We seek to love the way Jesus loved with humble actions.
the kind of actions that may never be noticed.
- to serve in the hard and the messy.
- to serve others without glamour and without acclaim.
- to leave the table where we might be served and serve others instead.

Not just to serve those who love us but to serve our enemies with equal compassion and humility. Amazingly, when obedience feels like it costs so much, you promise blessing instead.

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church



Photo Credit Brett Jordan/unsplash.com

St John 3

Sunday 5th June – Saturday 18th 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.

Reflection

There must have been a felt silence after Jesus finished washing the disciples' feet - all the disciples, not just a select few. I doubt any of them ever forgot it.

A minister tells of the time when she was part of a group visiting an African church on Maundy Thursday. After the table was laden with food, the minister's wife, Agnes, left the room. When she reappeared, she held a basin of warm water. A couple of towels over her shoulder. One by one, she knelt and washed the guests' hands. Agnes was the Christlike servant in their midst. She had prepared the wonderful meal, and now she washed their dirty hands.

Even though the disciples would remember the event, some didn't understand why Jesus did this. Certainly, they knew He had washed their feet but there must have been a deeper meaning. He then said, "If I have washed your feet, being the Lord and Master as you call me, you should wash one another's feet." I've wondered why He said this. Had none of the disciples ever done this at the beginning of the Passover? Had any of them ever done this when they had stayed at a lodging place anywhere on their travels? This might have given the disciples something to really consider—note that there is not one word of theirs recorded at this point. After this, Jesus went on to say, "I gave you an example that you would do to each other what I did for you".

In this time a mark of love and service is how Christ best becomes present among us - in acts of humble service from key workers and volunteers, in those who are served, in the ICU patient who is tenderly cared for or in the face of the supermarket worker offering a smile at the till.

Jesus, fill us with your love!

Prayer

way it should be?

Prayer

God of all;
from highest to lowest;
from richest to poorest;
from privileged to disadvantaged;
from strong to powerless;
teach us to be prepared to humble ourselves;
to shine the light of your love, peace and justice on others.
And may the Light of the World shine brightly and widely because of our Kingdom actions. Amen

Saturday 18th June St John 13: 12 - 20

The Rev'd Sue Henderson retired URC Minister worshipping at United Church Bradford on Avon

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'

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Sunday 5th June - Pentecost - Psalm 94

The Rev'd Andy Braunston is the URC's Minister for Digital Worship. He is a member of the Peedie Kirk URC in Orkney.

O great God and Lord
of all the earth,
rouse yourself & demonstrate justice;
give the arrogant
what they deserve,
silence all malevolent boasting.
See how some you love are broken,
for they know
the weight of oppression;
even widows and orphans
are murdered,
and poor strangers
are innocent victims.

2: Those who crush
your people delight,
claiming God above takes no notice;
they proclaim that heaven is blind,
that the God of Jacob is silent.
Stupid fools, when will you listen?
Now take heed,
you ignorant people.
God who gave us sight and hearing
has observed and noted
what happened.

3: God the Lord will not stay away
nor forsake
his well-beloved people;
heaven's justice soon will appear
and the pure in heart
will embrace it.
Yes, the ones whom God instructed,
who revere and study God's Word
will be saved
from all that harms them
while a pit is dug
for the wicked.

4: Should the wrong
change places with right
and the courts
play host to corruption;
should the innocent
fear for their lives
while the guilty
smile at their scheming;
still the Lord will be your refuge,
be your strength & courage & tower.
Though your foot
should verge on slipping,
God will cherish, keep
and protect you.

paraphrased and arranged by John Bell (b1949)
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Reflection

Not that long ago Jesus is recorded by John as having called his dead friend Lazarus from the tomb. More recently at his house, Lazarus' sister, Mary expresses her love and gratitude with an exuberant act of adoration, anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, followed by a symbolically triumphal entry into Jerusalem, concluding with Jesus announcing himself the 'Light of the World."

And here, in a surprisingly humble act, he then proceeds to wash the feet of his followers.

Peter objects. Of course he does - feet were pretty disgusting in those days and cleaning them was not something anyone above the rank of slave would willingly do.

Reading this, I was taken back to a placement in 2001, during my ordination training, with the Open Door Community in Atlanta, Georgia. One weekend in an upper room of their retreat house the leader Ed Loring wondered if we only had John's Gospel whether, instead of sharing bread and wine, Christians might perhaps wash each other's feet on a regular basis?

