Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church



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St Matthew's Gospel part 3
Sunday 12th – Tuesday 28th February 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

SUNDAY 12 FEBRUARY 2023 PSALM 122 3

MONDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 12: 1 - 21..... 5

TUESDAY 14 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 12: 22 - 37 7

WEDNESDAY 15 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 12: 38 - 50 9

THURSDAY 16 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 13: 1 - 23 11

FRIDAY 17 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 13: 24 - 43 14

SATURDAY 18 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 13: 44 - 53..... 16

SUNDAY 19 FEBRUARY 2023 PSALM 123 18

MONDAY 20 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 13: 54 - 58..... 20

TUESDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 14: 1 - 21 22

THURSDAY 23 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 15: 1 – 20..... 24

FRIDAY 24 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 15: 21 - 28 26

SATURDAY 25 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 15: 29 - 39..... 28

different is our reaction from that of Jesus' disciples when faced with the reality that we too are called not just to be witnesses but participants in Christ's body here on earth? What part are you and I, members of Christ's church, prepared to play in God's continuing work?

Prayer

Gracious God
we thank you for members of Christ's church
who witness to his presence daily
through word and deed, undeterred by the cost.
Help us to be your people not just in word, but also in deed.
Let your Spirit strengthen us
in times of suffering and trial,
so that we prove good disciples
of the one who suffered, died,
and rose again for us,
your well beloved Son. Amen.

not on divine things but on human things.' Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 'For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Reflection

'…it is not enough to dream of a world transformed under the narrow set of parameters out of which we all tend to operate. Dreaming of this world will require that our imaginations expand beyond the calculus of power and influence within which we now function….You do not understand Christ till you understand His Cross…. It is only by understanding it that we escape from religion with no mind, and from religion which is all mind, from pietism with its lack of critical judgement, and from rationalism with its lack of everything else" (PT Forsyth The cruciality of the Cross)

Peter operated within the parameters of his Jewish faith which did not include the Messiah suffering and dying on a Roman form of execution ie the Cross. As spokesman for the disciples we can assume the others thought the same. Peter could not countenance his beloved Master willingly travelling towards Jerusalem, suffering and death, any more than a similar journey being undertaken by the disciples. Jesus' sharp rebuke to Peter must have shocked them all. The disciples are not just to be witnesses of Jesus' suffering but participants in it. They don't just get to tell about it. They will actually live through Jesus' suffering in their own bodies. It's all so much to absorb, that I wonder if they took in Jesus' promise of God's reward.

We operate within the parameters of our faith. Do our dreams of a transformed world include the necessity of suffering for our faith? How

SUNDAY 26 FEBRUARY 2023 PSALM 124 29

MONDAY 27 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 16: 1 - 20..... 31

TUESDAY 28 FEBRUARY 2023 ST MATTHEW 16: 21 - 28 33

Sunday 12 February 2023 Psalm 122

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

Rejoice, rejoice,
come sing with me:
"This is the house of God!"
The temple gates swing
wide and free--
this is the house of God!
For every tribe and every race
this is the house of God.
God calls us to this holy place--
this is the house of God!

2 In market square and city street
we seek the peace of God.
Before the ruler's judgement seat,
we seek the peace of God.
In joyful song and whispered prayer
we seek the peace of God.
God's city can be anywhere
we seek the peace of God.

Adam M L Tice 2010 © GIA Publications Inc
You can hear this sung to Forest Green, the suggest tune, here
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzVzou4Fd_I
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Reflection

Psalm 122 is a pilgrim song. Jerusalem was the hub of Israel's worship in Old Testament times. At festival seasons people travelled there from around the nation. This is a psalm of rejoicing, loyalty and love. Praise matters, and so does the place where we offer it.

Adam Tice's metrical setting, which we read today, is lively, emphatic, and

attentive to the ancient words of scripture. The phrase 'house of the Lord', in the first and last verses of the Old Testament text (vv.1, 9), gathers and focuses the whole psalm. This phrase then becomes the chorus-line for the first stanza of Tice's version. And as the later verses of the psalm long repeatedly for 'peace' (vv.6-8), Tice too leaves this theme in our ears, by using it as chorus-line of his second stanza.

