Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church



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Thursday 5th May 2022 – Saturday 21st May

Introduction

Scholars think that the work we know as St John's Gospel has its origins in the 70s AD but reached its final form at some point between the years 90 and 110. It differs from the other Gospel in the way it presents Jesus - through a series of seven "signs" starting with the Wedding at Cana and ending with the raising of Lazarus and a series of seven "I Am" speeches which reflect growing tension between the embryonic Church and the Synagogue. Christianity soon separated itself from Judaism and St John is a record of the start of this separation. Tragically, the way the writer portrays Jewish people were used by later commentators to justify murderous anti-semitism and it is hard to hear phrases like "the Jews" in this Gospel without a shudder.

Like the other Gospels it is anonymous but it does identify "the disciple whom Jesus loved" as a source. Its similarities in style with the three Johannine Epistles lead modern scholars to treat them as coming, if not from the same author, but from a community of authors. Of course, like many debates on Biblical authorship all this is speculation.

We're not as familiar with St John as it is not read through the year like the other Gospels are. Instead, large chunks are inserted into the Church year so we know some passages very well indeed and others not at all well. Over the next few months we will read our way through this Gospel allowing ourselves to read the entire book not just selected passages chosen by the Church for Sunday after Sunday.

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Thursday 5th May St John 1: 1 - 4

The Rev'd Ron Reid, retired minister in the Mersey Synod serving as Link Minister at Rock Chapel, Farndon. Member at Upton-by-Chester URC

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Reflection

When asked what my favourite Bible passage is, the prologue to John's Gospel usually comes to mind – especially these first few verses. Part of the attraction is the beautiful flow of the cadences in most (but not all!) translations. More important is the way in which the prologue encompasses and encapsulates the whole story. Cosmology. Creation. Theology. History. Spoken into being from darkness to light.

Light – a powerful tool which can be used in so many ways. The light to which our eyes are sensitive is but a small part of a wide spectrum of electromagnetic radiation spanning radio waves to gamma-rays. Such "light" can be used for our entertainment (television); our sustenance (microwave cookers); our enlightenment (reading a book (pun intended)); our health (X-ray diagnosis or gamma-ray cancer treatment).

Much of my professional life was involved with machines for the production of intense light beams for scientific research – one member of a team of scientists and engineers designing, building and operating very high intensity sources of electromagnetic radiation. Before this team could do anything, scientists had to have the imagination to realise that a physical principle known since the 19th Century could be utilised in this way. Many novel technologies had to be developed before in the mid-late 20th Century a practical machine could be realised. Without the

For today I want to focus on two details

Philip features a number of times in the fourth Gospel but, although listed, is not featured in the other Gospels. In our account he is tested by Jesus – why? Perhaps Jesus, actually knowing what he planned to do, was helping Philip expand his understanding. From the Gospel I get the impression that Philip was a cautious man who, although seemingly close to Andrew, was the antithesis of Simon Peter. Philip had not sought out Jesus but was rather chosen by Jesus – yet, having been called, Philip went and brought along Nathanael. When some Greeks wanted to see Jesus they went to Philip who then consulted Andrew. How we should value those who may initially be cautious but are willing to act when opportunities are recognised and understood.

The second point that stood out for me is the word "the" – the prophet who is to come into the world, not "a prophet". Today, just as two thousand years ago, there are many who make end encourage claims about themselves: Jewish communities throughout Biblical times had many who claimed to be a prophet but whose claims proved false. On this occasion people realised that Jesus was the genuine prophet from God. Alas, the Christian community is not immune from those who distort the teaching of Jesus to their own advantage. We often need to be cautious like Philip, checking out what is true and dependable.

Prayer

Gracious God, so much in the world is confusing and many voices clamour to be heard, endow us, we pray, with the gift of discernment so that we do not go astray but remain steadfastly walking the Way of Jesus – in whose name and power we pray: Amen.

