declaration “I am he” that triggered a lightbulb moment and the response “I believe”. It was akin to the flash of recognition experienced in the road to Emmaus story when Jesus broke bread with the travellers or, more prosaically, when the autofocus on the camera in your smartphone snaps in and the picture suddenly becomes clear.

Trammelled by their preconceptions, the Pharisees just could not get it. Surely not them!

Pharisees, at least as depicted in the Gospels, were notoriously obsessed by the minutiae of the Law, deploying legalistic nit-picking and subtle nuance to prove that they were right. Their understanding was the only possible one.

Remind you of anyone?

We live at a time where semi-fake news, subtle bending of the truth and answering similar but less pointed questions not asked are taken as genuine political discourse. Sometimes discourse within the Christian community can take on the same flavour, especially on questions such as sexuality, abuse, and financial morality. Can we truly say “surely we are not blind”?

Prayer

God, it’s so easy to say “I see”
when what we see is so coloured
by our own prejudices and limited insight
that focus is, at best, hazy.

Grant us that clarity of vision
which comes with humility and acceptance
and realizing that it is through Christ Jesus
that true sight and vision is to be found.



Photo Credit Brett Jordan/unsplash.com

St John 2
Sunday 22nd May – Saturday 4th June

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.

uncomfortable. Don't blame people for being happy when something good happens to them. Instead, look and listen, share the joy, and carefully adjust your theories of God and the Church to fit the good news.

Prayer

O God, make me a good Christian,
in practice as well as in theory. Amen.

Saturday 4th June St John 9: 35 - 41

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

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

Reflection

In his second interrogation by the Pharisees, the blind man whom Jesus had healed had given an astonishing testimony – only someone who came from God could open the eyes of a man who had been blind from birth. The Pharisees were scunnered (to use a good Scots word) when a man who had been born blind because of the sin of his parents had the temerity to suggest that he understood better than they what was going on. They had thrown him out of the synagogue, end of. But Jesus sought him out.
Physically the man could see. Mentally, his understanding of what had happened had come a long way, but the picture was a bit out of focus. He was hazy about who this prophet from God really was. It was Jesus'

Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

Reflection

I'm someone who likes order and structure in church (unless I'm the one causing the chaos). So it's very frustrating when something works in practice, despite the fact that it doesn't work in theory, at least as far as I understand the theory. This puts me in sympathy with the Pharisees here, at least up to a point.

No Jew is supposed to work on the sabbath day. Instead, it's a time to enjoy God's creation and give thanks to God. Jesus (a Jew) has prepared a healing mud and spit concoction for application to the blind man's eyes. This could be taken to constitute 'work' and so would transgress the sabbath day, making Jesus a 'sinner', at least in theory. But, and this is a big 'but', as a result of Jesus's sabbath day action (work?) someone who formerly had been blind can now see.

Making the blind see is divine, godly activity (Isaiah 42:7), but how can Jesus be or do that? After all, according to the theory of the Pharisees (and others), 'he is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' In practice, though, Jesus has performed such a divine healing sign. In theory, then, he cannot be a sinner! If your head hurts at this point, think of what it was doing to Pharisees who were trying to make sense of it.

Then follow salutary lessons on how not to respond to good things which threaten the status quo, whether by the pool of Siloam, or in a church today. Don't blame someone for doing good because it makes you

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Sunday 22nd May Psalm 92

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

It is good to
sing your praises
And to thank you,
O Most High,
Showing forth your loving-kindness
When the morning lights the sky.
It is good when night is falling
Of your faithfulness to tell,
While with sweet,
melodious praises
Songs of adoration swell.

You have filled
my heart with gladness
Through the works
your hands have wrought;
You have made my life victorious;
Great your works
and deep your thought.
You, O Lord, on high exalted,
Reign forevermore in might;
All your enemies shall perish,
Sin be banished from your sight.

