Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Luke's Gospel Part 6



Sunday 28th February – Saturday 12th March

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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change and a feeling of loss.

Of course, the pandemic has brought its own losses—through deaths and lockdowns. We have missed experiences and physical connections. As a result of our pandemic experiences, we may feel lost.

These parables remind us that loss is part of life. As we read these parables, we are reminded that our losses are not lost to God. The harried housekeeper keeps looking until she finds the coin. The selfless shepherd does not stop until his shaggy sheep is found. God is pursuing us in our lostness. No one, no experience is lost to God. Being found brings God joy—we hear the joyful celebration in the invitation to join the celebration. When we feel loss or lost, we can relax into the loving, persistent presence of God. And there, we too find joy.

Prayer

Loving God,
You look.
You find.
You celebrate.

Help us relax into being found.
Help us join you to look for parts of ourselves we have lost.
Help us join you in finding those who are lost.

May we look.
May we find.
May we love and celebrate together.
Amen.

Sunday 28th February 2022 Psalm 81

The Rev'd Memona Shahbaz works with five churches in and around Eastbourne.

Sing a psalm of joy
Shout in celebration
Let the tambourine
And the trumpet bring
Praises to our King
For his great salvation

2 Sound the festal horn
Your thanksgiving voicing
Praise the LORD your God
As he did command
When from Egypt's land
You came forth rejoicing

3 Tune our hearts to praise
Turn our ears to hear you
Then in thankfulness
May we walk your way
And from day to day
Honour and adore you

4 When in need you cried
I was near and saved you
From the cloud I spoke
Answered your request
Meribah the test
I did not forsake you

5 O my people hear
When I call you listen
Choose no foreign god
Listen to my plea
Have no god but me
Come and be forgiven

6 I the LORD your God
Brought you out of Egypt
I removed your yoke
All your needs supplied
Open your mouth wide
Surely I will fill it

7 Oh that Israel
Would but hear my pleading
Oh that they would turn
Walk upon my path
I would pour my wrath
On their foes unheeding

8 With the finest wheat
I, your LORD, would fee you.
Honey from the rock
I would gladly give
that you all might live.
Hear me, O my people.

Marie J Post 1984 © 1987 Faith Alive Christian Resources You can hear the first verse sung to the Genevan tune here https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/152797

Reflection

Psalm 81 starts with a call to worship. The Psalmist is calling everyone to celebrate, most probably, the feast of Tabernacles. He encouraged them to praise and worship God through singing joyfully with accompaniment of the musical instruments. They should remember God's providence in the wilderness. God is recorded as telling the Israelites to celebrate this feast, and the purpose of celebrating it, in Leviticus 23:41-43.

I want to draw your attention to the history of the Jewish people; Joseph was sold by his brothers. He worked hard in Egypt and became "in charge of all." In a time of famine, Joseph's family came to Egypt and stayed there happily yet within 400 years the Jewish people had multiplied and were perceived to be a threat to the Egyptians. So, they were enslaved and their lives made miserable with harsh labour. The Jews cried to God who heard them. God appointed Moses to free them from their slavery and to lead them to the promised land - a deed celebrated in today's Psalm. What a great encouraging fact for us to know that whenever we call upon God, He is always listening to us. We should know that we can always trust in Him.

God rescued them and He rescued all of us too, through His Son. Colossians 1:13: "He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Three times in these verses, God said, HEAR me, O my people. We need to hear Him. There are many voices around us but we need to focus on only one voice, the voice of our God Almighty. Maybe we have missed many opportunities, today we need to come to him, and hear Him. He made a promise that he will satisfy all our needs.

Prayer

Gracious Father, we are coming to you and confess that we forgot many

Saturday 12 March 2022 St Luke 15: 1 - 10

The Rev'd Martha McInnes, Minister, Cardiff and Penarth Pastorate

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. 'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Reflection

As I read these parables, I first wondered what is 'lost' within me, in my relationships, in my life. Having celebrated a milestone birthday, I have reflected on parts of me lost over the years. I see there are also dreams which have been lost along the way. Voices were silenced; gifts ignored. Have I put aside dreams to care for my family? Have I ignored a desire that was a strong focus at a different point in my life? Have I silenced God's voice calling me in a different direction or simply ignored one of my 'giftings' because it isn't convenient to exercise it?