Saturday 21st May St John 6: 1 - 15

The Rev'd Julian Macro, Retired URC Minister, Member of Verwood United Reformed Church

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Reflection

The feeding of the multitude is recorded in all four Gospels, indeed there are two such accounts in Mark and Matthew. Those of us familiar with these accounts can too easily go into auto-pilot and not pick out significant variant details.

contributions of and communication between many skilled people, these particular light photons would not have come into being.

Such light was, in a sense, spoken into being and shone onto to interact with the molecules of matter. Thus, new knowledge was made manifest.

God spoke and light and life came into being. God spoke and Jesus was made manifest to give enlightenment to humanity. God speaks to us through Jesus so that even in the darkest of times, darkness will not overcome us.

Prayer

Even in the darkness
Come Lord Jesus, come
and let your light shine through us
so that through our actions
we may be a light in people's sight
and that we might reach out to you
in one another. Amen. (CAFOD, altd)

Friday 6th May St John 1: 6 - 18

Fay Rowland, graduate researcher at Wesley House, Cambridge.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as

of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Reflection

Grace Upon Grace. Doesn't that conjure a lovely picture of God's goodness and generosity? We receive grace heaped upon grace, pressed down, shaken together and running over.

Such a contrast to the Old Testament, where we only had the fusty law of Moses. We can throw all that old stuff away, now that we have grace and truth through Jesus.

Can we?
Many modern translations give that impression, saying "one blessing after another" or "grace after grace" in contrast with the (presumably not gracious) law given through Moses.

But that's not what it means. Jesus and Moses are not opposites, one with grace and one without, but examples of two types of grace.

The Greek word is 'anti' – grace anti grace. But anti does not mean 'opposing' or 'against', like it does in English. It's not saying that Jesus is the opposite of Moses, or that there's grace now and there wasn't before. As if God were not gracious before Jesus.

No. God always has been gracious and always will be gracious. So what does 'grace anti grace' mean?

Shinedown tell us "You can have a sound of the thousand voices calling your name. You can have the light of the world blind you, bathe you in grace" then ask the question "How did you love?"

It's all very well being the top of your game; the peak of your performance, and all the fame and glory that go with it – but if you do not love, what is the point? You can find the fastest; fittest; most talented people to idolise and follow but if you do not love, what do you gain?

No one is an island – we do not exist in isolation. But there is a difference between loving our neighbour and being adored by our fans, or adoring our idols at the expense of our neighbour.

The deserved glory does not belong to us, it belongs to God. It is no good trying to find a relationship with God by doing our own thing or following the latest trend, or only believing the bits of scripture we like. If we do not open ourselves up completely to God, what hope is there?

Let us turn to the eternal light and find our relationship with God –by reading the whole of scripture, and by loving God and our neighbour as ourselves with all we have.

Shinedown finish with "No-one gets out alive; every day is do or die; the one thing we leave behind is How did you love?"

What will our answer be?

Prayer

Lord help us not to pick and choose what we believe but open ourselves up to you fully. Open our hearts to love our neighbour and not be swayed by popular opinion or passing trends. May we give you the glory and honour due to you and allow others to support us on our journey of faith. Lord we offer you our lives. Amen

Friday 20th May St John 5: 30 - 47

The Rev'd Ruth Watson SCM MediaCityUK Church, Salford Quays

'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. 'If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. 'You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?'

Reflection

This passage in John is never read out as part of the Lectionary. Much of John is missed out because his gospel does not have its own year in the conventional lectionary. So this passage is not as familiar as some others we may read. So let's think about it this way….

The word means 'in exchange for', or 'following as a result of'. So the grace of Jesus is as a result of the grace of Moses, in exchange for the grace of Moses. The NIV helpfully has "grace in place of grace already given."

That's all well and lovely, but what does it mean for my discipleship today? It means I can expand my view of how God blesses, and through whom he blesses. God blessed through Moses, through law and prophets, through foreign kings, slave girls, disaster and abundance, nature (even a donkey!) and ultimately, through Jesus. All are God's grace after grace.

So I can see God working and speaking today through all sorts of unlikely channels – they don't have to be Christian for God to use them. Where will I see God's grace today? And where will I show it?

