Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Luke's Gospel Part 5



Monday 13th – Saturday 26th February - 2022

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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Nineveh have responded positively to him and changed their lives (repented).

But an "evil generation" wants more than an obscure prophet from a rural backwater. Hearing the truth is not enough – it must be told with style, panache and wealth.

Yet even the fabulously rich Queen of the South came to Solomon to ask questions. Why do we so lack curiosity about what is happening in the world around us and what God is saying?

Our "evil generation" has ignored the Jonahs of science who pronounced the doom of climate change and nature destruction over the past forty years. For many, it has taken children – such as Greta Thunberg and her followers – or the unshaven protestors of Extinction Rebellion to wake them up. Others still wait for the conclusive sign.

As we hesitate over the cost to us of investing ethically, changing our diet and lifestyle, the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South rise up in judgement against us. We may still be in the dark, but we have a source of light so much greater than Jonah. Let's open our eyes!

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
we don't like being called an evil generation.
But in our hearts, like the Ninevites,
we recognise truth when we hear it.
We don't always ask the right questions,
but in our hearts, like the Queen of the South,
we know it is worth travelling far to hear the answers.
We don't like hearing words of judgement,
but in our hearts, like the Ninevites,
we know that we need to repent. Amen.

Saturday 26 February 2022 St Luke 11: 29 - 36

The Rev'd Gethin Rhys, Policy Officer, Cytun (Churches together in Wales) and member of Parkminster URC, Cardiff

When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, 'This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise at the judgement with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here! The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! 'No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.'

Reflection

I love the story of Jonah, the hapless reluctant prophet who – via a lift from a large fish – eventually goes to Nineveh where, to his amazement and annoyance, the people respond positively to his message of judgement and are saved from disaster.

Jesus compares himself (the Son of Man) to Jonah. Why not eloquent Isaiah or brave Jeremiah? Jesus sees himself as a surprising prophet, like Jonah. Jesus does not strike a commanding figure – he is remembered principally as a beaten prisoner nailed to a cross. He writes no books (though he does on one occasion doodle in the sand) and he composes no great poetry. But over the centuries many times the population of

Sunday 13 February 2022 Psalm 79

The Revd Ruth Whitehead, Moderator of the South Western Synod.

Remember not, O God,
the sins of long ago;
in tender mercy visit us,
distressed and humbled low.

2 O Lord, our Saviour, help,
and glorify your name;
deliver us from all our sins
and take away our shame.

3 Then, safe within your fold, we will exalt your name;
our thankful hearts with songs of joy your goodness will proclaim.

Public Domain You can hear a verse of this Psalm sung to the tune, Gorton, here: https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/152759

Reflection

How natural to want to turn to God in our distress and ask for forgiveness. We know God will lift us up when we are low and in need.

How natural, once we are saved, to want to give thanks to God. We know God is worthy of our praise.

How natural to forget to offer that same chance of forgiveness to others! We know, or we think we know, they are much more guilty than we are.

It's interesting that to create this sung version of Psalm 79 the writer has omitted the first part of the Psalm – where the Psalmist asks God to 'pour out wrath' on the nations that have defiled Jerusalem – in order to focus on the forgiveness the people of God want for themselves. What a very natural human reaction, wanting punishment for someone else's wrong-doing, but leniency for ourselves. What a challenge for us poor humans to hear Jesus telling us to pray 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'.

And yet, if we truly grasp the forgiveness God offers – not a cheap grace that simple forgets or wipes over our sins, but costly, amazing grace that

wrestles with sin, suffering and death and overcomes it – we can be filled with a love, joy and praise that flows out of us to all those who need it. So as we sing this Psalm may God lift us up and fill us with grace so that we may reach out to others to lift them up, too, by God's mercy.

Prayer

God of endless grace,
pour out your mercy on us, we pray.
Lift us up from sin and despair and shame.
Help us to praise you with freed hearts.
But help us to know that your grace is for all.
Make us channels of the grace that knows no limits
able to pray and live as Jesus teaches us.
That all your children may know life and peace. Amen.

Monday 14 February 2022 St Luke 9: 37 - 43

The Rev'd Andrew Mann-Ray, Minster, Baxter, Kidderminster & Worcester URCs and Area Minister for Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, 'Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.' Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.' While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Reflection

I have always wondered what the disciples were up to during this

signs of the kingdom, that continues in this chapter.

