Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Luke's Gospel Part 7



Sunday 13th March – Thursday 31st 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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respect for the owner, nor the servants, they abuse the trust placed in them to look after the vineyard.

Their actions are brutal. They break one of the foundation commandments purely out of greed. They commit murder, and for what? Do they really think they will inherit the vineyard?

COP26 raised questions about our stewardship, our treatment of the vineyard. Are we any better as tenants than the 1st Century Jewish leaders?

We've had plenty of prophets both Biblical and modern day giving us warnings about the consequences of not treating the world God gave us to look after with due care. Do our actions show respect for the world around us?

Sometimes in reading a passage to prepare a daily devotion something new stands out. The verse about those falling on the cornerstone being broken isn't one I'd really paid much heed to before.

A Jewish proverb puts it as "If the stone falls on the pot, alas for the pot; if the pot falls on the stone, alas for the pot!" The lesson? Don't stumble over the cornerstone, but instead build on it, remembering this is the stone that was once rejected.

And how is the vineyard doing? Are we prepared to be accountable for our action or inaction when the owner sends his son to ask for the first fruits from the harvest?
Will there be any fruit to hand over?

Prayer

Creator God, help us to treat your world with respect
Your words as an encouragement to love
And you people as an opportunity to care. Amen

Thursday 31 March 2022 St Luke 20: 9 - 18

Sam Goodman, Elder, Central URC, Derby

He began to tell the people this parable: 'A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third; this one also they wounded and threw out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, "This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours." So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.' When they heard this, they said, 'Heaven forbid!' But he looked at them and said, 'What then does this text mean:

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone"?

Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.' When the scribes and chief priests realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people.

Reflection

Commentaries on this passage suggest that God is the owner, the vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the leaders at the time and the servants are the prophets.

It's clear that these tenants have been poor stewards of the vineyard. They've used it for profit and ignored the prophets. They have no

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Sunday 13 March 2022 Psalm 83

The Rev'd Elizabeth Gray-King, Visual Theologian, North Western Synod Pastor, member St Columba's URC

Do not keep silence, O my God;
Be not unmoved, lift up Thy rod.
For, lo,
Thy foes prepare for fighting;
They raise their heads,
for war uniting.
The flames of hatred
they are fanning,
The downfall of
Thy loved ones planning.

2: They say,
"Come let us wipe them out;
Let Israel be put to rout.
Burn down its towns
to ash and ember;
Let none that nation's
name remember."
With one accord
they are conspiring,
The fall of Israel desiring.

3: Yea, Edom and the Ishmaelites, the Hagarenes and Moabites,
All the Philistines and the Tyrians join Ammon's tribe and the Assyrians
Gebal confers with Agag's remnants;
they all give aid to Lot's descendants.

W. van der Kamp, 1972 You can hear this sung to the Genevan tune here https://bit.ly/3pNTTQY

Reflection

Here we are in Psalms, never sure who wrote these 150 poems. This poet assumes God to be silent as humans gather for war, so God is entreated to pick up God's rod, join the fight and prefer one side to another. War is as active now as it was when this poet picked up pen and papyrus. This is a deeply human poem.

God alone knows why humans endlessly repeat war and ask God to

support only one side. No matter what example Jesus gave, or what example wise justice marchers and canny negotiators model for us, groups of us can't manage to do peace. Groups of us are convinced that annihilation of the Other is what God commands us to do and use God's name to bless it. War on a smaller scale, groups of us are convinced that God will take sides in one local argument after another, that God will completely silence one group so one group alone may speak.

Frustratingly for many, God doesn't work that way. Jesus' parables and friendships make this clear. Called apparently across sides, Apostle Paul annoyingly often found middle ways. There is a needed pendulum though, where people who've been silenced need the Other to be silent for a while, so all voices are honoured. Perhaps this is why we humans prepare for war? It's probably easier to annihilate than to listen hard and work toward a common mind. Whether we choose easy or difficult, let's just not say it is God's choice to pick a fight or to take sides. We are intensely human and in the middle of that reality, God gifts us wisdom and grace to listen and work for love, if we ask. It's a grace God throws around willy-nilly to any side. Alleluia.

Prayer

God, I'm right. Not them.
But it's not about who is right or wrong is it?
It's about which of us enacts your love.
That's difficult God, because I'm not always sure.
They can seem so nice when they're really preparing for war.
Gift us both wisdom, clarity and love beyond imagining.
Let us all allow ourselves to work for peace. Amen.