Prayer

God of grace upon grace,
thank you for the blessings you have lavished upon me unseen,
the goodness I have not recognised,
the grace unnoticed.
And most of all, for Jesus:
the Word made flesh,
the one who dwells among us,
the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. Amen.

Saturday 7th May St John 1: 19 - 34

Lawrence Heath-Moore, Mission & Discipleship Mentor, NW Synod

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said,

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’”

as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

Reflection

John finishes his Prologue (or Overture) at 1:18 with the statement, “No one has ever seen God; it is God the only Son … who has made him known!”

The focus on the Word might lead us to think it’s all about Jesus, and yet it is equally about God. The emphasis on Jesus is because Jesus is God made visible; what John wants us to “get” absolutely clearly is the God of grace and truth whom Jesus reveals, in order that we, like Jesus, might become children of God (1:12).

Reflection

I am writing this as one who is freshly enthused to think about John’s Gospel after a recent study day with Professor David Ford. He has just published a new commentary in which he emphasises that although the Fourth Gospel has the simplest (Greek) language it often contains the deepest ideas and benefits from constant reading and rereading.

Prof Ford’s book is no ordinary commentary with lots of footnotes and highly technical explanations, though there is a lifetime’s scholarship lying underneath the surface. Instead it is explicitly focussed on living and praying the way of Jesus through the text of John’s gospel. And in today’s passage living and praying seem to be to be directly connected: “anyone who hears my word and believes… has eternal life” or more simply in the next vese “those who hear will live.”

Often in Christian living we are inclined to draw a distinction between the active (or even activist) life and the prayerful way of the contemplative. But perhaps a full Christian life is both. We may not all be monastics but we can all have a contemplative thread through our daily living.

And prayerfully reading John’s gospel is not a bad place to start.

Prayer

Gracious God
help us in our daily lives
both to spend time in quiet with you
and also to act with you
and for you
in your world. Amen

Prayer

Loving Lord,
I do want to be made well,
healed from my ability to shift the blame,
set free from my temptation to make others responsible,
liberated from my excuses.
Heal me Lord and make me well.
Amen.

Thursday 19th May St John 5: 19 - 29

The Rev'd Alistair Smeaton, Minister, Cumbria Missional Partnership

Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomsoever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son, so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Anyone who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life. 'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

From the get-go, John is clear that Jesus is the Light who will draw many to him, but send those who are opposed to what God is doing scuttling for the darkness (1:6-13). That is what begins to unfold immediately in this interrogation by the "priests and Levites from Jerusalem".

We discover that, in John's hand, the Baptist's sole purpose is to reveal Jesus and announce his mission. Jesus is the Lamb of God, who is to take away the sin of the world (Easter). And he is to baptise with the Holy Spirit (make us children of God). The Baptist has come to point to Jesus and urge first his own disciples and then us as readers to follow Jesus from within a Spirit-filled community of disciples that John calls "children of God" (1:35-37).

John will construct his narrative so that Jesus is killed on Thursday, at the very moment when the Passover lambs are being killed in the temple. His arrival is a New Exodus, celebrated by those longing to be part of a community of justice and peace (the "abundant life" of 10:10), resisted by those who prefer "darkness". Will we welcome him and follow, or walk away?

Prayer

Of course we welcome you, Jesus!
We're the Church - how could we do otherwise?
And yet … if you call me to give up everything I have invested in the way things are …
My job. My pension. My reputation. My possessions.
If you are altogether serious about how different living as a child of God is …
Do I really welcome you?
By your Spirit, open my heart to say yes to your call.
Today. Amen.

Sunday 8th May Psalm 90

The Rev'd David Coaker serves with Grays URC in Essex

God everlasting, at your word
the hills in splendour rise;
they overshadow human life
whose glory swiftly dies.

2: Our days like dreams
come to an end,
our story soon is told
when strength is spent,
and beauty fades,
and bodies have grown old.