In addition to the loss of parts of myself, I have experienced losses related to the deaths of family and friends. I have grieved the end of relationships and the loss of hopes for those relationships. I have grieved the ways life has changed—sometimes in good ways which still brought

themselves, and to other Christians, as ‘slaves of Christ’? A slave owns nothing. If you are a slave of Christ, all you have - your possessions, your rights, your desires, your dreams, your plans, even your very life - none of them are yours. They all belong to Christ.

I am often amazed at Christians insisting on getting their own way. What Jesus says here is shocking, but it shows how important it is: a Christian that hasn’t put everything on the altar, is not even good for the manure heap. A Christian that isn’t ready to pay the price, can’t even salt, err.. poop. God has no use for such a one.

I grew up in a country where Chrstians were persecuted. When I became too much of a problem, the ‘secret police’ asked me to emigrate if I wanted to survive. I left behind a pregnant wife and three young children. I was one of the lucky ones; others went to prison for their faith, and some never came back.

Here in the UK we are not persecuted; instead we are being enticed with distractions, with possessions, with pride, with ‘rights’. Jesus asks us to give it all away - only then can we follow him.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you left heaven,
gave everything up - even your everlasting life - for us. For me.
This is how much you want us for yourself.
Forgive me when I think of anything - including my very self –
as being ‘mine’.
Give us a proper perspective - to look not at the cost, but at the prize.
Give me a heart that holds on to nothing but you. Amen.

times to hear and to follow you. Forgive us and give us wisdom to remember your promises. Help us to remember that all your promises are, “YES” in Christ. Guide us to destroy all our other gods, god of wealth, status, self-admiration and fame and worship you in spirit and truth. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen

Monday 28 February 2022 St Luke 11: 37 - 53

Leo Roberts, Children and Youth Development Officer, North Western Synod

While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. 40 You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.

But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practised, without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honour in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the market-places. Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it.’

One of the lawyers answered him, ‘Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too.’ And he said, ‘Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them. Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, “I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute”, so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of

Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation. Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.'

When he went outside, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile towards him and to cross-examine him about many things, 54 lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.

Reflection

My wife and I have very different approaches to loading the dishwasher. I put the dirty plates and cutlery in their allotted compartments, whereas she washes them first and THEN puts them into the dishwasher – and not always in their allotted compartments. Sometimes the dishes go in the plate section and vice versa and I have to reorganise. It drives me mad. I'm sure finding gravy-laden plates in the machine drives her mad, too. Of course, on a bad day, how one of us has 'incorrectly' loaded the dishwasher might just be the precursor to any number of niggling arguments and we look for the opportunity to take offence at the slightest perceived wrong word, look or action. Occasionally, we act more like scribes and Pharisees than we ought to.

But don't we all? And wouldn't life be calmer and more pleasant if we could catch ourselves before we do? I might try it…

Prayer

Parent God
Forgive us when we try to find fault with other people.
Help us to recognise those times when we're just spoiling for a fight
And help us to see that we all need each other.

Friday 11 March 2022 St Luke 14: 25 - 34

Marius Mazuru, pastor, Pilgrim Church, Plymouth

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

Reflection

People wiser than I have written volumes on the meaning of the first verse in this text - so I'll leave it to them. It is sufficient to say that Jesus is not asking us to hate our family - rather, he is saying that nothing - not even family - should be more important to us than himself.

He doesn't stop there. We are used to thinking of God's grace being free. Jesus, however, is saying there is a cost to being his followers. We can not earn our salvation, but being disciples of Jesus comes at a price.

Faith is supposed to change us, it is supposed to make us like him.

Have you noticed how often people in the New Testament refer to

In Jesus' day the poor, crippled, blind and lame were not allowed into "respectable" company because they were considered unclean. A Pharisee might have invited some widows to a meal at his house, but not anyone with whom to eat would have made him unclean.

Jesus, in contrast, invites the outcasts to God's banquet, in the place of those who had been invited but were too busy with other things to come. (It would have been the height of rudeness to refuse an invitation in the way Jesus describes in this parable).

But the poor have not the distractions of the rich so they are free to accept the unexpected invitation to the banquet. As for the others in the roads and lanes outside the town, these are the gentiles, never part of God's chosen – yet here they are asked to fill the house so that the original invited guests will have no room.

