

Sunday Service 17.1.21

Readings Isaiah 62:1-5; St John 2:1-11

The Saviour comes

Readings: Isaiah 62:1-5; St John 2:1-11

Prayer: Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord Our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen
In John's Gospel chapter 2 and verse 11 we read these words, as they are found in the New International Version of the text, "This is the first of the miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He revealed his glory and his disciples put their faith in him."

Perhaps, because I had the prospect of travelling this week to record the service for today with Alex, I have been watching and listening to the weather forecasts rather more carefully than usual this week. The prospect of snow was more, or less, likely as the days progressed and the days on which the snow was predicted to fall and the amount and type of snow expected varied from forecaster to forecaster in a very frustrating way. Still the weather doesn't tailor itself to our particular circumstance so we must take what it must inevitably bring.

If this is how we foretell the future of one constant, though ever changing, element of our modern lives think how it must have been in the past? Old wives tales or their more ancient cousins must have played a big part. People, however, were more attuned to nature perhaps because big cities were few and therefore subtle atmospheric changes more easily seen. They could read the signs in the skies and the air and had no need of such things as long range forecasts to tell them what was in the wind.

Our two readings this morning are linked by the common theme of that ability to read the signs that God was giving to his people, not about the weather however, but about how God was at work in the world. Both too use the picture of the bride and groom to illustrate further the close relationship that God wishes to have with those he has created. The two readings are however seemingly very different, to our minds at least, but to the Jewish mind, and the context in which each was written, they were scriptures that could be easily linked as our lectionary still does today.

Our Old Testament lesson was a passage from the final part of that long book of the prophecies of Isaiah. It is so long and covers such a wide sweep of time that scholars realise that it could not have been the work of just one man but rather of a school of prophets who had initially probably been taught by Isaiah and had adopted his name to show the line of prophecy to which they belonged. By this point in the book they turn to look, not just at the near future but, to God's ultimate plan for the salvation of his people. It falls in the midst of a section where Isaiah was foretelling the coming of a Saviour into the world. The nation of Israel might be claiming the title of, or be called, "God's servant" but in its actions, or at times inaction, and failure to honour God it had fallen far short of this particular claim. Isaiah had been given the message by God that someone would come who was indeed God's servant in every way but would at the same time be God's appointed Saviour, not simply of Israel but, of the world.

This picture of Israel sharing a kind of intimate relationship with God, being married to God, occurs elsewhere in other Old Testament prophecies too.

Perhaps it was the most intimate and special human relationship the prophets

could see which was closest to the situation of this special people. The nation is pictured as the bride of God but though she is God's bride, she is a very unfaithful one, constantly being slated by the prophets for her waywardness as her people were continually tempted to follow the gods they saw their neighbours worshipping.

At the point we glimpsed today Isaiah had just shared Good news from God with the people. This Good News was of God's plan for deliverance. Just before this, he had forecast a great role reversal where foreigners would serve the people of Israel rather than the reverse. He had added to that prosperity would return to the land. The passage we read together follows hard on these amazing promises. Now the nation is pictured like a bride on her wedding day: the centre of attention, shining out in beauty; radiant with happiness; given a new name – a name chosen by God himself.

This name was so special that Isaiah went out of his way to show the total change that would take place by referring back to those other prophecies when Israel was slated for her faithlessness to God. This turnaround would be exemplified by giving her a new title. This new title would remove the shame of being referred to as "Deserted Wife" though perhaps it was the Israelites themselves who had deserted God rather than the other way round. Their new title translates as, "God is pleased with her" or "She is happily married". It would be God himself who would accomplish all this – but not yet. This was a prophecy for a future time, unspecified, when at last the promised saviour would arrive among them to carry out God's plan, as he did in the person of Jesus.

That prophecy about God's coming servant was, as we have just seen, full of references to marriage. What could be more appropriate, then, than that Jesus' first sign to his people takes place in the context of a marriage? We usually refer to this as the miracle of turning water to wine but John doesn't use that term: he chooses instead to call it a sign, as he does elsewhere in his Gospel. John does not in fact refer to miracles in his Gospel but rather carefully chooses to use the word "sign", linking back to the prophecies which had told people that these were the kind of things they should be looking out for; signs that the Messiah had come among them. If people were paying attention, they would, or rather should, recognise that Jesus was none other than the "Servant" promised by God, the saviour sent to rescue them.

On the face of it, to begin with at least, John was simply recounting a fairly straightforward story. Mary, Jesus mother, has been invited to a wedding. The wedding was to take place in Cana, a town in close proximity to Nazareth where Jesus had his family home. John is careful to tell us that the Cana he refers to was in fact this one as there were other towns with the same name. It is almost as if he is telling people where to go if they want to check-up on his account! He might well have been for, even as he wrote, other false gospels and books of so-called miracles which were quite spurious were doing the rounds: yes there was fake news even then!

There are some hints in the story that this was a special wedding for Mary was given a place of honour at the feast along with her son. We can infer that from the fact that she was able to direct the servants and that they took her words as authoritative. She also seems perhaps to have had something to do with the arrangements for she was quick to notice when the wine was in danger of running gout: a crass social error as well as a gross lapse of hospitality to the

invited guests.

This story only appears in John's Gospel: a fact which has led people to speculate over the years as to whether John himself was a guest at this wedding for this account has all the hall marks of coming from an eye-witness. That is something which we will never know for certain, for no matter the details, it is what happened in the course of the wedding feast that is important. And it was important not just for one unknown family but also for what it told those who looked with clear eyes at this amazing event, or sign, as participants, and for all who sought to learn from it in the ages to come.

In the times in which Jesus lived, wine was an essential ingredient at any feast. "Without wine," said the Rabbis, "there is no joy." This doesn't mean they were advocating drunkenness but it was at that period an essential element not simply to make the party go with a swing but to ensure the purity of what they drank. It probably killed, or at least diluted the potency of, a good many bugs in the water with which the wine was usually mixed. This was a practice carried on in many countries, for centuries to come until the provision of good water supplies became more certain.

When Mary noticed the looming catastrophe that the wine supply had run dry it seems she also immediately saw that she had the solution. She simply turned to her son to provide the answer. When she told him what was wrong however, it seems, to modern ears at least, that he gave her a somewhat dusty response.

Theologians have long worried away at this exchange and written many pages of text on this encounter but there is perhaps an all too obvious explanation of this apparent dusty response Jesus gave to his mother.

Could it have been that it was simply the suddenness of it all that momentarily wrong-footed the human Jesus: he was unprepared for the suddenness of it all. What was all this fuss to do with him? But maybe on this occasion at least, Mum did in fact know best. She had after all been told about how remarkable this child of hers was even before he was born.

Whatever the initial hesitation, it was only a thing of a moment for immediately, it seems, Mary was at work telling the servants to follow whatever instructions Jesus gave them and he, in turn, was giving them their precise orders. As Mary knew he would, Jesus provided the solution to the problem and in so doing exceeded all expectations. The wine that was now served was far superior to the original. So much so that people remarked about it.

Perhaps, however, not everyone looked behind the gratification they got from this superb vintage but some did. For Jesus and Mary had not gone to the wedding alone. Others had gone with them. Some of the Jesus disciples were there to witness the scene. They had observed all that had gone on and they realised that something amazing had happened. They had seen a sign of "glory" the Bible tells. They had seen something that changed them and their attitude to the new teacher they had followed. They had become believers. As the NIV puts it, they "put their faith in him".

Perhaps for some of them the penny dropped in an instant. The old prophecies they heard read regularly in their synagogues suddenly had a new meaning. This man Jesus whom they had decided to take as their teacher, the One, the Servant, the Bridegroom, had come at last to Israel as God had promised. For John, at least, it was not the glorious new wine that was important but what it signified in the salvation plan for his people and the world.

The disciples may have noticed what happened. Mary certainly did. But there must have been all the other guests at that wedding who simply remarked and gossiped about the strange way their host had catered for them and the remarkable good fortune of getting to sample such good wine. Everything else escaped them. They were unaware of anything unusual. They just took it as it came. They were blind to the signs of God at work. That alas is a familiar story. People, even those who attend church regularly, are all too often simply unaware that God is at work. Perhaps because we simply don't expect that God could ever be at work in our lives or use us as his agents in the world. Yet that is just what God does and what he very much wishes to do. Perhaps we all need to wake and not as the modern adage says "smell the coffee" but look for the signs of God at work and the work that God has for all of us in these days we live through. Not all of us can be on the front line but we can support others in many ways: and simply knowing someone is "there for us" can be a big boost. Like the prophets of old we too need to read the signs: to see how God is at work in our world through events and people; to praise him for it and to be aware that he might just want to use us as his agents of change to reach people with his love and grace.

Sunday 27th December 2020

Reading from Mathew chap 2 verses 9 - 11

The visit of the Wiremen

So how has Christmas been for you? Did you get all the presents you wanted? Will it be memorable for what you got or what you gave? So much time has been spent in buying gifts and sending cards that it is a relief when it is all done and we can relax again. For the children, though it is a great time of excitement leading up to Christmas and the expectation of what Santa Claus is going to bring. Unfortunately this year we have been unable to put on a nativity scene with the children and this is certainly something which we regret as it is usually so much a part of our worship at this time and helps to put over the true meaning of Christmas to the next generation and remind us of it too. So the shepherds have been furloughed and they are certainly not coming back till the ewes are vaccinated in the Spring, before lambing, and the Wiseman are held up at the border as they are from a different local authority area and cannot enter tier four. They need more than one day to get to Bethlehem. And as for Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, we cannot get in touch with them as there is - wait for it - "No Zoom at the inn" (I don't claim any originality for this !)

However, the real Christmas story does not change and has come down to us through all the centuries since it was first written down. It does not need me to enlarge upon the reading for today as it specifically deals with the Magi or Kings or Wisemen that came from the east having followed the star which led them to the stable at Bethlehem. The thing that stands out for me here though is the joy with which these Wisemen present their gifts to the baby Jesus. They had had a long journey and finding the place where Jesus had been born had not been easy. But it says in the Good News version that " how happy they were and what joy was theirs" when they found the star still leading them to Bethlehem and to the stable where Jesus and his mother were. So joy and happiness surrounded the first Christmas presents that were ever given. We like the Wisemen have had a long journey to get to Christmas this time and our plans may have been changed a time or two but let us too truly rejoice that we can celebrate once more.

Christmas should be about fun and rejoicing! Many things in life can change as

we know, and need to change, but there are some essential truths to which we need to cling to give us stability and a sense of purpose. The essential message of Christmas is the old one that God gave his son as a baby to the World as a gift to mankind as a saviour so that we should be free to live life to its full without the burden of sin. That should fill us all with joy and happiness at this Christmas and all the year through. Amen

Let us pray. Father we give thanks today for the gift you gave us of your son at this time of Christmas. For the joy that this has brought to mankind down the ages and for us today. Help us to truly embrace this and in so doing help to spread the joy to others, remembering especially those who find this time difficult for whatever reason. For them, and for ourselves we pray. Amen

20th December 2020

Today in church we will light the fourth Advent candle on our Christmas wreath. This one stands for Love, complementing those representing Hope, Joy and Peace which were lit in the previous three weeks.

While I always look forward to Christmas at this time of year, I also always rejoice when we reach the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, which happens to be tomorrow, 21st December. I celebrate because, from now on, I know that we can expect the days to get longer and the hours of darkness to get shorter – at least for the next 6 months. From this weekend, we know for sure that the days will steadily lengthen, and that there is the promise of increasing hours of daylight.

Christmas is of course very much a festival of light, especially here in the northern hemisphere. Just think of the Advent candles, the Christmas trees, the street lights. Given that we don't exactly know at what time of year Jesus was born, I don't think it's any coincidence that the early church chose to celebrate the birth of the Saviour so close to the winter solstice; in pagan times, the returning of the light was a great cause of celebration. And the Christmas narrative is suffused with the imagery of light - the shepherds are dazzled by the angels, the star leads the way for the wise men to find the stable.

In the prophecy of Isaiah, we read "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." In the great prologue of the Gospel of John, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

This symbolism of dark and light is hugely powerful. In our lives, we all face times of darkness – this year particularly has been difficult for so many people as Covid has wreaked havoc with our health, our economy and our ability to sustain

relationships without the hugs and handshakes we are so used to give and receive. Many are facing redundancy, the break-up of relationships, illness, bereavement. Over and above the pandemic, we struggle to understand the senseless carnage of innocent victims of wars and terrorism, the plight of people who are homeless, or who have lost loved ones because of drug addiction; the threat to our very environment because of climate change; or the exploitation of women and children in sex trafficking, the injustice of poverty, and the cruelty of 'hostile environments' being created to deter immigrants and the unemployed. It is so easy to see the darkness all around us – but the message of Christmas is one of hope – the hope that no matter what darkness we may be going through, God is with us – Immanuel – Jesus is the Light of the World. So let us continue to light the candles and pray that peace and justice will prevail; let us give thanks for the light that shines in the darkness, for our faith tells us that the darkness shall not overcome it.

The Candle

The candle gives light to us,
The flame reflects and flickers,
Like a spiralling shape, rising up to illuminate,
Directing, upwards, gentle and calming.
The flickering of a candle gives a warm and comfortable feeling
Lighting up a room, lighting our way.
Christmas candles, reflecting a birth of a King,
Reflecting our own Christian birth.

The Advent candles are special.
They bring hope, joy, peace and love
Burning brightly, showing us the way to Christmas Eve,
To a birth of a baby, Jesus, who was born long ago,
Bringing with him and in him these words:
"I am the light of the world."

This Christmas time, may the light from these candles
Stay with us, burning brightly in the days to come,
Lighting our way, beginning from now to the next
Christmas Eve, with even more
Peace, joy, hope and love.
Thank you, flickering candles of advent light
And a faith that may be born anew,

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Sunday 13th December 2020

Reading. John 1: 6-8 & 19-28.

In preparing this may I, Lord, have the grace to write acceptably to You. We heard last week from Isaiah [Is 40:1-11], about 700 years before Jesus' birth, about the preparations to be made for the coming of the Saviour but not precisely when nor where. It was God's preparation so that when the Saviour eventually did come that he would be recognised.

We are looking forward to so many things this Christmas like the full roll out of the vaccine. But where are we now in mid-December 2020 as we look around ourselves in this parish? We have no allocated minister, but we are getting by fine, the fire is still burning. Marina Brown has agreed to provide the pastoral care for us all. We have plans, we have concerns that we're okay with, we're making headway and we are able to live and to laugh. With all these positives on our doorsteps we are also where we are with the pandemic claiming lives across the world, global warming destroying habitats and species and with loneliness and unhappiness as a result of our inherent unkindness to others and yet we are in Advent, the start of the Christian year.

Advent is about the coming of Jesus. We hear the story of love, of God's love coming to touch the Earth, bringing with it the peace and goodwill to all that we long to feel and be part of. Talking about the Earth, our world, we're talking about Strathearn and about a refugee camp in Calais or a hostel in UK and about a homeless druggie cold on the streets somewhere. In the understandable form of a baby born to the family 2000 years ago God is showing us his love, is offering us that peace and goodwill, is offering us the way towards his kingdom. God's love is here and with it we can bolster people's mental health and physical well-being.

Around the passage from John, of Jesus being the light of the world, we know that John was not that light but was witness to it. Light travels infinitely fast, it spreads from the flame, the source, it touches, reflects; reflects off people's faces, it reflects off surfaces onto the others; it gets weaker the further away it gets from its source, but it is still there. In our villages the streetlights give us reference points from pool of light to pool of light as we walk along. As a metaphor light does all that and more. We light Advent candles that are tokens, but they remind us of how Jesus brings light into our world, everybody's world if we will let it. What are we doing with it now and what we will do with the light that we know is coming?

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians [1Th 5: 9-11] with the idea of busyness that encourages cooperation. This is something happening to us here in Mid

Strathearn as we live and pray. We are waiting for, wanting a new minister - but waiting - as far as Paul was concerned, is not about sitting back; it's not something passive but rather it's a time to [1Thess 5:11] 'encourage one another and build each other up' to continue to grow in faith and a time to celebrate God's goodness. Because we are His hands and eyes we could be trialling and working with everything that is good and peaceful; it's through us that we let God's spirit shine in our lives and, more importantly, in those of people around us.

Moving as we are towards Christmas in this extraordinary year, many have not been passive in the way that they have thought and cared about other people. John was active in working with people in his anticipation of Jesus coming to fulfil his role. He knew what their roles were to be, even if he couldn't fully understand them. [John1: 26-27] "I baptise with water, but amongst you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie".

