

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church



photo credit Philip Weis /pexels.com

St Matthew's Gospel part 1
Monday 9th - Tuesday 31st January 2023

[Introduction](#)

Matthew's Gospel is the first book of the New Testament and for millennia Christians believed it was the earliest of the four Gospels. Now, most scholars believe that Mark's Gospel was a source for Matthew - who repeats almost everything in St Mark. The editor of Matthew seems to have access to a body of material shared with the editor of St Luke but not known to either Mark or John and his own sources around the birth of Jesus - the stories of the Magi and of Gabriel's appearances to Joseph are only found in Matthew.

The Gospel is concerned with showing how Jesus’ life and ministry was foretold in what we now call the Old Testament. Most scholars think the Gospel was written between AD 80 and 90 with a range of between 70 and 110 being mentioned. A minority think it was written before AD 70 which would make it the oldest Gospel. All these dates are at least 40 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. We have no idea who the editor was who drew these stories together - the earliest Church identified him as the Apostle Matthew but we simply have no idea who wrote it.

Matthew is the Gospel that we will hear read in Church this year and so we will read through it between now and Easter - skipping the birth narratives as we’ve heard them over the Christmas services and Daily Devotions.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION..... 1

MONDAY 9 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 2: 1 - 12 3

TUESDAY 10 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 2: 13 - 15 5

WEDNESDAY 11 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 2: 16 - 18 7

THURSDAY 12 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 2: 18 - 23 8

FRIDAY 13 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 3: 1 - 6..... 10

SATURDAY 14 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 3: 7 - 12 11

SUNDAY 15 JANUARY 2023 PSALM 118..... 13

MONDAY 16 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 3 13 - 17 15

TUESDAY 17 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 4: 1 - 11..... 16

WEDNESDAY 18 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 4: 12 - 25 18

<u>THURSDAY 19 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 5: 1 - 12</u>	<u>20</u>
<u>FRIDAY 20 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 5: 13 - 20.....</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>SATURDAY 21 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 5: 21 - 31</u>	<u>24</u>
<u>SUNDAY 22 JANUARY 2023 PSALM 119</u>	<u>26</u>
<u>MONDAY 23 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 5: 33 - 48</u>	<u>28</u>
<u>TUESDAY 24 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 6: 1 - 15.....</u>	<u>30</u>
<u>WEDNESDAY 25 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 6: 16 - 34</u>	<u>32</u>
<u>THURSDAY 26 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 7: 1 - 6</u>	<u>35</u>
<u>FRIDAY 27 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 7: 7 - 20.....</u>	<u>36</u>
<u>SATURDAY 28 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 7: 21 - 28</u>	<u>38</u>
<u>SUNDAY 29 JANUARY 2023 PSALM 120.....</u>	<u>40</u>
<u>MONDAY 30 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 8: 1 - 4</u>	<u>42</u>
<u>TUESDAY 31 JANUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 8: 5 - 13.....</u>	<u>43</u>

[Monday 9 January 2023 St Matthew 2: 1 - 12](#)

The Rev'd Branwen Rees, East Wales Regional Minister

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been

written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Reflection

There is something of the pantomime villain about Herod, you can almost hear the boos and hisses as he enters the stage. But let’s be honest, there is nothing funny about what he does.

Herod the Great was a political survivor, astute at seeing which way the wind was blowing and swapping sides to retain power. He was a clever and efficient ruler, but he was also a cruel tyrant. Jews never accepted him as their rightful king and this incensed him, and he set about violently subduing any potential opposition including murdering members of his own family. So, the arrival of these wise men with news of the birth of the king of the Jews unsurprisingly sent him into a downward spiral.

But what of these visitors from the east? We know very little about them

and not in any worthiness or achievements of our own.
We come, with the centurion, to plead for those
who are paralysed by fear and guilt,
distressed by sickness, anxiety and grief.
May your love be known – under our rooves –
and the beauty of your word
silence the discord and unrest of our world.
Only say the word and our souls shall be healed.
Through Christ. Amen.

in that hour.

Reflection

The humble approach of the centurion contrasts with how others saw him. In Luke's version the elders tell Jesus: "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us". (Luke 7: 4-5) Clearly his military superiors considered him worthy of the rank of centurion. But in Jesus' presence he does not pull rank. Despite being a respected Synagogue benefactor he pleads as one unworthy.

"Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed." His words have found their way into the liturgy of the Church; for centuries Christians have used these words just before receiving Communion. Until recently the words used were, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed". Since 2011 the Catholic liturgy changed to "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed". The centurion's words have been the inspiration for the Prayer of Humble Access from the Anglican liturgy: We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table ...

Sometimes it is others who convince us we're unworthy; sometimes we convince ourselves by comparing ourselves unfavourably with others we deem to be more worthy. The centurion's prayer is a great leveller – reminding us that no-one is worthy in their own right and yet, amazingly, thanks to God's "manifold and great mercies", each of us is welcomed at God's banquet - God comes to us.

Prayer

God, we come to you, trusting in your mercy

other than they were persistent. Coming from the east we can assume they travelled from Babylon; a journey of some 1700 miles that would have taken four to five months along ancient roads and mountain passes. You can understand then that when they reached Jerusalem and saw a palace, obviously that was where a new king would be born.

We don't know what they think when they finally reach the place of Jesus' birth – whether they were surprised or horrified at such a humble beginning for a king, but when they enter they are in awe of the sight that greets them and so bow down and offer their gifts.

Whether we have been to the manger just once or many, many times, may we share the reaction of our royal visitors. May we too stand in awe, bow in adoration, offer all we have, and be open to the Word of God as to where we go next.