But the good shall live before you, planted in your dwelling place,
Fruitful trees and ever verdant, nourished by your boundless grace.
In his goodness to the righteous God his righteousness displays;
God, my rock, my strength and refuge, just and true are all your ways.

Public Domain
You can hear this hymn sung to the tune Ellesdie, here
https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/152680

Reflection

There are, it is said, three kinds of psalm.

Psalms of orientation are positive and affirming. They focus on God's goodness, truth and power. They name these as major landmarks of faith, and invite us to steer by them.

Psalms of disorientation raise sharp questions. They speak for us when life has thrown dust into our eyes. We stumble around, the landmarks are

neighbours. Help us do the simple things we can and thereby shine your light into the darkness. Amen

Friday 3rd June St John 9: 13 - 34

The Rev'd Dr Trevor Jamison, Minister, St Columba's URC, North Shields

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to

ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’ Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’ They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’

Reflection

How easily we complicate things. Jesus sees a man born blind and an opportunity to do him a good turn - and glorify God. The disciples launch into a theological discussion about the sin/suffering connection. But Jesus isn’t having any of it. And then he goes and heals the man using mud and spit - which was a common treatment in those days. Not complicated. He instructs the man to go and wash it off in the Pool of Siloam and off the man pops, and comes back able to see. Simples. Simple obedience, simple result. But again the bystanders seem intent on complicating everything, asking questions. More brownie points for the ex-blind man for simply saying ‘I don’t know’ - sometimes the hardest thing of all to admit.

We’ve had a global pandemic, a war in Ukraine with pictures on our TV screens the like of which we had hoped had gone away with the end of the Second World War. We’ve seen people doing good things - quite simply helping where they could. And we’ve seen other people adding complications which were obstacles in the way of desperate and suffering people.

And I remember Jesus’s instructions to his disciples: ‘Love one another, and your neighbour as yourself.’ Simple.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
Forgive us for our lack of obedience to your command to love our

hard to see, and the confident faith of easier days seems very distant.

Then psalms of reorientation talk of storms that have passed and of trust renewed. They invite us to step forward, with a weathered and more mature experience of God, yet walking to the rhythms of faith rather than fear.

We need all three kinds. They reflect the changing seasons and cycles of our living. Together they draw us into the varied experiences of faithful people across the centuries.

Today’s Psalm belongs in the first category – orientation. Praise is good, is the opening message. Good in itself: God deserves it. Good for us too: praise gladdens us and alerts us to appreciate God. Then the second verse tells of God’s works, wisdom and ways, of greatness that is practical, perceptive and powerful. God is not to be taken lightly. And the third verse draws the Psalm together, as it sings of the wholesome and nourishing life that God can give. Such life is rich with goodness, like a fresh and fruitful tree. People like this testify to the justice and truth of God. Their living is praise in action, and praise is good.

Of course, experience does not always feel as secure as this. But when the dust flies and the storms blow, it helps to know where the landmarks are. A psalm like this is a reminder.

[Note: The threefold idea above comes from the writing of Walter Brueggemann.]

Prayer

God of this world, keep us attentive to the landmarks of your love.
God of all wisdom, keep us attuned to your ways and your truth.
God of our days and years, keep us in touch with your presence,
that we may refresh others with goodness and live to your praise.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Monday 23rd May. St John 6: 16 - 21

The Rev'd Sue Cossey, NSM and Synod Pastoral Advisor, Bristol. Member of Zion United, Frampton Cotterell.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.' Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

Reflection

Rowing a boat on a rough sea in the dark must be scary, though perhaps for the fishermen disciples it was familiar territory. What WAS frightening to them was the sight of a man walking towards them 3 miles from land. How do you explain that?

And then Jesus said: 'It is I, do not be afraid.' The fear dissipated. But as soon as Jesus got in the boat, they landed – at least 5 miles on. What was happening?

Throughout the Bible, the reaction to encountering God is fear and awe, and the response is the exhortation to 'Be not afraid.' Think of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah on encountering God – all feared the consequences. Think of Mary, Zechariah, the shepherds in the fields – all are told not to be afraid.