We in the Church should heed this warning. Jesus tells us plainly that no-one is excluded from God's kingdom feast. Who might we be excluding by our customs or our language? Are we so preoccupied with peripheral matters that we cut ourselves off from the invitation to the Kingdom banquet?

We should be made uncomfortable by this parable. May we keep on accepting God's invitation whenever it comes and welcome the fellowship of those considered outcast by society at God's table.

Prayer

Welcoming God,
You invite all to your kingdom feast.
Help us to be like you in our welcome to all whom society treats as outcast, and generous in our hospitality.
May "all are welcome" be our reality as your kingdom people.
Amen

Tuesday 1 March 2022 St Luke 12: 1-11

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

Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered in thousands, so that they trampled on one another, he began to speak first to his disciples, 'Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops.

'I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

'And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.'

Reflection

Jesus has confronted the religious leaders and made them an object lesson for the disciples. He sums up what's wrong in one word – hypocrisy. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees is like yeast which spreads and changes the dough: regulations about divorce increased adultery; practices of vows increased lying; practices of revenge and hating enemies were contrary to God's commands of mercy, forgiveness and

love. Not that Jesus is saying that all Pharisees are hypocrites, or vice versa, but the Pharisees practiced religion to be seen by the world. They valued other's opinions over God's. Hypocrisy changed the truth of God's Word.

But God is not fooled. The opposite of hypocrisy is truth, freedom and repentance: remember nothing is hidden. In a time when the Church is at odds with the world, as disciples, we must be true to who we are. Remember our lives are always in the hands of God whose sovereignty alone is to be feared. The perfect love of God casts out all other fears which debilitate and enslave. Remember God's care for all those who belong to Him even the most insignificant of us and in spite of our actions. Repentance means accepting the truth about who you really are.

For disciples, truth is embodied in Jesus. The Pharisees' response to Jesus proved their hypocrisy. They professed to be followers of God, but very few were willing to confess their loyalty to Jesus despite his miracles and teachings. And those who continued to profess this defiant hardening of heart would commit the unforgivable sin against the truth of the Holy Spirit.

But those who are not afraid to acknowledge their loyalty to Jesus on earth will be accepted in heaven as the people of God. For now, all you really need to do is keep faith with God and God will keep faith with you through his Spirit, giving us the truth to speak in his name.

Prayer

God, you promised that Your Holy Spirit would guide Your children into all truth. It is sometimes hard to know what is true in a world when everything to do with you is being challenged.

Give me a discerning heart and help me to hear Your Word of Truth so that I may grow in grace and in a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christin the

May our temptation to be people's pleasers turn into our determination to please God and honour His presence within those in need. Whatever difficult choices lie ahead of us, may the Word inspired by the Holy Spirit be a lamp under our feet and the gravity of our decisions.

Thursday 10 March 2022 St Luke 14: 15 - 24

The Rev'd Helen Everard Chaplain to the Moderators of General Assembly, Minister Wonersh URC Surrey

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner."'

Reflection

Have you ever been in a situation where your guest criticizes everything you believe in, making everyone at the table uncomfortable? This is what Jesus, a guest in a pharisee's house, is doing with this parable. Following the blessing by another guest, Jesus talks very plainly about who will be included in God's kingdom and who might exclude themselves from the feast.

Reflection

What are the difficult decisions, we face in this season of life? We have hundreds of choices to make every day. Some choices are more challenging when they have to be made in public. Sometimes, we may know the right thing to do but we make excuses because we do not want to risk the hostile stare.

Many of us are also tempted to bend some laws to their advantage. For instance, many tax evaders claim that they do so legally. The fact that something is socially legal does not necessarily make it right. We are all made in the image of God. We all have a divine conscience within. We often know deep down when something legal is not right in God's sight.

What matters is not just what the laws say but also what the spirit of the law is. Jesus told His followers what the 613 laws from the Torah amount to: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength…Love your neighbour as yourself…No other commandment is greater than these'. (Luke 12.30-31).

Jesus, the healer and rabbi could have used the Old Testament command not to work on the Sabbath to overlook the man suffering with dropsy. This would have been a fair excuse. Are we not tempted to use socially acceptable excuses to avoid taking godly risks? Yet, the Holy Spirit is there to challenge us from within. Jesus' love and compassion for His suffering neighbour superseded the laws on the sabbath. Whatever our social laws, rules and rites are, the spirit of the laws of the Bible is about radical love for our neighbours, particularly those who are most vulnerable: the poor, the sick, the prisoner and the less able.