Prayer

Emmanuel, God with us, from east and west and north and south, may the light of your love shine through us this day so that all may be touched by your loving presence. Amen

[Tuesday 10 January 2023 St Matthew 2: 13 - 15](#)

The Revd John Durell, retired minister and member of Waddington Street URC, Durham

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Reflection

Matthew reads the scriptures in his own distinctive way. This is the second time that he has referred to the fulfilment of prophecy (and there are more instances to come), as though he believes that the prophets' chief task was to foretell the future.

But turn to the Hosea quote (Hosea ch 11) and we find a beautiful passage describing God's loving parenting relationship with his people Israel. "I took them up in my arms.... I led them with bands of love...." This is the son whom God has called out of Egypt through the liberating exodus experience that marks the turning point in their history – and the prophet of course had no idea that centuries later a child named Jesus, soon to be referred to as "Son of God", would also spend time in the land of the Pharaohs.

We could accuse Matthew of being wooden and unimaginative in the way he uses scripture. The frequent repetition of his formula "that the prophecy might be fulfilled" is as jarring as the claim "But the Bible says" which we often hear in angry and frustrating debates today. We may all claim to value the scriptures, but we do not interpret and understand them in the same way, even if we look for the help of the Holy Spirit in our all-too-human attempts.

But it's good that this early on in his gospel Matthew reminds us of the fascinating connections that can be made as we reflect on the story of God's great love from its beginnings. The Word of God that we encounter in the scriptures is, as Watts put, "a broad land of wealth unknown". And maybe we can find breadth and riches even here each day, as we share with one another our own reflections and insights.

Prayer

We thank God for the words of the prophets
and the writings of all who heard and recognised in their message

to articulate faith in thoughtful, sensitive, ways. Maybe, we're aware of how the Church often excludes and don't want to be muddled with those who seek to shut people out.

The challenge for us is to be both socially active and religiously literate. To include people in our churches, mission and in our evangelistic efforts that we show and tell people of the God whose love reaches all - even us.

Prayer

Since the beginning of time, Most High,
you have loved us and called us to be Your own.
Deep in your heart You hold us, Ancient of Days,
in Your tender embrace.
Give us grace, Eternal One,
to show and tell others of Your love,
that all may be made whole. Amen.

[Tuesday 31 January 2023 St Matthew 8: 5 - 13](#)

The Rev'd Geoffrey Clarke, Moderator, East Midlands Synod

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed, in terrible distress.' And he said to him, 'I will come and cure him.' The centurion answered, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it.' When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' And to the centurion Jesus said, 'Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the servant was healed

Monday 30 January 2023 St Matthew 8: 1 - 4

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

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. Then Jesus said to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.'

Reflection

The leper was excluded from his community due to fear of illness and fearful faith. The dreaded skin disease was not only unpleasant but also made him ritually unclean and so unable to be in a right relationship with God. Taught from birth to pray, attend Synagogue, and offer sacrifice at the Temple, the leper was excluded from God's people - shunned for fear of infection and for fear of passing on, through his infection, ritual uncleanness. Unable to pray with his people the leper was excluded from being the person God called him to be. No wonder he approached Jesus with fear - would the Rabbi send him away with harsh words, afraid to be made unclean himself? Jesus' response does not surprise us; he affirms his desire to cleanse and heal, restoring this man to health and to right relationship with his community and, in so doing, allows him again to join in with the praises of God in the midst of his people.

We're very good in the URC at seeing how we need to be active in our communities. This winter we've been feeding people through foodbanks, keeping folk warm through warm spaces, showing that our love is inclusive in a variety of ways. We're good at calling out the powerful and reminding them to whom they have, one day, to give account. We're less good, I suggest, at helping people restore their relationships with God. Maybe we're a bit embarrassed to talk about religion. Maybe we aren't sure how

a living word for their own time.

Through the Spirit may these words be alive for us in all that we believe and do. Amen

Wednesday 11 January 2023 St Matthew 2: 16 - 18

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

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

Reflection

I cannot imagine what it is like to lose a child, nor what it is like for an entire village to lose half a generation. Somehow these questions have been present throughout my life, owing to family circumstances and to growing up in South Wales.

Herod's greedy rage, trying to remove all possible challengers to his status and possessions, makes no sense either then or now. What had these children done that he had to take revenge against the Magi in this way? I doubt that the massacre was limited to babies and toddlers, more likely every small child was killed so those carrying out orders could report they had missed none. Putin's annexation of four areas of Ukraine, with yet more mass killings in the news from other countries, makes Herod's crimes even ring all too true with contemporary horrors.

What do you say? You, the neighbour suffering the same torment; you,

the rabbi standing in the synagogue; you, the writer trying to convey the horror of these families suddenly missing one beloved? What can you say, God? The sad loss of the potential all these individuals held within themselves; the harm which the future will reveal for parents and siblings “to the last syllable of recorded time”; the elimination of love?

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” (Isaiah 40:1) Some of the great pieces of Messianic love poetry stem from horror, fear, death. Is this God trying to warn and prepare his people; the rabbi reading the prophets - it was always thus; the writer’s explanatory use of prophecy?

By some means, you pick up the pieces, put your life back in a semblance of order and carry on. You ignore the taunts of those who escaped the horror but jibe at you in case the horror returns to them. Somehow you determine that good will come and these short lives will have meaning.

Prayer

God who grieves with us and alongside us,
you did not create us to live like this
half dead ourselves with fear and grief.
You know that we were not meant to live
sick to our hearts with pity for ourselves
and others. Comfort, O comfort
all your grieving people, come and listen to us.