When he was asked to justify who he is John answers [John1:23] "in the words of Isaiah the prophet "I am the voice of one calling in the desert 'Make straight the way for the Lord'". He tells the priests what and who he is not even though they have been trying to pigeon-hole him into a different mould. 'He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light' [John1:8]

Pulling these strands together, we know that the style of Jesus' birth was neither regal nor apocalyptic. The build-up to Jesus beginning his ministry is equally, neither regal nor apocalyptic; God chooses a man, Jesus' own cousin; God relies on an ordinary man to highlight that He has sent His son into the midst of humanity to redeem and restore the world. John's role was humble and yet so hugely significant because he bore witness of the coming light. We can do as John did and can use every opportunity to be part of the light that dispels every darkness - especially perhaps, at Christmas in a 2020 which has dimmed the lives of so many. What will we each and collectively bring?

Amen and thank you, Tim Carmichael

Sunday 6th December 2020

Instead of today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah, if I had chosen the gospel passage for today, you would have read the start of Mark's gospel. The gospel starts:

"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the son of God.

It is written in Isaiah the Prophet: "I will send my Messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way - a voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him".

And so John came, baptising in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"

In Mark's gospel, he presents the life of Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, the power of Jesus, and the effects that Jesus would have on people. Mark chose to start with the account of John the Baptist and the preparation for the coming of the Messiah. John came before Jesus and was preparing the way for him. John's first recorded words by Mark includes a quote from the passage in the 40th chapter of the book of the Prophet Isaiah, which you have just heard read.

Isaiah is a book that relates the story of the Israelites at the time, in their history, when they were taken into Babylon in captivity, a time of difficulty for them, a time of problems, a time of issues, a time of loss, a time of defeat, a time when the things just did not go well for them.

You could make some comparisons with today, with life in 2020. We have had all sorts of plans frustrated, plans as individuals, plans as families, plans as groups of people and plans as a church. We all had plans for what we were going to do this year .. and things were going well .. until March, when the world seemed to stop. In March life as we knew it was put into suspension and, even now, we don't know what life is going to be like in the future, or in what timescale. As I said, we can draw some comparisons with the Israelites at the time of Isaiah chapter 40. They had been taken out of their land, left the promised land behind, said goodbye and had been transported to Babylon in captivity. Their future was uncertain, life had changed. But their period of hassle and captivity lasted for 50 years so it was on a much greater scale than our inconvenience.

Chapters 1 to 39 of Isaiah outlined the punishment that Judah could expect because of relying on friendships and alliances with other nations, rather than putting their trust in God. Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed, and the people would experience a lengthy exile That is what happened. The exile has lasted nearly 50 years The Jews are living in captivity, as they had done in Egypt so many years earlier. Most of the Jews who lived in Jerusalem have died in exile and a new generation has been born into this captivity.

What did the people think? They probably wondered whether this situation would ever end, having lasted 50 years already, .. they would imagine them, and their successors, staying in Babylon forever. To a lesser extent, rather like us and the current virus but obviously not in the same timescale. But we do keep wondering whether it's going to finish, whether we're going to get through it in 2020 or 2021 or even 2022

At the start of this passage, God gives consolation to the people. That their sin has been paid for. We are not sure who this passage was actually addressed to - whether it was addressed to an individual, to the leaders or to the nation as a whole, but it certainly applied to all the people. It is saying that they should not worry so much; the message is to bring consolation to people who are experiencing distress and so it probably applied to the whole nation.

The passage goes on to talk about being prepared, to being prepared for whatever is going to happen. To prepare, to make straight the paths for the Lord.

It did not mean that they should get out their picks and shovels to make a road from Babylon to Jerusalem. But the preparation is in their hearts and minds - they must prepare for the Lord's coming and that preparation must involve some sort of spiritual discipline such as prayer, such as keeping God's laws. There is no detail on the form that this preparation should take - they must just prepare for something that is going to happen. Happen to them, but this passage can equally well apply to the Israelites in John the Baptist's time .. and it applies to us this year. We must prepare, prepare to celebrate the anniversary of God coming to his world in the form of a baby, prepare for how God is going to intervene in our lives, intervene in the world.

As an illustration, Isaiah uses grass growing and people being like grass. This illustration would be obvious to the hearers because they are dependent on their animals. The weather is hot and grass does not survive well in heat. People who herd sheep know that grass is valuable, that grass can be difficult to find. The sheep must eat their grass and the shepherd who cannot find grass for the sheep is doomed to lose his flock and lose his livelihood.

So, it is with us, we can wither not only from a physical point of view but from a spiritual point of view. We can get complacent and begin to think that we are invincible, that we can survive on our own.

The Israelites did not follow God's instructions - they decided that they would go their own way, they were not obedient, they thought that they didn't need God.

Isaiah then goes on to say that they have to be very powerful with their praise, they have to bring good tidings to Jerusalem, they have to lift up their voices, they have to proclaim that God exists, that God is here, God with all the sovereign power. God that looks after them, looks after them rather like a shepherd looks after their flock, a God who gathers the poor, the ill, the needy, the younger ones rather like a shepherd gathers a lamb into his arms, who looks after them and protects them.

So what does this passage from Isaiah say to us today?

We might not be held in slavery in a foreign country, but we do lack commitment at times. We accept a baby born in a stable as our God, but we don't always worship him enough, we don't talk about him enough. We don't rely on him enough .. we find ourselves alone and concerned by our lack of social contact when the most powerful being in this world wants us to be closer to him, to rely on him, to trust him.

This year many of the commercial distractions for Christmas have been removed. We are going to have a much simpler Christmas. This gives us a great opportunity to use the time to worship God, to think about God, to read about God, to talk to God. God arranged for the Israelites to be free to return to Jerusalem, he will help us to enjoy our different celebration of Jesus' birth.

Let us, both you and I, make it a memorable Christmas celebration, remembering

the things that are important for eternal life but avoiding those things that wither and fail.

Peace will come if we put our trust in our sovereign God, in our saviour born in that stable all those years ago. Amen.

Sunday 29th November 2020

Today is the first Sunday of Advent – ‘the sacred year has now revolved’ as the hymn says, and we are now into a new Christian year, in a time of preparation for Christmas. Advent is the season that begins 4 Sundays before 25th December, and is a time of expectant waiting, hopeful anticipation, and joyful preparation for God coming into our lives and our hearts, in all moments, in all places and all times, past, present and future.

This year, we have had to get used to waiting – waiting to be told when we can go into a friend’s house again, waiting to hear if we still have a job, waiting for a chance to embrace family and loved ones; waiting for news of the health of people who are dear to us; we have been waiting to hear what we can and cannot do around the 5 days of Christmas – forget about the 12 days this year! – crucially we are waiting for a vaccine, which now fortunately is looking ever more likely to be available in the spring; and we are waiting, are we not, for a return to some sort of normality?

Waiting is not always easy – we live in a world where many expect things to happen quickly and without having to wait. But during Advent we are invited to actively use the time to prepare ourselves for God coming into our lives – not just 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, but now, in the present day, as we open our hearts to allow Him to enter in, and make a difference in our lives.

In a strange sort of way, I wonder if this year may give us all an opportunity to really use the next four weeks as a time to watch and wait. Might this lockdown period be seen literally be a God-send? There’s likely to be less frenetic buying and flocking to the shops; there will be few if any pre-Christmas parties or lunches to either host or attend; there will be less scurrying around preparing nativity plays or Christmas concerts. Maybe this Advent we can really make time to prepare ourselves and consider again the wonder and challenge of God breaking into our lives. There are certainly plenty of resources to assist us in our journey through Advent – agencies like Christian Aid and Tear Fund are just two agencies which have daily reflections online; there are many more. We can use the Church of Scotland’s own online Advent Calendar; or have a look at the resources provided by Alternativity – their strapline is Just God, Simply Christmas and they encourage us to see through or eschew the commercialisation of Christmas and focus on ways in which we can make a more just world. (Links to all of these are provided on our "Thinking of Advent" page of our website.)

So, please, light your Advent candle each day and make time, like Mary (who had to do a lot of waiting!) to ponder what Christ means to you, and how much you

will allow him into your life. And consider also what you can do to spread the love and hope which comes from Christ.

An Advent Prayer, written by the late Rev David Ogston, former minister at St John's Kirk, Perth

Away with Gloom

O dayspring, rise upon our night

Dawn upon darkened minds

And lead us past all shams and shadows

To Yourself

Make us unhappy

With anything less than You.

O dayspring, rise upon our night

And be the light of all our days.

Kindle in every heart

Some overwhelming vision of Yourself.

O dayspring, rise upon our night

Shine in us gathered here

Pierce the clouds that hide you:

Dark clouds of unbelief

Chill clouds of anxiety

Heavy clouds of despair.

O dayspring, rise upon our night

Pour out Your glory

That we may see what lies around us.

The sunrise patient and slow;

The rainbow in the storm;

The silver lining in the greyness

Of laden skies.

O dayspring, rise upon our night

Invade the dark places of the earth

That the nerve centres of violence

May be destroyed.

Dispel our doubt and fear.

And for the eyes that wait

May morning come.

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Sunday 22nd November 2020

Reading Mathew chap 25 verse 31 – 46

This is the final Sunday in the church's calendar for the year as next Sunday is the first in Advent as we look forward to the birth of Christ. It is an opportune time to reflect and prepare for the coming year as a shepherd would for his sheep. Of course there are lots of references to sheep within the bible and today's reading is no exception and this reading speaks of running sheep and goats together. The Scottish Agricultural College who were and still are one of the prime sources of research and innovation from a particularly Scottish perspective ran a series of experiments of running sheep and goats together on a hill farm, the goats being used as a means of tidying up all the bits of the pasture that the sheep left behind. Sheep are very selective in what they eat and goats less so I am told. I don't know much about goats to be honest my biggest experience with them being as steward in charge of goats at Perth Show one year when I certainly began to learn about the different breeds of goats but learned a lot more about the people that kept them! Anyway the experiment of running sheep and goats together ran its course but I don't see any large herds of goats running with the sheep so I don't think it caught on. Perhaps they discovered, in a Scottish situation that cattle were better companions on the hillsides than goats. On our visit to the Holy Land – a good few years ago now – we certainly did see

sheep and goats running together and at first glance they were quite difficult to tell apart. The sheep were quite big and goat like and I remember we were told by our all knowing guide that the way to recognise the difference was that the goats walked about with their tail up the way and the sheep with their tail down! In this lesson this morning the Good Shepherd is sorting out the sheep from the goats, the sheep to his right and the goats to his left. The sheep to his right are the good guys but the goats to the left are the bad guys. Was it the case that even in these days goats were less highly prized than sheep? I don't know or was it just the smell of the goats that put folk off? Maybe. To return to the scriptures, the good guys the sheep on the right are quite unaware of when they have helped the master. When did we feed you when you were hungry, when did we invite you in? and so on. The answer given is that whenever you did it for the least of these my brothers you did it for me. Time and again Jesus focusses on those who are at the margins of life, the hungry, the homeless those who are sick and yes those who are in prison. Like a good shepherd he cares for all his sheep recognising that it is those at the edges of a flock that are going to take the most time and attention.

As for the goats on the left they are judged by their shepherd not so much for what they have done but for what they have not done. He condemns them for not feeding him when he was hungry, not inviting him in as a stranger not providing clothes for him and not visiting him. Again the cry goes up when did we see you like this? We didn't know. The answer this time is the negative form of the same answer as before. What you didn't do for the least of these my brothers you didn't do for me. Again Jesus focussed on the ones in difficulty and condemns the sins of omission by those who should have known better.

I suspect that most of us are a mixture of sheep and goats rather than falling into one camp or the other. Indeed at this time we cannot visit, we cannot have others in our home except for child minding and we cannot entertain. Of course there are other ways of helping and we have just to be inovative in thinking about them, but our hearts must go out to those who cannot visit elderly relatives or those who are sick at this time. How hard it must be both for the patient and for the family who are desperate to visit and I am glad to hear that in some situations where it is critical this is being relaxed to allow a certain amount of visiting.

Jesus has another parable, the parable of the ten virgins who are waiting on the arrival of the bridegroom. He is long in coming and by the time he comes the lamps of the virgins have run out of oil and only the five who have taken time to bring extra oil with them can go out and greet the bridegroom. The other five miss his arrival as they are away getting more oil and the bridegroom does not recognise them when they come late. Clearly, Jesus expects us to be prepared for whatever lies ahead and be open to what we can do to help. He has no other hands feet or minds on Earth than those of us who are here to do his work in his kingdom. This is partly why it remains important for us to meet for worship week by week, if we can, and to share this worship with those who are not able to come in person, so that we can feel the comfort and strength of those around us, that we are not on our own and that we are able to enjoy the feeling that wherever two or three are gathered together in His name He is there amongst us. As I said at the start this is the last Sunday in the church year and next Sunday becomes the first in Advent leading up to Christmas and the birth of Jesus. Like

the shepherd has to make sure that his sheep are in good fettle for the start of their year let us too make sure that we are as well prepared, spiritually, as we can be for the year that is to come. Amen

Prayer of thanks and for others Sunday 22nd Nov 20

Father, we thank you for the opportunity to come together through the benefit of technology to feel part of your worshipping congregation although we are not physically in the same building. We thank you that the work of the church continues through the help of all those who make it possible and we thank you for the time today to take stock of our spiritual journey and like the shepherd for his sheep prepare ourselves for the year that lies ahead.

Our prayers for others. We pray especially once again Father, for those affected by the ongoing pandemic, for those who are suffering for the families surrounding them and for the front line staff of nurse, carers and all the others involved in their care. With them we couple those who are suffering from loss of livelihood, those who feel isolated because of the restrictions and our politicians who day and daily have to make decisions that so directly affect the lives of all of us. Grant them wisdom and honesty at this time to make just and wise choices. Amidst all of that, Father, we pray for those caught up in the ongoing fighting in many parts of the world, Yemen, Syria, Ethiopia

Nearer to home we pray for those who are sick, those who are in carehomes and perhaps not able to meet their relatives. We pray for those recovering from operations and those suffering from long covid and for those who have recently lost loved ones that they may be comforted by your love that surrounds them. Lastly we pray for ourselves and our loved ones that we will always be with you in all aspects of our lives. Amen
Sunday 15th November 2020

The reading is Revelation 22: 1-5 when John, in the Holy City of New Jerusalem, is shown the River of the Water of Life

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Reflection

2020 is 75 years after the end of WW2 and today we will be reflecting on the service men and women who fought and died in that conflict and, in particular, those who were part of 'The Forgotten Army' fighting in the Far East under

Mountbatten and, in Burma, under Field Marshall Sir William Slim against the Imperial Japanese army and its acolytes. I'll explain why have I chosen 'the Forgotten Army', as the Press of 1943 dubbed it, as the vehicle for today's remembrance address.

In talking about them and the men who fought there I'll refer to the enemy they were fighting, the Imperial Japanese Army, as a fact rather than making any current day statement.

Kohima was THE decisive battle in 1944 against the Japanese in North East India, It was the turning point, the beginning of the fight back. The battlefield, resembling in our European experience the Somme in its devastation: treeless, mud and blood, is recalled in an immortal epitaph For your tomorrow, We gave our today.

November 1945, 75 years ago, saw men still travelling back from Burma, from Asia generally to the United Kingdom on troop ships via India and Africa. They had experienced a unity of awfulness against a ruthless enemy and were now individuals once more, looking for an identity.

Amongst them was an otherwise ordinary young man returning to Arbroath who, many years later, married his sweetheart and found they couldn't have children so they adopted a baby whom I shall call Frank. He was a genial older father, calm, loving in his own way and offering sound guidance to Frank as he grew through his teenage years as any father would.

In his working life the father had followed an unremarkable profession; Frank loved him for who he was to him, but knew nothing of his life as a young man. Frank's own children knew nothing of their kind and elderly grandfather's youth. He did know that his father had been a soldier, but when he died, sorting through his papers, Frank discovered that he had been in 2BW or 2nd Battalion The Black Watch in the second half of the war, but otherwise he was none the wiser about where and why.

The epitaph, carved on the Memorial of the 2nd British Division of 14th Army commanded by the legendary General 'Uncle Bill' Slim in the cemetery of Kohima, reads in full:

'When you go home, Tell them of us and say, For your tomorrow, We gave our today'.

The ideal of selflessness is evident in those words.

In 1942 the 2nd Battalion were sent to India and by September 1943 were ordered to convert into Chindits, a concept created by General Orde Wingate, to operate as long range penetration groups behind Japanese lines in Burma. A group or Column consisted of about 400 men with sixty mules, a few horses and some bullocks and the men carried all their equipment with them.

The Japanese had previously pushed the British forces out of Burma: in his book 'Defeat into Victory' Field Marshall Slim proudly comments: 'On the last day of that nine-hundred-mile retreat I watched the rear-guard march into India. All of them, British, Indian and Gurkha were gaunt and ragged as scarecrows. Yet, they were still recognisable as having the cohesion of fighting units.

'When they reached Imphal they were physically and mentally very near the end of their strength. They had endured casualties, hardships, hunger, sickness and, above all, the heart-breaking frustration of retreat that few armies have ever suffered and yet held together as armies.'

Their catastrophic defeat had been learned from; training had been adapted to learn necessary new skills and tactics and once ready, under Slim's leadership, the fight was successfully taken back against the enemy.