The Hebrew word for 'peace' is shalom. It is a big word – wholeness, not just quietness. True shalom speaks of a secure, considerate and loving community, of living that is hopeful, healthy, content and safe, where relationships are good, where people can sleep soundly at night and face each day with confidence and cheer. In this psalm, it seems that praise has led to a longing for shalom. And surely praising God well will always help us to care about community and neighbour, about justice and well-being.

So let our vision and prayers be deep and far-reaching. Let our thinking reach wide too. For Tice has expanded the scope of the ancient psalm, from the tribes of Israel to 'every tribe', and from Jerusalem to 'anywhere'. In Jesus the blessings of Israel were opened up to the world. Because of Jesus' flesh and death and risen life, all of earth can be holy ground. Let us pray for its peace.

For prayer

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,
still a focal point for many people's loyalty and love.
Pray for the buildings where you go to worship,
for their influence and impact for peace in God's world.
Pray for the community where you live,
and for all who work for its good.

favourably to God's love and weren't suffering. "Salvation belongs to the LORD" indeed (Jonah 2:9b).

So when Jesus speaks of "the sign of Jonah", he may be referring to his own death and resurrection (as in Matthew 12), but he may also be talking about God blessing people whom we would actively seek to exclude from "our" churches and community spaces as in Luke 11. In Matthew 16:17, when Peter is called the "son of Jonah," maybe we are given a little clue by Jesus as to what Peter's ministry will be like? Peter - the one reluctant to accept Gentiles, but realises the Holy Spirit of God has different plans (Acts 10).

The teaching of the sign-seeking, religious authorities then is the unwillingness or inability to see God at work and to follow God's lead. Even though they knew scripture, they struggled to see what God was doing through Jesus. Like Jonah, being able to quote scripture doesn't matter, if one fails to listen and follow God. This "yeast" is what Jesus tells his disciples to avoid.

Prayer

God, as we read your Word, help us to know Your heart better. Draw us closer to You and to Your priorities. Help us to live and serve together in the community that You are creating. Amen.

Tuesday 28 February 2023 St Matthew 16: 21 - 28

The Revd John A Young, retired minister of National Synod of Scotland, member Giffnock URC

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind

of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' They said to one another, 'It is because we have brought no bread.' And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, 'You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!' Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Reflection

Jesus had mentioned "the sign of Jonah" before and had explained that just as Jonah was in a big fish, he will be in the earth for three days (Matthew 12:40). However the Gospel of Luke explains the sign as having to do with Jonah being sent to Nineveh and Jesus being sent to this generation (Luke 11:30). So is this "sign" about Jesus' resurrection or our repentance? The book of Jonah is not about Jonah's death and resurrection. The focus is on a prophet who knows scripture well, but fails to understand God's will and rebels against God. God sent Jonah to call "those people" to repentance, and Jonah did not want to do it. Even in the end of the story, Jonah is sulking because "those people" responded

Monday 13 February 2023 St Matthew 12: 1 - 21

The Rev'd Dr David Whiting, Retired Minister living in Sunderland

At that time Jesus went through the cornfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, 'Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.' He said to them, 'Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice", you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.' He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, 'Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?' so that they might accuse him. He said to them, 'Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.' Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

'Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smouldering wick

until he brings justice to victory.
And in his name the Gentiles will hope.'

Reflection

Matthew shares with Mark (2:23-3:6) the two stories we get today. Firstly Jesus' disciples go through the cornfields plucking the heads of grain and eating them. Secondly, we have the healing of the man with the withered hand and the question whether it is lawful to heal on the sabbath.

The hungry disciples walk through cornfields picking the heads of the grain and eating them. Some Pharisees complain that what the disciples are doing is not lawful on the sabbath.

Jesus' response is to give an example from David's life, how David and his companions eat the consecrated Bread of Presence. The implication is that the disciples are no more open to criticism for breaking the sabbath than David and the others are for eating consecrated bread.