Thursday 12 January 2023 St Matthew 2: 18 - 23

Val Morrison - Elder, Ardeen Road URC Doncaster

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a

the text.

Recently I attended an online seminar discussing the Hebrew text of Psalm 120. Now it is a long time since I had done anything like this so I was hoping to remain a passenger. However, it soon became clear that active participation was required as we took turns reading, translating, or commenting on a verse. Although I was well out of my depth I really appreciated both the chance to look at a few verses from the Bible in that level of detail and also the many insights shared by the participants.

The most important thing i took away from the session was that after prayer to God for rescue from lying lips and deceitful tongues in verse 2 (of both the Psalm and the hymn), in the middle part of the Psalm (verses 3 and 4 in our Bibles) the Psalmist then goes on talk directly to that deceitful tongue ‘personified’. To use a current expression, he “calls it out”.

I wonder what lying lips we might need saving from today?
And which deceitful tongues we should be calling out?
Not forgetting the possibility that it might be our own!

Prayer

Almighty God. We give you thanks for careful scholars
who strive to understand the detail
of each word and phrase in the scriptures.
We give thanks for those who ponder
what you might be saying to us through the words.
Like our Psalmist and our hymn writer
we pray for release from lying lips in our own age,
and for the courage to name the lying tongues,
even when our own might also be guilty.
Amen

for how true our faith is.

Lord Jesus,
you told us that the foundation of our faith is our character,
that faith stands or fails on how we live.
Help us to take that to heart;
help us to not only profess your truth,
but to embody it in everyday living.
Help us to reject evil in all its forms,
and instead to embody your goodness and kindness. Amen.

Sunday 29 January 2023 Psalm 120

The Rev'd Alistair Smeaton, minister in the Cumbria Missional Partnership
of the NW Synod

O God of love, forever blest, pity my suffering state. When will you set my soul at rest from lips that love deceit?	2 I cried in trouble to the Lord, and he has answered me. From lying lips and crafty tongue, O Lord, my soul set free.
---	---

*Too long my soul (has made its home)
with those who lift the sword.
I am for peace; (but when I speak),
they make for war.*

Isaac Watts (1674 - 1748)

You can hear a congregation sing this here
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkIb_JWTko4

Reflection

Two weeks ago we were thinking about Isaac Watts' rewriting of a Psalm
in the light of the Christ event. In our hymn today he stays much closer to

dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in
a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the
prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

Reflection

I don't know about you but whenever I read this passage from Matthew's
gospel I get a picture in my mind of 21st Century refugees. The haunted
looks on the faces, the bundles of possessions, the bewilderment in the
eyes of the children and the relief as they find some sort of shelter, albeit
in a foreign land where they are uncertain about the sort of reception they
will get.

Sadly, it is all too easy for us to envisage what it must have been like for
Mary and Joseph and their precious son. However, I think the danger is
that this account of their journeys from Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth
over an unknown period of time is set within the 'fairy tale' context of the
birth of Jesus the Saviour of the world. A birth which is celebrated by many
with tinsel and glitter and not a little fantasy.

It is quite hard work to move from that to think about the reality of the
context and of the journeys. If we read the passage carefully we find that
much of it is quite broad brush, making assumptions about the harsh
experience whilst relating some minor and inconsequential details like
'then Joseph got up' (v21). And the question is, why bother, why not just
skate over the surface and hang on to the fantasy? And the answer –
because this is a story which takes us from the fantasy to the love which
God offers to all. Love which walks beside us all in the pain and the joy of
our daily living and which gives some of today's refugees the confidence
and the hope that God is with them in their harsh journeys.

That is the message we take into the New Year whatever our
circumstances.

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for your selfless love,
for your readiness to walk beside us
for sharing the pain
for offering the hope of a new future
as we make our journeys. Amen

Friday 13 January 2023 St Matthew 3: 1 - 6

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

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."' Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Reflection

"Prepare the way of the Lord" John the Baptist's words echo those of Isaiah then adds let's get ready for the Kingdom of heaven is near. How are we preparing for this in 2023? Do we feel the need for preparation, or do we feel we are ready as the Messiah has effectively already been and gone. We know the end of the story that John is professing – does that make us exempt from preparation?

As exam season looms again, an expression often used is "Fail to prepare, prepare to fail". Could we apply this to our lives? Unlike John, unless we are entering the jungle in a well known ITV show we do not have to dress in sackcloth and eat honey and locusts, but surely the new year is an opportunity to prepare for what is to come? Are our roads straight, so all

at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Reflection

The Church has always fought for the hearts and minds of people. I believe one of the most important things we need to fight for, in our generation, is truth - both professed, and embodied, truth.

We live in an age of politicians shouting 'fake news' to those sharing inconvenient facts; when conspiracy theories are spread and shared on social media; when people repeat 'sound bites' they heard or read about, without checking their validity or even knowing their meaning.

This Gospel passage tells us that people of that time were not much different. Many had jumped on the 'Jesus bandwagon' - said the right words and did the right religious acts. However, it didn't change how they acted or the kind of people they were. They spoke the right doctrines but embodied a wrong morality.

What is the foundation of what we claim to believe? We can choose the shifting sands of popular opinion, or solid truth.

Jesus tells us here that 'on that day' people will not be accepted or rejected based on their professed religious beliefs – rather on their character: 'you evildoers'.

In Protestant churches we place great emphasis on the fact that we are saved by faith, not by deeds – and we are right, nobody will earn their salvation by their good deeds. However, faith is supposed to transform our character; it's supposed to change the kind of people we are. If it doesn't, we are only pretending. As St James said in his epistle, "faith without deeds is dead."