The jungle is not the natural environment for Europeans nor for mountain populations. One young Private said "I didn't have a clue what was waiting for us when we got there. I knew what a forest was like but not the jungle". Another commented "We were the ordinary product of urban life. We were not used to it". Slim had identified this weakness and the troops became familiar with it through training before being committed to battle again.

The troops believed in the virtue of their task, that destroying the Japanese Army in the field was vital to the successful outcome of the war, that it was a just cause. As a consequence, their motivation, beyond the exhaustion and privations they were to experience, was based on this, was based on their trust in their commander, Slim, who'd given them their task.

To give an idea of the privations the Chindits underwent the monsoons and thunderstorms presented the threat of starvation; either might prevent the supply planes from flying and with the rain came leaches. A march of ten miles without tracks would take three to four days instead of one. After two months in Burma, behind enemy lines, spirits were low and most soldiers were in a weakened condition from dysentery and malaria; badly wounded soldiers often had to be left behind with a pistol or grenade or some reports said that they were shot by their own friends to prevent them falling into Japanese hands.

We don't have any accounts written by Frank's father of the personal price he was paying, but the 19 year old Private George MacDonald Fraser, in 1944 records his first time in battle:

'We were in that wood for four hours I had never been in a fight to the death before, with the enemy at close quarters, which is, to say the least, confusing.... To say I was shocked at seeing Parker and Steele hit is correct in the sense that one is shocked running into a brick wall; astonishment and fascination come into it, too.

'The best way I can sum up my emotions is to say that a continuous nervous excitement was shot through with occasional flashes of rage, terror, elation,

relief and amazement.'

The importance of trust within a team and with one another is vital. It came from thorough training and leadership at all levels. As familiarity in their own capabilities and leadership grew so fear of the enemy turned to confidence and moral and physical courage was able to break through.

The tide turned as history relates

However, turning back to Revelations, earlier than in our reading, John is shown the New Jerusalem by the angel and believes so strongly. In our passage he describes no more darkness only pure light, with no need even for lamps in the day. Now, I'm not ascribing Christianity to a war, but so too, did the soldiers of XIV Army gain an intangible belief and strength from believing in the justice of their mission and beginning to succeed.

High morale was not just a coincidence, it had been identified by Slim as essential if they were going to win and the ways to engender it were incorporated every-day. High morale gave them the strength to go beyond the possible when exhausted, soaked and outnumbered to achieve the victory they and the world needed.

Even though Chindit operations behind the Japanese front line were hugely demanding on air and supply resources they were recognised as being hugely impressive for morale to the British empire troops, demonstrating as they did that they were capable of taking the fight to the enemy and succeeding.

In August 1944 the two Black Watch Columns in one of which would have been Frank's father, were still operating behind enemy lines but by the middle of the month they began their journey on foot back to India and a period of recuperation.

The 19 year old MacDonald Fraser in Burma at the same time reflects that bottling up emotions became normal:'

An outsider might have thought, mistakenly, that the section was unmoved by the deaths of Gale and Little. There was no outward show of sorrow, no reminiscences or eulogies. Forster asked who was next on sentry. The new section commander, the young corporal who earlier in the day had won the Military Medal, gave out the roster; we went to sleep. And that was that. It was not callousness or indifference for two comrades who had been alive that morning and were now names for the war memorial; it was just that there was nothing more to be said.

'It was part of war; men died, more would die; that was past, and what mattered now was the business in hand; those who lived would get on with it. Whatever sorrow was felt, there was no point in brooding over it. Better and healthier to forget it and look forward to tomorrow.

'On this Remembrance Sunday of 2020, there is a different conflict affecting us. Due to Covid19 we are also remembering the sacrifices made by staff of the NHS who have died in the course of their duty to patients, to the care of their patients, often with inadequate protection, for the greater good of others.

One of the other suggested readings for today was Matthew's account of Jesus' interpretation to 'loving your enemy', of turning the other cheek. The health care staff are people who, in the words of the reading don't just work in a threatening job, they most definitely do turn the other cheek to do their job fully and in doing so, some have paid the ultimate price for their loyalty, dying for the care of others.

Over the past few months, we have been reading about and discussing real or metaphorical journeys of faith, of discovery and of belief. The Road to recovery for some is hard and demanding. That Road to Rangoon was recaptured mile by mile by British Empire troops in 1944/45 against horrendous odds.

Returning to Burma, as we've seen the battle hardening of the young men who fought to achieve this was at a cost to those who survived and to the families of those who did not, a potentially dehumanising personal cost.

Eventual success across the whole of the – euphemistically termed, 'theatre of operations' in the Far East came at huge costs to the soldiers fighting, to the civilian populations being terrorised and displaced, to the cultures and ways of life being destroyed. And yet, by the grace of God, some were able to put it behind them. Of the next generation, Frank benefitted directly from his old father's love and we are all beneficiaries of their sacrifice.

'When you go home, Tell them of us and say, For your tomorrow, We gave our today'

A prayer for Remembrance Sunday

Dear Lord, Hear us now as we offer our prayers of thanksgiving for all the good in our lives today and for the freedoms won at such a heavy human cost in World War 2. We hold with gratitude the service of those who were and are peacemakers in their service of our country. We are grateful for a vision that holds the darker forces of our own humanity in check with an ethos of cooperation, harmony and mutual flourishing as we work with others.

We pray for the dedicated service of our armed forces in all generations, remembering especially those who are still alive who fought in the Second World War. We thank You for their testimony which reminds us of the tragedy of conflict. Help us to hear their witness even as we honour the sacrifices that they and their generation made in striving for the good.

We pray too for the safety and are eternally grateful for the dedicated service of the staff of our National Health Service and for that of care workers across the nation. In their very everyday life we thank You for their dedication even to

catching the infection which reminds us of the tragedy of commitment. Help us to acknowledge their witness and sacrifices made in care of others, even as we honour their duty of care to the ill.

Today, when we are drawn together from many backgrounds, and with a faith flickering, strong, or with no faith, we thank You that there are times and causes that we can all rally around for the common good. Help us to find that common ground more often, and to work through our differences. May the example of Jesus, His boundary-crossing life, His open-hearted embrace of all peoples, be the inspiration for our weary and wounded world.

Lord God, We ask You to accept our prayers in Christ's name, Amen

Sunday 1st November 2020

Sunday 1st November is All Saints Day. What is All Saints day? What is its purpose? Why is it in the calendar? What does it say to us today?

I did some research and I believe that All Saints Day is part of Allhallowtide which is (or perhaps was) a three day period in the church comprising All Saints Eve (Halloween October 31st), All Saints day (All Hallows November 1st) and All Souls day (November 2nd). So Allhallowtide (rather like Christmastide and Eastertide) were old names for a period of the time in the Churches calendar.

This festival has got a long history, it can be traced back to the 7th century. It was a time to remember the dead including all the faithful departed Christians. It has fallen into disuse and Halloween has taken on a more secular celebration.

Let's have a look at All Saints day.

The human race has become more demanding - they want everything, and they want it now, People complain about having to wait for things - they want overnight delivery, they want instant service. The one thing that we do not seem to have is patience - no patience or desire to look forward to things to come. But this is precisely what we confess as Christians - there is an eternal city, a paradise with God, an eternity of rest and being with the Lord but we just do not have it yet. We walk by faith looking forward to the eternal joys of our life to come while struggling in this world. Perhaps we want to have all this peace and rest now rather than waiting for the next world.

No waiting. We are Christians so God should bless and reward us with a lack of problems: Christians should not get sick. Christians should not have money troubles. All the peace and joy and bliss of heaven ought to be ours immediately. But then when things go wrong - when we find ourselves far from God, we have a lack of belief, we have despair, and we wonder what is wrong. We do not feel like saints, do we? Why? Because we have let go of the relationship with Jesus and we have not heard what our Lord has said to us about being saints.

Jesus describes our life of sainthood. His word tells what "real life" is like as a Christian and at the same time comforts those who receive these words. "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn; they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are those who are persecuted for my sake." All of these Beatitudes, that Jesus spoke, describe the life of saints in this world. Since we are celebrating All Saints Day, let's be very clear about "saints." A saint is a holy

person. Those who committed their lives to Jesus, those who are fed by the Holy Spirit and those who do their very best to live a good life : those are the saints. You are saints. When we celebrate All Saints Day, we are recognizing that all of us are saints in God's sight through Jesus. After all, it is not how we live that makes us saints, but how Christ lived for us, died for us, and rose for us. Our life in Jesus makes us saints. Our being forgiven of our sins makes us saints. But saints, dear saints, are poor, mourning, harassed, hungering, struggling saints. In this life, the path of sainthood--that is, of being a Christian--is one of hardship and sorrow that does not bring with it the "instant gratification" our world tries to buy and sell.

But we are not alone, we gain strength from those saints who have gone before us. The saints that have been recognised by the world such as St Andrew or St Peter but also by all those good people who we have known – the ones who brought us to faith, the ones that encouraged us on our journey through life and the ones that supported us at times of trouble. Our Bible Study Group the other day debated whether those who have passed away are already in heaven or in a waiting room waiting for the last day. I do not much care – they have lived their lives; they have run the race and they have (or will have) their reward. But they have set a standard for us, they have supported us, they have been through their troubles. We remember them and ask them to guide us through our difficult times.

In my view sainthood is a result of being a good Christian not through our own efforts but through the suffering of Jesus in this world who has paid the price for us.

Let us accept the strength of those good people and show our faith out into the hurting world.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for all the saints that have guided us in our present lives. We thank you that they had the strength and courage to persevere during their challenging times. We pray that we will accept your grace that is poured out for us to enable us to live our lives in these times. We ask these prayers in Jesus' name. Amen

25th October 2020

Reading: Romans, chapter 8, vv 31 – 39

Theme – Journeying together.

On this morning when our church building reopens and a few of us gather for public worship in Madderty Church, I will be reflecting on journeys. Firstly, the 'lockdown' journey which we have all been on in this strange year. We can remember some of the positives of the early months, the slowing down of pace and the opportunities to enjoy nature in what was a lovely spring. Now, seven months on, as the clocks go back, the mood is much darker, with an increase in

anxiety and fear, with huge uncertainties for many about their future. The journey has become much more arduous; we still can't see where and when this particular journey might end, or what our society will look like after it. But now more than ever we need to be looking out for one another and helping each other on the road.

Journeys by their very nature suggest moving on – they are not static, and unless we are going round in circles, we don't arrive at the same place from which we left. There are many accounts of journeys in the Bible, and over the last months we have been following, in our study of the Acts of the Apostles, the growth of the early Christian church, including the journeys made by Peter and then Saul/Paul as they sought to take the gospel to others. (These early followers were known as 'people of the Way') As they travelled, and with the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the early apostles were on a sometimes difficult journey of discovery, that the gospel was not confined to the Jews, but that God's love embraced everyone.

The Church of Scotland is on a journey too; already before the pandemic we had embarked on a radical plan of action with a view to becoming more mission-orientated. During the last few months, we have had to adapt and many have found innovative ways of worshipping outwith our church buildings, and keeping open the lines of communication, and many more people than those who come to Sunday morning services have been tuning in and participating in online worship. Our challenge as a church as we move on is which of the old ways will be we willing to leave behind, as we "travel on towards the new."

But wherever we go, we have God's promise that we are not alone, that He is with us, caring for us each step of the way. Look at the promises in Deuteronomy 31: v 8 – "The Lord himself goes before you, and will be with you.", and Psalm 119, v.105 – "Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path." There are so many more. Read for yourself the wonderful promise in Paul's letter to the Romans 8, v 31 – 39, with its assertion that there is nothing which can separate us from the love of God.

And I leave with you this passage about hope, sent to me by a friend this week, which comes from Jim Wallis, the founder of the Sojourner movement (Sojourners are travellers, by the way!)

Hope means more than just hanging on. It is the conscious decision to see the world in a different way than most others see it. To hope is to look through the eyes of faith to a future not determined by the oppressive circumstances of the present. To hope is to know that the present reality will not have the last word. It is to know, despite the pretensions and cruelties of idolatrous authorities, that God rules. It is God who will have the last word. We need more than resistance; we need hope and a positive vision of where we are going. We begin to live out new possibilities in our daily living. Jim Wallis, theologian, writer and campaigner for justice for many years.

A prayer for those who are alone:

Loving God, in this year, when handshakes and hugs have been discouraged, embrace us with your love and wrap us in your care, so that we may know that we are never alone.

We think of those for whom being alone brings pain rather than peace. We pray for those who wait – for the card, the phone call, the e-mail, text or letter, to remind them that they are not forgotten. May we be your agents, bringing hope and reassurance to those who lack them.

We pray for those who mourn the loss of a loved one, who feel keenly the pain of separation. May memories of good times shared in the past comfort and sustain them.

We pray for those who, surrounded by people, still feel a sense of disconnection and experience loneliness in a crowd. May we be sensitive to where people are and how they are feeling in these situations.

We pray for refugee and asylum-seeker, far from their own land and culture, unsure of the future. Bless the efforts of agencies and individuals who reach out to offer welcome, friendship and practical help to the stranger in our midst.

Lord Jesus, let us learn from you, and know that, no matter what, we are never alone, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God; help us to trust in you and recover our sense of self-worth, reaching out to others to show your love to them.

Amen.

Sunday 18th October 2020

Since Easter 2020 we have been separated, we are working gradually through the book of Acts; from March we were under lockdown due to Covid. We have a new lexicon which includes 'socially distanced' and 'virtual meetings', new mantras mention hands, face and space, new ways maintain or strengthen existing relationships, new skills and habits involve donning face masks, we reach for the laptop, tablet or mobile phone as a means of seeing people - remotely rather than meeting in the flesh. The hug, touch and physicality of relationships have altered, outwith our own household they may have become a thing of the past or are certainly in suspension; young people exploring new relationships have had at least to consider the realities of airborne cross infection well before other considerations; communal activities have become rare; until a workable vaccine is developed and made available around the world we are in a changed world where support for the individual and overcoming loneliness become paramount.

What are we finding, what do we find in the Book of Acts as we have read thus far? Ourselves perhaps. To elaborate on that, and it may be that others are in the same boat as me, I have encountered events and stories during our months of reading that I've know about, but I've never known the continuity or context of

them.

In saying 'ourselves' it's not us, 21st Century livers that we are, who are there, but we are prominently familiar with the situations and characters found in the book of Acts; I feel it's about God and us, about God and who we are. The context of these examples of real, named, traceable people is here for us to recognise. Yes, Society was different 2000 years ago and values too, but human emotions and relations have perhaps been constant.

In compiling the chapters Luke would have been very aware of the quantity of material, the diversity of examples from which he could choose to illustrate the extraordinary growth in numbers and the path that those members of the early Christian church followed. In selecting incidents and people to describe he inadvertently, or deliberately, shows us the breadth of the personalities who are going through this determined transformation, sound in their new belief of Jesus being the son of God. When Peter reports (Ch10) back to his companions that he's just baptised the household of Cornelius the Roman centurion they are highly critical of him. That is until he explains his motivation and justification; it wasn't for them and nor is it for us today to decide on who is able to become a believer in Jesus, to decide who is a good, bad or indifferent Christian, but for God. How very applicable Peter's words are today (11:17): 'so if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God'. We've still a long way to go to overcome prejudices and recognise the other as our brother or sister in God.

In this book we have repeated examples of the strength of and support given by the Holy Spirit. I know all too often that having the confidence to speak out in an adverse situation about one's faith, our faith, my faith takes courage that I lack all too often. In Chapter 3 Peter heals a crippled beggar, people around him are astonished; he has done this in the name of Jesus; the power of the Holy Spirit is shown to have been passed also to believers. However, there are critics; Peter is charged for proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. The authorities estimate their conviction an easy thing, Peter and John being uneducated men, but (4:8-14) Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit carries the day magnificently in court; if are we confident of the strength and presence of the Holy Spirit why should we not take inspiration and be able to declare the love of God in far less stressful instances?

After Jesus' death on the cross the Disciples and his immediate followers were understandably in despair, their spirit had been broken and with the shock of his murder and loss of expectations they'd become despondent. Something extraordinary (2:4) transformed these men and women from this state of dejection into the confident, outgoing, articulate band of leaders, no longer only disciples but Apostles, leading the growing number of believers, preaching of their experience of God's love and baptising ever more members initially from amongst their fellow Jews and gradually incorporating the Gentiles in the name of Jesus (2:41).

There are numerous other examples of the power of the Holy Spirit in this book. Whether it is in overcoming fear (7:54) and maintaining one's convictions as Stephen did beyond all expectations on him, to death, whether it is in the form of the rescue of Peter from prison (12:1-12) or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit at the baptism of Cornelius' household (10: 44-48) The quality of their faith was such that these normal people were receptive to the strength of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus promised (1:8) that it is here for believers, for us, for those whom God knows; it is here for normal people.