Encountering God's awe and majesty makes us realise we are unworthy. Why would God want anything to do with us?
Amazingly, God wants a relationship with us, and wants us to 'be not afraid'.

Many of Jesus' parables point this out. Some who think they're 'in' because of nationality or heritage or deeds are 'out'. And others who assume they are 'out' for the same reasons are 'in'.

God has no grandchildren. And certainly no great-great-great … grandchildren. This applies to us as well. Each one of us must have our own relationship with God. If we forget that and try to rely on our heritage, then Jesus might have some tough words for us, too!

Prayer

Father God,
It is good to recall your mighty deeds of the past,
to learn from those before us,
to build on their work
and be encouraged by their example.
But help us not to wallow in the golden glow
of half-remembered glory days,
resting on the laurels of former victories.
But instead may we tell your story afresh this generation,
and know ourselves your children. Amen.

Thursday 2nd June St John 9: 1 - 12

Dorothy Courtis, elder and lay preacher, Wortwell URC

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to

Reflection

We've all seen those ding-dong battles on social media, the 'frank exchanges of opinion' which get more and more heated until the admin suspends comments.

Is that what was going on here? Was this the first-century equivalent of a Twitter storm?

Certainly we see some name-calling on both sides. They call him a Samaritan and demon-possessed. He calls them liars and children of the devil. Forget 'gentle Jesus meek and mild'. He didn't mind telling a few home-truths when needed.

He was talking to Jewish people who had heard him say "I am the light of the world" and were starting to believe in him. But when Jesus hinted that this wasn't just a nice phrase to put on the first-century equivalent of a tea towel, but must impact their faith, they were having none of it.

You can almost see them folding their arms. "Abraham is our father, if you don't mind. We're Israelites and that's enough. And you say that YOU can make us free? Cheek! We've never been slaves and we don't need making 'free', thank you very much!"

Had they forgotten their holidays in Egypt and Babylon?

But anyway, it was the wrong kind of freedom.

And the wrong kind of father.

God's family has never been about being descended from Abraham. In Genesis 17:5 God promises that Abraham will be the father of many nations – not just the nation of Israel. God's children have always been children of the promise.

Jesus was teaching his disciples about God in a series of revelations that gradually increased their understanding of the nature of God – think of Luke's story of the massive catch of fish after a fruitless night as he called Simon, James and John, the wedding at Cana where they saw how water was turned into wine, the feeding of the 5000, the walking on the lake. Each time, they wondered and feared, and understood a little more, as part of their journey with Jesus towards the cross.

We have heard the whole of the story, but we too need to learn as we journey through the Scriptures, walking the way of Jesus today, wondering and getting to know the loving and forgiving (but awesome) nature of God, enabling us to grow and to share the good news with those around us.

Prayer of St Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)

Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have given us,
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us.
Most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day. Amen.

Tuesday 24th May St John 6: 22 - 40

The Rev'd Neil Thorogood, Minister of Thornbury URC and Trinity-Henleaze URC (Bristol)

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the lake saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.' Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.' So they said to him, 'What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."' Then Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.'

Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.'

Reflection

From across the lake come the crowds wanting more from Jesus: more of his time and teaching; more signs and wonders. He sees and interprets their desires. Jesus uses their longings and demands as springboards to lead them, and us, ever deeper into who he is and why he has come.

They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does.' They said to him, 'We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.' Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.'

The Jews answered him, 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?' Jesus answered, 'I do not have a demon; but I honour my Father, and you dishonour me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he is the judge. Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.' The Jews said to him, 'Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, "Whoever keeps my word will never taste death." Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?' Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, "He is our God", though you do not know him. But I know him; if I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word. Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.' Then the Jews said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?' Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.' So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

said Jesus, when they 'had lifted up the Son of Man' on the cross.) Yes, Jesus's words on life, and his actions, back up what he has to say about himself.