Our character, our kindness and love – or lack of them – are the evidence

version of Christianity I don't recognise. Sometimes, as Yeats wrote, 'the worst are full of passionate intensity' and it can be easy to confuse passion with authenticity. Can we tell a true prophet from the fruit they bear.? After all, grapes are not gathered from thorns, but blackberries are. Perhaps the answer is we should question whatever we hear, from any source. There's an old Peanuts cartoon where the canine polymath Snoopy announces he has the perfect title for his work on theology: 'Has it ever occurred to you that you might be wrong?' That's a good question for us all to ask of ourselves, and anyone who wants to convince us of something.

Prayer

God of truth, help us to always be seekers
of the truth of your love and grace.
May we be humble and ready to question ourselves and others,
trusting always in your mercy and compassion.
May your holy spirit guide us to listen to prophetic voices,
however they reach us. Amen.

[Saturday 28 January 2023 St Matthew 7: 21 - 28](#)

Marius Mazuru, pastor, Pilgrim URC, Plymouth

'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers." 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!' Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded

can see our motives and our intentions, or do we like to wind our roads so we can conceal things we are not so sure of?

Where then is our wilderness? Are we a lone voice in a secular society? Is it time to re-state to the world that they (and we) need to repent? How would such a message be received? In John's case many came to confess their sins and be baptised – would such a message today be greeted with the same enthusiasm, or would we be taken away to the "funny farm", or worse – completely ignored?

Throughout the gospels we are warned to be ready and the dangers of what will happen if we are not. Let us take heed of John's (and Isaiah's) words and make straight the paths, clear our intentions and move forward to prepare the way of the Lord

Prayer

Lord, life is often seen as a long and winding road, but you take us down a straight path, to be open and honest in all we do. Help us to see the way ahead so that we may prepare for what is to come and see others on the road that we may serve them in their need, or walk alongside them on their way. Amen

[Saturday 14 January 2023 St Matthew 3: 7 - 12](#)

The Rev'd Tim Searle, Minister, The United Church, Winchester

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and

fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Reflection

In yesterday's reading, Matthew introduces us to the charismatic character of John the Baptist. With camel's hair and leather belt, we picture a wide-eyed figure extolling the faithful to repent in the waters of the Jordan. If the rhetoric wasn't amped up enough, today's reading hits a new high. With old-school street-preacher venom, John lays into the approaching Pharisees and Sadducees, saying: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'

Matthew's narrative here is a metaphorical 'changing of the guard'. Yesterday's reading revealed John as the current protagonist in God's saving work. Today, the Jewish leadership take centre stage as the new antagonists, following Herod's demise at the end of chapter 2. Monday's reading ushers in the new messiah and our first encounter with the adult Jesus. John's fiery judgement will give way to stubborn reverence as Jesus too makes his way through the waters.

John's injunction to 'Bear fruit worthy of repentance' is significant, and sets the tone for much of Matthew's gospel. Matthew's John, and his Jesus for that matter, doesn't do lukewarm. If you claim to be a disciple of Jesus, a Walker of the Way, then it can't be 'all show and no go'. The measure of your faith, and your claim on the saving love of Jesus, can only ever mean as much as what we're prepared to do, or to sacrifice, to bear fruit for the Kingdom. That might seem a bit 'black and white', but that's Matthew all over. Better to be wheat left on the threshing floor, waiting to be gathered, than chaff for the fire.

Two thousand years on, we may not feel the same urgency as Matthew did as he awaited Jesus' imminent return, and our theology might be more nuanced than wheat and chaff. But should our zeal to bear fruit worthy of

everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. 'Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy[d] that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Reflection

Beware of false prophets! When I was an undergraduate there was an election for the largely ceremonial position of Rector. I went to see one of the candidates speak, a young and radical politician; a superb orator with a fiery and exciting message, and he remains perhaps the most charismatic people I have ever seen address a crowd. I could feel myself being convinced as he talked and he seemed absolutely sincere, and I have no doubt he won over many people that night (though not enough to win the election.) I expected great things of him, but his reputation was destroyed when around ten years later he ended up in prison after being convicted of perjury.

How do we decide which messengers to trust? Which are true prophets and which are false? It's possible to strongly disagree with someone but respect their integrity, or conversely to hear a message truly from God from someone with deep flaws as an individual. There are figures who sincerely believe they are speaking God's truth, but promote a hate-filled

Jesus compares a tiny splinter to a massive beam – a main support for a building. How can I possibly see and remove the small sliver in your eye when there's an eye-beam as big as a house blocking my vision? Each and every person is fighting battles that no-one else knows about. No-one knows how hard they tried not to be where they are, nor do we know the power of the forces at work, and nor do we really know what we would have done in the same circumstances. Only God is aware of all the facts, and only God is able to judge.

Many of us find it so much easier to see the biases in other people, while our own biases are often invisible to our self-analysis, and resistant to our intelligence. As Robert Burns said in his poem about a louse he spotted on a lady's hat in church:

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us / to see oursels as ithers see us!

God's wish for us is not wailing and gnashing of teeth, but healing from judgement of ourselves and others. I find it reassuring that it's only God who judges, because God is full of mercy and grace, far more than I believe that I can comprehend let alone offer myself, and that's good news for me and for you, because we need God's mercy and grace.

Prayer

O judge us, Lord, and in your judgement free us,
and set our feet in freedom's open space;
take us as far as your compassion wanders
among the children of the human race. Amen.