Jesus goes on to refer to the priests who in their duties appear to be breaking the sabbath law, yet are guiltless. The priests are doing God's work and so are the disciples, they may sustain themselves by plucking the heads of grain and eating them, even on the sabbath.

The argument moves on as Jesus reminds the critics that something greater than the Temple is here. Alluding to Hosea 6:6 Jesus says: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice'. Compassion has a place above regulations. 'The Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath'. Jesus is above the sabbath and much else.

In the synagogue there is a man with a withered hand, Jesus is asked whether it is lawful to heal on the sabbath. Jesus shows that good may be done on the sabbath by restoring the man. Compassion finds its place again.

with us in the most difficult of circumstances, and finally he is praised as our friend, who hears our prayer and sets us free. Coursing through the verses is a sense of divine mystery - the attributes are not allowed to become too familiar - this is the great "I am," God for ever and God with us, and the emphasis is on trust and. hope for the future.

This is proclaimed and sealed in the repeated words "Our help is in the name of God the Lord," words which we latter-day pilgrims often affirm in our services of worship. For we too remember the ways in which God has blessed us in the past, how through Jesus Christ our Saviour he continues to deliver us from the chaos of our lives and set us free. And in joy, praise and thanksgiving, we in our turn bless God.

Prayer:

Our help is in the name of the Lord.
Gracious God, we thank you,
that you extend your grace to us,
calling us to a life of gratitude,
calling us to service in your Kingdom.
We bless you, and praise your holy name. Amen.

Monday 27 February 2023 St Matthew 16: 1 - 20

The Rev'd Angela Rigby, Minister serving Christ Church URC Tonbridge, St Johns Hill URC Sevenoaks, and Christ Church URC Sevenoaks

The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.' Then he left them and went away. When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, 'Watch out, and beware of the yeast

the one who made the heavens with a word;
Creator of the world, each living thing.
Come, bless the LORD, lift up your hearts and sing:
""Our help is in the name of God the LORD.""

When evil seems to have the upper hand,
call on God's name: the LORD, the great ""I AM.""
When troubles rise and all around gives way,
remember God stays with us night and day.'
Our help is in the name of God the LORD.

Praise God the LORD who hears the captives' prayer;
like bird escaping from the fowler's snare,
we are set free; our praises now ascend:
""Blessed by the LORD: Creator, Saviour, Friend.
Our help is in the name of God the LORD.""

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You can hear the tune, Old 124th, here
https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/205222

Reflection

Psalm 124, as is generally understood, is one of the psalms which pilgrims sang on their way to the Jerusalem temple for one of the great religious festivals. And as they did, they cast their minds back to some terrible time in the past when they were threatened with doom-laden chaos - recalling how God was there for them through it all. Then, with heart-felt praise, they blessed God who rescued them.

There is a similar sense of praise and blessing in Martin Tel's version of the psalm. He divides the words into three sections rather than two. Now God is evoked at the beginning rather than the end as the creator of heaven and earth. In the second verse, he is hailed as our saviour, always

We hear of the Pharisees conspiring against Jesus. So Jesus departs with the crowds, curing many of them.

The reading concludes with part of the servant song from Isaiah 42. In Jesus we find the compassionate servant, chosen by God.

Prayer

O God of compassion, may we find rest,
may we find food for our hunger, may we find healing,
in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Tuesday 14 February 2023 St Matthew 12: 22 - 37

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

Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. All the crowds were amazed and said, 'Can this be the Son of David?' But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.' He knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his property, without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. 'Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers!

How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.'

Reflection

Oh dear - perhaps not the sort of reading we might expect on Valentine's Day? No fluffy sentiment or grand, romantic gestures here! There can of course be conflict in relationships, though hopefully not as strong as those encountered between Jesus and those who opposed him.

Jesus' usual response to criticism and questions is to tell a story - and as one who purports to having a 'narrative theology,' I confess that, normally I thoroughly approve. It's not as if he is doing a clever-clever politician thing and, by telling his story, avoiding answering.

However, there are times when I just wish he would simply respond - and here is one such time when he does. And how!