A keystone moment in the Book is the conversion of Saul. 'We've all had a road to Damascus moment' is such a cliché as people use it to explain their change of mind, but actually have we? Is changing political allegiance in the UK or recognising that one has been wrong about someone so very fundamental? Has anyone else gone from being a systematic hunter and persecutor of Christians, aiming to stamp out through fear and murder (9:1-32) their confident strength of being a believer in Jesus Christ to becoming the mainstay of the early Christian church after Peter?

How Paul managed to reconcile his actions beforehand and afterwards is between him and God. There is, though, a present-day reality of the reported emotions of supporters and opponents of Paul. We can imagine the fear in poor Ananias whom God chose in Damascus to be the one who goes to rescue Saul from his blinded torment and we can understand why the nascent number of Christian believers in Damascus refused to believe Paul or to trust him, given his reputation, until they heard him preach. There was then the furious hatred of him from the Jews towards a turncoat. They had employed Saul to track down and imprison the believers, and have the very real impassioned reaction of wanting to kill him. On a lesser scale we can perhaps think of just the same reaction towards mediators in Northern Ireland, in the Middle East or in Afghanistan. It is a dreadfully human response that has to be overcome and can be if we let God in.

This is also the account of the early church, of the need for it to grow and how it manages this, with God's help. There are clashes of personality, there are instances of false faith. The array of people who are noted as becoming believers in Jesus Christ, who confess their sins and are baptised in Jesus' name is huge. On the one hand we read of the high placed Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-39) wanting to be baptised by Peter once he had had an explanation of a text from scripture coming true about Jesus. On the other, there are accounts of unnamed people wanting Peter's shadow to fall on a sick family member as he walks along a street, because they believe in the power of Jesus, or are desperate for the power of the Holy Spirit to be working through Peter. This book is about growth and the strength of the God's message which is there for us today and every day; it is here for us if we have that confidence to ask for it now.

A prayer.

Dear Lord, you give us so much and we thank you for it. You gave us Jesus as your proof of your love for us. You give us on a daily basis the strength and inspiration of the Holy Spirit to be with us. We know through the examples we have been told about that believers through the years have called on or been inspired by the Holy Spirit to change events for the better. We have read how believers in your son grew in number and of the positive influence they could bring about in your name. Here, as we are facing still more social isolation - to give it its real name, let us be receptive to your love, receptive to the needs of the other, receptive and active to making your world ever better for personal situations of isolation or caused by the disease itself. We ask you Lord that we may do these things to glorify your name in humility and in grace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen

Reflections for Sunday 11th October 2020

Reflections this week are from Act chap 13 v13 to v 41 and Barnabas and Saul now become Paul and Barnabas as they move from Cyprus to Turkey and the passage really gives us Paul's sermon from the synagogue in Psidian Antioch to the Jews of that town along with others who had an interest in the Jewish religion and wanted to hear what Paul had to say.

He starts by giving a potted history of the Israelites from their time in Egypt, their escape from there and their time in the wilderness followed 40 years later by their entry to the promised land. Thereafter, they were ruled by a selection of Judges until Saul was appointed king, followed by King David which represented a high point in the Israelites story. He then moves on to John the Baptist pointing the way towards Jesus and that Jesus was the long expected leader who's coming had been foretold by the prophets.

The crux of Paul's argument is that all these previous leaders had died and were buried and that was the end of them. With Jesus it was different. He was crucified on the cross, was buried in a tomb and then on the third day was raised from the dead and was seen by many of his followers before being taken up to Heaven. Paul was convinced of the resurrection and this was the central core of his belief that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah who had been long expected. Paul had not come to this conclusion easily as he was originally part of the Jewish establishment trying to snuff out this new following of Jesus and his teachings and had been present when Stephen was stoned as the first Christian martyr. But after his experiences on the road to Damascus and the time he spent with the apostles in Jerusalem who had been witnesses of the life death and resurrection of Christ he was convinced of the rightness of his faith that this Jesus was the Son of God. The fact of the resurrection was crucial to Paul. He had experienced Jesus on the road to Damascus and had heard directly from those who had met and seen Jesus after the resurrection. They had witnessed it and new it to be true. We have witnessed the effects of the present pandemic because we have lived through it and seen it and know what has happened. We know it to be true. Would we have believed that a year ago? For Paul his experience on the Damascus road and the witness of the apostles convinced him of the rightness of his belief.

We have not met with the apostles or spoken with Paul but we do have the assurance of Jesus who says "Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe"

Prayer

Father, at times we can feel remote from you, when life is not as we would like it to be. Help us to remember what inspired the early apostles and fired up the enthusiasm of the early believers to preach what they had seen with their own eyes.Help us too to remember your gift of the your Holy Spirit, given to the early church, through which all things are made possible in your name. Amen
Reflections for 27th September 2020

We are continuing our journey through the Acts of the Apostles. As you know the early Christians were persecuted in Jerusalem so some of them moved out from Jerusalem across Judea and into other places. One group of them travelled as far as Antioch in Syria. They had moved away from what they knew and were probably outside their comfort zone. But they were committed to their cause and so they would accept the move to another place, to another city and to another country.

When they got to their destination, they would go to the synagogue and they would talk to the people there about Jesus. They would tell them that Jesus was the long-expected Messiah. Some Jews would talk to them and be converted but in other places they wouldn't believe so these Christians would approach the Gentiles. Sometimes the opposition was extreme and the Christians would get run out of town.

Last week we heard how Barnabas and Saul in Antioch were set apart for some missionary work. The church had prayed, they had fasted, they had listened to the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit are said that there were plans for Barnabas and Saul – they should be set apart for the work. So the elders placed their hands on them and, as we have just heard in the reading, they set off for Cyprus.

We do not know how many people went. We know that they took John as a helper but there may have been others. So off they went. We don't know what they felt about it, we don't know whether they were excited about going off to a different place, we don't know whether they're apprehensive - we just don't know because nothing is recorded. They would go down to the docks, they waited for a ship that was going that way, they would get on that ship and set off to sail to Cyprus.

When they got to the island of Cyprus, they travelled around the island and met up with a man who was a Jewish sorcerer and the false prophet who was called Bar-Jesus. Bar-Jesus was an attendant to the proconsul so presumably he had the ear of the proconsul and the proconsul would trust what he told him. The proconsul was interested in what Barnabas and Saul had to say so he sent for them to visit him. He wanted to hear what they had to say about Jesus and about their faith in God. The sorcerer opposed Barnabas and Saul and tried to persuade the proconsul to reject the Christian faith. Saul had faith in God, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and triumphed over the sorcerer.

But what about us? how do we cope in a difficult time? do we put our trust in God? and trust in the Holy Spirit?

Looking at my life, there are times when I should have trusted, there were times when I decided I didn't need any help, there were times when I struggled, times when I was outside my comfort zone, times when I was anxious .. and in these times, I should have relied more on the Holy Spirit

This was brought home to me very vividly last week.

There have been times when I have been worried and anxious: going to work in a foreign country not knowing the language or lying on a hospital bed waiting for an operation. Last week these moments of anxiety were all brought back to me - I had to sit down at my desk in the study with the camera on and record a message for Mid Strathearn Church. I found it very, very difficult - I was really anxious, really concerned and ...looking back at the finished article, my anxiety came through.

So I sat down and tried to work out what it was that had gone wrong, why was I so anxious, why I was so concerned, so worried. I have come to conclusion that I hadn't put my trust in God. I had decided that I could do this that I didn't need his help. This week, I have trusted him, I have relied on him to give me help. I have felt much more comfortable and hopefully that means that the message will be more helpful.

Barnabas and Paul trusted God and things worked out. I didn't trust God enough and I struggled. There are times when I think I can do it myself and I am wrong. I need to learn to trust God more, to put my faith more firmly in him.

Does that apply to you as well – do you trust God? Do you believe that you are self-sufficient? That you don't need support? or do you realise that God's supreme power is available?... is supportive?... that we need to rely of this power?

Do we rely on God? Or just ourselves?

Let us pray

Reflections for Sunday 20th September 2020

As you know, we are currently working our way through the book of the Acts of the Apostles - the book that records the early life of the church after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Some commentators split the book of Acts into two sections. The first section is about Peter and the beginning of the church as it spread through Israel and northwards to Antioch. The second section is more about Saul (also known as Paul) and the expansion of the church throughout the eastern end of the Mediterranean and onto Rome.

A massive expansion over a 20-year period. The passage that has just been read bridges the two sections. The first verses, dealing with the death of Herod, are at the end of the first section and the last three verses, recording the appointing of Barnabas and Saul as missionaries for the spread of the gospel, are at the beginning of the second section.

The early church was being persecuted and was being scattered away from

Jerusalem. Part of the Christian community arrived in Antioch and formed a centre there. The Christian Church was just about to take the first but most important step in taking the gospel to the whole world. A decision that would cause much debate in future chapters of the book. Was the gospel just for Jews? or was it for the whole world?

This dispersing of the Christian followers encouraged them to take the gospel out into the whole world, not just keep it to a small part of the world but take it everywhere. Initially some people intended that just the Jews were to hear the message, but the church was moving towards the decision to pass the message to everybody... to everywhere. This a decision was eventually taken under the direction of the Holy Spirit. But that is for another day!!

Following a period of prayer, worship and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke to the believers in Antioch. The Spirit said to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which the Spirit has called them. Here is an example of the Holy Spirit driving the church forward, the Holy Spirit inspiring the church, the Holy Spirit providing courage and the Holy Spirit making sure that the church fulfilled the mission that Jesus had set it to go forth and make disciples of all nations.

The church at Antioch did not just sit down and discuss the options for action. No they prayed, they fasted, they worshipped God and they listened. The answer came. We just don't know the details of the debate. Did they have different opinions? Did some of them want to just do the same as before? But thankfully they heard the prompting of the Spirit and they made a decision that changed the lives of many people.

What about us? We have had a difficult time.. many things that we used to do have been changed because of the virus. For weeks we were locked in our houses,... for weeks we have been locked out of our churches,.... for weeks we have not been able to see anybody. Just as those early Christians were dispersed across the area by persecution.. taken out of their normal existence .. so we have been taken out of our normal existence by a virus.

What should we do? How should we react? Do we just wait for the virus to pass or should we ask God for direction.? Perhaps we ought to fast and pray, perhaps we ought to increase our worship God. Many of us have the ability and technology to use a search engine to find a worship service either recorded or live. I am not saying abandon Mid Strathearn but increase the worship of God by watching another service as well. And pray.. our privilege to talk to God is the best thing in our lives. We can tell him our concerns, share our joys, ask his help and he will direct us. He will steer us in the way that he wants us to go. It is possible to mishear but coming together to decide on a course of action will make our path clear.

God wants us to do something different – the world has changed, people have changed and God's plans are made to encourage people to accept him and worship him.

Back in the time of Barnabas and Saul, some people will have had doubts about the course of action because it was different – they would want to stay within the bounds of the Jewish community but next week we are going to hear of the activities of these Barnabas and Saul in Cyprus and hear how God enabled them to use God's power to extend his kingdom.

My plea is that we continue to rely on God, God who has helped us and protected us in the past, God who wants us to adapt to the situation in the world today, God who wants us to be closer to him in prayer. Only with prayer ... will we be able to discern what our mission is today... in this place. Barnabas and Saul travelled on God's plan and God has a plan for us. Let us deepen our prayer and discover the path that he wants us to take. Let us pray...

Reflections for Sunday 13th September 2020

Continuing as we are through the book of Acts, we have been following the events and decisions influencing the early church, its convictions, its examples and its ever growing confidence – as well as its divisions being overcome - and with the followers of Jesus having now been called Christians for the first time.

Act 12: 1 – 19 the passage we are using today is illustrated with the vivid description of the arrest and miraculous release from prison of Peter.

We know that Herod was wanting to persecute the church, feeling threatened by, to him, its indiscernible power. In murdering James publicly he was perhaps doing as a modern-day totalitarian ruler is acting; because of that we can understand the intended intimidation and malice in the second, prolonged arrest – of Peter, targeted at Christians.

Peter had been put in prison, securely held in chains by a team of 16 warders, for over a week. Herod had planned the spectacle of a trial and execution at the end of it to show his power to the people and his dominance to his Roman overlords. Those deriding the preaching of Jesus' Apostles or otherwise ignorant of Jesus' power may have welcomed the prospect of the cruel entertainment in their otherwise mundane lives.

However, imagine having been Peter. Peter, the rather head-strong man we initially meet during the gospels as Jesus calls Simon the fisherman to work with him and renames him Peter; Peter, the three times denier of knowing Jesus and now become the leader of His Apostles, the decision maker; Peter the man who had come into his destiny one might say.

But, he was under arrest, in chains, powerless, without influential friends amongst the rulers, facing a show trial after a week in prison.

Would he have been afraid of the unknown, of the pain to be inflicted, furious at the injustice of his forthcoming trial, worried about how the others would feel or be able to go on without him? We can't know, but what we do know is that he and his fellow Christians had and still have only one assured strength, that of prayer; of praying to God for his help and guidance, of knowing that He will act in his own best way for his people.

We also know and therefore can respect the bravery of it that, despite the persecutions across Judea, Samaria and Galilee, the Christians were still meeting unobtrusively, to discuss and to pray, in groups such as the group gathered at Mary's house to which Peter went after being freed.

Following Peter's arrest 'the church was earnestly praying to God for him' (v5). Amongst the Apostles he had had a role to play, if he were to have been killed they would have been leaderless, the cohesion amongst the faithful would have been set back. Despite the oppression they never gave up hope, never stopped praying.

As we read about Peter's time in prison (v6) it has an immediacy as if it's being described first hand, it has detail that may have been passed from him to John and then to Luke who wrote it down. How otherwise would we be told that the angel, coming into the prison cell where he was chained to two soldiers, sleeping between them, struck him on the side to wake him and said words to the effect of 'Quick, get up!' at which the chains had fallen off Peter's wrists?

It's too easy to say that the guards agreed to release him. There is no way that all 16 soldiers on duty as his guards would have been prepared to go to their death for dereliction of duty if they had connived at his escape. They would have known the severe consequences that were to be meted out to them if they were to let him go.

Peter is described as if wondering if he's in a trance (v9) as he follows the angel's instructions to get dressed and put on his sandals before following through, past the first and second sets of guards and then out of the prison through the iron exterior gate into the city. It's a very deliberate account. The angel leads him to one street beyond the prison wall and then disappears, no further instructions. Peter's faith in God had been tested, as had that of those praying for him. Perhaps it was a highly confused faith, for they understood that to be murdered in God's name was not a failure, but conversely the reality of the leadership and organisation needed amongst the diverse people who'd become Christians needed a living person; after all, James, the brother of John, had been recently murdered at Herod's orders.

We do not know what happened to liberate Peter, but in faith it was a miracle, or in common parlance it was miraculous. The fact of the matter was that, against all human odds he survived, and was a free man again.

With these conflicting thoughts in your mind, you know what it's like having been in a vivid dream and then waking up; Peter was no different, except that he realised this was for real (v11): 'I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating'.

Peter shows the presence of mind to go and tell his fellow Christians that he is free so as to reassure them, to show them God's will, but consciously not to endanger them. When he knocks at the outer door (v13) the servant girl, Rhoda, going to check who it is, cannot believe her eyes and rushes back to tell the household who don't believe her; they had become too dispirited. Peter persisted on knocking and eventually, they open the door and 'are astonished'. It is now that he demonstrates great alertness to their vulnerability and the danger they are all in; motioning with his hand he keeps them quiet, describes what has happened and to whom they are to pass on this news and then (v17) 'he left for another place'. There is no more description; what followed was unimportant relative to the miracle of his liberation.

We can only surmise what reflections Peter had personally, and with those he was sheltered by, as he realised the enormity of his liberation by God as a result of the prayer by his fellow Christians; his was also a life that counted. We don't know the huge boost that such an outcome gave to the faith of the Christians who had prayed for Peter's safety. Imagine, though, the shock of having refused to believe the joy of the young Rhoda telling you that Peter was freed and at the gate and then having to acknowledge on seeing him for yourself, against all odds, that he was indeed once again free.

There must have been mayhem and brutal searches the next morning when it was discovered that the intended spectacle was to be denied, that their prize prisoner had disappeared from their very clutches. Herod, again livid and fearful of being shown up for being incompetent, must have been foul; the likely understatement of him 'cross examining the guards and ordering that they be executed' ends the passage.

A prayer.