We then proceeded to do exactly that and I found myself on my knees lovingly washing those of an HIV-positive African-American community member, whose forebears had been slaves. Still living in a still deeply-racially-divided State, he was deeply embarrassed whilst I felt incredibly privileged and moved by the experience.

Such symbolic Kingdom Moments open up a vision of a world where there is indeed no longer black and white, 'Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.'

I believe that was what Jesus was symbolising in that earlier upper room - casting his own Light of the World brightness on the way it could be. The

Prayer

God of grace, God of forgiveness,
we thank you for sending Jesus to us
to love us and save us, not to judge us.
Help us to hear and to read your word,
in the many forms in which it comes to us,
and help us to respond to your message
of love, of peace, of compassion -
and be with us when we attempt difficult but rewarding things,
like reading modernist literature. Amen.

Friday 17th June St John 13: 1 - 11

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

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

The Psalm, set to the tune, Vos Sos El Destazadao by Guillermon Cuellar can be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37KOjxfDnZs

Reflection

Today we weave three themes together: John Bell's sensitive paraphrasing of Psalm 94, its deliberate pairing with Cuella's haunting tune, and Pentecost.

The opening stanza evokes images of women and children being bombed in Ukraine, babies and elderly killed, and the memorial to Jews murdered by the Nazis being descrated by Putin's forces. Bell senstively brings out the cry of the Psalmist urging God to act as those whom God loves are being harmed. Bell keeps up the punch with the second stanza showing how those who crush God's people delight and think Heaven is blind to their crimes. I couldn't read this without thinking of Patriarch Kirill who has, thus far, supported the war - sharing an ideology with his master in the Kremlin. Despite the anger and rawness of the Psalm we still have hope - hope that God will act, hope that even if the courts don't intervene, even if the guilty smile at their scheming that God will cherish, keep and protect the faithful.

The tune was written as part of a 1970s mass setting written at the request of St Oscar Romero when he was Archbishop of San Salvador. Romero, appointed as a conservative force in the Church, was moved by the sufferings of his people at the hands of an evil, corrupt, and Western supported government. He soon became a radical supporter of liberation. He was, for his pains, shot whilst celebrating mass in his cathedral. The simple tune works well with Bell's rendering of the Psalm.

So, on this Day of Pentecost, when we celebrate the birth of the Church, the energising presence of the Holy Spirit, we pray for all who are crushed under oppression, who wait for God to hear their case and vindicate them and remind ourselves that the same Spirit who gave birth to the Church calls, inspires and energises us to work for justice so God's people might

be free.

Prayer

Rise up O God,
forget not your suffering people,
bowed down with murderous rage,
crying out for liberation from invasion.
Rise up your people O God,
inspire us by your Spirit,
that we may not be silent
but rage for your Kingdom to come. Amen.

Monday 6th June St John 10: 1-20

Professor Graham Handscomb Member of Christ Church URC Chelmsford

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me.'

Reflection

Today is 'Bloomsday', the anniversary of the date in 1903 on which the action of James Joyce's epic, genius, brilliant but sometimes baffling novel 'Ulysses' takes place. In Dublin today folks will be dressed in period costume recreating scenes from the book, which follows its main characters over a single day from early morning to the small hours. Making extensive use of the 'stream of consciousness', an attempt to depict the inner workings of the human mind, it's not the easiest of novels to read. In fact, the website Goodreads places it third in a list of books most often started but left unfinished – two places above the Bible which comes in at number five.

Both, of course, are long and complex texts written in a wide variety of styles with a dazzling range of literary techniques, many memorable characters, and powerful meditations on the nature and ultimate meaning of human existence. Neither are straightforward to interpret in their entirety. But, luckily for those of us who profess to be followers of Jesus, he is always ready to accept those who don't make it to the end. He tells us here that he does not judge anyone who has heard his word but does not keep it, because the mission he has been given by God who sent him is to save the world, not to judge it. If you haven't read the whole of John's Gospel perhaps now is the time to try – or you could even try reading the whole Bible, in all its various and sometimes contradictory brilliance. Why not try reading 'Ulysses' too – and keep going, because as it happens the last chapter is the best!

Having experienced the Word of God's love in Jesus, the light is with us. Full stop and no returns.