(From a hymn by Fred Kaan)

Friday 27 January 2023 St Matthew 7: 7 - 20

The Rev'd Dr Nick Jones is minister of Heswall URC & Chester Road URC
Ellesmere Port, in Mersey Synod

'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and

repentance be any less passionate? I sincerely hope not!

Prayer

Saving God, increase our zeal; our hunger;
and our longing to bear fruit worthy of your redeeming love.
Risen God, deepen our love; our wonder;
and our passion for your life-transforming Word.
Cleansing God, remake us; refine us; restore in us your image,
through the fire of your Holy Spirit.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Sunday 15 January 2023 Psalm 118

The Rev'd Alistair Smeaton, minister in the Cumbria Missional Partnership
of the NW Synod

This is the day the Lord has made; he calls the hours his own. Let heav'n rejoice, let earth be glad and praise surround the throne.	3 Hosanna to th'anointed King, to David's holy Son! Help us, O Lord; descend and bring salvation from the throne.
---	--

2 Today he rose and left the dead, and Satan's empire fell; today the saints his triumphs spread and all his wonders tell.	4 Blessed is Jesus Christ, who came with messages of grace, who came in God the Father's name to save our sinful race.
---	---

5 Hosanna in the highest strains the Church on earth can raise;
the highest heav'ns, in which he reigns, shall give him nobler praise.

Isaac Watts (1674 - 1748)

You can hear the suggested tune, Nun Danket All' Und Bringet Ehr, here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC9IKmvSB6Y>

Reflection

“This is the day the Lord has made” is not the first verse of the Psalm, but for generations the Church has found it a good place to start, whether that be the day or Sunday worship or anything else we are involved in.

Isaac Watts was part of a generation of individuals who rediscovered the hymn of worship in the sense of a free composition for worship inspired by Scripture, rather than a paraphrase of it. The hymn in front of us appears to be part of a transition from metrical Psalms to a hymn. The words are recognisably based on the second half of Psalm 118, but Watts has moved well beyond paraphrase of even a careful hint that the text is fulfilled in Jesus. He has completely rewritten the Psalm in the light of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection.

St Paul wrote in the 15th chapter of the letter to the Corinthians that those very events took place “according to the Scriptures”. Watts was clearly convinced that one of those Scriptures was our Psalm for today. For me this is not to say that the Psalm writer ‘predicted’ in detail events many years in the future but rather that they had a yearning for God’s interaction in history and it is this yearning that is fulfilled in events in Jerusalem in 30AD.

Prayer

God who speaks: we thank you for the Biblical writers
who under the inspiration of your Spirit
sought to express your love for us in words.
We thank you for the Word made flesh in Jesus.
We thank you for the early Christians
who sought to understand the impact of Jesus
in the light of the story so far.
We thank you for writers of verse and prose
in the history of your Church who
restated the faith to make its implications clear. Amen

Prayer

God, of your goodness give me yourself, for you are sufficient for me. I cannot ask anything less to be worthy of you. If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In you alone do I have all.

The Oxford Cycle of Prayer

[Thursday 26 January 2023 St Matthew 7: 1 - 6](#)

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

‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, “Let me take the speck out of your eye”, while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye. ‘Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

Reflection

In the early years of World War II, Scottish scientist Robert Watson-Watt discovered that radio waves could be used to locate enemy aeroplanes. His invention was called radar, and it became an essential tool in the defence of the allies during the Battle of Britain. Years later, Robert Watson-Watt was pulled over for speeding. The policeman caught him by using a radar gun. Poking fun at himself, he penned this poem:

Pity Sir Robert Watson-Watt,
Strange target of his radar plot,
And this, with others I could mention,
A victim of his own invention.

Reflection

“..... where moth and rust consume”

According to the Bible the moth isn't just a nuisance, it's a curse. Psalms, Isaiah, Job, Matthew and Luke are unanimous in their verdicts. Not a good name for a minister of religion, but you have to live with what you are given. When I first went up to Oxford, the College thought they might put P Moth and B Rust on the same staircase. They relented at the last minute – perhaps the curse worried them. My tutor tried to persuade me to preach on “Heaven, where there is no moth” (in some translations of the Psalms), but I had spent my childhood listening to every moth-joke in the book and wasn't falling for that one.

To be “moth-eaten”, if not a curse, was certainly a disgrace. I well remember the strong smell of mothballs every time the wardrobe was opened. We liked to protect our clothes from the biblical curse.

Jesus regarded material possessions as an encumbrance and money as a temptation. He turned his back on both. He knew how much of our time and energy they took up. He knew the trouble and strife they created and what grief lack of them brought. How strange then that the only physical possession he left was the macabre and blood-stained linen robe he wore. How fitting that the robe should be divided amongst the soldiers who killed him, in due time to be moth-eaten and discarded. He left us nothing, except love; true to his word.

Material possessions and personal wealth have always hindered the Gospel. The poor will always be with us as long as the rich prosper. But to what purpose? We really can't take them with us, so leave them to the moths and the rust. We have to learn the humility of having nothing except His love, that will not let us go, which neither moth nor rust can destroy.

Monday 16 January 2023 St Matthew 3 13 - 17

John Collings, Lay Preacher, Rutherglen URC

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Reflection

If we look at the Basis of Union we find these words: “The United Reformed Church observes the gospel sacrament of baptism into Christ as a gift of God to his Church, and as an appointed means of grace. Baptism is administered with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It is the sacrament of entry into the Church and is therefore administered once only to any person.”.

John spent some years in the wilderness baptising people in the river Jordan, he baptised those who wanted to repent of their sins, turn their life round and be followers of God's way. To be baptised by John was a once in a lifetime event.