The mute man has been exorcised of a demon and given his voice. The reaction of onlookers is mixed - some marvel, others mutter and doubt. Jesus' critics seek more evidence in the form of a sign. They question by what power is this healing made and engage in theological debate by suggesting the powers used are demonic.

Who is Beelzebub (Lord of the Flies)? This isn't a Jewish title for Satan, according to Caird , but maybe a corrupted name for Baalzebul (Lord of the house), a pagan deity identified with evil spirits. Jesus rebuffs this understanding of the source of his power and in so doing challenges his critics and their theological stance. If the power used comes from God then the kingdom has been realised among them. They have not understood the signs they have already been given and by implication the critics have chosen the wrong side spiritually. Rather than gathering into the kingdom they are scattering.

The warning underlying the two illustrations is to remain delivered. Take care about choosing what fills the space that has been emptied. The healed man can choose to take the opportunity to fill life with good things rather than bad, or relapse. The onlookers are being encouraged to look beyond being amazed to choosing which authority to allow to be in control of their lives. Blessing lies in not just hearing what God says but living in obedience to God's voice.

Prayer

Lord, for ourselves; in living power remake us
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne;
past put behind us, for the future take us,
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

Timothy Dudley-Smith (1926-)

Friday 25 February 2022 St Luke 11: 14 - 27

The Rev'd Viv Henderson, Minister of Minehead URC and Chaplain at Wellesley Hospital

Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.' Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? —for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. 'When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting-place, but not finding any, it says, "I will return to my house from which I came." When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first.' While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!' But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!'

Reflection

The female witness to these events points us back to the manifesto given in the synagogue at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus experienced opposition then, and, as he continues his healing ministry bringing about

incident. Clearly they had been trying to put into practice what they had seen Jesus do as they observed his healing and teaching ministry, but to no avail. It was clearly a painful experience for the father of this child. He had come to the disciples in desperation and they appeared to have let him down. It was only when Jesus turned up that things changed and the miracle occurred.

I feel desperately sorry for the disciples. Everything probably felt so helpless for them and they couldn't offer the care that was needed.

But I think that is because they read the situation wrongly. The father came to the disciples because he had nowhere else to turn and however inadequate the disciples felt and acted they still were able to offer something to the father. I think they were at least trying! I wonder if it wasn't so much the care that they were giving as to how they were giving it and it is only later when Jesus explains to them why they failed that we realise they were trying to offer care in their own strength rather than God's.

Sometimes like the disciples we are faced with challenging situations where the position seems hopeless. People that turn to us might have similar desperate situations such as the terminal illness of a loved one, or an impossible mountain of debt to manage, or another situation in their lives that they simply cannot manage on their own. In such moments it can be easy to fall into the trap of trying to help them in our own strength and thinking that we know what is best for them. But in such moments we need to be reminded to stop, to pause and breathe and then offer the situation into God's hands through prayer, safe in the knowledge that if we put our faith and trust in God, God will minister to us and the person we are supporting in ways we cannot even begin to imagine.

Prayer

Gracious God,

thank you that in the midst of the complexity of life,
You offer love, care and comfort to us.
Remind us in difficult situations
to place things into your hands through prayer.
Help us to lean on you for our strength,
rather than relying on our own fallibility and weakness.
Thank you that through Jesus,
hopeless situations become life giving and life affirming.
In Jesus' name we pray these things. Amen.

Tuesday 15 February 2022 St Luke 9: 44 - 45

The Rev'd Jenny Mills, Secretary for Education and Learning for the URC.

While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, 'Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.' But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

Reflection

When my children were young one of their favourite films was A Bugs Life. The bit where the moth flies towards the flame stayed with them and even became a favourite saying. As he flies towards the flame he says: 'I can't help it, it's too beautiful!' The moth had a feeling that he was heading for trouble but was mesmerised by the flame and attracted by its beauty and allure.

Over the years much hurt and harm has been caused by people whose words or actions have been attention grabbing or immediately engaging. Think of tricksters, charismatic leaders, and celebrities who have been lauded or hailed as special or 'the next big thing'. People followed, signed up, committed money, or their lives, without discernment, question, or challenge. We all know stories of people being hurt or losing everything.

house, but a cave.