When accused of casting out demons by the power of other demons, he deftly demolishes their premise by pointing out its absurdity, before declaring clearly and succinctly that he does what he does by the power of God's Spirit! Can you imagine the faces of his audience as he says that? In my mind's eye I see smiles at the lightbulb moment. Though, sadly I also see angry frustration on the faces of those opponents who have been so comprehensively outsmarted!

In truth I am not entirely comfortable with the words that follow all about blasphemy and speaking against the Holy Spirit - not least because such words have been disgracefully used by Church authorities in the past to unleash violent punishments upon those they see as having done so.

It's enough for Jesus. He somehow gets the attention of the crowd, orders them to sit (imagine a wave of thousands of people slowly sitting down) and offers the food. It's enough for everyone.

Corporately, we have lurched from one crisis to another in the last three years. Personally, we may be facing a crisis. If this is the case, we may feel we have nothing left to give. 'I can barely make it through the day, what can I do for someone else?' In addition, as churches, our resources may be fewer than they were 3 or 13 years ago. We are older; we are tired. We have less money in our savings. 'What can we do for someone else?'

Maybe this is how the disciples felt. 'Jesus does such an amazing job, what can we offer in the midst of these healing moments?' Jesus simply asks them to see the needs of the crowd, look at what they have and offer it with thankful hearts.

We are faced with crowds in need. What are we doing in response? We have buildings which we can open to offer people warm spaces and safe gatherings. We have an extra few cans in our shopping carts for the food bank. What else do we have, that we perhaps take for granted, that we can share?

Prayer

Living Lord, we thank you for the healing you bring to the life of the world. For those who dedicate their lives to bring healing through medicine, for the carers who work in homes and care homes, we thank you. Give us wisdom to see into our own lives and offer what we can, however simple, to provide for the needs of your people. Amen.

Sunday 26 February 2023 Psalm 124

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

Our help is in the name of God the LORD;

Saturday 25 February 2023 St Matthew 15: 29 - 39

The Rev'd Martha McInnes, Minister, Cardiff and Penarth Pastorate

After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.' The disciples said to him, 'Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?' Jesus asked them, 'How many loaves have you?' They said, 'Seven, and a few small fish.' Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children. After sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

Reflection

'How many loaves have you?' Jesus has spent time healing the crowds, but he sees they have other needs. They are hungry. He asks the disciples, 'What can you do to help these people?'

The disciples may be a bit surprised. Perhaps they think, 'Hmm, we only brought enough for our dinner!' Someone thinks quickly, adding what they have together, and answers Jesus, 'Seven loaves and a few SMALL fish.' Translation: 'Really, we don't have much, Lord, this is ALL we have to offer.'

Nevertheless the analogy of good fruit from good trees and the concept of the good person bringing good things out of a good treasure, while the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure I find clearer, positive and encouraging. It's a model worth following.

It is also worth being reminded that we will be judged on our actions, and the choices of trees and treasures we make … and to be wary of the words, sentiments and expressions we utter?

Prayer

Dear God, on this day focusing on romance, roses and cards,
remind us constantly of the true value of love:
love in action;
love in our words;
love in caring;
love in giving;
love in supporting others;
may the love we share and exhibit reflect the love you have for your people and your planet. Amen

Wednesday 15 February 2023 St Matthew 12: 38 - 50

The Rev'd Fiona Thomas, freelance facilitator, and transitional minister with the Bellingham, Catford and Lee Green pastorate. Rad by Graham Handscomb

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.' But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! The queen of the South will rise up at the judgement with

this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here! 'When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting-place, but it finds none. Then it says, "I will return to my house from which I came." When it comes, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So will it be also with this evil generation.' While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'

Reflection

Jesus isn't holding back. His earlier warning about speaking carelessly is unheeded when he is asked for a sign to prove his authority. He critiques a whole generation by his withering words, citing examples from scripture of foreigners who saw the authentic power of God in prophets and kings. Yet his questioners are oblivious to what's right in front of them. He blasts them for their good intentions which are inadequately followed through. It is not enough to get rid of an unclean spirit – there needs to be a purpose for the space that it has left behind. And then he transcends one of the most important truths of the culture into which he was born, by reinterpreting what family means. Not family by blood, but by shared commitment to a new community of loving action. How on earth did he get a reputation for being meek and mild?