Monday 14 March 2022 St Luke 15: 11- 32

The Revd Sue Chapman, Minister, Hove & Portslade Pastorate, East Sussex

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of

similar question asked in John 10:24 'If you are the Christ tell us plainly'. Answer this one, then the questions come thick and fast 'By What Authority ('Exousia') are you doing these things? Jesus' responses were making them squirm: Where had John's authority ('Exousia') come from tell me plainly and clearly. Was this from God or had John made it up?

Jesus was in the temple because he was a learned Rabbi and had earned his place. This wasn't some random individual who had come in from the outside world: 'He was teaching the people'. If Jesus was teaching dodgy stuff, they wouldn't be listening; he could have been taken out and silenced there and then. Those with the authority 'Exousia' were biding their time preparing the case: it gets messy later.

Those who were in it and around it were more concerned about maintaining their own privileged position rather than accept that through Jesus (whatever label you give him) God was and is doing a new thing.

It is by the grace of God that we too can share the good news where we are called to be and share. The authority 'Exousia' we have been given is to tell the story slowly and clearly so it might dwell in our hearts as we share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Or in the words of Katherine Hankey hymn:

Tell me the old old story
Of unseen things above
Of Jesus and his glory
Of Jesus and his love
Tell me the story simply
As to a little child
For I am weak and weary
And helpless and defiled
Tell me the old, old story
Of Jesus and his love.

Katherine Hankey (1834-1911)

Prayer

Saviour God, we thank you for Christ's sacrifice as he stood up against the powers of corrupt governments and oppressive empires. We thank you that his resurrection demonstrated the triumph of good over evil, of love over hate. We pray you will give us the courage and insight to do the same today. Amen.

Wednesday 30 March 2022 St Luke 20: 1 - 8

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

One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders and said to him, 'Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?' He answered them, 'I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' They discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.' So they answered that they did not know where it came from. 8 Then Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

Reflection

It was flu Jab this morning. After scanning the QR code at the pharmacy the questions came thick and fast. By what authority makes you eligible? Could I tick the correct box that unlocks a free Flu jab? A quick stab and it was all over. Success.

Jesus had ticked the required permissions which allowed him to be teaching in the Temple. This miracle worker has been causing chaos in the Temple courts and beyond, but the tipping the tables over incident in the Temple is the final straw. It now feels a bit like putting the tail on the donkey as the blindsided authorities try to pin Jesus down. We find a

them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost

and has been found."'

Reflection

Many people who have read or heard this parable of Jesus look at it with a world view overlayed on it. The son was wastefully extravagant. He should be punished for his actions, not welcomed with open arms, a suit of clothes and a big kiss. The father is also wastefully extravagant because his son was back at home with him. The father was overflowing with joy for his son's return. His prayers have been answered. The lost one had returned, to face the consequences of his actions and the judgement of his father. This is a repentant son, who has realised that his actions had caused pain to his father, to everyone he had been living among, including himself. He has come to the end of himself and is ready to make a new beginning. Do we recognise this situation in our own lives?

The father in the story we know is God, the prodigal son is a human person, who has forgotten that God loves them, with a deep and passionate love, which cannot be extinguished by any action we can perform in life. God is always watching for the lost ones to be welcomed, unconditionally, into that deep love, which will never allow us to be lost ever again. Through the return of the son we are able to perceive more than the story of a wayward, strong-minded boy, to the heart of a father, who shows great patience and love for his absent son, being able to welcome him, with open arms back into the family, with rejoicing and celebration. The one who is lost has been found and great is the rejoicing!

Prayer

Loving God,
who opens your arms wide
to accept and welcome us into your love,

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.' Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, 'It is written, "My house shall be a house of prayer"; but you have made it a den of robbers.' Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

Reflection

Actions speak louder than words. And here Christ's actions shout, very loudly indeed. This final step of the journey into Jerusalem was not a spur of the moment thing; it was planned. At this time Jesus already had a price on his head, as we are told in John 11:57. So, this was a deliberate, courageous act. The timing of his triumphant, peaceful and kingly ride into Jerusalem on a colt was chosen to contrast with the Roman procession into Jerusalem. Jerusalem, at the time of the Passover, would be powder keg waiting to be ignited by all sorts of 'trouble makers'; after all Passover celebrated the Jewish people's release from a previous empire, and anti-Roman passions would be running high. So, at the beginning of the week of Passover Roman legions from the sea-side garrison in Caesarea Maritima would ride into Jerusalem to subdue any trouble, which would be done with cruel efficiency. This procession of imperial cavalry was headed by Pontious Pilate on a war horse. The contrast could not have been greater, and few would have failed to notice the significance. Jesus had set his face against oppression, corruption and exploitation … and he would pay the price for it; and thank God he did!