Prayer

May God grant us the courage to follow the spirit of the law of love, even when this triggers hostile stares and damages our worldly reputation.

power of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Wednesday 2 March 2022 St Luke: 12: 13 - 34

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

Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

He said to his disciples, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these

things will be given to you as well.

'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Reflection

"What's the use of worrying? It never was worthwhile" Words from the song that won first prize in the competition for the best morale-building song in WW1, and written by George Powell, a Welsh pacifist and conscientious objector! We may assume that the author knew today's Gospel passage just as we may also assume that many who sang the song lustily wanted to suppress many worries during that terrible war.

So many people seem to have more than enough reasons to be anxious – Covid, the international situation, inflation, health and waiting lists, relationships for example, perhaps you can add your own – so that it can seem insensitive to tell someone not to worry.

But should we not draw a distinction between "worrying" and "showing concern" about people and issues. Worrying can be self-centred, inward looking and corrosive, stopping us from moving on – "It never was worthwhile." The rich landowner was worried about how he could store and protect his abundance: he should have shown concern for the poor and needy (possibly his own exploited tenants) and shared his bounty.

It is far better to be equally alert to serious issues and then show concern about what can be done to make things better – and not just what others can do, but what we ourselves can do. Of course, there are major issues which as an individual we can never put right, but that should never be a reason to do nothing: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

Turn our pride into humility.
Help us say yes afresh to the depth of Your amazing love,
even when it demands our lives, our souls and our all. Amen

Wednesday 9 March St Luke 14: 1-14

The Rev'd Bachelard Kaze Yemtsa is a minster in the East Midlands Synod

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, 'Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?' But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, 'If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?' And they could not reply to this.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place", and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

Reflection

This reading led to the idea of deep love within costly grace. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a classic book entitled 'The Cost of Discipleship'. His life was an embodiment of that book in that his Christian convictions led him to fight against the Nazi regime; eventually costing him his life. Being a genuine Christian often requires bold sacrifices. Grace is free and yet very costly. Bonhoeffer said: '*Costly grace… is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life'*.

Jesus is clear that the true gate to the kingdom of God is narrow. Jesus bemoaned that many in Jerusalem would not let Him fully embrace them so that they could fully embrace God. Many could have been let down by other rabbis. Others may have been unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to follow Jesus. Many may have enjoyed the social side of discipleship while overlooking the depth of its relational and spiritual dimensions. Following Jesus was not that easy for early followers. It often involved being unpopular with religious and political authorities: this was a price many were not ready to pay. Hence, they preferred following Jesus superficially even if this amounted to nothing in the end. Some things in life can never be fully understood and appreciated until we fully commit to them. Many around us have many lovers but have never truly fallen in love. The deeper love relationship Jesus calls all of us to often requires humility, vulnerability and a degree of venturing. May the Lord bless us with discomfort, calling us to a deeper relationship with Jesus and to a fresh wonder of the depth of His love within costly grace.

Prayer

Lord, we survey your wondrous cross afresh today.
Would You draw closer and reign over each and every area of our lives!
Help us value the price You paid over our greatest achievements:
may our worldly crowns bow to Your crown of thorns.

George Powell advised that people should "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit-Bag, and Smile, Smile, Smile." Yes, but is that enough? Should we not also do what we can to help others find for themselves a way through such troubles, striving for God's kingdom, following in the Way of Jesus? Surely a worthwhile Lenten discipline.

Prayer

Understanding God, when we feel hard-pressed by many concerns help us, we pray, not to turn in on ourselves with worry but rather turn to you to guide us so that we can do something to improve matters even if we cannot solve all problems! In the name and power of our Saviour, Jesus Christ: Amen.

Thursday 3 March 2022 St Luke 12: 35 - 48

The Rev'd Dr Gillian Poucher, Minister, Gainsborough United Reformed Church & North Lincolnshire Area

'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Peter said, 'Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?' And the Lord said, 'Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of

all his possessions. But if that slave says to himself, "My master is delayed in coming", and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful. That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Reflection

The Parable of the Faithful, or Unfaithful, Slave in Luke's Gospel develops the similar parable in Matthew 24:45-51. Both evangelists present us with a double-minded slave, entrusted with the management of his colleagues by an absent master. The manager might choose either to faithfully perform his duties pending his master's return, or alternatively take advantage of the master's absence to mistreat his colleagues and consort with the dissolute (Matt. 24:48-49//Luke 12:45). When the master returns without warning, and discovers how the manager has abused his position, he enforces a gruesome punishment (Matt. 24:51//Luke 12:46).

