

Connecting faith and daily life

Something to complain about?

Heather Cooke *reflects on*
Exodus 16:2-4. 9-15 and John 6:24-35

Moan, moan, moan! It's hard to miss the complaining in today's reading from Exodus. The "whole congregation" complained against Moses and Aaron. Fortunately, God was also listening, as always. Seeming to forget they'd been delivered from cruel slavery, the Israelites bemoan the lack of food now that they're in the wilderness.

Understandable, you might think. The newly coined word "hangry" reflects how hunger can indeed make people short-tempered. God, whose shoulders are broad, doesn't resent the ingratitude expressed towards those chosen to lead the exodus. Instead, miraculous food is provided.

In today's Gospel, Jesus had just fed the five thousand with only five loaves and two fish, every bit as miraculous as quails and manna. Those in the crowd were no longer physically hungry. But Jesus spots that spiritually they might be "hangry". Indeed, the rest of this month's Gospel readings will show him facing complaints about his claim to be the bread of life. It would take his resurrection to prove the point, rescuing us from slavery to sin and death.

Do some of us, perhaps even our "whole congregation", sometimes complain against our church leaders? Or against God? When we feel we're in the wilderness, angry that our spiritual appetites aren't being satisfied, can we take heart from the promise God makes to all of us, to provide spiritual food – sometimes in the most unexpected ways? Just keep looking! 🙏

Journalling

Living the word with the written word

by Julia McGuinness

As worshippers of Jesus, God's living Word, Christians uphold the written word. The Bible records God's story and ours. Translators have laboured to make it accessible down generations and across nations – monasteries have housed learning and libraries; Robert Raikes, who pioneered Sunday Schools in the 1780s, widened literacy to children of every background.

Widespread literacy has opened up a proliferation of personal writing. Journalling has become a popular tool for personal

development. But it may also be valuable for the Christian faith journey.

Perhaps we already write Bible study or sermon notes. A journal can expand this to include anything we sense God is saying to us day by day. We can write down where we experience God at work to help us keep hold of our blessings. We can write down our worries, to help us let go. We can write our prayers, and note how they have been answered. We can grapple with complex issues, express our feelings and explore hopes and dreams.

How could writing things down strengthen your walk of faith? 🙏



Lord God, who leads us into eternal life, give us grace to see you in our daily lives. May we be thankful for the miracles of friendship and family, of love and laughter, and patient in times of trouble. Amen.

John Mason Neale (1818-1866)

by Caroline Hodgson

In his short life, John Mason Neale, who is commemorated in the *Common Worship Lectionary* on Wednesday, worked tirelessly to educate and inform.

Despite his strongly evangelical heritage, Neale became deeply drawn towards Anglo-Catholicism, and passionate about antiquarianism and architecture. In 1839 he co-founded the Ecclesiological Society, to define correct principles of church architecture, decoration, ritual and music. At a time when the low/high Church controversy was raging, Neale

was often frozen out for his views. He was dogged by ill health and died at just forty-eight.

More than anyone else, he made English-speaking congregations aware of the tradition of Latin, Greek and Russian hymns. *The English Hymnal* (1906) contains sixty-three hymns he translated and six original compositions. His translations include: "All glory, laud, and honour", "O come, o come, Emmanuel", and "Of the Father's heart begotten". As a hymn-writer, his enduring legacy is his contribution to the Christmas repertoire, notably "Good Christian men, rejoice" and "Good King Wenceslas". 🙏

“It is not the body's posture, but the heart's attitude that counts when we pray.”

Billy Graham (1918-2018), evangelist

"Do not let the sun go down on your anger"



Heather Cooke *reflects on* Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2 and John 6:35. 41-51

Do you ever get angry? We all do. It's only human. So it's affirming to read those two words near the beginning of today's letter to the Ephesians: "Be angry..." But it doesn't end there. "Be angry but do not sin." The difference is explained in the wise advice not to let the sun go down on our anger. Don't let it last too long, don't let it fester. Put it away from us, later verses advise, and build loving relationships. Sometimes, of course, we're right to get angry – if we can turn that anger into healing action. Even Jesus did, in righteous anger cleansing the Temple of greedy money-lenders.

People seem angry with Jesus in today's Gospel. How could he "have come down from heaven", they grumble, when they know he is a human being, with a father and mother like everyone else? What they don't yet appreciate is that his dual lineage, human and heavenly, is not only possible but crucial – in the strictest sense of the word.

The miracle of the cross, giving life to the world, reconciling heaven and earth, could only work because Jesus was both human and divine, son of Joseph but also Son of God. His humanity manifested itself in many ways – weeping at the tomb of Lazarus, using humour in his teaching, and even getting angry. It's only human. Fortunately for us, Jesus wasn't "only" human. ☺

Loving God, you came down from heaven in Jesus, that he might lead us home. In our journey, may we see him in all of humanity, share his anger at injustice and follow his example of service and sacrifice. Amen.

People of the New Testament Introduction, part 1

by Caroline Fletcher

Caroline Fletcher's new book, People of the New Testament, was inspired by articles she wrote for Sunday Link. In the coming weeks she will explain what motivated her to turn the articles into chapters, and tells us about some of the characters she has included.