We are surrounded with witnesses – with therapists, friends, family, support workers, charities, churches and so many more – who reflect the light of Christ to us, warming our hearts so that we might do the same. Circumstances can blind us, but light persists. We can decide to walk through this world believing in the light that shatters all darkness – that we might say:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 38-39)

Prayer

Light of the world,
scatter the darkness we pray.
Open our eyes to hope,
Open our ears to joy,
Open our hearts to each other
that we might follow you and display your likeness.
Light of the world,
enlighten our darkness we pray. Amen

Thursday 16th June St John 12: 44 - 50

The Rev'd Nick Jones, Minister, Heswall URC

Then Jesus cried aloud: 'Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge;

sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'

Reflection

In the centuries since the time when the Gospels were written we may have developed a rather cosy, comfortable and even saccharine image of the Good Shepherd. The archetypal picture on the Sunday school walls of the benevolent, protecting shepherd cradling the woolly sheep holds sway in many minds. There is certainly an element of this loving, caring figure in the Gospel message. However, as today's reading shows, Jesus' teaching, using the concept of the shepherd, is far more potent and visceral in the punch that it carries.

In the anodyne characterisation of the shepherd the modern reader seems to have lost the connection between the shepherd and that of the office of ruler which Ezekiel and others so powerfully make in Old Testament prophecy (e.g. Ezekiel 37.24). Jesus is the one true shepherd, the one true leader of his people, and how are we to know this … because, as foretold, he lays down his life for his sheep.

So this sets a very different tone from the comfortable picture we have grown up with. Jesus as the Good Shepherd is a poignant and tragic figure. He also represents a challenge for those who he calls to enter by the gate that his self-giving love has fashioned for us. The stakes could not be higher; we are dealing with big issues of divine leadership, sacrifice and salvation. And these verses show we are not the only ones to struggle with understanding the nature of his teaching, and to recognise the shepherd's voice: "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them."

So we must guard against the familiar cosy image blinding us to the personal challenge that these verses are making for us. The marvellous thing is that he calls each one of us by name. We only need to show that we know his voice and enter by the gate.

Prayer

Jesus, You wonderfully call each one of us by name.
We ask that through your Spirit
we hear and recognise your voice;
so that you truly become
the shepherd, the leader,
the one who guides us
through our lives and
through the gate
into the fold of your embrace. Amen.

Tuesday 7th June Read St John 10: 22 - 42

Val Morrison, Elder and Lay Preacher, Doncaster

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's

'He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.'

Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him. Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God.

Reflection

Jesus words, just prior to his departing, have stuck with me as I prepared to write this reflection: "Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you…While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light" (vs.35-36).

As I write, the Ukrainian members of our human family are fighting for their identity and land. Many are fleeing the violence across the borders to friendlier neighbours. Some are staying to defend their cities. Families that just a few days ago were planning home improvements, have packed a bag, and left; not knowing if they will return. I have no idea what the situation will be as you read this.

Holding to the light is difficult. We don't need to face war to know this, but my heart breaks wherever light is shattered and darkness advances.

We see that walking as children of light was hard for the disciples of Jesus: that even those who believed in him, rejected him for fear of their place in society and for how others will treat them.

What darkness lurks and overwhelms our faith today?
What stops us from even acknowledging that there is light?

any moment by forces beyond our control. We only need to look at the lamentable situation in Ukraine. However, Jesus knew exactly what He was going to endure- betrayal, crucifixion and the anguish of being forsaken his Father. That must have been tough! This knowledge troubled him and he said, “Now my soul is troubled”. Two days later, still troubled he said: “O my Father, if it were possible, let this cup pass from me”.

Here is where I find hope in this passage. That Jesus could feel just as troubled, and sad as we would in the face of similar trials. Being fully divine, he was nevertheless like us since He is fully human. This is a tremendous source of comfort in that we have a Saviour who fully understands our feelings, hopes, fears, dreams and weaknesses because He Himself was troubled by the very things. If we have a need, we should take it to Him in prayer for He has been there and he got the t-shirt! Amen.

Prayer

Lord Jesus we thank you because you went through the trials and sufferings we encounter here on earth even though you were without sin. Because you triumphed we can join the songwriter in singing; oh what peace we often forfeit and what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer-Amen.