Luke expands on the story of the double-minded slave by describing two further slaves. One has a clear idea of the master's requirements. Because he has less responsibility than the manager and doesn't abuse his position to the same degree, he receives a lesser punishment. The other doesn't know what is expected. He is guilty of wrongdoing, but because of his ignorance, this incurs a lighter penalty again.

Luke's parable teaches that our accountability to God as servants is proportionate to our awareness of what is required. As those with

Tuesday 8 March 2022 St Luke 13: 22- 35

The Rev'd Bachelard Kaze Yemtsa is a minster in the East Midlands Synod

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

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

it? Shouting, singing praises, laughing, slapping each other on the back, maybe some are calling out to each other "Did you see that? Did you see what happened? What will he do next?"

The crowds are important in the Gospels. The crowd acts as a kind of litmus test backdrop as to the impact Jesus is having. Through Luke's Gospel, up to this point, the crowd are in turn: looking for him; wanting to prevent him from leaving them; pressing in on him to hear the word of God; gathering to be cured of their diseases; being amazed; glorifying God and being filled with awe; coming from town after town; welcoming him; waiting for him; following him; being astounded at the greatness of God; increasing; gathering by the thousands so that they trample on one another. Then here in chapter 13, rejoicing "at all the wonderful things that he was doing".

And, of course, within the crowd are a myriad of individuals each with their longings, needs and hopes. They include people to whom some of those wonderful things are happening very directly. The woman in today's reading has been ill for eighteen years. No wonder the entire crowd was rejoicing when Jesus healed her.

When I attend Evening Prayer in our parish church I am struck by the phrase, "… make your chosen people joyful." By God's grace, can we see beyond those many things that stifle joy? Can we too rejoice at all the wonderful things God is doing? This Lent, shall we practice the discipline of joy?

Prayer

Give me joy in my heart, keep me praising,
Give me joy in my heart, I pray;
Give me joy in my hearts keep me praising,
Keep me praising till the break of day.

insight into God's love, justice, mercy and peace, we find ourselves in the position of Jesus's disciples, and are required to be in a state of perpetual readiness for Jesus's return. Being entrusted with knowledge and understanding of the gospel is a privilege which carries substantial responsibility with it. '*From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded*.'

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for entrusting us with the good news of Jesus. Help us to be faithful witnesses to the gospel in our words and deeds. May we always and everywhere seek opportunities to share your love, justice, mercy and peace. Stir us from complacency and strengthen our commitment to live whole-heartedly as your people in the world. Amen.

Friday 4 March 2022 St Luke 12: 49 - 59

The Rev'd Martin Knight is minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon and South Croydon United Church (Methodist/URC)

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

father against son
  and son against father,
mother against daughter
  and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
  and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'

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

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

Reflection

The wonderful Good News of Jesus can come as a real surprise!
This is the Gospel that is freeing and healing for some, and life-changing in its correction of others.

I have always been drawn to this passage, as it speaks so clearly of the reality of what the Good News can offer and what it can cause. The Good News is not all nice and fluffy – it is fire and conflict.

Some of the deepest pains in our society have not changed a great deal from Jesus' time to ours. Political and religious corruption, misogyny, poverty and nationalism – Jesus faces them all in the Gospels. The Good News of Jesus; the way he lived and walked through the world, shows clearly that as much as he brings healing and freedom, he brings fire to any way of living that causes harm to God's amazing, diverse people. Take a moment to think about the lives of people you know and the effect that the Good News might have on them.

The Good News of diversity that taught me that I am loved as a gay man, brought fire to the homophobia around me. Similarly, the Good News that proclaims women and the rainbow of genders as equals in society,

Monday 7 March 2022 St Luke 13: 10 - 21

The Rev'd Gwen Collins, retired minister, member of Avenue St Andrew's URC

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

He said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.'

And again he said, 'To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

Reflection

"The entire crowd was rejoicing …"

Can you picture it? If you were a film-maker how would you portray

Reflection

In this imaginative piece of writing we have a poem written many years back and cast into modern verse two generations ago. We are invited into a conversation between God and 'the gods' (rendered judges above). Exactly what kind of beings these are is hinted at in the third verse but we might struggle to articulate it precisely.