The larder would be at the very back of the cave – for coolness. The children (who went to sleep first) would sleep in front of the larder. The mother slept in front of them. The father slept at the entrance to keep watch.

His reluctance to go and get bread for his neighbour was not meanness, but concern for his family. To get at the bread, he would have to light a candle and clamber over his sleeping wife and the sleeping children (very possibly waking them up). He would then need to locate the bread in the dark and climb back over his family. His reluctance is understandable. But if the neighbour persists and perhaps even raises his voice, the calculation changes. His wife and children may well be woken by the commotion. He might as well give in and go and get the bread.
The humour and the point of Jesus's story are easily lost on modern western readers. But not on those who today live in caves or shanty towns. Whenever they are generous to their persistent neighbours, from the little they possess, they put us to shame. God's generosity is seen above all not in our rich lives, but in the lives of the poor, who know how to share.

Prayer

Loving God,
the more we have, the less able we seem to be to share.
Help our neighbours in need to be persistent in their asking,
so that even we in our comfortable homes
may be willing to put ourselves out to meet the needs of others.
Help us to hear those who are knocking on our doors
and the cries for bread from our neighbours,
and inspire us to respond with loving generosity. Amen.

Thursday 24 February 2022 St Luke 11: 1-13

The Rev'd Gethin Rhys, Policy Officer, Cytun (Churches together in Wales) and member of Parkminster URC, Cardiff

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.' And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Reflection

When I visited the Holy Land we were led by Bassam, a wonderfully knowledgeable Palestinian Christian guide. He transformed my understanding of Jesus's story which follows the Lord's Prayer.
Bassam was standing in front of a cave that would have been inhabited by a family in Jesus' time. He pointed out that in hot countries, caves provide excellent shelter from the heat and other dangers. He believes that the home to which the neighbour came to ask for bread was not a

The people in the story are amazed and because of this are unable to hear what is truly being said because they were afraid to ask. They were so in awe of Jesus that they did not ask questions. Yet we know that Jesus encouraged his followers to think and work things out and use their reasoning and intelligence.

How often in church circles are we afraid to ask? We can find ourselves pretending that we know something because we do not want to look 'silly'. We assume everyone else knows the answer or teaching and we fear humiliation. Yet when someone is brave enough to admit, 'I don't know' we can find freedom in discussion, in asking questions and seeking answers and that enables us to grow and flourish.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are made in the image of God. We are precious and unique. We are loved. May we not miss the truth because we are too busy being what everyone else expects us to be….and brave enough to ask the stupid question- because as we know, 'there is no such thing as a stupid question!' 😊

Prayer

Gracious God,
May we be discerning and questioning and challenging.
May we look carefully and listen wisely.
May we seek truth and authenticity.
May we not miss your word to us because we are too afraid to ask.
And may we create safe spaces
where we are able to be real with each other. Amen.

Wednesday 16 February 2022 St Luke 9: 46 - 48

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

An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.'

Reflection

Jesus punctures the balloon of puffed-up pomposity which was noisily inflating itself alongside him. Preening disciples argue and bicker about their status based on who-knows-what measure of discipleship worth they had most recently seized upon. You can almost hear the hiss of air escaping their self-important windbag egos as Jesus picks up a child and sets her in their midst. Whoever welcomes this child…

There is much scholarly argument about the precise status of children in first century Palestine, this isn't the place to add to that, but it's fairly obvious that these disciples had an understanding of their own status that would eclipse the status of a child. It is an ego-deflating experience!

There are at the very least ECHOES here of Jesus talking about the sheep and the goats - all the interactions with the poor, the imprisoned, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked - whatsoever you did for the least of my brothers, you did it for me. The "sheep" were so unconcerned with questions about their own status that they hadn't really noticed they had done ANYTHING for Jesus. The "goats" would have helped the hungry if only they'd known it would have been Jesus they were helping! Whoever welcomes this child in my name, welcomes me.

It's hard to imagine anything quite as blatant as this amongst URC members. Of course we are obsessed by status, but we are not usually clumsy or crass enough to argue about it out loud in public! Perhaps it's

represents where many of us would want to be i.e. 'living in the moment'.

If Martha lived in modern times, her inner dialogue would probably be saying things like "Do it now!" ; "Don't forget to…"; "Hurry up!"; "Get it out of the way with".