This is Jesus at his most scathing, taking-no-prisoners, laser-minded critic of the "let's do what we've always done" mealy-mouthed religious establishment around him. Terrifying for any of us entrusted with keeping

heals a Centurion's boy (another can of worms) and commends the Centurion's faith. After this encounter Jesus foretold people coming to the Kingdom's feast from all the corners of the earth - hardly a position of prejudice against Gentiles. Matthew wove pagans into his genealogy and mysterious foreigners followed the star to the newborn Jesus. In his early ministry (Chapter 4) Jesus included people from Syria and from ten Gentile cities. In Chapter 8 Jesus healed two demon possessed gentiles. So, if this woman was teaching Jesus about being open to Gentiles she'd not understood him very well!

Instead it might be rather more interesting to see Jesus' teaching the woman and helping her increase her self-confidence. As a tutor at the Scottish College I can be provocative to encourage students to reach beyond themselves, to see their potential, and to push back in argument as they find a stronger sense of ministerial identity. Perhaps Jesus was doing this with the woman - he commends her faith and delights in her answer.

This isn't to say that Jesus didn't learn. He learned carpentry from his father and Aramaic on his mother's lap but never ceased to be the eternal second person of the Trinity. In his humanity, Jesus certainly learned but did not need to learn moral truth from anyone. He was, and is, moral truth. The only instruction that Jesus needed was from God's Eternal Majesty - and this He always heard clearly.

Prayer

Eternal Majesty,
you guide us through Your Voice, enfleshed in Jesus,
made present by Your Abiding Spirit,
help us to learn when we're pushed and provoked,
help us to see you both through and beyond our cultural assumptions,
that we might share our faith in Your immortal truth. Amen.

Prayer

Holy God, release me from the need to compare.
Instead, open my heart and hands
to receive and use your gifts beyond compare:
holiness, righteousness, and liberation,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Friday 24 February 2023 St Matthew 15: 21 - 28

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

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Reflection

This passage when read in isolation often leads to contemporary commentators suggesting that Jesus learned, from the pagan woman, to move on from his Jewish racism.

Leaving aside the problems in suggesting that Jews were racist and had power over the dominant pagan culture surrounding them (which is nonsense), a careful reading of Matthew shows that the editor, and Jesus himself, were concerned to expand the notions of who is included in the Kingdom - even in a work written for a Jewish audience. In Chapter 8 Jesus

the boat steady, keeping the show on the road, keeping the horses pacified. Translated into our time it extends beyond church too, as teenage prophets of climate emergency critique a whole generation which has allowed the crisis to develop. Nations living with the legacies of slavery speak of reparations because apologies based on good intentions are not enough to acknowledge the loss and damage caused by centuries of colonialism. And now, as holders of a diminishing worldview in the lands we inhabit, Christians are challenged to find allies in goodness and right action across the divides of faith and ideology.

Jesus asks nothing less of us.

Prayer

At our best, Jesus,
we would see with your clarity
act with your certainty
cut through the hypocrisy
and never settle for less than the truth.

Bear with us
when it's hard to do this.
Show us your Way
and give us the courage to follow it. Amen

Thursday 16 February 2023 St Matthew 13: 1 - 23

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

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they

sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears[a] listen!'

Then the disciples came and asked him, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?' He answered, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand." With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

"You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them."

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

'Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on

false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.'

Reflection

"What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." Jesus locates the heart—specifically, the motivations that arise from the heart—as an indicator of a person's relationship with God, or alienation from God. He does so in a debate with some Pharisees and scribes who accuse Jesus's disciples of breaking the law by eating with hands that have not first been ritually purified. Jesus responds this way: the Law commands that one must honour one's father and mother. Why, then, do some Pharisees allow their members to make a korban vow to assign one's property to the temple, thereby retaining personal use of the property, but also thereby denying financial support to one's parents? The Pharisees' toleration of his korban tradition breaks the Law.