When anyone, child or adult is baptised we are following the example of Jesus who went to be baptised by John. People usually gather around to either congratulate the parents if a baby being baptised or to congratulate the adult who has been baptised.

It is clear that Jesus did not need to repent but he was baptised as He knew it was what the Father wanted Him to do. In the passage today God told Jesus that He was pleased that Jesus had done this. This might link to the words in Isaiah 53:11 “My devoted servant, with whom I am pleased, will

bear the punishment of many and for his sake I will forgive them.”

This is one occasion when people saw the Holy Spirit who took the form of a dove. This was the same type of bird that Noah sent from the arc to find dry land. Many fonts have eight sides which is symbolic of Noah, his wife, their three sons and their wives.

Prayer

Loving God,
we thank you for the example set by Jesus and His obedience to your will.
We ask that we might also listen to and obey You,
We thank you that the obedience of Jesus has transformed our lives.
We thank you for all that we have in Jesus. Amen

[Tuesday 17 January 2023 St Matthew 4: 1 - 11](#)

The Rev'd Dr Elizabeth Welch, retired minister, active ecumenically and theologically, member at St Andrews URC, Ealing.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil left him, and suddenly ⁶angels came and waited on him.

‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

‘The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

But it's always seemed odd that the one communal prayer we all say, irrespective of our tradition, is the one that Jesus said we shouldn't.

"But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret"

There's something comforting about joining in with what everyone else is doing or saying - it lets us feel as though we belong, that we are part of something bigger. When you are the only young person in a church it can remind you that there are other young people in other churches saying the same thing - it can give hope, succour (and I'm only using that word because I've already used 'comforting', I'm not trying to show off.)

I wonder if Jesus knew when he said it that for two millennia people would be ignoring what he told them to do? I wonder if he cared... there were many other things he told us about how to live our lives: caring for the sick, loving our neighbours and so on, that we try to maintain. Perhaps how we pray isn't *that* important in the big scheme of things. Or perhaps it is. I wonder if Jesus is disappointed? "If they can't even do the easy things..."

Prayer

Lord, please just let me off this one and forgive me my trespasses. Amen.

[Wednesday 25 January 2023 St Matthew 6: 16 - 34](#)

The Rev'd Peter Moth, retired minister and broadcaster, St Andrew's URC Kenton, Newcastle upon Tyne

'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Reflection

We've got a few weeks to go yet before the start of Lent, at which point this reading is traditionally the focus. In Lent, the forty days and forty nights that Jesus endured are seen as being re-enacted in our lives, in the run up to our marking of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Reflecting on this passage outside Lent comes as a reminder that the experience of wilderness, testing and fasting are not only something we enter into during one part of the Christian year, but can be part of our daily living.

We can face bleak and barren times in which we're not sure which way to turn. We can feel tested, by the world around us, and sometimes even by family and friends, and be unsure as to how to respond. We can see those who are literally in a wilderness, of homelessness and as refugees.

Jesus' fasting was part of his freeing of himself from all that might have weighed him down, in order to face the even bigger temptations that were going to come his way, in his struggle with the Devil.

He faced the temptation of seeing physical food on its own as all that mattered, rather than the spiritual and emotional and mind-filling food that comes from God's word as the food that gives life in all its wholeness.

He faced the temptation of testing God in order to find an answer to his problems, rather than putting his life into God's hands and waiting to see what God would ask of him.

He faced the temptation of worshipping someone other than God, rather than the worship and service of God being the way to the fullness of life.

As we wrestle with all that tempts us today, let us engage again with Jesus' wrestling, and see once more what it really is that God offers us at the heart of life, for ourselves and for all God's people.

Prayer

Loving and gracious God,
as you were with Jesus in his wrestling in the wilderness,
be with us in our times of wrestling today.
Help us to see the food that you offer in your word.
May we place our lives in your hands and follow where you lead.
May our worship of you be at the heart of each day,
leading us out into boldly living in your way in a troubled world. Amen.

Wednesday 18 January 2023 St Matthew 4: 12 - 25

The Revd Julian Macro, Retired Minister, Member of Verwood URC

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.' From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria,

is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

'Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Reflection

Being a Roman Catholic I am used to prayers with a communal response. We use them all the time in Mass, it's almost automatic - I rarely think about the words. And not just short responses - the Nicene Creed has more than a few lines; thank goodness I don't have to do it in Latin any more, at least I (mostly) understand what I'm saying.

‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’ in common usage justifies the need for revenge. This was not its original intention – which was to limit a counterattack in proportion to the offence suffered. Again Jesus reaches behind a law which could lead to a feud, or at least a permanent breakdown in relationships. He advocates non-violent action, a generosity of spirit which helps disarm the aggressor. How difficult is that, faced with continuing aggression?

While there is no explicit Jewish law to hate an enemy, defining who is your neighbour does imply limiting your love and concern. Jesus goes behind the definition of neighbour, and thoroughly subverts it to mean wherever we find the one in need.

All this is righteousness.

Prayer

Gracious God how can we possibly be perfect as your Son demands?
Yet without the guidance of your Spirit
we cannot live in right relationship with you and our neighbours.
In these days, where there are so many voices claiming our allegiance,
help us to hear your voice more clearly,
and feel your love more closely day by day, Amen

Tuesday 24 January 2023 St Matthew 6: 1 - 15

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

‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand

and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

Reflection

“Location, location, location” is the maxim of property developers – and should, perhaps, also be treated as significant by local churches.