Dear God, give us the strength to believe fully in your power, in the power of prayer, to be committed to you. We praise you, we passively acknowledge the beauty of the world around us on a daily basis, we subconsciously acknowledge the power of and are hugely thankful to you for the positive aspects of human

invention. We see the dedication of service to others in the stress and strain of treating covid victims in our society, we see the stress and strain of dedication to treating covid and the health and wellbeing of others in the work of Médecins sans frontières and similar selfless organisations in hellish and dysfunctional societies across the world. We are grateful, not sufficiently grateful, but grateful each in our own ways to you for the lives that count, for the people who care for others, for the people who care for the environment and for the people who care for honesty and integrity. We may not know them, but we thank you God for the fact that you will never let us down, that you will always be there for us, through people who care in your name or through the example of Jesus Christ our Lord, your love will always be a strength for us each and all. Amen

Reflections for Sunday 6th September 2020

The passage for today is Acts 11:19-30

After lunch today I was listening to Radio 4 where they are re-running the series "A History of the World in 100 Objects". Many of the objects Neil Mac Gregor refers to are ritual objects often having a religious purpose. As he described the object for Today he mentioned that it marked one of those periods in history, one of those developments where "The genie was released from the bottle" he would have been able to use that phrase more than once about the history of the early church. Today's reading in fact, describes just such a moment (as does last week's).

It also describes one of those times when the worst of circumstances becomes, in God's hands, a unique opportunity. In this case persecution which scattered the believers around the Roman world, and to different parts of the Mediterranean regions, resulted not in extinguishing the Gospel but in spreading it. Three growth areas are noted: Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Phoenicia was a fairly narrow coastal strip to the West of Galilee; Antioch was further north on the Mediterranean coast, with Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean. This was however a restricted mission for it was only to the communities of the Jewish Diaspora that these first missionaries passed on the Good News.

It was "other believers" (V.20), perhaps people whom that first mission converted, who took the initiative and spread the word beyond solely Jewish communities. And this is my "Genie out of the bottle" moment when the Gospel was freed of any partiality and the conversion of the Gentiles, non-Jews, began in earnest. Barnabas was sent from HQ in Jerusalem, no doubt to assess the situation, and he was pleased with what he found. He saw "that God had blessed the people" (v.22). Barnabas is highlighted elsewhere in Acts for his discernment and his willingness to "get alongside" people and give them the chance to "fly" (not always to the satisfaction of his fellow apostle Paul as we shall see later). It was this man of good character who went to Tarsus and found Paul, took him back to Antioch with him, and conducted with him a successful mission: preaching and teaching. Acts tell us that it was in this city that the word "Christian" was first used to describe this group of believers. At this point we are introduced to another feature of the early church: the activity of prophets (charismatic teachers who might either be attached to a local house church or conduct an itinerant ministry. One commentator speculates that they might be Jews who used their knowledge of the Old Testament to show how prophecy had

been fulfilled in Jesus. In this case they also acted as their Old Testament equivalents had done by relaying a message from God; a warning of famine. The phrase used here about the famine happening “over all the earth” indicates that it would affect the entire Roman World as indeed occurred during the emperorship of Claudius. This was in fact an age of frequent famines as Roman historians document.

This early warning however was not simply greeted with a groan or by panic but with a very practical reaction. It must be one of the first recorded famine relief funds and it was set up by the Christian church to help fellow believers as the Jewish authorities and the Roman ones might not have been over eager to assist them. The young church in Antioch stepped up to the mark deciding that each of them should donate “as much as he could to help their fellow believers who lived in Judea” (V.19) it was a task given to two men of good repute: Barnabas and Saul.

Prayer: Loving God, we marvel at the faith and work of these early Christians who travelled many miles in dangerous countries to spread the word and help their fellow believers. Forgive us that all too often we are fearful to pass on the message fearing ridicule and scorn. Give us the courage to speak a word in season to those who need it. Help us too to hear the call of those in need and be prepared to answer it in whatever way we can. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.
Reflections for Sunday 30th August 2020

The passage for today is Acts 10:34-11:18 in which we see the message spread ever further. Having had his strange dream and subsequently met with Cornelius, the Roman officer from the Italian regiment Peter was now ready for whatever God had in store for him. The penny had finally dropped. Amazingly, it seems, Peter had retreated to his Jewish principles for he had spent those vital years with Jesus whose mission had included the same “outcast” peoples he is now preparing to work with. This new reality will spell danger for Peter but despite that he shows his leadership by giving a speech which in modern parlance would be thought of as his manifesto. Cornelius had assembled a no doubt motley group of friends – at least from Peter’s Jewish standpoint but he knew now that God’s purpose was to reach all people with the Gospel and so he addresses them.

He admits that he had been biased in former times but that God has opened his eyes. He reminds them of things they already knew, and that’s a message he kept hammering home: You know these things already. But it was a good opportunity to clarify the essentials with them so that he knew, in modern parlance, that they “were all on the same page”. It was in the midst of this that that God’s spirit came on the group as the final seal not only on the Peter and those in the room but on the mission itself. The Gospel was for all people.

And so Peter went home to Jerusalem, no doubt feeling ebullient about the experiences he had had, the people he had met, the way the Gospel was spreading. But what a disappointment he must have had to find those he met there did not congratulate him or praise God. Instead they criticised him: he had stayed in a Gentile’s house: that was against Jewish Law! He had even committed

the sin of eating with Gentiles!

Surprisingly for Peter, who in the Gospels was marked for his outspoken, sometimes blunt interjections and questions, it appears that this time he simply listened, allowed them to get all this off their chests and then told them his story and how his amazing vision had taught him that the Gospel message was for all people and of the subsequent events that had confirmed this to him. Amazingly they listened and they heard and understood what God had in store for them "God," they said, "has given to the Gentiles also the opportunity to repent and live!" Amen.

Let us pray: Loving and gracious God, you are greater than our human minds can ever conceive. Your plans for us and your world are also often difficult to see, to understand or to grasp. Open our eyes to see the work you have for us; the plans you have for us. Help us to remember that Jesus came to save the world and not simply a chosen few. Show us the work you have for us at this time and bind us together in your love we pray, in Jesus name, Amen.

Reflections for Sunday 23rd August 2020

Reading Acts chap 10 v 1 – 33

Our reading this week continues on from where Marjorie left off last week. The apostle Simon Peter is still staying with Simon the Tanner in Joppa and this week we hear of his vision from God and also the vision of Cornelius the Roman centurion from Caesarea and how that brought these two men together one a Jew and the other a Gentile.

Cornelius, the centurion, was different from most of his fellow soldiers in that he was already worshipping and praying to God and did a lot of good among the Jews under his control. While he was praying an angel in a vision told him that this had been recognised and that he should contact Peter and bring him to his own house. So he organises a small group and sends them to Joppa to meet Peter.

When this group are almost at the house where Peter is staying, Peter too has a vision while he was praying where he sees a sheet being lowered down to earth with all the birds and animals on it and is told to get up and eat. Now, this to a Jew would be very strange as most of these animals would be deemed unclean under their law and not for Peter to eat. Three times he gets this message and continues to say, "No". While he is still pondering over the meaning of this the men from Cornelius arrive and he is told by the Holy Spirit to go and meet with them and be willing to go with them, again something which a devout Jew would not do.

So he meets with them and has them stay the night and goes along with some of his own to meet Cornelius where he explains to Cornelius that he has been encouraged through the vision he had to meet with him, a gentile. Cornelius in

turn tells of his vision and invites Peter to speak to the assembled company.

Two things from this stand out to me. Firstly, Up to this point the apostles had been restricting their outreach and mission to the Jewish communities. With the action that Peter took by entering Cornelius' house and eating there with him Peter accepted that the message of Christ was open to the Gentiles as well. This was the beginning of the Church moving away from being a branch of the Jewish faith to establishing itself as being open to everyone. Very important for us. If this had not happened we, as Gentiles, would not have been included.

Secondly, Both these men were praying when they had these visions, Some people claim to have visions of what God wants them to do even today. I cannot say that I have had a clear vision of what God is saying to me but there is no doubt in my that prayer concentrates the mind and both these men after they had prayed, felt moved to do something and they took action. They prayed, felt moved, and certainly in Peter's case, against his own will took action under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are not all going to change the world but we can try praying. Amen.

Prayer.

As we pray to you, Father, about the things that are on our hearts help us to be open to what you might have to say to us.

Help us to be open minded about aspects of our own worship which have merely become routine and may be hindering us in our mission and support of those around us.

Thank you for your continuing love for us and help us to reflect this love to those who come in contact with us. Amen

Reflections for Sunday 16th August 2020

Please click on the white arrow to play the video above.

Reflection – Sunday 16th August

Reading: Acts, chapter 9, verses 32 – 43

Our journey through the Acts of the Apostles brings us back today to Peter, who had been doing a lot of travelling, sharing the good news, and bringing more and more people to faith. In today's reading, we find two stories of healing – that of Aeneas, in the town of Lydda, who was cured of the paralysis he had borne for 8 years; and the raising from the dead of Dorcas or Tabitha, a kind and generous woman, whose friends, distraught at her death, had called Peter to come and help them. There are clear parallels here with the healing miracles of Jesus; re-read the story of the paralysed man at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5, v 2-9) and the raising of Jairus' daughter (Matthew 9, 18 – 26) and you will see a lot of

similarities.

These were not the first 'miracles' performed by the Apostles; in preceding chapters we read of Peter healing another lame man, and that Stephen and Philip 'did many wonders'. All of the healings were done 'in the name of Jesus' and resulted in many people coming to faith; these were signs that God was at work, and that the claims which the early believers were making, about the power of the risen Jesus, were true. Indeed, the very last chapter of the Gospel of Mark has this verse "The disciples went and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them, and proved that their preaching was true by the miracles that were performed." When Jesus performed his healing acts, it was not to prove that he was a superstar or a magician, but it was a way of showing people how much God loved them, how he wanted to heal them and make them whole. So it was also with the apostles – their acts of healing were signs of God's love and power.

Today in our 21st century, with its increased understanding of science, there is often a scepticism about 'miracles.' But if we hold on to the concept of them as 'signs', then we have to ask ourselves the question, as today's followers of Jesus Christ – what are the signs of our faith which people see in our lives? I often return to the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he quoted from Isaiah, saying he had come to preach good news to the poor, to set at liberty the oppressed, to bring recovery of sight to the blind. We too can preach good news to the poor – by supporting agencies like Church Action against Poverty, or Christian Aid and Tearfund, to name but three; we can look at ways of helping those oppressed by politic systems – or by illness or addiction? I leave you with this quote from Teresa of Avila, just as true today as it was when she first wrote it in the 16th Century: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world; yours are the feet with which he walks to do good; yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world." That was true of the early apostles, and should be equally true for us today.

Prayer:

Heavenly father, We thank you for the inspiration we find in the stories of the Acts of the Apostles; we thank you for their faith and commitment, and the example they give us as they spread the Good News of Jesus Christ, crucified, dead and risen, to the world around them. Help us to do the same in our world today.

Gracious God, you have given us so much to enjoy and celebrate; we praise you for your wonderful love revealed in Christ, and for the inner experience of your presence through your Spirit.

Hear us now as we pray for others in the name of Jesus:

For those bowed down, that God may lift them up;

For those who are hungry, that they might find food and the nourishment they

need;

For those who are sick and for all in the caring professions;

For those who call for help, that they may find you near at hand;

We pray for those who struggle with God, that they may find themselves and find God.

Particularly this week we pray for all who have been affected by the thunderstorms and flooding in our local area;

And we pray for the victims of the train crash near Stonehaven, for those who are mourning the loss of a loved one, and for those who are injured in hospital; we give thanks for the emergency services and the medical personnel involved.

And we continue to pray for the people of Beirut as they attempt to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives and community.

Be with all those who are struggling with physical or mental illness, and be with us as we seek to give what help we can, and offer support and assistance to our neighbours, wherever they are.

All these our prayers we offer in the name of Jesus, Amen
Thought for the Day, Sunday 9th August 2020

Reading: Acts, chapter 9, verses 1 – 25

by Marjorie Clark

Today's passage brings us to one of the most pivotal events in the life of the early Church, the conversion of Saul.

Think back to the story of the stoning of Stephen; we read that it was witnessed by a young man called Saul. Saul was from the Jewish faith and was determined to stamp out this new radical movement of the followers of the Way of Jesus Christ (which is how Christians were originally described.) Saul was a man on a mission – he had secured the necessary permissions from the religious authorities in Jerusalem to seek out and punish any followers he found in Damascus (which is over 100 miles from Jerusalem.)

What happened as he approached the town is so well known that the phrase “a road to Damascus” experience has entered the lexicon of our language. Saul was not seeking God, but God sought him out and in a most dramatic way. The bright light, the voice of Jesus, the ensuing blindness for three days before Saul (also known as Paul) could see again. This incident turned Saul's life around, and so began the powerful mission of spreading the good news of the Gospel throughout the Roman world, and eventually to Jews and Gentiles alike.

There are so many questions evoked by this story. What courage, for example, did it take for Ananias to respond to God's message to go and meet with Saul, and heal him, knowing his reputation as a persecutor of this new Jesus movement? Can we see the connection between Saul's three days of blindness and the three days between the Cross and the Resurrection - is this Saul dying to his old life and rising to the new?

But perhaps the most important questions are those which both Saul and Ananias asked, at different times. "Who are you, Lord?" and "What do you want me to do?" These are the questions which all of us who seek to serve and follow our Lord should be asking, prayerfully and humbly. God knows there is much to be responded to in our world, with local uncertainty surrounding coming out of lockdown, national disasters such as we witnessed this week in Beirut, and the global pandemic affecting so many countries, and people's lives and livelihoods.

Not everyone will have a Road to Damascus experience; we may never have to respond as Ananias did to an improbable and unpalatable challenge - but then again we might! Let us keep open our lines of communication with God - both speaking and listening, - and let us respond with heart and mind and soul. The fact that both Saul and Ananias did as they were asked had a profound effect on the future of the fledgling church. Who knows what effect our responses to God's promptings may have?

Prayer:

Lord, I come before you today, with all my faith and all my doubt, in all my strength and in all my weakness. You know the burdens I carry, my expectations and hopes, but today I pray: God of the road to Damascus, shatter my complacency, disturb certainties and open my heart to new possibilities and new truths, that the scales of my prejudices, dogmas and mistakes may fall away and, like Saul, I may become the person you truly made me to be. Help me to discern your call, and respond with heart and soul. All this I ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

And a prayer for Lebanon, written by former Moderator, Rev Dr Susan Brown of Dornoch Cathedral:

When news comes in that makes your heart sink and evokes a feeling of despair;

When news comes in that makes your heart go out to the too many injured and bereaved;

When you think of emergency services and hospitals, overstretched, and people more generally, traumatised and shocked;

As an entire nation worries about loved ones and asks "Why?" "How?"

Lord God, we ask you to step in to the midst of chaos, to hold and help and comfort.

We ask you to calm and console and to encourage the nations of the world to hold out hands to enable healing and hope.

In your name, Lord Jesus, Amen

Thought for the Day, Sunday 2nd August 2020

Reading today Acts CH. 8 v 26 – 40

by Anne Buchan

Philip was one of the Seven chosen to care for the Christian community in Jerusalem and beyond.

After Stephen was stoned and died, a martyr, Philip went to Samaria where he was well received . He was listened to as he spoke about Jesus, healed the sick and created joy in the city, and many became Christians.

We next hear of Philip in the readings for today. God takes the initiative through the Holy Spirit and guides Philip to take the road through the wilderness of the Judean mountains from Jerusalem to Gaza - not the best of routes in the mid-day sun, however a route paved and suitable for a chariot !! For God to suggest Philip leave the thriving successful ministry he had in Samaria with a people who were previously so at odds with the Jews would seem to be irrational. However there have been many times when missionaries we are just as familiar with eg. Mary Slessor, David Livingstone, Eric Liddel were asked to go to remote and hostile places.

On his journey Philip meets a young man travelling in a chariot and possibly at first sight perhaps the most unlikely person he would like to speak to. The young man, a dark skinned Ethiopian, a senior official in a royal household, however , Philip overcomes any reservations he might have and engages in conversation . The man in the chariot is reading from Isaiah the old testament Prophet Ch. 53 v 7 but could not understand what it was saying and he needed someone to explain to him what was being asked of him personally. As a result of Philip's meeting with the eunuch he was able to say that by believing in the power of God and that Jesus had died for our sins he would be saved. Philip then went to the river and baptized the eunuch . " As a body was cleansed by water , so his soul was bathed in the grace of Christ " Romans Ch 6 v 1-4.

The conversion of the Ethiopian demonstrates the inclusiveness of the gospel. No apparent obstacle, whether physical defect, race or geographical remoteness can place a person beyond the saving call of the Good News.

The Ethiopian went on to spread the word in his own country.

We are all disciples who should be aware of how and when the Holy Spirit calls us to make that phone call, write that letter, send that e. mail, especially in these

times of lockdown and lack of opportunity to meet up with family, friends and neighbours. We thank God also for the people He has sent when we needed them most – for the insight, the touch and the smile that showed what God is like especially in these difficult times.

PRAYER

Lord God we humbly approach You in awe.

All creation is made for Your glory, and we voice that now.

Your spirit plants in our hearts thoughts of those less fortunate,

Those who are sad, those who are finding it difficult

And those who are grieving at this time of lockdown

Help us in our living to honour

You and in our silence

To wait for You to speak.

