it very difficult to hypothetically see: yet with the small amount of vision they hypothetically have, they can only seem to see someone else's problems/failings. It must be a sad life to live.

I knew someone in church - now long dead - who was convinced that everyone around him was dreadfully flawed, and would spend his life informing them about their problems. How sad it was to see - particularly as he thought he was doing a good turn. He spent his life with no friends: all because the great log in his eye stopped him seeing the beauty of those around him.

I pray that I may a) be more aware of peoples' blessings than their failings or imperfections, and b) may have the grace to let others clean the logs or dust from my eyes every now and then.

Prayer

Jesus, my Lord and Friend, so often I am tempted to think I know best, or that someone else is doing it all wrong. Don't let this log in my eye deceive me, but instead give me the grace to allow others to remove it, that I may see clearly. Amen

Saturday 22 January 2022 St Luke 6: 43 - 45

The Rev'd Ruth Browning, retired Minister, worshiping at Thornbury URC

'No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns,

well as reactive.

It is easy to say to someone 'do let me know if there is anything I can do', and we may well mean it, but the chances are that they won't. They won't because they find it hard to ask for help. Don't we all? Far better to take them some flowers or something you know they will like, or to invite them for a cup of tea or a meal. Bereaved people sometimes feel ignored by friends who, because they don't want to upset them, avoid making contact. The word 'compassion' literally means 'suffer with' and you can't do that without being in contact, as Jesus shows in this story, as in others.

Prayer

Loving Lord, we pray for people who have lost loved ones and those who are in particular need, especially any we know. Please fill us with your compassion for them. Give us the courage to show it and the wisdom to know how best to do so in practical ways. Amen.

Thursday 27 January 2022 St Luke 7: 18 - 34

The Revd Andrew Royal, Minister, Maidstone & Staplehurst URC's

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' When the men had come to him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"' Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed

as I hope that's how you will judge me. Amen.

Wednesday 26 January 2022 St Luke 7: 11 - 17

The Rev'd John Matthews is a retired Baptist minister and member of Wellingborough URC.

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

Reflection

The widow is in greater peril than we may realise. Losing her son as well as her husband means that she is not only alone but also vulnerable. Jesus not only has compassion on her but expressed this in a practical way. He doesn't say 'sorry for your loss' – a phrase which seems to have become quite common in our society – he reaches out and touches the bier containing her son's body. In so doing he breaks the taboo against touching a dead body or anything in contact with one. He then brings the young man back to life, totally transforming his mother's life as well as her son's.

It's a great story, but what does it say to us? We are not Jesus and, much as we might like to, we cannot raise the dead. No. But we can show compassion to people who have been bereaved, and to those in various kinds of need. Showing compassion is more than feeling sorry for people. It is doing what we can to help them which means being proactive as

nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

Reflection

One of our apple trees produces fruit which I don't actually like. It is perfect for the purpose for which it was bred but I should have tasted it before buying. Caveat emptor. Our brambles, an Ashton Cross variety, produce brambles, rather large berries in fact and the Madelaine Sylvaner grape vine does, indeed, produce grapes, rather small juicing ones.

As Luke records it, Jesus' sermon focuses on the nature of the new community he is bringing into being. Starting from the "blessings and woes" (vv 20-26) Luke stresses that the community must image God to those it touches. An apple is an apple. Whether it is for friends or enemies the apple tastes the same, it cannot be otherwise. You might not like the taste but it must be true to its own nature, perfect for its purpose. Disciples can only produce good treasure when it comes from their good heart. It's a long time since I heard any expressions about "that's a seed sown". Jesus throughout the passage emphasizes that disciples must be like God and God plays a long game. We won't necessarily know the result of any seed of word or act of mercy we have sown but if it is from good fruit, the fruit of the good heart then we can rest assured there will be a good outcome.

In the autumn both the brambles and grapevine send out long runners to try to establish new plants. In response to a combination of plentiful rain and bright sunny days there are more runners and more young plants next spring, than in dull or dry years. One would like to draw the simile "out of their abundance" and in a way this is true, but it is perhaps a better simile to say they have heard the call of the sun and respond to it with good heart and produce the good treasure out of the abundance

God gives them.

Prayer

Lord, “Sow in our hearts the seeds of Thy dear love,
That we may reap contentment, joy, and peace;
And when at last our earthly labours cease,
Grant us to join Thy harvest home above.”

(Sixth verse of “Hear us, O Lord” T.H.Gill)

Sunday 23 January 2022 Psalm 76

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

God is known among His people;
Every mouth His praises fill
From of old he has established
His abode on Zion's hill.
There He broke the sword
and arrow,
Bade the noise of war be still.

2 Excellent and glorious art Thou,
With Thy trophies from the fray;
Thou hast slain the the valiant-
hearted
Wrapped in sleep of death are they;
When Thy anger once is risen,
Who can stand in that dread day?

3 When from heaven
Thy sentence sounded,
All the earth in fear was still,
While to save the meek and lowly
God in judgement wrought His will;
E'en the wrath of man
shall praise Thee,
Thy design it shall fulfill.