Prayer

Lord,
When we are pressured to take part in dubious practices give us the clear sight to understand and deal with what is distasteful to us and unacceptable to you. Amen

Tuesday 29 March 2022 St Luke 19: 28 - 48

Alan Yates, Education & Learning Committee Convenor, member of Trinity URC, High Wycombe

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this: "The Lord needs it."' So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' They said, 'The Lord needs it.' Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

'Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!'

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'

help us to each feel the warmth and heat
of your powerful love for us.
May we find our joy and peace in you, always. Amen

Tuesday 15 March 2022 St Luke 16: 1-18

The Rev'd Jacky Embrey, Bolton and Salford Missional Partnership

Then Jesus said to the disciples, 'There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty." Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty." And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

'The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

Reflection

Jesus had a habit of catching his disciples unawares. Sometimes they felt that they had to take him aside privately and ask him to explain what he had said further. I wonder if they dared to question him, when he told them the story about the shrewd manager.

If we treat the parable as an allegory where every element corresponds to something in 'real life', Jesus could be praising dishonesty, sloppy work or both. However, sometimes Jesus used parables to illustrate one specific point. (For example in the parable of the unjust judge, when Luke felt the need to tell us what the parable was about.)

Perhaps in this parable Jesus just wanted us to see that in a crisis, the unreliable manager did well, if you judge him as a crafty manager, whereas the 'children of light' had not been doing so well as disciples. Woops! Even the unreliable manager is making a better fist of being a crafty manager, than they are of being good disciples.

Jesus' first disciples found that the right path for a disciple can be difficult to find. They had plenty to learn and to unlearn and so they had to work

Reflection

Occasionally I wonder why Luke made the point that Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore. Was it merely a passing comment or is there some symbolism there? I don't know, I wasn't there. Sycamore figs in Israel are a bit of an oddity - they are figs! - but are native to tropical Africa and lack the wasp which would normally pollinate them. It was known that people, such as Amos describing himself as a dresser of figs, had to do something to them so they produced fruit.

Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham but somehow lacks something and has become a tax collector. Effectively, he became a collaborator with the Roman invaders. Meeting Jesus he is introduced to a new experience, the missing understanding, and comes face to face with an ethic far more satisfying.

As Luke tells the story, Jesus takes the opportunity to teach. This parable is usually taken as an explanation for Jesus' not immediately overthrowing the Romans and the Day of the Lord starting or as an explanation for the delayed second coming or … Or do we have here a radical story of wrong demands by a bullying nobleman? In the story, bullying elicits an unexpected response from one person. There is no compliance with an instruction to do business, as Zacchaeus had been doing for his Roman masters, but a complete refusal to take part in something distasteful. The reason is given in a blunt character description. That leads to the nobleman's grab to get the initial amount back and the punishment of seeing it handed over to another combined with the threat (reality?) of slaughter. Is this reassurance to Zacchaeus that now he has made Jesus his master the threat of summary execution by a Roman overlord is averted?

It is hard, difficult work being a disciple especially when it might seem easier to go with distasteful demands even though failure can be seen lurking in the background.

poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

As they were listening to this, he went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. So he said, 'A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, "Do business with these until I come back." But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, "We do not want this man to rule over us." When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading. The first came forward and said, "Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds." He said to him, "Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities." Then the second came, saying, "Lord, your pound has made five pounds." He said to him, "And you, rule over five cities." Then the other came, saying, "Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow." He said to him, "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest." He said to the bystanders, "Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds." (And they said to him, "Lord, he has ten pounds!") "I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence."'

at their discipleship, casting aside assumptions and discerning afresh each day.

The same goes for us. We're no better at being disciples than they were, even though we have the advantage of having the Bible in our hands day by day. We also have two thousand years of Church practice, behind us, though that may not always be an advantage. In the end, like the first disciples, we each ultimately have to take responsibility for our own discipleship.

Maybe we should take note of Jesus' comments about being faithful in a little, and work hard at the little things, and the bigger things will hopefully follow.

Prayer

Living Lord Jesus,
Show us how to follow you more closely than yesterday.
Help us to take the next step and not to worry about the one after.
Guide us for today.
Grant us discernment for tomorrow.
That we may do your will and walk in your way.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

Wednesday 16 March 2022 St Luke 16: 19 - 31

Karen Campbell, URC Secretary for Global & Intercultural Ministries

'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue;

for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."'

Reflection

Must there always be…?

There will always be rich and poor - both Lazarus and the rich man.

Rich and poor – it's all relative, right? "I have more than those people, but these people have far more than me!"
I wonder if we take comfort – even refuge – in knowing that 'this is just the way of the world'.