3: Teach us, good Lord,
to count our days,
to cherish every hour;
to seek your will, to do your work,
and trust your mighty power.

4: Lord, at your hand
we have received
the cup of joy and pain:
pour out the fulness of your grace
and we shall sing again!

After Psalm 90, David Mowbray (born 1938)
© David Mowbray/Jubilate Hymns

You can hear the tune suggested, Orphan Girl, here https://www.jubilate.co.uk/songs/god_everlasting_at_your_word

Reflection

Trying to use words when it comes to God can start with a single one but will quite soon spiral into thousands. Questions, clarifications, exceptions, all pile on to single words, and a theology degree will only give you a rough idea of the libraries that have been written. Though they are fallible, words about God do help. We may not be able to argue another person into accepting God's existence, but hopefully we will at least have a rough grasp of what we believe and through us they may perceive the possibility. A possibility that can weave together experiences, images, feelings before any words are expressed.

A rephrasing of the Psalm:

things on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working.' For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

Reflection

Something bugs me in this passage. This pool was a place of healing - rather like the spring at Lourdes. It seems that the moment to find healing was when the waters were stirred (a later verse was added to say an angel stirred the water adding a more miraculous slant) yet this man was not able to get to the water as there was no one to assist him - though presumably he was helped to and from the building each day. For 38 years this man had been ill and nothing had been done until Jesus healed him. So we might ponder the miraculous power of God but the next bit still niggles - the man does as he's told, picks up his mat and goes on his way and, in so doing, breaks the Law. It's not his fault, Jesus told him to. The man who couldn't find anyone to help him get well now passes the blame for breaking the Law. I can hear Jesus' being a bit annoyed when he said "do you want to be made well?"

Maybe Jesus was puzzled at how this man arrived at the pool each day but got no further. Maybe Jesus realised that this man needed to take some responsibility for his own health and healing. Maybe Jesus recognised the all too human response to pass the blame.

The story bugs me. Do I pass the blame or accept responsibility? How do we do this now the Covid restrictions are gone we're all being told to take responsibility for our own health? Do we go into work if we've got a cold? Do we keep away from others when we're feeing unwell so as to protect them? Do we wear a mask on public transport to keep others safe? Taking responsibility has always been hard, in our post-Covid world it's become more complex. Yet Jesus' question still bugs me - do you want to be made well?

So what about us? We hear God's word of life today. As we are faced with news of calamity, storms, floods, disease and death, are we too not called as followers of Jesus to go and be signs of God alive and at work in the world?

Prayer

Dear God, from the barrenness of our own resources, we look to you
In trust and hope, through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Wednesday 18th May St John 5: 1-18

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

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralysed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.' Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, 'It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.' But he answered them, 'The man who made me well said to me, "Take up your mat and walk."' They asked him, 'Who is the man who said to you, "Take it up and walk"?' Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.' The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such

God is eternal. Since time began, before it existed, and in whatever unknown future; God was, is, and shall be.
All of life is held within God. All life, from the simplest to complex, is energised by God. All of Creation, from quantum to galaxy, is encompassed within God. All of time, past, present and future, is beheld by God.

What are our lives but a blink of God's eye? Fifty generations pass in a night. Like dew-soaked grass that turns brown when you look away.

Our inability to truly comprehend the mind of God traps us in fear and shame. Our imperfect lives are scorched by the perfection of God's presence.

Human life is a struggle if we focus inwards rather than outwards in God. It begins with a cry and ends with a whimper.

However long our life may be, our days are filled with work and worry. They quickly come to an end and we disappear from sight.

So contemplate the nature of God and seek to emulate it. Stand in awe before God and embrace your unknowing. Make your days' count, and strive after wisdom.

Prayer

Creator God,
in the complexity and intricacy of the universe and life,
we can be drawn into your presence.
Help us to contemplate your nature.
Inspire and encourage us to emulate it.
As we stand in awe before you,
give us the courage to embrace our unknowing.
May our actions, words and character draw others to you. n

Monday 9th May St John 1: 35 - 51

Sam Richards, serving as Head of Children's and Youth Work, member of mayBe Community

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

for he was at the point of death. Then Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.' The official said to him, 'Sir, come down before my little boy dies.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, 'Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him.' The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' So he himself believed, along with his whole household. Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.