4 Vow and pay ye to Jehovah,
Him your God forever own;
All men, bring your gifts before him;
Worship Him and Him alone;
Mighty kings obey and fear Him,
Princes bow before His throne.

public domain You can hear the tune, Lauda Anima (Praise My Soul the King of Heaven), here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9X400-8h_A

Reflection

or prostitutes (of either gender), or with young males before they were deemed to be adults.
If the Centurion was asking Jesus to heal his younger lover this passage is all the more remarkable than if he was asking for a slave to be healed - but still troubling to modern sensibilities. If the boy was a slave shouldn’t Jesus have told the Centurion to free him and ensure he was enabled to make an independent living? If he was a same sex lover, albeit in a pattern which was common in the ancient world, then Jesus is remarkable for not telling the Centurion off but for praising his faith to the crowd.

This passage is troubling as:

- the pattern of relationship that might be seen here is one that we’d now see as abusive and dangerous.
- if the boy was a slave then what hope might there have been for a fulfilled life for him?
- I don’t know what was going on and I like to have all the answers!
- one on the outside - an agent of the occupying power, a slave holder, or abusive (in our eyes) boyfriend, is praised by Jesus for having faith.

Maybe it’s Jesus who troubles me?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, at times you trouble me;
you welcome people I’d rather not have in my manse,
you talk to oppressors and collaborators,
and accept folk who make me squirm.
Yet I really believe I’m inclusive.
You trouble me Lord!

Help me to see things as you do, to love as you do,
and only to judge with love and grace -

Tuesday 25 January 2022 St Luke 7: 1 - 10

The Rev'd Andy Braunston works with four churches in and around Glasgow.

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

Reflection

This passage troubles me as it's not clear in the Greek who the sick person is for the Centurion. The Greek text doesn't use the word for "slave" but the word "boy". This latter term might have meant slave, probably didn't mean son, but might have meant a younger same sex lover - a type of relationship we'd now recoil from and report to the authorities. The Romans had very different sexual mores than we do - same sex love between women was utterly despised, yet sexual relationships between men were accepted if there was a power or social imbalance. A Roman citizen might have relations with his wife, his slaves

This Psalm takes my breath away! It is easy to be a little scared when reading these words, isn't it? – maybe the word isn't scared – but awestruck?

The Psalmist begins gently enough by stating that God is well known among his people. What does that mean? Someone can be well known but not necessarily loved. I think this can be interpreted as God being the protector of his people and therefore they honour him and hold him up high because he has defeated their enemies.

Verse 2 goes on to say that no-one can defeat God. He is the champion of his people and has power over life and death. When he has cause to be angry, then no-one can stand in his way.

When God speaks, the earth falls silent, but instead of saving those who demonstrate strength and valiance, he supports the meek and lowly – those who have no-one to uphold them.

Make your pledge to the Lord and call him your God! Bring the spoils of war to present to him and worship him and him alone as your redeemer and your saviour. Even mighty kings give way to him and princes bow before his throne.

God's power is definitely evident in this Psalm. Imagine if you were on the side of those attacking his people and you had heard that they have a protector on their side with such mighty power. You would be completely intimidated.

We know however, that we ARE on the winning side; God has victory even over life and death.

Sometimes, it feels like a battle that we are facing in the world today: against greed, intolerance, violence, disbelief, prejudice, lack of freedom, famine, disease - and I could go on……

But we must hold on to the belief that God will support the meek and lowly, and in turn, we must learn to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Only then will God win hearts and minds. It is not what we say, it is what we do that demonstrates God's love to all – and only then can others know God also.

Prayer

Lord – You are known among us here! You are awesome, mighty, righteous, glorious, most high! God you are my King, my Lord, my Strength! God, your Son IS the revelation – the deliverer, conqueror, and saviour!

We bring you praise, honour, and glory. We march in victory given to us by You and only You! We bring our lives, our talents, our dreams, everything God, we bring it to you, the One to be honoured. There is none like you. Awesome is the revelation – God is known among us here!

Monday 24 January 2022 St Luke 6: 46 - 49

The Revd Dr Michael Hopkins, is minister of a group of Methodist and United Reformed Churches, based around Farnham, Surrey, and Clerk of the General Assembly.

'Why do you call me "Lord, Lord", and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.'

Reflection

Jesus gives a stern warning, expressed as another vivid story, told slightly differently but also in Matthew's gospel. Listening to wisdom but not putting it into practice is like building without foundations. Eventually the floods will come, and you'll know soon enough what sort of building you're living in.

Jesus's hearers probably saw an immediate allusion to the great church building project of their day: the completion of Herod's rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, but the message is relevant to everyone. Building projects are an illustration, not the entire scope of this story. It's about lives not our chapels.

Jesus told stories that were vivid and easily memorable, through which people of every age and in every part of the world can hear something pertinent. Children in the British Isles know about building sandcastles on beaches, and old people in Bangladesh know about floodwater rising up into houses. The question is: do our plans and schemes look good on the outside, but ignore our souls? Are we building without a foundation? These are not optional extras, but cut to the heart of the matter.

As we ask those questions about ourselves, do we maintain the generous, free-spirited approach that we see in Jesus? Jesus's radical offer of new and abundant life is all-embracing, and hence all-demanding, which sometimes lead us into trying to find other ways. But they must be resisted, or the house will come down with a crash.

Prayer

God, our rock, bless your Church. Help us to dig deep foundations for our life in you, and be a blessing for those among whom we live. Make us attentive to the ways you speak to us, especially in the voices and the lives of unexpected people, and help us to make better connections between our worship and our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.