According to Jesus, what we say and do is an outward expression of our inner motivation, and inner motivation is located figuratively in one's 'heart'. God does not want from us mere lip service or outward show; God wants wholehearted devotion and service. The Pharisees and scribes believed that scrupulous attention to ritual purification made a person acceptable to God. But Jesus suggests that being pure, or holy, is not a matter of external ritual cleanliness. Being holy is a matter of being faithful to God in one's inner attitude and thinking, and this ought to inform one's outer words and actions. It ought to; but honesty might compel us to confess that consistency of inner and outer faithfulness to God sometimes eludes us.

Lest we become downcast due to our lack of consistency, the Apostle Paul brings us a message of grace. God chooses the foolish, the weak, and the lowly to receive his gift of salvation and thereby puts an end to the need to compare. Holiness is not a matter of being 'holier than thou'; holiness, righteousness, and liberation are God's gifts to be received and practised as we live in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:27-31).

Prayer

Gracious God, encourage and help us to be speakers of truth, empowerers of the voiceless, and protectors of the vulnerable. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Thursday 23 February 2023 St Matthew 15: 1 – 20

The Rev'd Dr Julian Templeton, Training and Development Officer, Thames North Synod

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.' He answered them, 'And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, "Honour your father and your mother," and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die." But you say that whoever tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God", then that person need not honour the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

"This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."'

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.' Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?' He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.' But Peter said to him, 'Explain this parable to us.' Then he said, 'Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft,

account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.'

Reflection

In the industrialised West, most folk live in an urban environment, so urban farms have been created to help children understand what rural life is like. Today, small farms have given way to large agricultural units worked by a few people with specialised machinery. Crops have been manipulated genetically to be resistant to disease, drought, and infestation. The world of farming expects maximum yields from treated seeds, intensively fed. The humble seed? Not so humble now! It is an industrial possession.

Back in first century Palestine, small scale agriculture and fishing were the mainstays of life. It was from the sowing of seed by hand, the fisherman's catch, the tending of sheep – actions familiar to his listeners - that Jesus made word pictures to describe the kingdom of God come close. He imbued rural working life, often hard and unyielding, with eternal significance. How was his message received, then? And now, how potent are the word pictures he has left us given different agricultural practices?

Jesus used stories to teach anybody who would listen. They were surely not meant to stump folk. They were told to aid understanding, not make it difficult. Not everyone got their point. And, as is the way with stories (and indeed sermons) folk take what they want from them, which may or may not be what was originally intended. Stories can develop a life of their own. Perhaps it is in this light that we should understand Jesus speaking privately to his disciples about the Kingdom of God?

As for the power of the word picture of the soil, seed, and sower today; most of the world cannot afford mechanisation, family life is dependent

on family land. We in the West need to look wider than our own expensive technologies and learn afresh about God.

Prayer

Gracious God teach us afresh how to use our creative powers,
and give us eyes to see and understand the nature of God's Kingdom.
'Take a lesson from the ground…the world is charged with the grandeur of God..; nature is never spent…;
there lives the dearest freshness deep down things…;
because the Holy Ghost over the bent
world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.' Amen

quotations from Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem 'God's grandeur'.

Friday 17 February 2023 St Matthew 13: 24 - 43

John Ellis, Area Leader for the West Kent and East Sussex Synod Area

He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."' He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.' He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like

Reflection

Today's passage has been painted, made in to a play by Oscar Wilde, and an opera by Strauss with the 'Dance of the Seven Veils', but if we are taken in by that classy façade, then our disgust at this cacophony of incest, lust, greed, and the vilest injustice has been dulled.

Today's Herod was the son of Herod (the Great), and Phillip was his half-brother. Dad Herod executed some other brothers and gave orphaned granddaughter, Herodias, to half-uncle Phillip as a wife. They had a daughter, Salome, then Herodias left Phillip and moved in with half-uncle-cum-brother-in-law Herod (today's Herod), and that's when John the Baptist stepped in.