If Mary lived in modern times, I think she may be saying, "Slow down and listen"; "Focus on the present" ; "Pay attention to the wise words".

When Martha asks the Lord if he doesn't care; I think she is really asking for help, enquiring whether what she is doing isn't good enough, in His eyes. His answer should serve as a reminder to not be distracted by all that is around us, to focus on what is important, to take in what HE is saying to us, to listen to that 'still small voice', to not worry and to trust and have faith.

By commending Mary, the Lord is telling us that there is a different way to be fulfilled and that is to "Be Still", as this is the way to lead a life that is closer to Him; a path that builds inner peace, the likes of which cannot be taken away.

Prayer

Father God,
you blessed us with abilities that enable us to do many things.
Let us use these gifts wisely to bring more people to you,
bringing hope to many.
Help us to use our energy appropriately to do good and to show we care.
Father God, this is how we show the difference your love makes in us.
Amen

It is love that draws us together in Christ to forge a strong, caring society. This is tough love; it calls us to step out of our comfort zones. Do we perhaps need the wounded stranger to help us?

Prayer

Gracious God, we ask your blessing on all those who serve in Christ's name that your loving purposes may be fulfilled. May they know your joy in their hearts. Amen.

Wednesday 23 February St Luke 10: 38 - 42

Alexandra Priddy, Elder and Children's Church Leader, Trinity Church Mill Hill URC and Methodist

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

Reflection

This passage strongly resonated with me on many levels. Firstly, because I am blessed to have a sister who is different to me in some ways; at times this is irritating, but when I am in respectful mode, I appreciate our differences and realise I can learn from them.

The story also reflects the disease of 'busyness' that so many of us are afflicted with. Martha represents the person I see myself to be much of the time. I suspect she also reflects many people who are busy doing.. organising.. managing tasks, people and life. It never ends! Mary

because we know the ending - "for the least among all of you is the greatest". We are FAR more likely to be found humble-bragging about being the LEAST (knowing that this means we are the greatest!) I suspect Jesus would be onto that!

Prayer

Loving God, take your pin and puncture my pomposity;
Burst the balloon of my bloated self-importance.
Lead us in your ways of faith and wisdom,
that we may learn to truly see and hear,
and in humility find blessing. Amen.

Thursday 17 February 2022 St Luke 9: 49 - 50

The Rev'd Jonnie Hill, Minister in the Greater Manchester South & Cheshire Missional Partnership

John answered, 'Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.' But Jesus said to him, 'Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.'

Reflection

Growing up, I belonged to a tradition that believed there was only one valid way to be Christian (ours), and that Christians of other traditions, along with everyone else, were essentially lost. I accepted the teaching, but it always sat heavily with me – were my friends of other denominations really not going to heaven? After I left home, I spent a decade as 'spiritual but not religious' before being led to find my home in the URC. Even then, I had some lingering suspicions about whether it was 'above board'.

In these verses from Luke, we hear of one who is casting out demons in Jesus' name but is not one of Jesus' followers. John's and the disciples'

assumption is that he should be stopped and they attempt to do so. But Jesus is relaxed about this. And why? Because "whoever is not against you is for you".

When I first read the Basis of Union, our governing document, I was profoundly impacted by the following words.

"The United Reformed Church humbly recognises that the failure and weakness of the Church have in particular been manifested in division which has made it impossible for Christians fully to know, experience and communicate the life of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church."

These words spoke powerfully to that part of me, who like John and the disciples, still thought there were 'real' Christians and everyone else. But as humans, we must confess that it is we who create 'in' and 'out' groups – our history is littered with examples. But this was not Jesus' vision for the unity of his Church or for the cause of Christ, which is love, mercy, justice and peace.

The vision and energy of the ecumenical movement which saw the creation of our church 50 years ago may have waned. But Christ's call to love, mercy, justice and peace, and for the unity of his Church remains the same today as it always has.

Prayer

God,
whose very nature is unity and love.
May our hearts and minds be open,
so that we are ready to labour
with all people of goodwill
for love, mercy, justice and peace.
And may we never forget the significance
of the 'United' in our name, for the cause of Christ, Amen.

him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Reflection

The lawyer asks Jesus a leading question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In response to Jesus' further question: "What is written in the law?" the man cites the double love command from the Torah – you shall love God and your neighbour as yourself. Correct, says Jesus. The lawyer persists. Who is my neighbour?