In Jesus Name AMEN

Thought for the Day, Sunday 26th July 2020

based on Act 7:54-8:24

by Tim Carmichael

This week, we're continuing our walk through the Middle East of Judea, Samaria and Galilee reading of events recorded about the early church. If, like me, you'd never read Acts systematically, the cumulative picture building up of the people, the events and the intrigue are vivid.

The courage of Stephen, as we read last week, defending his faith and facing down his accusers is something that few of us could emulate.

His honesty and assuredness, inspired by the Holy Spirit, really upset the court he had been answering to. Outraged at being confronted with such truth they murdered him. They furiously and deliberately dragged him out and stoned him to death. Some years ago, on the TV news, there was revolting footage of a terrified young woman stoned to death reportedly for adultery. I couldn't watch it; it was a foul destruction with rocks and bigotry of a human; the same was done to Stephen, for his love of Jesus.

The writer of Acts, probably Luke, is selective in what he records. I'm not sure he'd have known what Stephen prayed in those awful minutes, but might have heard that he called out to God to not hold the crime they were committing against his murderers. The strength of Stephen's faith and character is contrasted by Luke as he records the sinister figure of Saul watching on, sanctioning, even if not taking part in, Stephen's murder.

The established religious and political leaders in Jerusalem were becoming increasingly alarmed by the growing, indefatigable influence of the church. On their behalf, Saul instigated a persecution of Christians across the city. As a result, people such as Philip, who like Stephen was one of seven prominent believers chosen by Jesus' disciples on the advice of the Apostles to disburse welfare while they gave their attention to prayer and ministry, left Jerusalem for Samaria and Galilee to the north.

Philip, inspired by the Holy Spirit, preached influentially about the power of God in Jesus in Samaria; Peter and John later followed him there, having heard of the Samaritans accepting the word of God. Luke incorporates Philip's story and introduces people he met, one of whom is an odd character, Simon the sorcerer. Impressed by Philip's speaking, Simon came to believe in the forgiveness of sin and was baptised by him in the name of Jesus. However, as we read on, this was without understanding it, in which he is not alone.

You wonder why Simon, described as a popular, intriguing and boastful magician showman, of all the other personalities and events of the time that were not included into the book, is allocated 14 verses. Perhaps it is what he represents that is significant in what is being given us in this record.

Is he included because he is so similar to so many of us who, perhaps with the best of intentions, have only a shallow understanding of the commitment needed to be worthy of the strength of the Holy Spirit?

Simon saw that the two Apostles who, having prayed for believers, were able to give them the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. Ever the showman he saw an opportunity and told them that he'd pay them to learn that skill so that everyone whom he touched could also receive it.

In response, Peter gave him short shrift because his heart was obviously in the wrong place and sent him packing but did tell him to ask God for guidance; he was not a lost cause. Luke tells us that Simon asked Peter and John to pray for him, but not the consequence of it.

A prayer for commitment.

Dear God, I know of and admire the strength that Stephen showed in declaring the strength of his Christian faith. I ask that I too may find that inner strength through the Holy Spirit to present my faith in my thoughts, in my daily life, in daily activity and interactions with and caring for others. I thank you for the examples given us by Christians throughout the ages who if doubting have

listened to your voice and have acted, if frightened have listened to your voice and found solace and who if unsure of themselves have listened to your voice and received forgiveness. We know that it is possible to change if we listen to you, listen for you in all the ways that you are present in our lives and if we ask for your help to do so through the love of Jesus our Lord and Saviour, Amen

Thought for the Day, Sunday 19th July 2020
by Marjorie Clark
Reflection on Acts Chapter 7, verses 1-53

In today's reading from Acts, we find a very long speech! It was delivered by Stephen, whom we met last week. Marina explained how he had been chosen along with six others to look after some of the practicalities facing the early church in Jerusalem. He seemed ideally suited to the job, but a faction sought to discredit him and accused him of blasphemy against Moses and God; so he was brought before the Sanhedrin, the court of Jewish religious leaders, to explain himself.

So here we have Stephen's response to the charge. If you want a summary of God's invitation to the early patriarchs and their responses, you can't get a more comprehensive account than Stephen's speech. It is worth taking the time to read this chapter in full. There is no doubt that Stephen knew his Jewish scriptures, but it is his analysis and interpretation which is so interesting. Time and again, he says, God called leaders who responded in faith – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon. But there were always the naysayers in their communities, who objected, or wanted to do things differently, and didn't believe this was what God wanted. There is a recurring theme here of the people resisting the will of God.

By pointing out to his listeners that there had always been times when people had resisted the promptings of God through the Holy Spirit, Stephen hardly endeared himself to them. Especially when, at the conclusion of his long exposition, he was to accuse them now of doing the same thing, by their rejection of God's chosen one; although he does not mention Jesus by name, it is clear he is referring to the refusal of the Court to accept that Jesus was the Messiah. Stephen's speech was a fearless proclamation of his Christian faith – many commentators point out that, far from being on the defensive, he is clearly using this opportunity to testify to his Saviour and Lord.

We will find out next week what the response was from the Court. But what is the message for us today, 2000 years later? Firstly, we may ask ourselves, how open are we to the Holy Spirit? Are we willing to be taken out of our comfort zone, as so many faithful Christians who have responded over the years have been? Or do we resist and find excuses to do our own thing? Secondly there is a warning within this chapter about putting our trust in religious duty and actions (and buildings?) instead of having faith that God has our future in His hands, and that we are invited to trust Him.

Few of us will ever have to defend our Christian faith in the way Stephen did, but let us pray that we have his courage to witness to our Lord and Saviour, and to go forward in faith, wherever that may lead us.

A prayer, written by Rev Mary Ann Rennie of Dunfermline Abbey Church.

Your invitation given to Abraham called him to follow, trusting in the promises that You offered - promises of a relationship that would build a community willing to share in the care of Your creation.

Jesus is your invitation. An invitation into a relationship with You, where we recognise the value of those we share the world with; where we see You and greet You, in the hands and voices of others. The Good News fills our imaginations with the hope of living as You would have us live, welcoming the stranger, caring for the outcast, healing those who struggle with life, bring new life where the dust of devastation has led to death.

Through the Holy Spirit, Your invitation sounds in least expected moments and in the ordinary tasks of our days. We are Your creation, and in our turning to You we trust You with our lives, believing that with Your presence our world can be transformed to offer signs of the kingdom of heaven. Amen God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God present in Jesus, God present in the activity of Your people, You are the God of invitation

A Thought for the Day, Sunday 12th July 2020
by Rev Marina Brown

Please take time to read Acts chapter 6 on which the comment is based. It's an entire chapter but not too long! Our note for the day is perhaps a bit longer too as a result.

The young church is growing! A wonderful thought in these days of decreasing numbers at worship (in normal times at least) but this growth was not without problems. The early church was, as every church is, comprised of human beings and the quarrel that arose at this point in the church was a cultural one. Again this is a very current topic in these days of needing to be reminded yet again that "black lives matter". The church's problem at this time was not one of colour, however, but of language. This, however, hid a different racial problem for as the Gospel message spread, men and women of differing races and cultural backgrounds became included in this larger Christian family bringing with them their own customs and expectations and perhaps riding roughshod over the long held ones of the existing converts in the process. Another layer of leadership was added to the church to handle finances (similar to the old system of the Deacons Court which handled fiscal/financial affairs rather than spiritual matters in our own denomination). This served the purpose and the verse 5 tells us that "the whole group were pleased with the apostles' proposal" and peace was restored. Note however that those chosen were not simply "money men", they were also people of proven faith who were blessed in their new work by laying on of hands

(as ordination still requires today) as part of the process.

The work of spreading the Gospel could now continue unhindered by internal dissent – for a time at least - and great growth was accomplished with even some Jewish priests being added to the number. It is at this point that Stephen is first mentioned: his name will be familiar to us as he is sadly remembered as the first Christian who died as a result of his faith. Interestingly the opposition to him, at this point, came not from the converts among the Jewish hierarchy, members of which had opposed Jesus, but from another group: “Freedman” (your margin note will tell you that these were ex-slaves or self-made men who had bought their freedom). There have always been those who seek to hinder new things perhaps because, in this case, they felt threatened by the number of Jewish priests among the converts. Stephen was arrested and brought to trial before the Jewish Court. Stephen’s accusers spread rumours and lies - nothing changes! No doubt words were twisted along the way. It seems though that a touch good old fashioned pique was also on display for Stephen was a wise man “richly blessed by God and full of power” (V.8). Some were perhaps simply jealous of his wisdom, his wealth and his God-given abilities. A few twistings of words akin to similar accusations made against Jesus (vv.13&14) were also added to the mix. Stephen was unmoved and given great serenity by God. He was in fact quite literally given the face of an angel in the face of his accusers!

This picture of the early church is in fact quite a mixed bag: great success, progress, growth on one hand and on the other those who would pick fault, spread rumour and attempt to create dissent. So much of this sadly still plays out today in congregations around the country and churches around the world. We all need our Stephens as our shining examples but we also need to be aware of those darker figures who seek to sow dissent and ask God’s help to overcome in these situations.

Let us pray: Loving God who sent Jesus into a broken world we praise you that you are still among us now in the presence of your Holy Spirit. We remember churches round the world, in our own land and our community and ask that we may all be bound together by your love. We pray at this time especially when we are divided by distance and restrictions which are for our safety that we may not turn in on ourselves and away from others. Help us to find ways to show your love in action that we may be known as Christians by our lives and so live out your love by our example wherever we are and however we are able to. In Jesus name we pray, Amen

Marina D. Brown

Thought for the Day, Sunday 5th July 2020
by Anne Buchan

You may like to go to your Hymn book first, to Hymn 194 – ‘This is the day the Lord has made, let us be glad in it’ - read it but I am sure many of you will be singing it out loud and clear !!

Reading Acts Ch 5 v 17 – 42

The apostles were obeying God by healing and spreading God's word to the people, but they were being met with some forceful opposition from the Saducees, who did not believe in the living Spirit or the eternal life after death, and for this reason they hated Jesus and were at odds with the Pharisees. They were envious of the popularity and following Peter, John and the other apostles were getting. The leaders of the Saducees could see that peoples lives and outlook were being changed for the better, by following Jesus and becoming Christians. As a result some of the apostles were put in prison In an attempt to silence them, and not necessarily as a punishment. Before they were released by the Angel they did not know what would happen, but no doubt they would be praying and aware of God saying " Be still and know that I am God "

At this particular time when we are trying to keep safe while trying to live out our life, look after our families, keeping in touch with friends and neighbours we can become anxious and fearful, considering almost every little decision we have to make and the consequences it might have on others. It is necessary for us to stop " BE STILL " know that God is there in the midst of all of this and that we can still appreciate the simple beauty of creation , the skills of those in the front line , the carers and all the unsung , humble heroes. We may not be able to enter our church buildings but we can still worship, listen to the Spirit and give thanks.

The apostles on being released , whether or not it was a miracle, had no fear in facing the excited crowds that awaited them in the Temple court. By going forward quietly they secured another opportunity to tell of their Lord's Salvation - where ever a Christian can witness for Christ he should go.

" There is no prison so dark , so strong, but, that God can visit His people in it and fetch them out of it. Recoveries from sickness, releases from trouble are granted, not that we may enjoy the comforts of a life, but that God may be honoured with the services of our lives. " (Matthew Henry's commentary)

PRAYER

We thank you Lord for this day , for its freshness and possibility

Help us to go through this day and week not worrying too much about how it will work out

But knowing that You hold us , and all the world in Your hands

Bless, sustain and renew all creation, as the dry stane walls enfold the fields,

Enfold us, our families our Church and all whom we name now

And when evening comes, may our hearts know Your calm light.

In Jesus Name

AMEN

Thought for the Day, Sunday 28th June 2020

by Michael Benneworth

Today's passage is from the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 5, verses 1 to 16. As background you might want to read from Chapter 4, verse 32.

Some passages in the Bible give us warm feelings – passages that we find encouraging and reassuring.. on the face of it today's passage is challenging and worrying. How does this passage apply to us? Have we given enough? Should we sell a property?

A man and his wife Ananias and Sapphira decided to sell a piece of property and donate the money to be held by the whole church to help the needy. We don't know what that property was, how much it was worth, how much it was sold for and whether it was their only property.

The verses from chapter 4 tell us that there was a real buzz in the early church, everybody was united in heart and mind. They shared all their possessions. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of Jesus and God's grace was powerfully at work in them. There were no needy people among them. From time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet for distribution to the needy.

There was no compulsion to sell the property but Ananias and Sapphira decided that they wanted to do this. However, they amended the amount of money they got from the sale – they kept some back for themselves! Once their deception was discovered they fell down and died.

Why? Let's be clear .. there was no pressure to sell.. to donate the money.. but they had tried to mislead God. Peter insists that this was a sin against God.. saying that they were selling the property to give to the needy but keeping some back was dishonest.

We must be diligent in all we do.. everything that a follower of Jesus does must be to the best of our ability. Failure of diligence is a sin.. failure of truth is a sin. We must try our very best to be the best that we can be.. to do everything to the best of our ability.. to be scrupulously honest in all our dealings.

We must always be honest with God .

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we know that you are all powerful, that you support us, that

you want the best for us. We pray that, with your grace, we will trust you in the way we live our lives. We will be honest, and we will do all we can for the future of your kingdom. We ask these prayers in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Thought for the Day, Sunday 21st June 2020

by David Cameron

This morning we are following on from where Tim left off last week and I would ask you to turn to Luke's Gospel chap 4 verses 23 – 37 for the reading for today.

Remember the action taking place here is after Pentecost, after Peter had cured the lame man at the door of the Temple and both he and John had been thrown into gaol by the religious authorities for preaching that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. Peter had spoken in their defence to the same court as had condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion some months earlier. Peter spoke with such courage and conviction that the court could not find a charge that would stand up to scrutiny and let them out of gaol with a threat to take further action if they continued to preach.

In today's passage Peter and John have come back to be among their friends and to tell them all what they had experienced and what the court had told them. Instead of being cowed and defeated as the authorities had hoped they felt filled with the Holy Spirit and full of joy. They prayed to God with thankfulness and asked God to take care of the threats which had been issued to Peter and John and to continue to give them confidence to preach in His name. The whole congregation of believers, which earlier in the chapter it says amounted to about 5000, were enthused by this and a great spirit of generosity swept over them, whereby they shared all their possessions and nobody went short.

The story doesn't stop there, of course, for, if you read further, Peter finds himself in prison again and the church in Jerusalem has to ask for contributions from some of the new churches in Asia which Paul and his friends establish to keep itself going. But Peter never loses his confidence in preaching about what he saw and experienced during his time with Jesus and the events surrounding Pentecost. It was never made easy for him but he knew he was being led and supported by the Holy Spirit in what he was doing.

At this unprecedented time in any of our lives, when we find our church buildings closed and we are not allowed to gather together to worship for perfectly just reasons, we need to take strength from this reading and go forward with confidence in what we stand for and continue to be generous within our own limitations particularly to those most in need. Amen

Prayer for today

Father in Heaven, give us the will to go forward with confidence for the future as

we look to coming out of lockdown and opening up our churches once again. Help us to be generous with all our talents and thankful for your support and guiding hand in all we do. Amen

Thought for the Day, Sunday 14th June 2020
by Tim Carmichael

Please read Acts 4: 1-22. Again, here a narration arising from these verses and concluding with a prayer

We have become – I should say, I have become, almost casual in response to reading of Jesus healing the sick or ridding someone of a mental illness because, if I think about it at all, it's what he did, I'm complacent. 'It's what they did in the Bible, back then, they did miracles – we can read about them like here'. The shocking reality of it, though, is stark when the power of God's grace is used by Peter in this passage. How is it that I could read of a miracle witnessed by hundreds and heard about by thousands and not wonder?

I invite you to imagine three things; firstly, if a well-known journalist, a paraplegic for at least 25 years since a riding catastrophe, were, because someone told her to, suddenly to get out of her wheelchair and become active once more. Imagine if one of the drug trials to find a coronavirus vaccine suddenly were to find a universal cure. Imagine the palaver in the international media if, against all the medical odds, against reason and likelihood, against logic and the bounds of known science, one of these situations were to come about, or both.

In a situation we'd recognise nowadays Peter, in an act of kindness, says to a physically handicapped beggar 'I can't give you any money because I don't have any, but I will give you what I have'. Confidently and in faith Peter goes on to say: 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk', whereupon the beggar does just that, witnessed by all the people milling about outside the temple entrance.

Peter explains to the astounded crowd of witnesses how and what and why it had been possible for him to be the conduit to this. Peter's belief and confidence is exuded throughout his words; the proof he cites and the context he sets it in would all have been known to his audience in the same way as if recent historical figures were mentioned in a talk these days.