John the Baptist calls out this morally-corrupt rat's nest and winds up in prison for his trouble. Herod liked to listen to John, but was also in love with his position of power. He throws a massive party and brings out his young step-daughter-cum-great-half-niece-cum-cousin-twice-removed for men to drool over. Testosterone takes over, and he makes a showy and rash promise. Then instead of having the guts to admit he's done something stupid, he gives in to the vengeful scheming of his wife-cum-sister-in-law-cum-niece, and murders John to save his pride.

It's a sorry tale of all that is worst in humanity. And all that John's friends can do is mourn. Sometimes things really stink, and people get away with stuff they should not get away with. Other people suffer for things that are not their fault. It's not right and it's not good.

Then came one who spoke of God who wipes every tear from our eyes, and of a world where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. Do we want a community, a nation, with values and behaviours like Herod and Herodias? Or do we use our gifts and talents, stretching ourselves, to try to make the world a better place for children like Salome, and all vulnerable children?

Tuesday 21 February 2023 St Matthew 14: 1 - 21

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.

At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus; and he said to his servants, 'This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been telling him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her.' Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.' The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother. His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus. Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.' Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.'

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Reflection

If there are weeds in the rough patch of grass behind the garage, I don't really mind. If any dared spoil the flower bed at the front, that would be a different matter entirely. If the "weeds" spoiling our church, our community or our country really niggle us, that is a good sign. It shows we care.

The understandable urge to purge the Church of such corruption has so often made the Church seem miserably censorious, the community whose favourite phrase is "Thou shalt not". Even more importantly, Jesus warns us that our confidence that we can spot the weeds is misplaced. God knows, but us pretending to be God is idolatry. When my employer had "Judgement" as one of the qualities on which staff were assessed in their performance reviews, we had debates about how you define good judgement objectively: too easily it collapses to "Do they agree with me?"

This passage however gives little succour to those who assume that if I feel passionately enough about something I must be on the side of justice, truly prophetic. My feelings are not the benchmark. There are some absolute rights and wrongs that God will fully reveal when ready. Meanwhile, aware we cannot be sure which of a mixed group of seeds will grow into pathetic little weeds and which will grow into magnificent great trees, we need to stay humble in our judgements.

These three parables all feature the need to wait patiently. If we become the people who can handle that, we will certainly be Nonconformist with the surrounding culture. We might also make the Church a place where more people can grow to be what God intended. We might also have something notable to offer to social media and the public discourse. At the last Harvest, we might even turn out to be wheat.

Prayer

Dear God
My church is such an odd bunch.
Not one of them is quite like me.
You know those who irritate, fuss about the wrong things,
trivialise what feeds me.
Thank you for the opportunity to practise patience.
Help me see all your children as equally precious.
Help me celebrate strengths.
Help me realise I can't always be right.
Then rewrite my prayers
so that I never talk of "my" church but Yours. Amen

Saturday 18 February 2023 St Matthew 13: 44 - 53

The Rev'd Nicola Furley-Smith, Secretary for Ministries, Purley United Reformed Church

'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys

Any why? Because he points out their lack of care for orphans, widows, and leapers.

We can see around us the efforts to which people and organisations will go to stop a message of diversity, equality, and hopeful joy, with its ability to raise all humanity and creation to the fullness that God desires and of which, Jesus speaks and shows us through his life, death and new life.
Some thoughts for all of us:

What has your church community done recently that caused offence because of its radical love?

Who have you welcomed and included, causing a scandal?

Has anyone threatened to throw you off a cliff, because you've 'brought good news to the poor and proclaimed release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind'?

It does us good to be reminded that 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because we are anointed' as we follow God's way. Hopefully this gives us the bravery we need to speak truth to power and to light a candle in the dark.

Prayer

Emmanuel.
God with us and upon us.
Strengthen us, we pray, and renew our hope and strength
to be salt and light
and to speak the truth, in love. Amen

greatest love and surest help that could be shown to us.

Prayer

I lift my eyes to Calvary, there the Lord Jesus bled for me;
no greater love could ever be, no surer help.

Monday 20 February 2023 St Matthew 13: 54 - 58

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

He came to his home town and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?' And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house.' And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

Reflection

This passage lays plain the sacrifice of following the way of Jesus.