Reflection

Jesus' return to Galilee is sandwiched between two visits to Jerusalem. But there is a world of difference between the two. During his first visit, for the Passover festival, the atmosphere is tense, he makes good his escape. Prophets after all, come to no good in Jerusalem. Yet after his stay in Galilee, he returns for another festival, with new confidence, vested with the authority and power of God. What has happened?

In Galilee he's welcomed. The Galileans were impressed by what they had seen of him in Jerusalem; it seems they wanted a Messiah who would perform miracles to order. After all, had he not already changed water into wine In Cana? But this is not Jesus' agenda. He is looking for something else – evidence that it was possible for a person to believe solely on the strength of his words as "Word made flesh." He doesn't have long to wait. A royal official has come from his dying son's bedside in Capernaum. He begs Jesus to come and heal him. Jesus is abruptly dismissive; do you people have to see signs and wonders before you can believe? But the official appeals to him directly, addresses him as Lord. The urgency of the situation and his love for his little boy is only too clear. This is the language of belief. And Jesus responds simply – "go; your son will live." And he goes. Jesus' word is enough for him. The child is healed and God's power to give life is confirmed. The boy lives and the official with his whole household become faithful followers of Jesus.

As I write this we are emerging from a pandemic and into other uncertainties. When you read this what will the world be like? We have a few certainties that we need to hold onto, we can be certain of our own relationship with God as He is unchanging. We can be certain that today is the day to serve God and speak about Him to others because the fields are still ripe for harvesting. We can thank God for all the Christians who have gone before us preparing the ground so we can reap the benefits of their toil. If crops are left unharvested that will be of no use to anyone and in the same way if we do not reach out to people who have heard the word of God they will not understand and enter His kingdom. Let's work without making excuses and like the disciples we will reap that which we did not sow.

Prayer

Almighty God I thank you for all you have done for us.
Help me to see the opportunities that You provide,
Give me the words to say
Help me to know when to speak out and when to be silent but above all teach me how to be true to you in everything I do. Amen

Tuesday 17th May St John 4: 43 - 54

The Rev'd Fleur Houston, a retired minister, is a member of Macclesfield and Bollington United Reformed Church.

When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee (for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in the prophet's own country). When he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival; for they too had gone to the festival. Then he came again to Cana in Galilee where he had changed the water into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son,

Reflection

'Come and see' – this is Jesus' invitation to the two curious disciples of John the Baptist, and the invitation Philip shares with his brother Nathanael. This passage is full of seeing and being seen, from John exclaiming 'Look!' to Jesus promising Nathanael that he will 'see heaven opened'. Perhaps the key is in Jesus' question 'What are you looking for?' and the claims of the future disciples Andrew and Philip that they have found all they are searching for in him. Seek and you will find….

This passage is also full of really seeing the other. First John sees Jesus for who he is, the Lamb of God, the innocent suffering servant who would bring restoration, resurrection and renewal for the whole world. Jesus sees Simon as the Peter-rock on which a Spirit-filled community of love, with the ability to change the world, can be built. Nathanael sees past his learnt prejudice of Nazarenes to recognise Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus sees Nathanael's heart of integrity (no deceit) and preparedness to discover God in unlikely times and places – a true Israelite or member of the family of God.

Learning to see others as Jesus sees them, to name and affirm the gifts God has given them, to enable those gifts to be exercised as part of the body of Christ (whatever the age, stage, background of that person) is our collective calling to build one another up. Perhaps then we will be able to see that heaven is indeed open, and we will be able to excitedly say 'Look!' to our neighbours and point to where we can see Christ alive and at work in the world bring hope and peace.

Prayer

Open our eyes Lord
we want to see Jesus.

Open our eyes Lord

we want to see past our prejudices and see each other as your beloved children.