Wednesday 15th June St John 12: 36 - 43

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

After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them. Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. This was to fulfil the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

‘Lord, who has believed our message,
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’

And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said,

name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.’

The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, ‘I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?’ The Jews answered, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.’ Jesus answered, ‘Is it not written in your law, “I said, you are gods”? If those to whom the word of God came were called “gods”—and the scripture cannot be annulled— can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, “I am God’s Son”? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.’ Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands.

He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there. Many came to him, and they were saying, ‘John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.’ And many believed in him there.

Reflection

The first thing which strikes me as I begin reading this passage is the very precise and specific time and location, placing Jesus in the temple and at the time of the festival of Dedication. The people gathered round - potentially a threatening group – laying down the challenge to Jesus. The question “How long will you keep us in suspense, if you are the Messiah tell us plainly” does not seem to be a question asked with friendly intent. Are these people who really want the answer to their question? As the conversation continues it becomes very clear that those present fail to

understand Jesus and his all-important relationship with God. The image of the sheep and the shepherd which runs through this chapter of John's gospel has a tradition of illustrating the soft and caring elements of shepherding but if we look more closely we might find a different picture. Jesus' reference to 'the works I do in my Father's name' points to something deeper perhaps leading those gathered round to a fear of the underlying power of those works and a recognition that they really do not understand what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus' challenge back to his listeners is to say if I am not doing the works of my Father then don't believe me.

This is not a passage about what is said or what is done. It is a passage about Jesus' relationship with God and in turn our relationship with Jesus and through him with God. It is an invitation to us to step up to the plate, to be prepared to see the 'good works from the Father' and to learn from the one who performed them so that we may do likewise.

Prayer

Challenging God,
may we not hide from your call.
may our daily living be a demonstration to those around us of our relationship with you.
may our words and actions offer hope in a hurting world. Amen

Wednesday 8th June St John 11: 1 - 44

The Rev'd Dr Elaine Colechin, Minister, St Mark's United Church, Greenwich and Bromley United Reformed Church

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory,

Tuesday 14th June St John 12: 27 - 36

The Rev'd George Mwaura church of Christ the Cornerstone Milton Keynes

'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, 'We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?' Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.'

Reflection

History is littered with celebrities who died prematurely and never attained their finest hour of glory in their careers, Elvis, Jackson, Whitney etc. But in our passage, Jesus goes down in history as One whose death produced his finest hour of glory. This amazing glory continues to influence and change lives twenty centuries later. This passage helps to separate Christ's earthly life and ministry with his final journey to the Cross.

Previously, John tells us in chapters 2, 6, & 8 that His hour had not arrived. But now we read: The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified.' Jesus is no longer talking in future tense, but now confirms that the time had arrived.

Unlike Jesus, most of us cannot tell when our work on earth is finished. We can and make plans, but they remain just plans. They can be scampered

The Greek visitors in the temple court of the Gentiles may have witnessed the "Palm Sunday" triumphal entry of Jesus with the Passover pilgrims and they were curious to know more. This incident was transformative for Jesus as it demonstrated that his mission was not only to his often inward-looking, restrictive fellow Jews but made real their ancient mission to be a light to all peoples.

Today's enquirers cannot meet Jesus physically (and may be put off by some of the GHPs – ghastly holy pictures – still seen in some places) but they can meet us. If people want to meet Jesus are they not entitled to form their assessment from their experience of his followers? How do our lives reveal to others what Jesus is like? (I rather wish this was to be published anonymously.)

Over 90 years ago Nicholas Berdyaev* wrote, "There is no longer any room in the world for a merely external form of Christianity… The world is entering upon a period of catastrophe and crisis when we are being forced to take sides, and in which a higher and more intense kind of spiritual life will be demanded from Christians." (Freedom and the Spirit). Jesus said, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."

*Born in Kyiv, taught in Moscow, exiled in France

Prayer

When I survey the wondrous Cross,
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride,
Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all. Amen

Isaac Watts

so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come

to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Reflection

Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

As I pondered this text, considering how it draws us into the mystery and wonder of the resurrection and aids honesty in those left behind in the hours surrounding death, these final words of Jesus in the story of Lazarus lingered in my thoughts. Obviously, as Lazarus' life was restored and he went to leave the tomb, he needed to be physically unwrapped from the strips of cloth that a body was bound with when it was laid out. But in the context of resurrection and thinking about the complexity of death where

Psalm 95 does not show how God's power is known in every situation, but it does encourage us to think about the difference between our will and God's will, and it does encourage us to be aware of the difference between what we plan and what God plans.