Then also I think I believe Jesus's testimony about himself because a little voice tells me so. Somehow, but don't ask me how, I hear the whisper of a testimony within my human heart, one telling me that this is true. Perhaps, Jesus might say, it's the testimony of 'the Father who sent me.' Perhaps others would want to name-check the Holy Spirit here.

He is the light of the world. Follow, and don't be afraid.

Prayer

Jesus, light of the world, guide me in life.
Father, Spirit, speak to me today. Amen.

Wednesday 1st June St John 8: 31 - 59

Fay Rowland, graduate researcher at Wesley House, Cambridge, worshipping at Christ the King, Kettering.

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?'

Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.'

There is much going on here! We might notice how Jesus corrects their cry for a miracle as great as the manna their ancestors received in the wilderness. That miracle, Jesus reminds them, was not a sign of the greatness of Moses, as if he conjured food from thin air. No, like all miracles, that sign pointed to God as giver and sustainer of life against all odds. The crowd's plea is reframed; if God is the giver, how can we get hold of what God gives?

To which Jesus responds with his stunning offer: "I am the bread of life." This is the first of seven times running across this Gospel in which Jesus will sum up all that he brings with an "I am…" Each time they come, these sayings extend the scope and scale of what is happening. Each time they come, they open a doorway into the work of God in the world being revealed in Jesus' ministry. Each time, they offer anyone with ears to hear the dawn of salvation.

Jesus is offering life in all of its fullness. Jesus draws the contrasts. Physical hunger comes again and again. We are only as satisfied as the gap between one meal and the next. Believing in Jesus changes everything. As his friends and followers, we are assured of the unending, unquenchable, unbroken love of God. Even dying cannot undo such love. Much we face in our lives invites us towards despair. God's silence can be bitter agony. Today, this text invites us to hold on to the deepest truth of all; Jesus has come to give us life. He does not lie. We can trust him.

Prayer

Jesus, help us to trust you;
to trust that your offer of life is real,
to believe that it is freely given,
to know it for ourselves
and share it with the world.
Amen.

Wednesday 25th May St John 6: 41 - 59

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

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' They were saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven"?' Jesus answered them, 'Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God." Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.' The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

Reflection

We think we know who people are. As the youngest in a well spread out family I got used to the question "Can I talk to your grandfather?". By the time I was 12 the set answer was "No, but you can talk to my father", and

but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.' Then the Jews said, 'Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, "Where I am going, you cannot come"?' He said to them, 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.' They said to him, 'Who are you?' Jesus said to them, 'Why do I speak to you at all? I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.' They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father. So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.' As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

Reflection

Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' That sounds wonderful to me. In this world, where it's sometimes hard to find my way, Jesus lights the path and gives me life. But why do I respond so positively? Not everyone does. Many will be left untouched by this declaration, others sceptical or hostile. In John's Gospel, some responded with criticism. Jesus, they complained, was testifying on his own behalf, so the claim was invalid.

Not everyone sees things the way I do. That presses me to ask why I believe the things I do believe, including about Jesus. Why do I trust what Jesus has to say about himself? There are lots of other people whose self-testimony makes me cautious, if not sceptical.

I think I believe Jesus's testimony about himself because, well, because he's Jesus! He's the great teacher. He's the one whose miracles change people's lives for the better. He's the one who faces the cross. (Even the argumentative sceptics in John's Gospel would see him for who he was,

Prayer

Almighty God,
we confess before you our own sin,
the sin of the Church
and the sin of the world, in which we share.
We have not loved you with our whole being;
we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves.
In your mercy,
forgive us when we turn from you;
release us from the burden of our past,
and remake us in your image and likeness
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(from the First Order of Holy Communion, Worship: from the United Reformed Church)

Tuesday 31st May St John 8: 12 - 30

The Rev'd Dr Trevor Jamison, Minister, St Columba's URC, North Shields

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' Then the Pharisees said to him, 'You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.' Jesus answered, 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.' Then they said to him, 'Where is your Father?' Jesus answered, 'You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.' He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come. Again he said to them, 'I am going away, and you will search for me,

a rather confused caller found themselves talking to the person they wanted. Wrong question, right answer.