And that is the cue for one of Jesus's best-known parables. A man was mugged, stripped, beaten up by robbers and left for dead. First a priest, then a Levite, men of standing in Jewish society, spotted him and crossed the road to avoid him. But the next traveller, a Samaritan, was moved with compassion. He tended the man's wounds, set him on his beast, took him to an inn and paid for his care. It was pure altruism.

And then Jesus drives his point home. There is a difference between having a neighbour and being a neighbour. The lawyer had been trying to identify the neighbour whom he might love. But now the neighbour is portrayed as a man who had become a neighbour to the person in need. The wounded man and his helper were neighbours to one another. They were both outsiders. The man had no clothes, no belongings, no signs of status or identity. He could have been anyone. And for religious and historical reasons, Samaritans were shunned by Jews as enemies. But the two had their humanity in common and love drew the Samaritan to tend to the human need he encountered while the heartless representatives of the official cult walked by on the other side.

than lessons in the latest communications techniques.

As the enthusiasts return from their mission, they are given this precious moment of insight – a thanksgiving prayer on the lips of Jesus (and the most profound statements of belief all arise from thankfulness) which seems to lead us into the very heart of God. And most precious of all is the assurance that what we might have heard as some deep theological truth, accessible only to the wise and intelligent, is in fact hidden from the likes of them and revealed instead "to infants". Time then to nurture our inner child!

Prayer

God our Saviour
scattering the proud and bringing down the powerful
lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things
keep us childlike and ever receptive to your grace in Jesus.

Tuesday 22 February 2022 St Luke 10: 25 - 37

The Revd Fleur Houston, retired minister, member of Macclesfield and Bollington URC.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw

Friday 18 February 2022 St Luke 9: 51 - 56

The Rev'd Fiona Thomas, freelance facilitator, member at Christ Church, Bellingham

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

Reflection

The name given to James and John in Mark's Gospel seems apt. The "Sons of Thunder" respond disproportionately to predictable reluctance to offer hospitality to a wandering rabbi. From a Samaritan viewpoint Jesus was resolutely going in the wrong direction, heading south to the upstart Jerusalem when he should have been going north to Mount Gerizim to worship God in the right place.

Jesus had just taught the disciples that "whoever is not against you is for you". Perhaps the brothers' logic became "therefore anyone who is not for you is against you, especially when they're Samaritans". Some versions of the text add a reference to Elijah, reminding the informed reader of the prophet calling down fire as a sign of God's power during a stand-off with King Ahaziah of Samaria. Elsewhere Luke mentions Samaritans in relation to getting things right while those who should know better miss the point.

When Jesus sent out the twelve (Luke 9.1-6) they were to simply shake off the dust from their feet if any house chose not to welcome them. He repeats this injunction when he sends out the seventy (Luke 10. 1-12.) Wasn't this enough? It's easy to imagine him wincing and rolling his eyes at James and John's suggestion. No wonder he rebuked them.

Where do we put our energies? Persist in trying to persuade people who have given up on Church-going Christians that we're not as bad as they think we are, and critiquing the absence of meaning in their life as we see it? Or finding ways of getting alongside and engaging with people who are trying to make sense of life, as they respond to neighbours' needs with compassion and generosity?

This village may have good reasons for shutting their doors against us. There are other villages.

Prayer

God, my heart's compass,
when my plans don't work out the way I hope they will,
or think they should;
when an agenda close to my heart is not affirmed,
or when my ambitions for good are thwarted;
remind me to take a breath, stand back and look for you
and wait to be shown a different way to go,
to reach your destination. Amen

Saturday 19 February 2022 St Luke 9: 57 - 62

Mathias Tchatchoua, Elder and Lay Leader, Stow Park Church URC/PCW Newport.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.'

Reflection

It's not the twelve, but the seventy (or is it 72?) others, who now step up. We still need to learn that evangelism isn't just the business of the in-group: the anonymous have their place in the story too. And if we in our turn are prompted by Jesus, we too will have practical things to sort out. Just where are we going? What are we taking with us and what should we leave behind? How do we share ourselves around? Attitudes it seems can be as significant as the message itself.