It is the way of the world, but is it right? And should I accept it?

It seems, sometimes, that we almost romanticise 'the poor': 'Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' – but I don't see many of us rushing to give up what we have in order to inherit the kingdom.

We put a nice spin on reality: "Their suffering today is seen by God – but they will be blessed with an eternity of plenty (…so ultimately, all will be ok!)' But, if that is such a comfort, would I - 'the rich man' - be prepared to swap places with Lazarus in anticipation of what is to come?

Although different translations have different ways of saying it, the Psalmist is clear that the world of prayer and faith is also the world of nature, and The Message paraphrase puts this very simply saying that Right Living and Whole Living go hand-in-hand.

Perhaps this Psalm is a Kingdom lesson for 21st century disciples, it's about caring for each other and for the earth and asking God for renewal. As the hymn writer here says 'Revive us Lord, that we may raise our thankful hymns and psalms of praise'.

Prayer

'Lord, bring us back to grace again'.
Help us to listen for your words in the voices of vulnerable people, refugees, people who are grieving and all who are suffering. Help us understand that we cannot have ' Whole Living' unless we are 'Right Living', so help us to care for each other and in so-doing to care for creation. Revive us Lord, so that we can indeed sing your praises anew. Amen

Monday 28 March 2022 St Luke 19: 1 - 27

The Rev'd Ruth Browning, retired minister, worshipping at Thornbury URC

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycomore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the

3 To all his saints,
the LORD speaks peace;
his faithful love and care increase.
He shares his grace with open hand
to spread his glory
through our land.
Salvation from the LORD is near
to all who trust the LORD in fear.

4 Then love will meet
with faithfulness;
God's righteousness
and peace will kiss.
As righteousness smiles
down from heaven,
great harvests to our land are given.
With God all righteousness abides;
his truth and justice are our guides.

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You can hear the tune suggested for this Psalm, Melita (Eternal Father Strong to Save) here https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/155047

Reflection

A Psalm for Today.

Looking at the commentaries, there are differing views as to when this Psalm was written – possibly post Exile, or maybe earlier. Opinions also differ regarding the event to which it refers. Perhaps it is a generic hymn written for the Autumn festivals, and asking God to ensure renewal next Spring, or perhaps it refers to a specific disaster.
Whatever you might believe about the context, the Psalmist was living through a period of bleakness at the time of writing, lamenting the darkness of some unnamed affliction. Yet through all of this I admire the fortitude and optimism as the Psalmist looks back with gratitude and joyfully sings the details of times when God saved, then looks forward in the absolute certainty that God will do the same again knowing there is no shame in asking for more.

There are many potential analogies here with our 21st Century situation as we come to terms with a world that has taken a battering from Covid, where some have vaccines whilst others have none, where climate chaos is real, and refugees die in their struggle to find somewhere that will offer hospitality.

I don't know about you, but I don't want 'bad things' – either in this life or the next. And, like the rich man, I am at pains to ensure the wellbeing of those I care about. Why, then, should I find any comfort in the thought that someone else's 'good things' are awaiting in some future time? What about this time - the here and now? And isn't everybody someone's child/sibling/loved one? Why would I wish any differently for them NOW than I wish for me and mine? Surely being content for some people to wait for their blessing in eternity is to reconcile myself to perpetual injustice today.

Years ago, I fell in love with the Christian Aid slogan 'We believe in life before death.' What if we all actively embraced that belief and sought to live it into being? No more Lazarus and the rich man, but equal human beings, sharing the abundance which was always intended for all.

Prayer

Ah, Bountiful God,
How have we gone so wrong?

How do we take your plenty
And turn it into over-abundance for some
And scarcity for others?

Forgive us –
But not without moving us
To bring about real and lasting change.

For the sake of Lazarus, we pray, Amen.

Thursday 17 March 2022 St Luke 17: 1 - 10

Karen Campbell, URC Secretary for Global & Intercultural Ministries

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come,

but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent", you must forgive.'

The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' The Lord replied, 'If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea", and it would obey you.

'Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, "Come here at once and take your place at the table"? Would you not rather say to him, "Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink"? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!"'

Reflection

Slaves no more?

In recent months, much of my work has focused on the URC's engagement with the Legacies of (transatlantic) Slavery, considering issues of enduring racism and structural inequalities – in the world, in society, and in the Church. We don't like to admit it – and sometimes it is easier to turn away – but that does not change the truth. Reading today's text hits an unpleasant chord, with its reference to what is expected of the slave. Who would expect the slave to do anything other than what they are instructed by their master? And who would do the hard graft themselves if they had a slave to do it for them? Turning that around, which slave would come in from their outdoor toils expecting to

while hearing a lot of negative news on TV, radio, or on social media over the past two years? I know I did. However, just like the blind man, we have to ask "Lord, let me see again" when we are feeling blind to God's work.