Taken together with the place, Capernaum, the question about Joseph's son seems to mean Galileans rather than all Jews. They thought they knew his father, and jeering the wrong question, are given the right answer: You want to know about God - keep listening.

It seems to be a reflex - we think we know, and so hold as individuals and separate that which should be complete and enlightened. Reading John the evangelist stating that John the Baptist is a witness, gives us an advantage of written gospel over the Jews of Jesus' day, "And the Word became flesh ..." Jn 1:14. It's no wonder that more than one witness is required (Deut 19:15). Here are 2 witnesses: one informing the other, yet held apart and argued over. The Galileans can be understood for thinking a) they knew Joseph's son and b) he was telling them to eat his flesh. Lacking a second witness, the response is jeering at something incomprehensible and alien. Eat his flesh? No, eat the Word of life.

The human response of decry or destroy that which is different means we fail to give God praise for what is beautiful, created for salvation. It took a long time for us to get used to online and then hybrid worship, better to go without than take in a different way of thinking and behaving. "Your ancestors ate...": for them it was a case of eat or starve. In the desert of the pandemic, we learned about new ways of being church.

Prayer

Lord, may we learn to take with thanksgiving the beautiful ways of being your people the church so that we offer your Word of life to the starving. Amen.

Thursday 26th May St John 7: 1 - 13

The Rev'd Peter Clark, Retired Minister & Member of Bridport United Church

After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near. So his brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.' (For not even his brothers believed in him.) Jesus said to them, 'My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil. 8 Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come.' After saying this, he remained in Galilee. But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret. The Jews were looking for him at the festival and saying, 'Where is he?' And there was considerable complaining about him among the crowds. While some were saying, 'He is a good man', others were saying, 'No, he is deceiving the crowd.' Yet no one would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews.

Reflection

John's story-telling is detailed and extraordinary and he has a fascinating narrative going on here! Not that long after demonstrating his divinity with an amazing mass-feeding miracle, followed by walking on water, Jesus is once again surrounded by many folk, inexplicably demanding yet more signs.

I love the way that Jesus responds instead by going to this festival incognito. He wanders around, listening to what folk are saying about him, taking in what they say before later responding?

In truth that is the way I tend to use Twitter - following a number of folks, some of whom I admire and others I profoundly disagree with, rarely

said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

Reflection

When I talk to people who are outside the Church, they often feel churches are obsessed by sex and hypocritical about their own failings (particularly, in recent years, around the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults by people in authority, but also about how we use our money). Reading this passage should bring us up short if we think we have somehow progressed and are less prone to sin than people in first century Palestine.

It's such a wearyingly familiar story - a woman is thought to have done something wrong, and is harried and humiliated by the crowd. Where's the other party to this alleged adultery? Jesus handles the crowd skillfully; he doesn't let himself be rushed to a response, but takes his time. Perhaps some of the crowd are beginning to doubt themselves already. They've been caught up in the emotion of the mob, and are now regretting their action towards a neighbour. And then Jesus suggests that someone without sin should cast the first stone.

It's a bit of a gamble. There are certainly people around today who say they have no sin; what if someone like that was to snatch up a rock? But Jesus' quiet authority seems to have cowed even the most self-righteous of the accusers.

So the mob disperses. But that's not the end of the story. The woman remains, uncertain, accused but not neither exonerated, punished nor forgiven. Until Jesus speaks those words of forgiveness and encouragement.

When we meet for worship, we share a prayer of forgiveness and hear words of grace. Let us hear them afresh, as if we were the woman accused of adultery hearing Jesus' words for the first time. And may we amend our lives in response to his call.

After floods and storms, comes calm and stillness.
After strife and noise, comes peace and silence. God is within it all.

Creation displays God's constancy, holiness and eternity.