The plot is straightforward; these gods or judges have not discharged their delegated responsibility well. I like the modern author's use of the word judge here with its Biblical overtones of government or leadership beyond the narrow field of the courtroom. God the almighty is giving them a dressing down because they have wilfully oppressed others but also because they understand nothing.

We might think immediately of human governments and leaders or even the 'powers' that Paul writes about. But perhaps the poem applies to anyone who ever carries any responsibility for others whether fleeting or permanent. Don't show partiality; defend the weak; uphold the voice of those without a voice. It might even apply to us, at least for one aspect or one season of our lives.

And at the end, after God speaks to the gods, there is a simple prayer: rise up O God, judge the earth for all the nations are your inheritance.

Prayer

For those circumstances where I have some power or influence help me to understand more clearly, care more deeply and act more justly.

And for those circumstances where I seem to have little such power, I cry out to you : "Rise up O God and judge the earth."

brings fire to all toxic masculinity. Tackling homelessness brings fire to our apathy and holds a mirror to a community that is content to accept poverty. As Jesus hangs from the cross, he brings fire to all that causes death to humanity.

'Do you think I came to bring peace to the earth?'
What amazing Good News to know that Jesus brings fire to everything that keeps us from God's love.

Prayer

Good News God,
We pray that we will know this truth today:
that your love for us brings fire to all that keeps us from you.
May we also be prepared for our hands and minds
to bring peace where necessary
and fire and division to all structures in society
that keep us from your love.
May we hold the depth of this love in our hearts. Amen

Saturday 5 March 2022 St Luke 13: 1-9

The Revd Viv Henderson, Minister at Minehead URC and Chaplain at Wellesley Hospital

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

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the

gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’

Reflection

Suffering raises questions - such questions are often raised in my chaplaincy encounters. Suffering challenges what we believe about how life works. It is part of our nature that we want there to be a pattern - we want to know the reason this has happened. We want there to be a simple cause and effect, so we can avoid disasters striking us. However life is rarely like that.

Were the Galileans killed in the temple and those killed by the fall of the tower just in the wrong place at the wrong time? They want to know ‘what did they do to deserve this? Were these preventable deaths?
In his reply Jesus encourages his questioners to repent. The words seem harsh and probably aren’t those I would use in a pastoral encounter! s he making a link between what happened and their state of grace? I think Jesus wants them to make sure they are ready to meet their maker should they be in a similar situation, rather than gloat about those who suffered. He disputes that those killed were somehow more deserving of their fate than those who survive. Would repenting have protected the victims from suffering or is life more random than that?

Then Jesus tells a story - what should the owner do if the tree doesn’t bear fruit. What does the tree deserve? Is it a waste of space and resources? How patient should its owner be? The gardener advocates for one more year to bear fruit. For those who have survived or avoided suffering, the close encounter with mortality can be life changing - life is precious and to be used well. We have a God of second chances, welcoming us even if we change our lives in that final year. For who knows when the final year will be - let’s seize the chance whilst we have

the opportunity to do so.

To ponder

Today we need this story
to help us think again,
when some are set for failure,
whilst others just condemn.
Let’s reconstruct our nurture,
let’s give each fig their chance
let’s show all fig trees matter,
let fruitfulness advance.

John Campbell in ‘Sunflowers & Thistles’, URC June 2020

Sunday 6 March 2022 Psalm 82

The Rev’d Alistair Smeaton, is a minister in the Cumbria missional partnership

There where the judges gather,
a greater takes his seat;
"How long, " he asks the judges,
"will you pronounce deceit?
How long show special favour
to those of ill repute?
How long neglect the orphaned,
the poor and destitute?

2 "Deal justly with the needy,
protect the parentless,
deliver the afflicted
from those who would oppress.
But you are wholly blinded,
you do not understand;
therefore foundations totter,
injustice rocks the land."

3 God speaks: "I named you rulers, to serve the Most High God;
but you shall die as mortals and perish by my rod."
Arise, O God, in judgment, your sovereignty make known;
for yours are all the nations; the peoples are your own.

Henry Zylstra 1953 © Faith Alive Chr. Res. You can hear the tune for this Psalm, Meirionydd, here https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/155103