As we hopefully look towards our lives being a bit more normal, it is so easy to get caught up in our day to day lives whether that be at work, university, school or just socialising. In these moments we often forget or are even blind ourselves to seeing where God is playing a part. However, sometimes we do need to open our eyes and take some time out of our day to reflect as well as to have faith that God is there for Jesus says 'your faith has saved you'. For example, over the rest of your day or weekend, are you planning to meet any friends or family for coffee or a meal? God will be there in those conversations!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, for you are good, we come to you in need,
We come to you with faith,
we come to you knowing that you let the blind see
Open our eye's lord to the things around us and the word that you do
In Jesus name we pray, Amen

Sunday 27 March 2022 Psalm 85

Linda Rayner, Member at Bramhall URC and URC Coordinator for fresh expressions.

LORD, you have lavished
on your land
amazing blessings from your hand,
restored us from captivity
and pardoned our iniquity.
In grace you caused
your wrath to turn;
you did not let your anger burn.

2 LORD, bring us back
to grace again;
blot out your anger at our sin.
Revive us, LORD, that we may raise
our thankful hymns
and psalms of praise.
In mercy, LORD, your people bless
with saving love and faithfulness.

Prayer

Up or down,
left or right,
north or south,
we give thanks that whatever direction we travel
you travel along with us;
help us to find the direction
that leads us closer to you,
and brings us into deeper fellowship and connection
with the people we share our lives with. Amen.

Saturday 26 March 2022 St Luke 18: 35 - 43

Reuben Watt, Former Youth Assembly Moderator

As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.' Then he shouted, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' He said, 'Lord, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

Reflection

Today is two years to the day since the first Covid lockdown legally came into force. I am sure on the 26th March 2020, like me, some of you were blind to the fact that this lockdown was going to last as long as it did. I am sure we also had moments over the past two years when we have been like the blind man in today's bible reading. This man, who in the book of Mark, is called Bartimaeus, was blind and unable to see Jesus. Were there ever times when you found it difficult to see Jesus, especially

relax at the table, excused from their household labours? Everyone knew and understood the roles of both master and slave.

And so, my mind turns to our world today. Transatlantic slavery is no more, but I think of the structural inequalities which continue - an unspoken 'way of being' which frequently sees Black people at the bottom of the pile in respect of jobs, pay, housing and educational achievement. I think of health inequalities, and the ways in which Black people fall foul of our criminal justice systems. I consider our world, divided into rich (predominantly white) nations, and poor (predominantly Black) nations – and recognise this is no 'act of God', but the legacies of transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and empire. The situation has prevailed for so long, is so entrenched, that many of us never think to question it, let alone challenge it. Both white people and Black people have been conditioned to 'know our place', and the presumed places others should occupy.

In November 2020 the URC committed itself to a journey from 'not racist' to actively anti-racist, to recognise and dismantle the status quo until there is truly neither slave nor free. Maybe then we can all take our rightful place, side-by-side, at a wonderful bring-and-share table.

Prayer

God, I know you are not colour blind.
Help us to see colour too.

I know you don't birth some to be slaves
And others to be masters.

It cannot please you
for dark skins to remain at the mercy of unjust systems
while lighter skins are cushioned, held in greater esteem.

Shake us up, spin us round, remind us –

You are the God of justice, dignity, and most of all, love –
And you call us to live in your ways.

Friday 18 March 2022 St Luke 17: 11 - 19

The Rev'd Andy Braunston is the Digital Minister for Worship and a member of Barrhead URC.

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

Reflection

Monty Python's Life of Brian had a similar episode where Brian was asked "alms for an ex-leper." Brian, puzzled, discovered that Jesus had healed the leper who then considered himself deprived of his ability to make money. Brian muttered, "there's no helping some people" and the ex-leper responded "that's what Jesus said!" Truth is often stranger than fiction.

There's a wry humour in today's passage as we realise that people are often ungrateful for what is done for them. Only one of the lepers comes back to thank Jesus and, of course, that one was a religious and social outsider. A lesson for the Jewish onlookers to see, again, that a Samaritan is the hero and they are the villains in the story.