Jesus knew the importance of location: Nazareth had been a safe refuge for his parents away from the attention of the Herods, but it was not the sort of place from which to launch a national mission; so, Jesus made his home in Capernaum at the head of Lake Galilee. Capernaum was a very different place sitting on a major trade route. It was there that Jesus met and attracted people whom he would never have met in Nazareth; the core who accompanied him on his ministry.

We have inherited the sites of our local churches; movements of population and town planning have affected them over the generations. What courage it takes to recognise that a cherished building is in the wrong place today. The ancient Israelites were encouraged to focus on a moveable tent/tabernacle rather than a Temple; it is not so straightforward for us, especially if a building has been listed.

Is your church site well-placed in its community? Is it easy to find, easy to reach, easy to park? If so, how are you using such an advantage and the opportunities available? Or is your church building in the wrong place for today’s community and mission? If so, what can be done about that? I know this is a question easier to ask than to answer, but, if your church building was not where it is, would you choose that site for it now?

Jesus chose to make his home in a busy community on a major trade route; it was there that he met and called a very varied group to be his disciples; it was from there that he could reach out to the wider communities around

– and take time out in the countryside to pray, think and plan. Yes, location and opportunities are so important to today's Church in our outreach and mission.

Prayer

We thank you, Lord God, for brave and faithful men and women who formed the congregations and built the churches where we worship; guide us in our stewardship of our resources so that our buildings may stand as signs of your Spirit at work in the world, and as a witness to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen

[Thursday 19 January 2023 St Matthew 5: 1 - 12](#)

The Rev'd Daphne Preece, Retired Minister living in East Midlands Synod

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Reflection

Matthew, like a teacher, presents his material. Here he addresses commandments and regulations placed upon Israel known as the 'law'. We're given three of Jesus' (re)interpretations of the 'law' sometimes known as the antitheses: 'You have heard it said that... but I tell you...' . Jesus opens up the motives behind the law, strengthening rather than weakening it ('Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill').

The first of Jesus' comments regards swearing oaths. This is not so much to do with 'bad language', as using God's name to insist on the honesty of our actions or intentions ('I swear to God that I...'). Cutting through a potential minefield of interpretations, Jesus simply says let your 'yes' mean yes, and your 'no' mean no. This apparently simple instruction is one we find surprisingly difficult to keep. We keep wanting to qualify or justify our responses to folk (no, its not just politicians who struggle with this instruction).

And lest we assume the writers (both Hebrew and English) are simply being clever, their choice of an acrostic form itself offers us an important insight. For just as, in the absence of smartphones or GPS, we might navigate an unfamiliar city by consulting an 'A to Z', so likewise God's Torah – God's instruction – is comprehensive enough to guide us through all of life.

Elegance. Ingenuity. Above all, Grace. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

(in which the words may be read from first-to-last or from last-to-first)

We offer thanksgiving and praise, with obedience,
God of revelation.

A life-shaped Law, bearing witness:
gift divine, in joy and freedom.

Amen and Amen!

Freedom and joy in divine gift:
witness-bearing, Law-shaped life -
a revelation of God.

Obedience, with praise and thanksgiving, offer we.

[Monday 23 January 2023 St Matthew 5: 33 - 48](#)

The Rev'd John A Young, retired minister of National Synod of Scotland,
member Giffnock URC

‘Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.” But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a

Reflection

I once had the privilege of reading the Beatitudes in the Church of the Beatitudes overlooking the Sea of Galilee. A picture of that place comes back to me every time I read this passage. In contrast another memory also reappears; a heated conversation about what on earth the first Beatitude means! Who are the poor in spirit? Cue looking at other translations. My favourite is, ‘Blessed are those who know their need of God. . .’ (NEB).

Most of my ministry has been in healthcare chaplaincy. What united the patients I met and worked with was that their lives were experiencing a spiritual wobble. Teaching spiritual care to staff, I would wave my arms around aimlessly, expressing how people were reaching out for something, something that would give them some stability, peace and hope. Time and again I saw people reach into the unknown and discover something helpful. To me they were expressing their need of God, though the word God often went unspoken.

However strong our own faith, it may still be the case that we know our need of God more powerfully in down times than in good ones. It’s human nature! Indeed, The Message has an even more graphic interpretation: ‘You’re blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God . . .’

In the good times it is often easy to be complacent, think we know best, and get in the way of what God is trying to do or say. Maybe the first Beatitude is a reminder to put ego aside, to let go and let God. Then it’s easier for us to receive God’s gifts, and to be blessed with peace and joy and hope, the hallmarks of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Prayer

God of all contexts, thank you for being there in good times and tough.
May we never become complacent with the easy or the familiar.

May we not wait until we are at the end of our tether,
but always own our need of you,
that we may be blessed by the life of your Kingdom.
In Jesus's name, Amen.

Friday 20 January 2023 St Matthew 5: 13 - 20

Dr Sam Richards, serving as Head of Children's and Youth Work, member of Messy Church team, Chalgrove.

'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Reflection

This is my go-to passage for reconnecting with the heart of our calling as followers of Jesus. Jesus declares that we ARE the salt of the earth, the light of the world – not that we have to try to turn ourselves into these things. Eugene Peterson paraphrases these words of Jesus as 'Let me tell you why you are here... [to] bring out the God-flavours... [to] bring out the God-colours in the world'.

8 Vain are my own ways; yours is the victory;
Wonderful Counsellor, you are my wisdom;
Your Word shall teach me; I will obey you.