Open our eyes Lord
we want to see heaven open and your light and love poured out into the world.

Open our eyes Lord
we want to show others all you have shown us.

Open our eyes Lord
that we may come and see. Amen

Tuesday 10th May St John 2: 1 - 12

The Rev'd Carole Elphick Retired minister worshipping at Muswell Hill URC

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. After this he went

Help me to recognise that your love
is more precious than anything that can be touched or owned.
Through Jesus Christ our lord. Amen.

Monday 16th May St John 4: 31 - 38

John Collings, Lay Preacher, Rutherglen URC

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

Reflection

Sometimes people simply do not understand what is important. Here the disciples were concerned about food and did not seem to realise that Jesus was busy with other things and food was not His priority. The pressing matter was to obey God and do the things that were needed. People were ready to hear the message, there was no need to wait, it was the time to harvest the people who wanted to learn and follow Jesus.

Do we feel like the disciples today? Are we concerned for our own physical needs and want to wait before doing the will of God? Do we find excuses not to speak about Jesus? Do we say that we need to wait a while until such and such has happened and then people will be ready?

Martin Leckebusch © 2006 Kevin Mayhew Ltd
Tune: Ye Banks and Braes. You can hear the tune here
https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/199195

Reflection

Here we encounter God's bold invitation to live in God's presence with protection, safety, and love. Perhaps you may find it helpful to think of this Psalm as conversation between the Psalmist and God? The Psalmist praises God for shelter, love, and strength; and God responds by acknowledging our love, and assuring us of protection and rescue. Thought of in this way, the Psalm is an invitation to experience God offering shelter to each one of us – an eternal, loving, presence.

How might we respond? We could ask ourselves whether we look for God's presence in people around us and the situations we go through as much as we could. We could ask God to help us love others more. We could try to trust God more. Above all, we can try to know that we are loved by God, without limit or condition.

How might we put that response more into practice? Do we read the Bible regularly, seeking to encounter a loving God? Do we talk to God of what gives us joy, and what troubles us? Do we share our steps on the journey of following God with others doing the same thing?

Today's Psalm is one which can reassure us that God is with us and for us, someone in whom we can trust, with both hope and confidence. There is no larger vision than God's, and no greater comfort or protection. All of this we see in the one in whom we see God among us: Jesus.

Prayer

Teach me, God, to see you in everything,
and to do everything for you.
Help me to glimpse heaven in the ordinary around me.

down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there for a few days.

Reflection

John notes that Jesus' glory is revealed in seven signs of which this is just the first. It is not just transforming plain water into high quality wine but the sheer quantity involved is almost beyond imagining - the equivalent of over 1000 bottles. The steward is so mystified he asks why the best wine has been kept till last.

We don't know what the bridegroom said. We don't know if the servants told everybody of Jesus' miracle. Why did Jesus speak like that to his mother? What did he mean by 'my hour has not yet come'? Annoyingly none of these loose ends is tied up and we are left to draw our own conclusions.

It's always tempting to try and dissect or deconstruct miracles with rational explanations and scientific reinterpretations but at the heart of each there remains a kernel of inexplicable glory which we can't really ignore.

It also raises the question of how we distinguish between good and bad wine. There is an element of common sense but, as anyone who has been to a tasting session knows, it's very easy to lose sight of what you are assessing after a few mouthfuls. Are we so caught up in everyday life and its difficulties that we can no longer see the profligacy of God's love and provision for us? Have we lost the ability to discern God at work in every part of our life? Have we simply domesticated the miraculous?

This account is to do with our glimpse into the nature of God who sees a need, meets it, and goes way over the top in providing a solution. Walter Brueggemann describes this as 'the tension between the myth of scarcity and the reality of God's plenty'. God's provision stretches our vocabulary

and our ability to grasp the immensity of God's love beyond the use of words or even actions.

'Why have you kept the best till now?'

A very good question!