Lest we become too smug, how often do we show gratitude for the good

he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

Reflection

What's in a direction? Jesus and his friends are going 'up' to Jerusalem, and often in the Bible people are described as going 'up' to the city, regardless of where they start from. East, west, south, north, Jerusalem is always up. Perhaps this is because as a city on a hill it is literally higher than the surrounding lands, but it could also be that because of its status as a holy city, home of the Temple, Jerusalem is 'up' in a deeper sense. It was where people went to celebrate festivals and encounter the living God.

We use up and down language all the time. Traditionally on the railways in the UK 'up' was in the direction of London, and 'down' away from it, while no dramatic courtroom scene on film or TV in which the accused is found guilty is complete without the instruction to 'take him down!' It's also in how we think of the earth. Mediaeval maps put Jerusalem at the centre of the world, but now we usually have north at the top and south at the bottom, and some map projections make the countries of the northern hemisphere look bigger and so more important than those in the south. Looking at a map with south at the top* can be a disorientating experience, forcing us to consider if our assumptions are actually correct. In the book of Acts a group of Jesus' followers are accused of 'turning the world upside down' and this is what Jesus is doing here in speaking of his coming sufferings; even his friends were not ready for the idea a messiah could suffer and die.

Are we called to turn the values of our world upside down? And if so, how can we travel 'up', in the footsteps of Jesus on the road to the cross, growing closer to the God that we worship?

* for some examples see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South-up_map_orientation

To quote theologian Marvin McMickle, If our definition of liberation is only one group's liberation rather than all oppressed, then we seek privilege, not liberation. He agrees with St. Oscar Romero - murdered on this day in 1980 - that ending violence requires getting to the root of structural violence. It's long distance work.

I've found Bethlehem to be one of my most powerful images in the midst of my country's ongoing racial injustice. In the ruins of bombed-out buildings, Palestinian youth decorate the walls with George Floyd murals.

Colonization has brought them to the brink of their own personal catastrophe. However, they saw themselves in an ex-incarcerated person of colour thousands of miles away, suffocated by the indifference of a dysfunctional system.

Perhaps the plot was all too familiar. And yet, privilege still doesn't get it.

Prayer

Nurture us, Mothering God, away from the security of our privilege and toward Your Kingdom's liberative potential. Give us the courage to stand up for victims of Human Rights abuses at home and abroad.
Ase and Amen.

Friday 25 March 2022 St Luke 18: 31 - 34

The Rev'd Nick Jones, Minister, Heswall URC

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon.After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.' But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what

things that happen to us? How often do we show gratitude to God? Who do we identify with in the passage? The nine ungrateful lepers? The Samaritan leper? Or Jesus, as we're often not thanked for what we do for others? Does our ingratitude lead us to take things for granted. Does the ingratitude of others lead us to resentment and bitterness? Does our attitude of gratitude keep us grounded?

We can choose how we respond - with gratitude, resentment, bitterness, or indifference. Our response, however, will colour our life and our attitudes just as it coloured the ex-leper in The Life of Brian and the lepers in today's story.

Prayer

God of healing,
help us to thank you for all you've done for us,
for the loving kindness you shower upon us,
for friends, family, and strangers who undertake random kind acts.
Help us to have an attitude of gratitude,
to counter the bitterness and resentment that can so easily build up,
that, as we give thanks, we become more generous,
for your Name's sake, Amen.

Saturday 19 March 2022 St Luke 17: 20 - 37

Susan Knight is a Local Church Leader at Reigate Park URC and Lay Preaching Commissioner for the Southern Synod

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

Then he said to the disciples, 'The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, "Look there!" or "Look here!" Do not go, do not set off in

pursuit. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulphur from heaven and destroyed all of them —it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left.' Then they asked him, 'Where, Lord?' He said to them, 'Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.'

Reflection

In our text the Saviour informs us of three dangers with reference to the Second Coming. The first danger is that of shaping the Second Coming in accordance with our own desires and expectations. The Pharisees nor the people of Israel would not recognize the coming kingdom because they had false pre-conceptions of what the King and the Kingdom would (must) be like. When Jesus failed to fulfil these expectations, He was rejected, and ultimately put on the Cross.

The second danger is one that posed a threat to the disciples: over-eagerness to see the Lord Jesus again, manifested in a chasing after every potential "messiah" which may arise. Our Lord's return cannot (as the Pharisees supposed) be all figured out in advance, but we can be assured that we will know it when it comes. The emphasis of our Lord is not on us finding or discovering Him and His coming Kingdom, but on how He will

Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' Those who heard it said, 'Then who can be saved?' He replied, 'What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.' Then Peter said, 'Look, we have left our homes and followed you.' And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, 30 who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.'

Reflection

Maybe I'm not the only clergyperson who has people tell you when they last went to church after hearing what you do for a living! I get the impression it's more of an apology than a genuine dialogue. When was this kind of conversation ever amusing? These days, I tell people I'm a jazz singer.