The temple authorities didn't like it; the acknowledged source of its strength challenged their power; they feared insurrection, they feared the truth getting out, they feared the witnesses amongst the public and they couldn't suppress it. The otherwise inexplicable transformation, in the name of Jesus, of the 40-year-old disabled man into a whole-bodied person couldn't be denied.

They recognised that this truth cannot be suppressed; the evidence of God's power channelled through Peter in the name of Jesus had restored to health the erstwhile 40-year-old beggar.

What follows is then like a film script.

We have already encountered the Sanhedrin with its named staff, the court in which Jesus was harangued by the same, named people. The socially privileged and respected figures of authority, educated through their class and religious standing, see in Peter an 'unschooled, ordinary' man; they expect him to be overawed by them and to cave in to their superiority.

However, it is superb when you read Peter's riposte, inspired by the Holy Spirit, for its confidence, openness and honesty (8-12): 'Rulers and elders of the people, if we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone." Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.'

This is magnificent; I've asked you to imagine before but, for a final time here, imagine having the strength, courage and certainty, despite being surrounded by intimidation, to reply to a charge with that!

The narrator, Luke, recounts that the court hadn't expected an answer. They'd thought they could quash the public discussion and nullify the significance of the event by sentencing Peter, but Peter's eloquence is adding to it publicly, defiantly and confidently.

The court have no planned response to this undeniable honesty, so they imprison Peter and John overnight, they threaten them and warn them to remain silent about and not to teach at all in the name of Jesus.

So, how is that relevant to us today?

Think, perhaps, of that poor doctor, possibly murdered, but definitely dead, in Wuhan being threatened and coerced by his authorities to retract his statement about the virulence of the new virus. Despite that dreadful intimidation he knew the truth had to be heard, that he had to go ahead. Peter and John's reply to the intimidation they suffered was (19-20): "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

They were released; there could be no charge against that reply nor in the face of the Public praising God for how the nameless beggar had been miraculously healed.

The message is there for all to see, that in Jesus' name we can change what needs to be changed for the better when we allow ourselves the time, the confidence and the willingness to use it.

If the Acts of the Apostles is describing for posterity how the early church gained strength then here is chapter and verse; people saw, they listened and they believed. What have we lost that we can't take time to listen to the Holy Spirit present with us in our lives and do what we need to do for others in the name of God?

A prayer to conclude:

Please give me, dear Lord, the humility to realise that by listening for and allowing the strength and reassurance of the Holy Spirit into my life that I, too, in the name of Jesus can achieve changes for others.

Please give me the strength to see myself as others see me, to acknowledge my weak traits which I have habitually come not to see and, by listening to you, to do something positive about them.

Help me to acknowledge the 'other', the 'beggar' disfigured from birth by the prejudices surrounding him or her, so that he or she can love and laugh as I love or laugh and that we may love and laugh together.

Strengthen me to use moderation as a force for good and never to take the easy way out and follow the mob.

May I find that strength, as Peter again showed me, to listen to the Holy Spirit active in my life and do the right thing by other people in theirs so that the whole of our natural world, seen and unseen, explored, exploited and still not understood may be witness to your glory.

I ask all of this in the name of Jesus Christ our risen Lord, confident in the example of Peter and John, Amen.

Thought for the Day, Sunday 7th June 2020

by Marjorie Clark

Trinity Sunday

Trinity Sunday celebrates the Christian doctrine of God, the Three in One – God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Last week at Pentecost, we celebrated what is sometimes known as the birthday of the Church, when, some time after Jesus' resurrection, the believers, gathered in Jerusalem, experienced the power of the Holy Spirit descending on them, with a mighty wind and flames of fire. The commotion had attracted a large group of Jews from many countries who were also in Jerusalem, who were amazed to hear their own languages being spoken by the disciples. Today's reading, from Acts, chapter 2, vv 14 – 36, is what might be called the first Christian sermon, where Peter addresses this crowd of onlookers.

If ever we wonder about the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, just consider that this is the same Peter who not so long ago had denied he even knew Jesus,

and who along with the other disciples had deserted Jesus as he was led to the Cross. Since then, Peter had encountered the risen Christ on a number of occasions. And now here we see him, with courage and conviction making his testimony and testifying to the crowd what God had done for him and them through Jesus. What a transformation! And he explains to these Jews in Jerusalem what has just happened that has so caught their attention.

He reminds them of the prophecies of Joel in the scriptures, where God promises that He will pour out His Spirit upon them. He also refers to King David, highly revered by the Jews, and points to the prophecy in the Psalms that the Messiah would be raised from the dead. Here we have Peter, loudly and clearly, declaring that Jesus is the Messiah, that Jesus is Lord, and that what he has accomplished through his death and resurrection has brought about the Father's outpouring of the Spirit on the believers.

Peter here is looking both backwards – to the Old Testament prophecies - and forwards, recognising that the ministry of Jesus continues through his followers, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Two thousand years later, that is still true; we are called to show the love of God through what we do and say; we are called like Peter to proclaim the Good News of Christ's redeeming sacrifice; and we are reminded each day that we are not called to do this on our own, but that He is with us, through His Spirit, to comfort, inspire, encourage – and also to challenge us. And so we pray:

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me

Spirit of the Living God , fall afresh on me.

A hymn for Trinity Sunday

God the Father of Creation, source of life and energy

Your creative love so shapes us that we share your liberty

Teach us how to use this freedom, loving children so to be.

Jesus Christ, our Lord and brother, in your Cross we see the way

To be servants for each other, caring suffering every day

Teach us patience and obedience, never from your path to stray

Holy Spirit, love that binds us to the Father and the Son,

Giver of the joy that fills us, yours the peace that makes us one,
Teach our hearts to be more open, as we pray "God's will be done."

Members of our Saviour's body, here on earth his life to be,
Though we stand as different people, may we share the unity
Of the Father, Son and Spirit, perfect love in Trinity.

CH4 113 © Iain Cunningham

A Thought for the Day, Sunday 31st May 2020

by Rev Marina Brown

Pentecost

Today is the Sunday on which the church worldwide remembers and celebrates a special day: It is the day of Pentecost. The word means 50 days since that was the time that elapsed between the offerings of Barley sheaves in the temple at the beginning of the Passover and this new Feast. It is sometimes also called "The feast of Weeks". It was therefore a Jewish celebration as our passage will mention, before it became also celebrated by Christians for a different reason. Read Acts 2:1-13: This, perhaps to us strange, event mobilised and galvanised the frightened disciples. The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament was depicted as associated with both wind and fire so this event must surely have resonated with the disciples. They must have realised that the Spirit promised them by Jesus had indeed come and quite literally inspired them. It certainly was the mighty push they needed to get out there and do something: spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ! That is our legacy too, though perhaps we think it's a job only assigned to the clergy. The Spirit did not merely inspire them, however. The Spirit also equipped them for the work they were doing. Suddenly they became linguists, able to communicate to the people in their own languages.

But what does all this mean for us today especially at this difficult time? We like these men have the Holy Spirit with us. This infilling may not have come with flames of fire but we are assured in our baptism and by our faith that God, that his Spirit is always with us. And we too are equipped with gifts, maybe not of languages, but of so many other things; sometimes things we simply take so much for granted that we've stopped noticing them. Think for a minute of all the things you do almost automatically, smile in greeting, pay a quick visit -though that might be to a doorstep just now, help with practical things, pray silently in joy or sorrow... The list could be endless. Thank God for these gifts but most of all for his Spirit inspiring you right now.

Prayer: Loving and gracious Lord, I praise you for all you have done and still do in your world. In this time of disruption where news seems one day hopeful and the next doom-laden we sometimes feel anxious and uncertain. Give us all the assurance of your presence I pray, remembering that you are there in the world around sending beauty into brokenness. I pray for family and friends from some

of whom we must be distanced. Keep them safe, I pray. Thank you for every act and word of love and kindness received. May each of us also remember to reciprocate with our own words and actions whenever we are able. Thank you Loving God that you hear all our prayers and that you will answer them according to your good will and purpose for we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

A Thought for the Day, Sunday 24th May 2020

By Anne Buchan

BIBLE Reading ACTS CH.3 v 11 to 26

We heard last week how Peter and John were able to heal the beggar because of their faith and God's power within them. They were very aware that they were channels for spreading the word and furthering God's Kingdom.

So long as a Christian thinks only of what he , himself can do and be, there can be nothing but failure, frustration and fear. But, when he thinks 'not I but Christ in me ' there can be nothing but peace and power.

When the Jews who witnessed the miracle of healing the beggar were so surprised and taken aback at what had taken place, Peter rebuked them -having to remind them, in no uncertain terms that this sort of event had been prophesied and they should have known to expect miracles and that when the beggar was healed he jumped for joy and was healed body and soul. Isaiah 35 v 5/ 6.

My brother has a 70th birthday in June and since there will be no family gathering due to lockdown we have all been asked to record some of the memories we have of him. It has brought back lots of things which had been forgotten and were special at the time they took place, and have been great to revisit. Sometimes we do lose sight of where , and how we have come to where we are now and particularly in this present situation of lockdown we have time to reflect.

We all have our part to play in God's plan, just as those early preachers. Peter and John did - the church grew by 5,000 !! in the first few weeks.

The power of God is and will always be there for you through Jesus, his sacrifice and resurrection – confirming His love and desire to answer our prayers, especially in times of stress, fear, loneliness and loss.

From Peter Miller - Iona Community – World migratory bird day

Go gently, my friends, feel the good earth beneath your feet, celebrate the rising of the sun, listen to the birds at dawn, walk gently under the stars, knowing you are on holy ground held in love – in the wonder of God's creation.

PRAYER

Lord, cleanse our hearts and set us free from all that keeps us from the life of fulfilment and purpose You have for us. Restore what has been lost us. to us as only You can do.

When we go through the fire, overflow us with Your Spirit so that we are refreshed. When we feel as though we are struggling, lift us above our circumstances and bring us safely through to the other side.

We pray for those families in our parish who have lost loved ones and are grieving and in the present circumstances are not able hug and comfort each other or be comforted by friends in the usual way Be with them Lord

In Jesus name AMEN

A Thought for the Day, Sunday 17th May 2020

By Michael Benneworth

Healing of a lame man (Acts 3 : 1 – 10)

As you know, we are currently working our way through the Acts of the Apostles (the life of the early Christian Church). We have reached chapter 3. Read the account in Acts Chapter 3 verses 1 to 10 of Peter healing the lame beggar.

Peter and John (two of the disciples of Jesus) were on their way to the temple to pray one afternoon. A man who had been lame since birth was carried to the gate of the temple so that he could beg for money. There were no state benefits in those days and he had to beg to get enough money to sustain his family. His friends carried him to the gate of the temple because that was the best place to attract the attention of those passing by and those going to the temple. He could appeal to the passer-by for money.

He attracted the attention of Peter and John. Peter said "Look at us" which lead the man to expect some money. But Peter did not give him money but Peter healed the man in Jesus' name. Peter and John helped him to his feet and he began to walk, praising God. The people were filled with wonder and excitement. The man's life was changed, changed by the power of God through the works of God's followers.

Does this passage say anything to us today? The man was trapped by his circumstances – he could not go anywhere on his own power but with the power of God everything was possible. We are locked in ... imprisoned by a virus.. unable to be free to go where we want. But with God anything is possible.. God is guiding the scientists on their search for a vaccine.. God is strengthening the NHS people to look after those suffering.. God is encouraging us all to stay positive.. to be reassured that he is with us however difficult life becomes.

We need to trust God, to believe in God, to talk to God and he will provide the support for us to cope with our lives and protect us in the coming weeks and months.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we know that you are all powerful, that you can do anything, that you send Jesus to this world to rescue us from the mess that we created. We know that you are alongside us at all times. We pray that we will trust in you completely, just as Peter and John trusted you to perform a miracle to rescue the lame beggar from his situation. We pray that we accept the strength that you send us to prevail in these exceptional times. We ask these prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.

A Thought for the Day, Sunday 10th May 2020

By David Cameron

Life Among the Believers

Today's passage continues from where Tim left off last week and is Acts Chap 2 verses 41 – 46 if you like to look it up in your bible. This gives us a snapshot in time as to how the very young church lived. Peter had just given his very first mission statement after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the Bible tells us that 3000 were added to the number of Believers at that time. So a sizeable crowd – more than used to be at McDiarmid Park on a good day!

They shared their possessions and property and distributed the money amongst all according to each others needs and many were added to their number as they became believers. They came together daily, ate together in each others homes and were filled with enthusiasm for the faith that they had found. I see parallels with our situation today.

There has been a huge amount of goodwill extended to the communities in which our church operates and an outpouring of generosity to the most vulnerable and a willingness to look out for each other which is new and uplifting. OK, we can't meet and socialize and we can't even eat together apart from those with whom we live. But the day will come when these restrictions will be lifted. Let us pray that when that happens we also remember to be generous, outward looking and above all sensitive to the needs of the vulnerable. That's all of us.

A Prayer

Father in Heaven we thank you for this opportunity to reassess how we live our lives, to be willing to embrace new ideas, to know what the core values of our faith are and to keep them.

Help us to be sensitive to the needs of all our neighbours near and far and to pray for all those families in this country and else where who have lost someone they love whether as a consequence of the covid 19 pandemic or otherwise.

All our prayers we ask in Your name. Amen

A THOUGHT FOR 3rd MAY 2020

by Tim Carmichael

A New Normal

It's the 4th Sunday after Easter; how boring is that statement?

Please read this passage as a number of paragraphs of discussion, based on Acts 2: 36-41 and today's events, and then a concluding paragraph followed by a prayer, and may my thoughts be acceptable to God. If you don't do prayer just try praying in your own words in your own way; it's hugely helpful.

A prime minister's press secretary described a school as a bog ordinary comprehensive; he was dismissive and patronising. Even if he'd said 'unremarkable' he'd still have missed the point entirely. It's the potential, the human potential, that learning can stimulate and release that makes every school phenomenal. Jesus' disciples were chosen from unremarkable backgrounds.

Those of us who would have gone to church to celebrate Easter this year might have been inspired by the service, gone home and waited for it to come around again next year, like one of the seasons. Easter is over; when it happens, it is scheduled near the beginning of Spring.

Spring comes annually; we anticipate it living, as we do, surrounded by evidence of its return; we see it, we hear it we know it is part of the seasons. Walking up the hill from the village there are the stands of fern fronds uncurling like shepherds' crooks some say, but more like bishops' crooks as they are so delicately ornate and perfectly formed. There are violets to be spotted in field gateways, blackthorn blossom in the hedges. Audibly there is the intricate splendour of the dawn chorus. We hear it, we see it, we sense it and we know it with the return or departure of birds on migration. We accept Spring annually as part of the powerful cycle of Life.

Although Easter 'happens' or is celebrated every year in early Spring, it doesn't happen every year; it happened once. Something occurred in that upper room of such simply profound magnitude that we cannot understand. What we do know is that Jesus' disciples had locked themselves away, fearful of what the mob or the Roman authorities would do to them. They went from being a ragged group of bog ordinary artisans into possessing an inspiration, we could talk about a divine inspiration, but I don't really understand what that means yet, into presenting the strength of their message as vital, hugely powerful and dynamic.

This transformation is recorded by Paul in this book of Acts – of their actions. This band of brothers and sisters retained their humility; we read of them selling their possessions to finance their journeys outwards beyond their Galilee to towns and cities previously unknown or even dreamed of by these bog ordinary people they were. There was something transformational about them; they had gained a confidence and skills; they'd gone from being passive to having the, literally, God-given conviction to tell unknown gatherings and crowds of Jesus' life.

Peter went from being the man who denied even knowing Jesus three times before dawn to being a leader, the rock on which Jesus was to build his church.

At a time when it was dangerous to be a dissenter, to not acknowledge the power and authority of Rome we read in the passage of this man who was now an outstanding figure confidently and authoritatively talking to, inspiring and baptising up to three thousand in one day in the name of Jesus Christ.

It's too easy to be sceptical about the power of the message of being a believer in Jesus' resurrection as the son of God and of following his example, to love your neighbour as yourself. The platitude of saying there were no telecommunications or newspapers in those days is unnecessary; news of Jesus spread by messenger or word of mouth around the known world, spread into languages other than Hebrew, spread into societies other than those of the Jews and has spread through Time.

Think now about Captain Tom Moore, a no one to anyone else outside his devoted family, who set out to raise £1000 as a mark of showing his gratitude to his local NHS and who raised over £30 million. Think of Greta Thurnberg, coincidentally an English speaking Swedish school girl and her message of if we don't do it now then there's no point because we won't have a world to save.

She's off the front pages because of the immediate threat to mankind, coronavirus. The notion that power is in our hands, those of all generations, if we choose to exercise it is maintained on the internet and in groups meeting on line. Statistically, we know that the sea is clearer, the air cleaner as a direct consequence of the lockdown. Saving the planet cannot be let go of, especially once it has been so clearly seen. Our future and that of creation is tied to our world regaining its health.