Prayer

Creator God,
revealed in the universe around us
and present in the beating of our hearts,
we place ourselves before you.
May we be attentive to your urgings.
Humble in our thoughts, words and actions.
Aware of our own short-comings and preferences.
Draw us ever closer to the way of Christ.
Amen

Monday 30th May St John 7:53 - 8: 11

Gordon Woods, Elder, St. Columba's URC, Oxford

Then each of them went home, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She

posting or responding to others' Tweets, but getting a feel for what is being said?

People raise issues, often in short and often in rather reactionary, even angry, ways and some responses are in equally combative style. Sometimes somebody responds rationally and painstakingly in a thoughtful, analytical way - often prompting the original Tweeter to answer back in a short (and often rude!) way, dismissing the responder with extreme scepticism, often using labels, and abuse.

I (unusually) responded to a Tweet in, I thought just, such a gentle and reasonable way to something someone had posted recently and was promptly blocked. I was, though, secretly rather pleased that, even though I could no longer follow the conversation, several others 'liked' my comment and that was displayed on my thread!

I wonder, then if Jesus' undercover festival visit is a bit like that? Having trailed around for a while he has the courage to raise his head above the parapet and respond? As they demonstrate how humanity's ways haven't changed significantly over the ages, he, too, demonstrates his true humanity as he teaches and shares of, what else, but his divinity? As with Twitter, some get it … some don't?

Prayer

"Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart
and a discerning mind:
give, as I play the Christian's part,
the strength to finish what I start
and act on what I find."

(Caryl Micklem (1925-2002)
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Friday 27th May St John 7: 14 - 36

The Rev'd John Matthews, retired Baptist minister, member of Wellingborough URC

About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. The Jews were astonished at it, saying, 'How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?' Then Jesus answered them, 'My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own. Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him.

'Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?' The crowd answered, 'You have a demon! Who is trying to kill you?' Jesus answered them, 'I performed one work, and all of you are astonished. Moses gave you circumcision (it is, of course, not from Moses, but from the patriarchs), and you circumcise a man on the sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man's whole body on the sabbath? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement.'

Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, 'Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.' Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, 'You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.' Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come. Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, 'When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?'

Reflection

This planet would probably be a barren rock if it were not for the tectonic plates moving beneath us. Their movement helps regulate our atmosphere, temperature and the makeup of the ground beneath our feet and oceans. Yet they are also the cause of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis. How could God create something so beneficial and yet so harmful?

This, and many other paradoxes, are reasons why many discount the existence of God. Yet there are many scientists, predominantly physicists, who still profess their faith. How can we square the circle?

The idea of God is both perfectly simple and indescribably complex. For me it is rooted in a feeling, which I then attempt to articulate. In my experience, God is. To elaborate on that statement is a never-ending work-in-progress.

Too often the words we use reinforces the impression that God is an old man in the sky, occasionally interfering with the world. We inherited that model of God from the earliest writings within the Bible, but as it was compiled the model developed and other views came into being. People of faith have grappled with trying to comprehend God from the dawn of time and will continue to do so into eternity.

When we speak of God's strength, power and might, we need to be careful that we don't limit their meaning by implying that they are ours to wield. Speaking of God requires attentiveness, humility and self-awareness.

A rephrasing of the Psalm:

God; spirit within, around, and beyond all that is.
Creation displays your splendour and shows your power.
God; present before, within, and beyond all time.
Creation displays your timelessness and shows your constancy.

invigorating; enough not only to refresh the individual, but to become a source of life to others.

I doubt that I'm the only person who feels that sometimes they are running on empty. I need to respond afresh to Jesus' offer of living water, not just for myself, but so that I can share God's life-giving spirit, the river of life, with those who I meet today.

Prayer

Jesus, I am thirsty for your life.
Fill me again with your living water.
Refresh me with your spirit.
Make me a source of life to others.