Prayer

Teach me your ways, Lord:
help me to see that it's all about you
and not always all about me. Amen.

Monday 13th June St John 12: 20 - 26

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

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

Reflection

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus," is, I have been told, a notice fixed to the pulpit of one of our churches. Let's not get side-tracked by the gender or location of preachers but accept that this is both a relevant and demanding request. Through how many of my sermons have people been able to see, to meet Jesus? How often do you leave worship feeling that you now know Jesus better?

3: In worship bow the knee,
our glorious God confess;
the great Creator, he,
the Lord our Righteousness.
He reigns unseen:
his flock he feeds
and gently leads
in pastures green.

4: Come, hear his voice today,
receive what love imparts;
his holy will obey
and harden not your hearts.
His ways are best;
and lead at last,
all troubles past,
to perfect rest.

Timothy Dudley Smith © 1984 Hope Publishing Company, 380 S Main Pl, Carol Stream, IL 60188
You can hear the tune suggested for this hymn, Darwell's 148th, here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6xQy2LnW5M

Reflection

Those who grew up with the Book of Common Prayer (not the average Daily Devotions reader, I accept) will know this Psalm well, as part of Morning prayer, also known as Matins. It is widely known as the Venite from its first word 'come'. What can it say to us, whether we know it well or not?

This Psalm speaks of the choice to pay attention to God. We might do that through reading or through prayer in church, but do we pay attention to God in the events of our lives through the week? They may be simple choices, or more complex life decisions. Do we pay attention to God in our care for the creation which clearly mattered to the Psalmist? This Psalm is an invitation to reflect upon whether we ever confuse our perspective with what we are able to discern as God's perspective.

This Psalm also speaks of God's sovereignty. Our spiritual ancestor John Calvin wrote of God's power and our total dependence upon God. The Psalmist puts this as the rock, the Maker, and the shepherd. To those of us who think we might have some power or influence, this is an unwelcome reminder that God is in charge, not us.

we grapple with our beliefs amidst the overwhelming emotions of grief, why has the storyteller, the Gospel writer of John, ended with an image of new or renewed life being the unwinding of the things that bind and the need to let go?

As we mark 50 years of the URC there is great encouragement to celebrate our achievements. However, given the difficult times we find ourselves in—the deployment crisis, numerous church closures, lack of people—there feels like there is little to rejoice over. Rather than planning a party, might it not be more fitting to begin scripting a funeral? Yet, although a funeral is where we gather to collectively mourn the passing of a loved one, is it not also the moment where we give thanks for a life and offer it back to God in hope of resurrection?

John Bradbury in his paper published in Reform (March 2022) suggested that God is calling us to refashion the Church in radical ways. To do this we have to believe in the resurrection and look for the green shoots of life. However, this requires being unbound and letting go!

Prayer

Living God, you call us from death to life, darkness to light.
You call for those things that bind us to be stripped away
so that we may go in faith and live in your way.
Help us to give thanks for what has been,
as we seek your courage and strength
to be unburden and refashioned as you will,
as part of the body of Christ,
given life through your mercy and grace. Amen.

Thursday 9th June St John 11: 45 - 55

John Collings. Lay Preacher. Member of Rutherglen URC

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and

told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples.

Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, 'What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?' Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

Reflection

We read of some very different reactions to Jesus, many believed and others were afraid of the Roman authority's reaction. Caiaphas recognised that one man could die for a nation. John wrote that Caiaphas prophesied that Jesus was about to die. Caiaphas was speaking a prophecy that was given to him by God. He spoke the words, but did he really realise the full significance of what was going to happen? It is easy for us to understand the significance of what was about to happen to Jesus but how could anyone know in advance that Jesus would die then rise again?

There were different reactions in the account. How do people react today

of which we are part. Many of them come from African Palms, a project started in 1965 by Fr Alan Talbot, an Anglican priest. Whilst serving as a priest in very poor and remote areas of South Tanzania, he had the idea that people could earn money by making crosses from Dwarf Palms which grow wild. He would then aim to sell them in the UK. The project became very successful and now three million crosses are sold worldwide each year, providing additional income for the villagers who make them. (For more information go to Africanpalms.co.uk.)