Christopher Idle © 1980 The Jubilate Group (admin. Hope Publishing Company) CCLI licence number 1064776

Reflection

If we were to ask the folk in our church congregations to name their favourite Psalm, would Psalm 119 be foremost among them? Its sheer length can intimidate: at 176 verses it's the longest chapter in the Bible, let alone the Psalter. And I wonder whether some Christians (particularly perhaps those in the Reformed Tradition) might even feel its focus upon relentless observance of God's Law to be – well – somewhat graceless?

So it's perhaps surprising to find, in today's setting, those 176 verses distilled to just eight 3-line stanzas, winsome and wonderful. Indeed, Christopher Idle's paraphrase-precis helps us to see that Psalm 119 is nothing if not graceful.

It's graceful in its subject-matter: God's Law, also named here as commandments, statutes, instruction, judgments, precepts and so on. Together these are expressions of God's Torah – the entirety of God's guidance for right living. And we're reminded here that Torah is loving gift, not stern imposition: it comprises "Laws that spell freedom, true liberation".

Furthermore, it's graceful in its structure: have you noticed that each line of the Psalm in today's setting begins with a subsequent letter of the alphabet? (Only X and Z are missing – fair enough really!) This style of writing is known as an acrostic, but it's not just Christopher Idle's idea: for in the Hebrew text of Psalm 119, remarkably, the eight lines of each stanza all begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, before moving on to the next letter in the next stanza.

Keep us from the sins of violence or apathy.
Keep us true to your values planted in our hearts that we may fully live this
one wild and precious life as your disciples. Amen.

Sunday 22 January 2023 Psalm 119

The Rev'd Dominic Grant, Minister, Barnet URC and St Andrew's
Chesterfield Road URC

All your commandments,
Father almighty,
Bring to your children
healing and blessing;
Christians who keep them
find here their comfort.

2 Daily instruct us
as your disciples:
Each of your statutes
stands firm for ever;
Faithful your promise,
free your forgiveness.

3 God of all mercy,
grant me your guidance;
How can a young man
keep his way holy?
I have found treasure
in your instruction.

4 Joy comes to nations
knowing your judgments;
Keeping them brings us

close to your kingdom
Laws that spell freedom,
true liberation.

5 My heart is listening
for you each morning;
Never desert me;
speak in the night-time;
Open my eyes, Lord,
then lead me onwards.

6 Put right my passions
by your clear precepts;
Quell my rebellions,
rescue me quickly;
Raise and restore me,
mighty Redeemer.

7 Saviour whose Spirit
gave us the Scriptures,
Train me to trust them
when I am tempted;
Unless you helped me,
I would go under.

The Spirit of God is already at work in the world, and God's glory covers
the earth as the waters cover the sea. Our calling is to taste and see this
and enable others to do so too. We can fine-tune our spiritual taste buds
and de-distort our spiritual vision so that we can 'taste and see that the
Lord is good' – and then share that experience of living in a world soaked
in the wonder-filled presence of God.

Jesus also tells us where and how to do this – God has already placed us
on 'the lampstand' – somewhere that can give light to an environment. All
we have to do is shine - where we are!

Jesus is not abolishing the law, but fulfilling it. Elsewhere he sums up the
whole law as loving God with all our heart, mind and strength, and loving
our neighbour as ourselves. So we taste and see more clearly as we grow
in love – love for God and love for others. In the parables Jesus does not
depict scribes and Pharisees as full of love for God or for their neighbours
(the tax-collector in the Temple, the man attacked on the road to Jericho).
Rather Jesus says that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven are those
who become like children. So embrace your inner child, wonder again at
the God-flavours and God-colours you encounter in your daily life and
invite others into this love-soaked life.

Prayer

Jesus – thank you for calling us into your kingdom of love.
Help us to shine as a light in the world –
bringing out the vibrant God-colours of your creation.
Help us to live as salt in our daily lives –
bringing out the fulsome God-flavours through loving our neighbours.
May people see through us, your children, to you
and give glory to God. Amen.

The Rev'd Ryan Sirmons, Minister, North West & Central Newcastle upon Tyne Pastorate

'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." 32 But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Reflection

I wonder if Jesus ever heard of Socrates' dictum 'the unexamined life is not worth living.' I think he would have agreed for it seems that he saw failure

to examine the causes of anger or lust as sin.

Jeffrey Krehbiel, a late American Presbyterian minister, held that the word anger derives from Old Norse words meaning "memory" or "grief. For Krehbiel, healthy anger was deeply related to loss. Taking our anger seriously, and being curious about its source - such as what we lost, could lead to opportunities for reconciliation and building up the common good. Being honest with ourselves helps us avoid either the sins of violent rage or soul-crushing apathy that unexamined anger could otherwise lead us into.

Instead of dancing inside the lines of adultery, Jesus wants us to ask, 'why does my eye wander?' When we become so emotionally wrapped up in another person or thing, we lose sight of what we value. For Jesus, that's as bad as losing an eye or a hand, because it undercuts our humanity and keeps us from being disciples.

The poet Mary Oliver asked the question, 'what will you do with your one wild and precious life?' I have seen people be curious and examine their anger over subpar living conditions, and in seeking to reconcile it, organise others and win millions in repairs making their homes suitable for habitation. I have seen people reconnect with themselves, and the people they love, when they ended emotional affairs with other people, work, or hobbies. They didn't commit adultery, but the relationships that were at the core of their very being was under threat. If we don't examine our lives and be deeply curious about the sources of our anger and lust, I fear that we risk living a not just lacklustre life, but one that doesn't participate in the 'wild and precious' life around us. That would be a sin.

Prayer

God, let us be curious and respect anger so much that we address its root causes.

Give us curiosity about why we lust after people and things.

Give us the courage and patience to explore the sources of anger and lust.