Jesus, we are thirsty for your justice.
Fill us afresh with the water of life.
Refresh us with your spirit,
so that we, in our words and our actions
bring signs of your life to the world. Amen

Sunday 29th May Psalm 93

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

Robed in majesty, he reigns,
sovereign from eternity;
praise the Lord, the god of strength,
robed in awesome majesty.
Firm and sure the world will stand:
here the Maker's power is shown--
yet, predating even time,
firmer, surer stands his throne.

Surging seas and pounding waves:
mightier is the Lord than these;
mightier than the breaker's roar,
mightier than those surging seas.
Holiness adorns his house;
age on age will hear his law;
praise the Lord, whose reign upholds
holiness for evermore.

Martin Leckebusch © 2003 Kevin Mayhew Ltd
You can hear the tune suggested for this hymn, Salzburg, here
https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/221605

The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering such things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent temple police to arrest him. Jesus then said, 'I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come.' The Jews said to one another, 'Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, "You will search for me and you will not find me" and, "Where I am, you cannot come"?'

Reflection

What makes you angry? How do you show your anger? Please pause for a couple of minutes to ponder these questions.

In this passage Jesus asks his opponents whether they are angry with him for healing a man on the Sabbath (which was against the Jewish law unless the person was not likely to survive until the following day).

In his book 'Do You Love Me?' Michael H Crosby points out that 'The word for anger that John's Jesus uses here to describe his hearers' reaction is cholan. Ordinarily anger arises from a sense of being disrespected, attacked, or deprived of something considered to be one's right. However, anger in the form of cholan is not just an emotional response to perceived or real threats; it arises from a place deep within one's being. It represents an underlying resentment stemming from a kind of envy toward another who is feared as a threat to one's world. People with cholan end up having their perception clouded. With objectivity impaired, clear judgement is impossible.' (p68f) Are there things which make us and cloud our judgement in this way?

We get angry about all kinds of things and for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes our anger is justified, sometimes it isn't. I am writing this in Fairtrade Fortnight, and we ought to get angry that so many people do not receive a fair reward for their labour. Oughtn't we? But our anger is no use

unless it stirs us to take action to change the situation, like buying fairly traded goods.

Kathleen Fischer writes, 'Anger is essential to a healthy spirituality. Losing one's passion condemns us to the 'status quo.' Failing to direct it wisely puts us and the world at risk.' (Transforming Fire, p1). But if our righteous anger is directed wisely, and channelled into right actions, it will help to change the world.

Prayer

Loving God, we confess that we are sometimes angry without good cause. Please help us to be angry about the right things and to direct our angry in helpful ways. So may we play our parts in your kingdom coming and your will being done on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

Saturday 28th May St John 7: 37 - 52

The Rev'd Clare Downing, Moderator of Wessex Synod and General Assembly Moderator (2020-22)

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?' So there was a division in the crowd because of him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, 'Why did you not arrest him?' The police answered, 'Never has anyone spoken like this!' Then the Pharisees replied, 'Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed.' Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, 'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?' They replied, 'Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.'

Reflection

Water is the most amazing substance. The fact that in most parts of the earth it exists as a liquid makes it incredibly unusual. Any molecule that small ought to be a gas – but the magic of hydrogen bonds (ask a science teacher) gives us the liquid that is the basis of life as we know it.

Whilst in our country we spend time complaining about an excess of the stuff, in the Middle East it's a precious commodity. That is probably why there are so many powerful references to water in the scriptures, from the first chapter of Genesis to the last of Revelation.

A few chapters back, Jesus has already quietly offered a spring of living water to the Samaritan woman who he talked with at Jacob's Well. And here, in the outer courts of the Jerusalem temple, he shouts out the offer to the crowds gathered for the festival. The Samaritan woman engages him in discussion about the right place to worship God – mountain or temple. Now as he stands within the courts of that temple, he offers living water to anyone who listens. God's spirit is available to all, not just for the special people who can enter the holiest places.

Unlike the overwhelming Pentecost experience of the Spirit in fire, this is a spring, bubbling up inside the believer, constantly refreshing and