There are times when being counter-cultural, counter-endless growth, counter-hate, counter-injustice, counter-despair, counter-division can cause offence to those who benefit from or are simply overwhelmed by the comfort of the status-quo.

Am I being pessimistic or realistic when I say that it doesn't surprise me that in Luke's account of this story (Luke 4: 16-30), the crowds don't simply 'take offence', they take Jesus 'to the brow of a hill, so that they might throw him off'?

that field. 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

Reflection

What sparks joy for you? These three short parables remind us about the joy of discipleship: hidden treasure has been found and, because it brings great joy, the finder risks it all to obtain more. In exchange for the possibility of finding more treasure, and more joy, he sells it all! As such, the kingdom of heaven is not simply joy; it is a joy that is worth all that you have. Like the finder, the merchant searching for a pearl liquidates all his assets to purchase it. His discovery is not unexpected. It is the result of persistent searching. As such, the kingdom of heaven is something to be sought. It is not easily obtained or readily available.

The experience of discovery differs for both the finder and the merchant, two people from very different backgrounds but both throw caution to the wind to obtain the goal. Living under the reign of God entails discoveries like these which will reshape our kingdom priorities.

The parable of the dragnet sets a contrast for us. The dragnet collects all sorts of fish, edible and nonedible, the good collected, the bad discarded. The kingdom of heaven adds to our understanding of discipleship: the kingdom of heaven is diverse and inclusive. Just as fish exist together in

the sea, we must live together and leave the final judgement to God.

Jesus highlights one more aspect of the kingdom: the role of the scribe who is disciplined in learning and committed to the preparation of others for life under God's rule both the old story of God's promise to establish a reign of peace and justice in the world and the new contemporary application of it today demonstrated through our discipleship. Understanding this is critical and should remind us that discipleship is not a game. It is a matter of life and death.

Prayer

Let me, O God, risk all that I have and all that I am for you
that through my words and actions a glimpse of your kingdom
may be seen. Amen.

Sunday 19 February 2023 Psalm 123

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

Up to the hills I lift my eyes.
Is it from there my help will rise?
God made the hills,
the earth, the skies, and he will help.

2 He'll not allow your foot to slip,
Faithful the watch
your God will keep,
he'll never slumber,
never sleep, but he will help.

3 God watches over all your way,
close by your side he'll always stay,
shading from harm
both night and day.
The Lord will help.

4 Evil shall never vanquish you;
God watches everything you do,
he'll keep you safe
your whole life through,
he'll always help.

5 Out on a hill where sinners died
God's holy Son was crucified;
now he is at his Father's side,
our living help.

6 I lift my eyes to Calvary,
there the Lord Jesus bled for me;
no greater love could ever be,
no surer help.

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You can hear the tune here
https://www.jubilate.co.uk/songs/up_to_the_hills_i_lift_my_eyes

Reflection

I wonder if you, like me, wondered if the number of the psalm was correct, and we were looking at another hymn based in Psalm 121. Both psalms start with us lifting our eyes, but this hymn is listed as being based on Psalm 123 in Psalms for All Seasons, so we can set those reservations aside. I have been struck by the opening (shared by both psalms) with the call to lift our eyes. Writing at a time when the rain has just about wiped out the drought of the summer, it feels that I rarely lift my eyes when out – watching for puddles and keeping the rain out of my face. By doing that, I am reduced to looking at mud and dead leaves – hardly designed to lift my spirits.

Yet when I do lift my eyes, I see so much that I miss when my head is down – the beautiful shape of winter trees, the birds gathering together, a beautiful sunset. Oh, and a pair of trainers very high in a tall tree, showing some ingenuity! (how did they get there?)

Sometimes, our spiritual life can be a bit like a winter walk – grey days with our heads down, only seeing the mess of life. When we do lift our eyes to the One enthroned above, we glimpse a richer life, leading us to worship, and the reassurance of help from our Lord.

The last line of each verse mentions the help of the Lord – reminding us of God's love, care and attention to each one of us – the help which is there through the toughest times in our lives.

Finally, this hymn reaches beyond the psalm to include the culmination of God's love in sending his Son, with references to his crucifixion - the