A recent visit to hospital, at short notice, to have a device fitted has probably been lifesaving; it has certainly been life transforming. The people of the NHS each fulfilled their role professionally and with caring humanity, from GP via receptionists, via nurses to surgeon and back down through the roles. The NHS system worked superbly efficiently. Ordinary people doing extraordinary work for a stranger. Ordinary people who, with the others in the health and care professions, are at the forefront of our thoughts and television screens daily. Ordinary people are dying because they believe in the cause that motivated them in the first place, that of wanting to help others, strangers. I find them humbling.

I'm not attributing Christianity to either Captain Tom or to Greta or to the NHS, but as examples of how unremarkable people, those whom might have been described beforehand as bog ordinary people before our year 2020, can change lives and attitudes, they bring hope. It makes me think of those 11 Christian named men and their fellow men and women immediately around them who had something to transmit to their contemporaries, whose role was vital for the message of Jesus' example and rising again to get beyond the shores of Galilee to the world. Their generation died as we all do, but their faith has come through the generations, it has thrived, has overcome its bigots en route, and is the reality still today.

Jesus Christ is risen, the actions of his disciples from unremarkable backgrounds

who became his apostles prove that; the power of the Holy Spirit is here, we can see it every day in the actions of today's remarkable unremarkable people. We give thanks on a Thursday for their selflessness; what will we do tomorrow? Will we just go back to what was; will we still care about our neighbours; will the caring professions again be relegated to financial obscurity; will we value our dustmen (sic) and essential trades still?

We can all journey in the way the apostles did, those people who used to be followers but were become confident advocates, outspokenly meek, death defying ordinary people whose message is in the example Capt Tom, in the example of Greta, in the powerful beauty of bleating of lambs on the hillside above the village or the petals of a violet in a field gate; if we care enough we can change things; if we believe and trust in God we can change things through our actions and prayer.

Let's come down from the heady stuff to reality. The threat of Coronavirus is the reality engulfing us, changing our ways of life. We're in lockdown, social distancing. Out of every crisis come opportunities; what are ours with us today and for tomorrow?

A prayer for us all today

Lord, we are those who journey,

And who find that journey hard today.

We are those who journey,

And long to find our hope renewed.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Lord, whether in our own company or with companions beside us,

We journey on.

Whether sure, or unsure, as to our journey's end,

Come beside us through our risen Lord Jesus.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Lord, we pray for others;
For carers of the living and of the dying;
For the bereaved and for the anxious;
For those fearing loss of work and of business.
Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Lord, we pray for scientists and researchers;
For those seeking to understand the challenge we face;
For those creating potential vaccines;
For those advising decision-makers. Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Lord, we pray for those who shape our common life:
In local Councils and in Scottish Government
And in the Government of the United Kingdom.
Grant to them wisdom, compassion and understanding.
Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Lord, we pray for your Kingdom to come
And for your will to be done,
On earth.
As it is in heaven.
Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Amen.

Allow yourself a couple of minutes here. This takes us calmly through our own concerns and worries, our hope and faith, our support for others and guidance for our leaders. I'd encourage you to pray to God if you'd like to, to read it through if you'd like to, but in all to reflect on and feel inspired by what we can do for each other due to the love of Jesus

A THOUGHT FOR 26TH APRIL 2020

by Rev Marina Brown

An introduction to the book The Acts

We are for the next spell going to be using readings from the second of the book written by Luke.

If you have a Bible which has an introduction to each book take time to read it. Otherwise: read on!

The Acts of the Apostles takes up the story where Luke left off in his Gospel. He opens it in the same way his Gospel did revealing that it was first of all a letter to a man called Theophilus who might have been a Roman official because of the title Luke used for him in the original but thereafter it is simply speculation as to who this man was. Certainly he was someone who was a Christian and keen to learn more about this new faith he had accepted. The Book is partly a history of the early church but it is more than that for it firstly completes the Jesus story, recounting the ascension and the command to the disciple and later will contain early sermons given by those who became known as apostles. It is in fact a book whose purpose is contained in its title. It tells us what the first disciples, now no longer learners (pupils) but teachers in their own right did: where they went, who they met, what happened to them.

It's a fascinating book to read from cover to cover and one that's well worth the time that would take: and time is something we find ourselves with right now! Let the story begin....

Read Acts chapter 1: In his introduction Luke was keen to get Theophilus up to speed on the next chapter of the story of Jesus as it were. He had already told him about the resurrection and about people seeing Jesus but there was an unanswered question: "What happened next?" While Luke was writing a history it was very much always "HisStory": about Jesus and people might spend fruitless hours speculating on where he was now entombed, wishing to visit the site. Luke settles the matter right away. Jesus did not die a second time Luke tells us in this introduction: he returned to heaven and immediately it became the responsibility of the disciples, now apostles, to set to work. It seems they were a bit daunted by the task and so they prayed together and verse 14 tells us that Mary and the other women joined them in this along with Jesus brothers. They

decided to fill the hole in their ranks left by Judas who it appears had committed suicide in a field that had been purchased with his blood money. The disciple apostles acted prayerfully but in the end used the old method of drawing lots to make their decision, a matter which has taken up many pages of theological discussion! Whether they acted wisely or not will always be a cause of speculation. Matthias was chosen but we hear no more of him. This is not unprecedented as apart from Peter, James and John, we hear little more of the others also. It is the story of these men and the “new kid on the block” (Paul) which will concern us in future weeks.

A THOUGHT FOR 19TH APRIL 2020

by Michael Benneworth

Read Gospel of John chapter 20 verses 19 to 30

Last Sunday was Easter Sunday on which we celebrated the fact that God had raised his Son from the dead. When all was black and full of despair, the events of that day turned the world upside down. That day proved that Jesus was (and is) God, proved that death can be conquered and gave us all an opportunity to share with God in an eternal kingdom for ever.

This week the set reading for the week is from the gospel of John (Chapter 20 verses 19 to 31) which recalls the events when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples.

The disciples were all together locked in a room for fear of the Jews. They thought that they might be dragged off and suffer death in a similar way to the death of Jesus. The risen Jesus came and stood among them and this appearance persuaded them to realise that he had been raised from the dead. He had conquered death; he had rebuilt himself in three days. They were overjoyed. But they were not all present; Thomas was missing. The disciples told Thomas about meeting with Jesus and he scoffed. He did not believe – they were not serious, he wouldn't believe without cast iron proof.

A week later and Jesus appeared again – he came through that same locked door a second time to prove to Thomas that his worries were groundless. He was alive and Thomas was convinced.

We are locked in our houses not due to fear of the Jews but to defeat a virus that is causing trouble wherever it goes. Are we rather like Thomas and doubt something – doubt that the virus is true, doubt that we will see the world again, doubt that God exists? Thomas needs to be our model. He believed, he trusted and he was convinced. We need to believe that the human race will come through this difficult time and God will support us and encourage us if we let him. He wants to have a close relationship with each of us. We need to say, as Thomas said, “My Lord and my God” and we need to accept Jesus deeper into our lives.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father as you raised your Son on that first Easter Day we thank you for all that you have done for us. We are sorry that there are times that we doubt you and we pray that, with your grace, we will grow closer to you and we will accept your protection.

In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

EASTER GREETINGS TO THE PRESBYTERY OF PERTH

from the Moderator Rev Klaus Buwert.

This year is an Easter like no other for us all. Everyone is using the term “unprecedented” for the situation we are in. Perhaps that should be qualified. There have been serious plagues and infections before. More died of flu after the first World War than were killed in it for instance. The unprecedented nature of this outbreak is twofold. Firstly, the speed with which it has spread throughout the world because of the interconnectedness of our world through air travel. Perhaps after all this is over, we may think more globally, and realise our complete interdependence on one another. Secondly, our response to the pandemic. We are prepared to sacrifice our freedom and economy for the sake of saving lives. The parallels with the gospel are clear. Firstly, Jesus gave his disciples a commission to preach the gospel to the whole world. The superhighways of the Roman Empire gave the early missionaries “unprecedented” opportunities to do that. And now the church, for many of us, has been dragged into the 21st century and we are learning new ways of communicating with our congregations and parishes. Secondly, this week we remember the greatest sacrifice of all. Not our freedom for a few weeks. Or jobs and businesses which will recover, even if it takes a few years. But God’s concern to halt the virus of evil through the death of his son. Greater love has no-one than this, and no-one made a greater sacrifice. Thirdly, the message of the first Christians was of an “unprecedented” event. The resurrection of Jesus. There had been holy men, and rabbis and prophets and would be messiahs before. None of them died and rose again to back up their message. Jesus’ message was that he was bringing life in all its fullness. There can be no fuller life than the one that bounces back from the grave. For believers, the life Jesus gives is one the grave cannot touch. May we all have the opportunity this year to appreciate that message in a new and deeper way in the new and unexpected circumstances we find ourselves in.

A prayer

Lord, You are the God of time and eternity, of history and the present moment. In these difficult times, we ask that you would open our eyes to every blessing you have bestowed, perhaps in unexpected places. Open our hearts to every token of your love which never changes; the daffodil, the sparrows in the hedge, the good in people looking out for each other. We pray for all for whom this time of lockdown is especially difficult, those whose jobs are on the line, who have few interests to fill their time with, whose family is causing stress and anxiety, who are fearful because they know they are especially susceptible and weak. We pray for those who are working even harder, keeping our shops supplied, trying to care for the most vulnerable and at risk in this situation. We pray for those wondering where God is in such a pandemic and who find faith hard. We pray for those open to you in this pandemic because life has suddenly become so uncertain. We pray for ourselves as members of Presbytery, that we might know how you want us to uphold the faith of our members, feed the flock, still provide pastoral care where it is needed. But above all we pray for the doctors and nurses and ancillary staff keeping our hospitals going, seeking to save lives, in the front line of this battle, and always at great risk to themselves. We ask for wisdom for our government and its medical and scientific advisers, striving to get the balance between hard discipline and common sense, and having to make tough

decisions. We remember our Prime Minister and pray for a full recovery for him. In this most special of weeks, take us to the cross once more, where the pain of the world was concentrated and focused. And take us to the empty tomb, where the victory over sin and death has been made available to us all, so that even in our present distress we can be more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Amen

Easter Sunday

A thought for Easter Day
by Rev Marina Brown

Read John 20

“The Lord Christ is risen” says the old hymn and there are numerous other hymns singing out this amazing truth. (Try reading and singing a few to yourself.) It was such an amazing event that the first disciples, even though they should have known better, found it hard to credit – women’s nonsense – until they saw it for themselves and a shame-faced Thomas was challenged with the reality. This “unbelievable” fact has challenged people over the years: a stumbling-block for some an open doorway to God for others. One man set out to disprove the truth of it when he wrote a book called “Who rolled the stone”. As he wrote something amazing happened: God spoke to him and his eyes opened. By the end he knew that it was true! Allow yourself to marvel at the mystery of it all, at the glory of it all, and take time to thank God that because Christ died he took on himself the penalty for the world’s sin and because he rose again we know that there is far more to life than the present and give thanks for that.

A prayer for the day:

Heavenly Father, we come today in a time of confusion and uncertainty.

Remind us of your followers on that first Easter Day who began the Day in mourning, in fear and in uncertainty and were transformed by your living presence among them.

May we feel a sense of your presence with us to strengthen us to face whatever the future holds for us knowing that you are a god of miracles and a God of love and Life.

In the name of the risen Christ we pray, Amen

THOUGHT for GOOD FRIDAY April 11th 2020

By Anne Buchan

Good Friday is the day remembered by Christians all over the World , no matter

which Denomination or Church they are part of as the day JESUS was crucified.

Reading LUKE Ch. 23 v 35 - 47

You will know how He had asked God to take away this cup of suffering , but said ' be it THY will not mine.' Jesus was tried and found guilty and faced the most agonizing of deaths and here we are calling this Good Friday!! 'Good' has apparently been traced in the old Oxford dictionaries to mean ' Holy or of God'. However, one theory some Christians believe is, that there is something good about this day and we are reminded that in Jesus's suffering and dying on the cross our sins are forgiven. That terrible Friday is called Good Friday because it also led to the Resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, and His victory over death and sin. The celebration of Easter being the very pinnacle of Christian celebrations In any season and particularly at his time when the whole world and our own dear land is in the midst of turmoil, disease, death and fear. Christians must choose joy over despair, hope over doubt and faith over fear - trusting , believing in and proclaiming that God's plans are good - Romans Ch8 v 28

Jerimiah Ch. 29 v 11 – 13

In the moment it may be difficult to see the light, but remember the doom and gloom of the Cross would eventually fade to joy and celebration of the Resurrection which all can share in. This Easter wherever you are , possibly caring for some who is ill, or grieving for the loss of a loved, not being able visit friends and family and give them a hug. Social media is great at times like these but it is not the same is it ?.Lift your voice to Jesus – see His hand at work in the world and know that He is with you always and His best is yet to come. - Even in the garden at Gethsemane Jesus was not thinking of himself, He encourages the disciples to pray for themselves , as he also had done with the women who wailed for Him on His way to the Cross. He continues as the man he has always been looking out for those He has always cared for.

The following is taken from my book of Daily readings - Streams in the Desert by Mrs Charles E Cowman.

Yes, leave it with Him, The lilies do. And they grow

Yes, they grow in the rain. And they grow in the dew – Yes they grow:

They grow in the darkness, all hid in the night, They grow in the sunshine,

Revealed by the light - still they grow.

Yes leave it with Him

Tis more clear to His heart, You will know, than the lilies that bloom,

Or flowers that start neath the snow

Whatever you need, if you seek it in prayer, you can leave it with Him

For you are His care

A prayer for Good Friday

Father we come before you on this day, a crucial day in the most important festival of the Christian calendar when your Son was crucified on a cross died and was buried in a tomb – for us, so that we were made free to love you and our fellow humans.

Yet this Holy Week up to this point left your disciples confused dispirited and scattered, unable to understand what was going on despite all the time spent with your Son. Father we can draw many parallels between that first Holy Week and the times we are in at the moment. We, like the disciples before us, are left confused and uncertain about our future, perhaps worried about our jobs, our income our health and our families. Yet we have others, putting themselves in danger, and in some cases dying, in order to save their fellows from this horrible disease.

Yet Lord, like the disciples had to learn before us, Good Friday was not the end but only the beginning of the Easter story and for us, as with the disciples in the past, the present circumstances have to be gone through and we pray that it will lead to a more loving and caring society, worldwide. And yes Lord, it starts with me. Amen

D Cameron

Maundy Thursday

A thought for Maundy Thursday

by Rev Marina Brown

Read John 13:1-18

When I was growing up in the city, and later in town parishes, there were services every evening of Holy Week usually spread round different churches of different denominations. For one week we were all one people. Latterly as the gatherings grew smaller the services reduced to just three, then two – Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday. Maundy was always special: even kings got involved distributing largesse to the poor on this day. Kings also followed in Jesus footsteps by washing the feet of those who came, humbling themselves to take on the servant's role as Christ had done. This year more than ever we need to relearn this message of servant discipleship. As the hymn says, "This is our God, the servant King!" Hallelujah! A prayer for the day: Loving God, we thank you for Christ's example of servant leadership. Open our eyes to those who need our service no matter how small we feel it to be. We give thanks for the kind deeds, the kind words spoken and written that lift our spirits. But most of all we thank you that you are with us; that you will hold us up. May we relearn the beauty of simple things and relearn the value of all you have given us in the world you made. In Jesus name, we pray, Amen.

A thought for Palm Sunday 2020

Read Matthew 21:1-11

It's a story we all remember, this account of cheering crowds who waved the only things that came easily to hand: palm branches ripped from the trees beside the road. As I type I have nearby a little vase full of palm branches or rather strips of palm branches which have been transformed into crosses. For crowds are fickle things: ready to cheer one day and shout condemnation the next. We too are fickle people, one day condemning the NHS for its faults and failings and now in our time of need applauding them on our doorsteps as some of you will have done. I'm told it is an uplifting experience; a time of gathering and solidarity. Think of that and remember the loneliness of the Garden, the hate of the trial, leading to the agony of the cross and think, "Who am I that someone did all this for me?" I know I don't deserve such sacrifice and yet Jesus went through all this for us. As he rode on that donkey he knew he rode to death but he also knew that his Father would never leave him, would take him through and lead him into the light that was Easter Day.

Let us pray, Loving God, in you love you sent Jesus. As we think of the joyful crowds who greeted him help us to rejoice in your love too. Help us to remain faithful and true to that love even in times of fear and uncertainty such as those we live through. Carry us forward in faith. We pray for families who are afraid just now for themselves or a loved one. Give them your strength. We pray for all health workers that they will be kept safe to carry on their vital work. We pray for researchers seeking vaccines to avert the spread of this virus. And we pray for ourselves and all your people everywhere that we may find strength in your love as we worship you now. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

If you can, read GK Chesterton's lovely poem about the first Palm Sunday; When fishes flew (see below)

MDB

When Fishes Flew

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth.
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,

And palms before my feet.
A thought for our day - 29th March 2020