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for Alan Talbot's vision for palm crosses and for the income which people earn through making them. We pray for our sisters and brothers in Christ in other countries who suffer privation and persecution. Thank you, too, for the meaning that palm crosses can have for us all the year round. Helpful us to live as faithful disciples of the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord. Amen.

Sunday 12th June Psalm 95

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.

Come, let us praise the Lord,
with joy our God acclaim,
his greatness tell abroad
and bless his saving Name.
Lift high your songs
before his throne
to whom alone
all praise belongs.

2: Our God of matchless worth,
our King beyond compare,
the deepest bounds of earth,
the hills, are in his care.
He all decrees,
who by his hand
prepared the land
and formed the seas.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!'

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.
Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!'

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'

Reflection

This is, of course, John's version of the story which we refer to as Palm Sunday. But without John's version we could not do so, as it is the only Gospel that specifically mentions that it was palm branches which people waved to welcome Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem.

In many churches palm crosses are distributed on Palm Sunday. These make the link between Jesus riding into Jerusalem, and being acclaimed by the crowd, and his being crucified just five days later, after a crowd (the same people or different ones?) bayed for his blood.

There is an Anglican and Roman Catholic tradition of burning palm crosses and using the ashes in the next Ash Wednesday service. What do you do with yours, if you have one? I keep mine until the next Palm Sunday, and it serves as a visual reminder of the Lord's life, death and resurrection.

Palm crosses can also remind us of the wider church, and the wider world,

when they hear the truth about Jesus? Many do believe and despite the numbers who attend Church falling over the past two pandemic dominated years there is no suggestion that less people believe.

Many people went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It seems that a lot of these people were talking about Jesus. They wondered where He was. We may ask the same question, "where has Jesus been for the last two years?". We know the true answer, He has been constantly with us, offering comfort and support to those living in fear, uncertainty or distress. We are living in very uncertain times (as I write this the war in the Ukraine is raging). As Christians we need to remember that we have a constant in our lives, we have the Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:17 "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." We have this certainty today because of the events that happened at the time of Passover we have been reading about.

Prayer

Loving God,
We thank you for being with us
even when we don't realise that You are near,
Help us to trust you more deeply day by day,
We thank you that even when
we see empty places in our churches You are there,
We ask you to bring comfort to all who are living with fear or distress
We thank you for the events that happened in Jerusalem so long ago and most of all we thank you that we know you will never leave us. Amen

Friday 10th June St John 12: 1 - 11

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

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary

took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Reflection

The word 'anointed' appears three times in John's Gospel, by my count. In Chapter 1, Andrew tells Simon Peter "'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed)", and then there are two references to this story - slightly oddly, Mary is described in Chapter 11 as 'the one who anointed' Jesus, even before we get to this story in Chapter 12! [I can hear my writer friend Fiona giving John editorial feedback: "You've got too many Marys in this story. Give your characters names with different initials so the reader can remember which is which!"].

What an interesting anointment, though. Not anointing with holy oils on the head as a King or Priest might be, but anointing with burial perfumes on the feet - and by a woman, not some powerful man. Not for the first or last time, Jesus's life confounds those who are expecting a mighty king or warrior. I see a parallel with Matthew's story of the Magi; their gifts included frankincense and myrrh, with their costly fragrance and use for anointing. Even in life, Jesus is brought gifts that prefigure death. It feels incongruous - almost like asking a dinner guest to stand up so we can measure them for their coffin!

I think Mary had a sense that she wouldn't have Jesus for long, and wanted to show the depth of her love and respect. After all, the rumblings have already started after the raising of Lazarus. The way she lives in the moment is shocking to Judas, who can think of better ways to spend her money (though John comments that his concern for fiscal prudence had a darker motivation). Is it shocking to us, conditioned to think of saving for rainy days and to shun excessive consumption?

Prayer

Lord, we give thanks for those like Mary,
who have the perception to see what we cannot or will not.

Help us when we hesitate
and fail to act because we might need to do something else later.

Challenge us when we fail to rejoice
because we think sorrow is just round the corner.

Prompt us to hear your call now
and not just when it's convenient to us.

And may we live life in its fullest,
and enable our neighbours to do so too. Amen

Saturday 11th June St John 12: 12 - 19

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

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

'Hosanna!