Jesus must have been annoyed by this aristocrat's righteousness. Not even Jesus could claim that he kept ALL the commandments. He was constantly getting into trouble for healing and liberating people on the Sabbath. Jesus knew that Torah keeping was not as transformative as Torah living.

Anything worse than a life squandered on excessive consumption is a life squandered on doing nothing at all. People who do everything "properly"... which means you're probably under a lot of pressure to please those who can't be pleased!

The aristocrat walks away "sad", not because Jesus asks for the bare minimum – charity – but because Jesus asks for a complete systemic shift.

Give up your power to free the powerless!

However, I don't think that Jesus was highlighting children for what they don't have, but for what they do have. I can think of four qualities children and child-like people have:
A deep sense of wonder and an excitement for life.
An intrinsic trust in the adults around them.
A natural obedience … at least until they are two years old!
An amazing ability to forgive and to love.

With qualities like that you can see why the gates to God's kingdom would open wide for you. So, as you approach the time of year when we mark Christ's death and resurrection, why not build up your child-like qualities and live as a child of God.

Prayer

Parent God, I thank you for this vivid demonstration of how important even the 'lowly' children were to you, and by inference, how important each one of us is to you. The enormity of your love defies our comprehension, but we can still have a sense of wonderment and excitement about life lived with you. Help us to trust, love, and forgive as a true child of God in obedience to your holy word. Amen

Thursday 24 March 2022 St Luke 18: 18 - 30

The Rev'd William Young, Pastor, Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ, Washington, D.C., USA

A certain ruler asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother."' He replied, 'I have kept all these since my youth.' When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich.

find us.

The third danger is that of worldly preoccupations, which diminishes our desire for the Kingdom, and dims our view of its reality, and dulls our desire for it to come. When our "life" is found in Christ, and we can give up all else, then we will eagerly await His return, and we will work to hasten it. This is why Jesus has had so much to say about possessions. These three dangers are relevant not only to the coming kingdom, but to all other areas of our life as well. If you, my friends, have not yet trusted in Christ as your Saviour, you should do so today.

Prayer

Where nations budget for war,
countries waste food,
governments claim their policies are heaven-blessed,
Christians seek the Kingdom in the shape of their own church
women who speak up for their dignity are treated with scorn and contempt,
men try hard to be tough because they are afraid to be tender,
our prayers falter,
our faith weakens,
and our light grows dim,
we pray, in Jesus' name,
your Kingdom come,
your will be done. Amen

Sunday 20 March 2022 Psalm 84

The Rev'd John Proctor, retired minister, member of Downing Place URC, Cambridge.

How lovely is Your dwelling place
O Lord Almighty
For my soul longs and even faints for You
For here my heart is satisfied

Within Your presence
I sing beneath the shadow of Your wings

Better is one day in Your courts
Better is one day in Your house
Better is one day in Your courts
Than thousands elsewhere

One thing I ask and I would seek
To see Your beauty
To find You in the place Your glory dwells

(Repeat Chorus)

Bridge

My heart and flesh cry out
For You, the living God
Your Spirit's water to my soul
I've tasted and I've seen
Come once again to me
I will draw near to You
I will draw near to You

Matt Redman © Copyright 1995 Thankyou Music
You can hear Matt Redman sing this here
https://bit.ly/3gvt7Zt

Journey through two worlds

Psalm 84 is a pilgrim song. It tells of a journey to the Temple in Jerusalem. Like many a journey, this one has two dimensions. It makes its way through two worlds.

The first and obvious dimension is the physical journey – along the road, across the land, among companions, according to plan and custom. This

I've tried so hard, but I've failed.
I thank you that you are willing to forgive me,
not because I've done anything good
but because your son, Jesus, died for me.
Please help me to do better,
teach me to reply of your Holy Spirit for guidance.
I bring my prayers to you in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday 23 March 2022 St Luke 18: 15 - 17

Alan Yates, Education & Learning Committee Convenor, elder at Trinity URC, High Wycombe

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'

Reflection

Children, 2000 years ago, had virtually no rights. Their father literally had the power of life or death over them. Even knowing this, the disciples don't come out of this story in a good light, but, I suspect they were simply trying to protect Jesus who had set his sight on Jerusalem and his supreme sacrifice. I can still remember my mum telling me to give my dad some peace when he had come home from work tired and hungry. But Jesus was not looking after his own wellbeing. He recognised how important it was to bless these children, not just for their sakes but also for their mothers who wanted their children to be blessed by a distinguished rabbi.