Prayer

'We limit not the truth of God
to our poor reach of mind,
by notions of our day and sect,
crude, partial and confined.
Now let a new and better hope
within our hearts bestirred:
the Lord hath yet more light and truth
to break forth from his word' *George Rawson (1807 - 1889)*

Wednesday 11th May St John 2: 13 - 25

Kirsty-Ann Mabbott, Church Related Community Worker, Coventry

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that

of belonging that comes from our baptism and the being uplifted by living water that is our life in Christ, do not slip back into the older ways that do not bring life or justice.

Prayer

O God, we thank you for the joy of belonging to Christ and to each other.

We pray for our sisters and brothers in the world-wide Church - especially for the persecuted Church in places of violence and terror.

Inspire us with your vision as we move into your future,
where you are already active and waiting for us to discover and serve you and your world. Amen

Sunday 15th May Psalm 91

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

Within the shelter of the Lord,
at home in his unfailing care,
we trust in his eternal strength
to rescue us from every snare:
how safe it is, this hiding place
beneath his ever lasting wings;
how strong a fortress is our God,
the Mighty One, the King of Kings.

2 Though brutal conflicts scar the day,
though nameless perils fill the night,
God's presence calms our troubled minds
and puts our primal fears to flight.
When sin persists & judgement fails
the true security is ours;
protected by the Lord, we stand,
beyond the grasp of evil powers.

3: God answers every cry for help; his love is ours till journey's end -
how ever long our lives may be, on God's firm promise we depend.
Who knows what dangers we are spared
since angels guard the way we take
And all who trust and love the Lord he pledges never to forsake.

Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

Reflection

How seriously do we, in the URC, take our baptism? Baptism echoes Jesus' words on 'living water' in this conversation. We are a people who share in 'one baptism' (Ephesians 4:5) and a people who know what it is to have the 'living water' of Christ in our lives. These are 'waters' which bring together our individual relationships with Christ, and our relationships with one another within the community of the Church.

The well, here, seems to mark the history which can only quench a natural thirst. We should take care not to live in the past – which might quench our thirst temporarily but is not about living in Christ, and in one another. What about our older buildings - they might be wonderful places to worship that uplift us for an hour a week and reflect our history, but they do not represent the living faith nor the future. Or perhaps the past is about 'how we've always done X', from worship to many other activities in the life of a church. The older ways are not bringing growth to our denomination.

The conversation about living water turns out to be about what is possible in the future. We are not told that Jesus drank a cup of water, nor whether the woman drew any water to take home – the well and the cup are no longer in the picture. Instead we have the insight the woman has gained and the courage she has to speak to the very people who have ostracised her. Even though she's found the capacity to use her voice, they tell her 'thanks, but it's not about you any longer'. I hope she didn't have to fall back into being marginalised. I hope that we, having experienced the joy

he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

Reflection

This reading is so well known, yet it doesn't sit comfortably with us that Jesus was angry and violent. To those in the Temple that day, Jesus' behaviour is that of a violent thug. His actions seem more like those of rioters and looters. Yet we accept this as Jesus doing the right thing…maybe we need to stop and consider the actions of people who we consider acting in the same way. Jesus was angry and frustrated that the Temple, the heart of Jewish faith practice had been turned into a marketplace that excluded the poor and marginalised of the community.

Try imagining that you are one of the poor, marginalised and oppressed people standing at the entrance to the Temple watching as Jesus blows a fuse and flips over the tables, throws money everywhere and smashes the baskets holding birds open so they fly away. Then to top it all off he MAKES a whip (he Blue Peter's a whip from cord - he utilises what is at hand - that's impressive) to drive out animals. Nobody is trying to stop him, probably due to terror at what this lunatic is going to do next. Jesus is red-faced, sweaty, and looking crazed, yet he is smashing up the system that keeps you marginalised, oppressed and poor. How do you feel?

The last two years have left people feeling frustrated, and tired, but there is also a current of dissatisfaction. We saw how nature began to recover internationally because of our lock-downs, lock-ins, quarrentines, but at the same time people struggled financially, and mental ill-health in all ages soared. Then when we see people acting out on their anger and frustration we sit and judge, rather than asking what the meaning behind it is. Jesus

got mad, he got beyond angry and challenged the status-quo and tried breaking the system of oppression. Maybe we need to get angry too.