Does Luke already realise that he is writing a two-part work? Is he preparing us for the mighty story of the spreading of the good news, starting here in Palestine, and reaching to the very ends of the world? As we are often reminded today, rather than talk too much about the Church's mission, we need to recognise that it is God who has a mission, and that the Church is simply part of this. And if we then discover a role for our anonymous selves, let us hope that our hesitant steps and tentative plans for sharing the gospel may be rooted in something more

Monday 21 February 2022 St Luke 10: 1 - 23

The Rev'd John Durell, retired minister, member of Waddington Street, Durham

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near." I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But at the judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades.

'Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.'

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread

Reflection

This passage concerns humans' false security and ambition. Jesus tells us that our commitment to follow him comes at a cost which must be followed exactly at whatever price. He warns us that committing ourselves to follow him is at the expense of our personal comfort.
Our commitment to God should not be distracted, whether by lifestyle or family engagement. The desire to follow Jesus is commendable but comes at great cost - we are told to take up our crosses after all.
In verse 57, the disciple rightly desired to follow Jesus. However, Jesus makes it clear that to follow Him we should never prioritise our possessions and comfort. This is so far removed from our lives today, where most of us do the opposite, working to acquire a comfortable lifestyle. Following Him is at the cost of our personal security as we lay aside our belongings and possessions to put the Lord our God first with all our mind, heart and soul.

Jesus reinforces that following him means putting aside everything we cherish. The young man needing to bury his father was actually waiting for the security of his inheritance before he would follow Jesus. Today, people similarly declare they will follow the Lord when schooling is finished or when retirement arrives or mortgage is paid. The excuses are endless and demonstrate how greedy and lacking in faith we are. Let us not be like this man who was trusting in his inheritance for security rather than in Christ, nor like the man needing to say goodbye to his family. Jesus clarifies that love for Him takes priority without condition. Indeed, this reflects the greatest commandments, to Love the Lord your God with all your mind, heart and soul and then to love your neighbour as yourself. Through this the whole world would know that we are His disciples, fit to enter the kingdom of God.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we pray that Your discerning spirit will enable us to know that You are our God above all else, and that nothing on earth

should impede our ability to love and follow You. Amen!

Sunday 20 February 2022 Psalm 80

The Rev'd Viv Henderson, Minister of Minehead URC and Chaplain at Wellesley Hospital

O hear our cry, O Lord,
now hear us as we pray.
You guide us as a shepherd leads,
so keep us in Your way.
O come, Lord, come,
restore and save us now.

2: Enthroned above all worlds,
You shine with holy light.
Lord, pour Your pow'r upon us all,
and save us with Your might.
O come, Lord, come,
restore and save us now.

3: O Lord, the God of hosts,
turn not Your face away.
Our tears have been both food
and drink;
foes mock us night and day.
O come, Lord, come,
restore and save us now.

4: O Lord, our God, return;
bring peace into each home.
So let Your face shine on us all;
restore us as Your own.
O come, Lord, come,
restore and save us now.

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Reflection

This Psalm is a prayer for restoration after disaster. In the original version the refrain to restore and save us is repeated three times using ever grander titles to address God. The hymn writer has distilled the essence of this cry for help into four verses and ends each with the initial refrain from the Psalm.

Maybe this Psalm was written during exile. It was certainly written in a time of distress, of endless sorrow. Maybe it calls to mind a situation today which needs God's loving gaze.

The imagery used in the first two verses reminds us both of God's immanence and transcendence. The immanent shepherd is walking with the people guiding them on. The transcendent God is enthroned in heavenly splendour. In a weakened state, the psalmist longs for empowerment, to be restored and saved, and longs for celestial light to shine in the darkness.

In the last two verses the present sufferings are described and the hope of a better times for vindication in being faithful is expressed. The Psalmist is longing for a restored relationship where God smiles on the faithful remnant and is pleased with them.

The Psalmist longs for God's face to shine on us all. Echoing the blessing attributed to Aaron in Numbers 6, what is translated as 'shine' literally means to know God's smile, rather than feel God is turning away and abandoning. The Psalmist longs to be assured of God's pleasure rather than disdain. Bathed in the light of God's love, rather than suffering in his apparent absence.

We can use this Psalm for ourselves, but can also use it to bless all for whom we pray:

Prayer

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Numbers 6:24-26 (NRSV)