So good so far. But then Jesus delivers the bombshell: 'you need to be like a child to enter God's kingdom'. You can just hear the crowd say, 'but do I really have to put aside my freedom, wisdom and education?'

for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

Reflection

Today we might grumble about paying taxes and perhaps feel that the money raised should be spent in a different way. We do know that the people collecting our taxes are fair and honest and only collect what is set out in the rules and laws. This is different to the situation at the time of Jesus, when the tax collector could collect extra and keep it for himself. This made tax collectors very unpopular with most people. Despite this Jesus did not condemn this tax collector because he admitted that he was a sinner and called on God in repentance. In contrast the Pharisee was someone who thought of himself as being righteous as he observed all the laws he could think of and spent many hours in prayer.

The difference between these two is clear, the Pharisee thought that he was a wonderful and almost perfect person and certainly superior to most others while the tax collector admitted that he was not perfect and cried out to God for forgiveness.

As we look around our locality, we may see people who live a lifestyle that we disagree with. We hear on the news of people who commit a variety of heinous crimes. These crimes can have devastating effects on many people. It is easy to be like the Pharisee and decide that we are far better than those people, but are we? Paul wrote in Romans 3:23 "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". It is not the sin that condemns us but how we deal with our wrongdoing. We need to make sure that we follow the example of the tax collector and admit our failings and trust God, through Jesus, to forgive our sins.

Prayer

Loving God I am sorry for all the times that I have failed.

journey matters: you do want to get to the Temple. But in some ways the second dimension matters more. For it runs through inner space. It is a journey of anticipation, a pilgrimage of hope, in the human heart. The very act of travelling kindles a spiritual experience within the worshipper. I look forward to worship because I want to meet with God. My spirit sings with joy, and stretches forward in longing, to be where God is.

Matt Redman's version splices sections of this Psalm with a thread from Psalm 27 ('one thing I ask …'). The effect is to highlight the inner journey. We are invited to share in the worshipper's emotional investment, the heart's yearning for God, the hunger and thirst of the human spirit. To be near to God is a consuming desire and complete delight.

So this Psalm could prepare us for church today, for entering a building hallowed by the prayers of the years, a touching place with heaven, where many before us have been able to go deep with God. But perhaps the Psalm does more than this. It beckons us along the inner journey, wherever we find ourselves and whatever our needs. Yes, church does help us to locate God. But God is beyond location too. God is everywhere, accessible and gracious, always open to our prayers, constantly ready to embrace us with love and life. Sometimes that is the good news we need.

Prayer

We love the place, O God,
wherein thine honour dwells;
the joy of thine abode
all earthly joy excels.
Lord Jesus, give us grace
on earth to love thee more,
in heaven to see thy face,
and with thy saints adore. (William Bullock, 1854)

Monday 21 March 2022 St Luke 18: 1-8

Professor Graham Handscomb is a member of Christchurch URC, Chelmsford.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

Reflection

We often read the Bible with perhaps too much solemnity! There is a danger of treating its verses as terribly serious tracts to be recounted in deeply reverential tones. What we can miss is the sheer fun and wicked (in the modern sense of the word!) sense of humour that often lies within Jesus' words and images.

Picture the scene: a crowded, bustling gathering listening to this new preacher … who has a growing reputation for cocking a snook at authority figures. When he paints this image of the unjust judge it is unlikely that the crowd would be earnestly silent. Rather there would be laughter and crude guffaws, with people knowingly nudging each other and thoroughly enjoying a salacious tale.

The greatness of Jesus' parables is that they draw on such earthy illustrations but nevertheless use them to convey profound truths. It was the function of the judge to not only be an impartial arbiter of justice but

also to be the champion of the helpless and downtrodden – the widow, the orphan, the poor and the foreigner. "Whatever other cases he heard, he must be sure that these at least received their rights" (C.B. Caird)

Not so this corrupt individual. He just wants an easy life and cared little for religious principle or public opinion. Nevertheless through sheer persistence the widow secures the justice she seeks. If such doggedness pays off even with such a disreputable character as the unjust judge, how much more can we expect an ever willing God to respond to those who petition him? So this is an assurance about prayer, which Luke is deeply interested in and mentions more than Mark and Matthew. Luke's message throughout is that prayer is knocking on an ever open door beckoning us into God's loving embrace.

Prayer

Dear God,
Thank you for the Spirit inspired words of the bible;
for the way they reach out and connect with everyday life;
And thank you for: the gift, the assurance, the privilege of prayer.
Amen.

Tuesday 22 March 2022 St Luke 18: 9 - 14

John Collings, Lay Preacher, Rutherglen URC

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other;