Prayer

Living God, sometimes we feel so angry and frustrated about the marginalisation and oppression we see, but then we feel guilty for feeling that way. Help us to take that frustration and anger and weave it into action that challenges the systemic evil of the world, so that people can live life to the fullest. Amen.

Thursday 12th May St John 3: 1 - 21

Professor Graham Handscomb Member of Christ Church URC Chelmsford

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.' Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.' Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him….Many

But he's not. It appears that he's always been perfectly clear that his mission is from God, that it's temporary and subordinate to Jesus' - and he's happy about that. Not simply passively accepting the inevitable but happy. As the friend of the bridegroom is when he opens the door to the bridegroom and leaves the bride and bridegroom together, so John has done his work of introducing people to Jesus and he can rejoice.

There's an old story of an old minister whose flock deserted him for a happy-clappy, lively, new church nearby. And one morning, seeing the congregation even fewer than usual, the old minister enquired 'Where is everybody?' Only to be told by one brave member where the people had gone. 'Well, then,' said the minister 'Maybe we should join them.' And he led his congregation out the door and into the thriving new church.

Maybe when your focus is on Jesus, status and personal success don't matter so much?

Prayer

In a world that seems to thrive on competition, give us contentment and humility in all we do that we might truly serve you, Lord Jesus, and not ourselves.

Saturday 14th May St John 4: 1 - 30, 39-42

The Rev'd Dr Rosalind Selby, Northern College

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John'— although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

Reflection

It seems more than ever that what the world needs most is a second chance. What each one of us longs for as we stumble and at times even blunder through life - littering the road we have travelled with our mistakes and failings - is the space, the opportunity to reset, renew … redeem.

Here we find that today's reading gives us both reassurance … and a powerful challenge. And wow, what a rich passage it is: replete with profound truths; full to the gunnels with theological insights; and burgeoning with the ripe, opulent fruit of the gospel message. Indeed, it could be said that if we had nothing else, these verses alone would convey the essence, the core, of our Christian faith.

These concise verses give us so much. They feature Nicodemus, a noble Pharisee and genuine seeker of the truth … but unable to look beyond

tradition to see the Kingdom of God before him in the person of Jesus. We gain insight into the contrast between being born into the heritage of Nicodemus' world and being born anew, a second birth, born of the Spirit. And the verses also set in train that tragic (and at times almost comic) theme which permeates John's gospel narrative where everyone Jesus encounters, disciples included, just don't get it. They fail to connect with the transcendent presence and message of Jesus. In the drama of this gospel it is as if Jesus and those around him are on different plains and inhabit separate realms. Yet, as with Nicodemus, the wonderful, redemptive good news, embodied in Jesus, is there for all to see, in plain sight: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life."

As individuals, young and old, we ache for a second chance. It is there before us to claim. We need only open our eyes, and our hearts, to take possession.

Prayer

Dear God,
In the daily round of our busy lives;
In our preoccupations, anxieties and concerns;
We fail to see the one who sits and walks alongside us.
Take the scales from our eyes
And the bindings from our hearts
So that again we experience
The love, the grace, the redemptive power
Of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

Friday 13th May St John 3: 22 - 35

Dorothy Courtis, elder and lay preacher, Wortwell URC

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. John also was baptizing

at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized— John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.' John answered, 'No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, "I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him." He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.' The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified[n] this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

Reflection

We live in a world which peddles a tale of shortage. We're told there's not enough love, petrol, or money to go round so we have to grab our share, and a bit more just in case. The driver for social media is FOMO: fear of missing out. Contentment seems rare - but of course advertising wouldn't work if we were content with our lives and what we have.

Which is what makes John the Baptist so unusual. He seems amazingly relaxed about the fact that his disciples are deserting him and flocking to Jesus. And those that stay seem to expect him to be jealous - as maybe they are.