Characters such as Barnabas and John Mark do not leap out of the pages of the Bible on first reading, as Paul or Peter do. Because they

are mentioned only briefly, I initially thought they would be perfect subjects for 150-word articles. It soon became clear, however, that there was so much more that could be said. As I have delved deeper into these characters and unearthed their stories, I've discovered that each of them reveals something unique about that period of time when Jesus walked the earth and the first churches were established. I hope you find them as fascinating, inspiring and faith-affirming as I have. ☺

“To confess our sins is to accuse ourselves of them: quite a different thing from merely telling them.”

Maud D. Petre (1863-1942), Roman Catholic laywoman

Finding God on the smallholding

by Jeni Parsons

We are great recyclers and composters here on the smallholding but there's always stuff accumulating that we have to take to the local recycling centre. It's one of my favourite places where nothing is wasted, all is sorted and much of it will be reused in a new form. When I go there I feel burdened with all

the junk in the back of the car – the old, broken stuff and the things you can't just chuck away. When I leave there I feel lighter, cleaner, with new resolve not to allow such stuff to accumulate.

It feels like a confession of the mess in my life and in the world and coming away is just like being absolved. For me the link is obvious – God takes our mess and we leave free of the burden, transformed and with a new chance. ☺

What is wisdom?

Heather Cooke *reflects on* Proverbs 9:1-6 and John 6:51-58

“Is that wise?” How often have you heard that expression? When we’re about to do something foolish, a caring friend might well use that tactful question to get us back on the right track. But what is wise, what is wisdom? Apart from the Gospel, all today’s set readings focus specifically on the topic. And yet it is in today’s words from Jesus that we learn what is truly wise.

As he continues his lengthy discourse about the bread of life, can you see echoes of the Proverbs reading? Wisdom is calling even the foolish to share her bread and wine. From her posh, seven-pillared home she invites everyone – just as Jesus, who has come down from

a heavenly home, invites us all. No class distinction here either! It isn’t our background that matters, but our willingness to accept what the crowd (and next week even the disciples) found difficult.

You can hardly blame them, really. Jesus had not yet sacrificed his body and blood on the cross, still less risen again from the dead. We, who know about his death and resurrection, have less of an excuse to ignore his wise words to us today. Foolish or not, rich or poor, we are all invited to share in Christ’s heavenly banquet and eternal life. Would you turn away from that greatest gift of all? Is that wise? 🍞



Wise and wonderful God, you invite us to share the bread and wine that will nourish our souls. May those holy gifts strengthen our faith, build us up in fellowship and protect us from the folly of selfish pride. Amen.

People of the New Testament *Introduction, part 2*

by Caroline Fletcher

Caroline continues her series in which she shares the inspiration behind writing her book.

Barnabas and John Mark receive only fleeting mentions in a few verses scattered throughout the New Testament. But without Barnabas, Paul would not have been given the chance to become a missionary, and without John Mark many stories about Jesus would never have been recorded.

In their own way, each of the characters in my book played an

important role in the development of Christianity. As I learnt about them, I found that their stories revealed more about other subjects, such as the Pharisees’ mindset, how Israel was governed, Christianity’s Jewish roots, the radical attitudes of Jesus, and much more.

My hope is that my book will bring the reader a fresh insight into the time in which these people lived, and that this will in turn provide an opportunity to deepen and enrich your faith. 🍞

“You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble.”

Psalms 32:7

Walking with Rosie *Need*

by Gillian Cooper

For me, our morning walk is about exercise, meeting people, enjoying nature and collecting the newspaper. For Rosie it is about food: a reward for waiting, a biscuit from the petrol station staff, a discarded chip, and whatever disgusting thing she can dig out of the bottom of the hedge. She expresses shamelessly the primal need of all living things for the fuel that powers them.

“I am the living bread,” said Jesus, “Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever.” We know our need for food. We know what happens if we have too little, or too much, or the wrong kind. Our appetites can dominate our lives. That is what makes Jesus’ words so powerful. In Jesus all our needs are met. One day there will be no more planning and buying and worrying and scavenging, but only the fullness of joy at God’s generous table. 🍞

Top of the class

Heather Cooke *reflects on* John 6:56-69



Lord God, our teacher, you guide us daily with your loving word. As we seek to learn more about your will, help us not just to listen with our ears, or to read with our eyes, but to open our hearts. Amen.

This teaching is difficult." Did you ever feel like that at school? Or in church, have you ever listened to a sermon and felt you didn't really understand it? Perhaps you even disagreed with what was being said. Either way, you're not alone. And even the great teacher, Jesus, didn't always reach his listeners in quite the way he hoped to.

As the readings about the bread of life finally come to an end today, the grumbling we've heard all month also reaches its climax. Many people in the Capernaum synagogue found the teaching hard, even among the broader group of disciples. Since "disciple" means "student", we can see that the lesson was a bit over their heads – even with Jesus as a teacher.

But Peter, who often got things wrong, wasn't the dunce today. He went to the top of the class. He trusted that if Jesus said it, then it must be true. Jesus had the words of eternal life. Peter might not have understood at that point quite how Jesus could offer eternal life, but he was willing to take it on trust that Jesus was the Holy One of God. We don't always understand God's ways, and much of the Bible's teaching is difficult to fathom. Peter would carry on learning all his life, even as he taught others about Jesus. Are we prepared to do both? 🍞

People of the New Testament *Introduction, part 3*

by Caroline Fletcher

Caroline continues her series in which she shares the inspiration behind writing her book.

Paul may have been a groundbreaking missionary and an inspirational leader, but he needed the help of faithful co-workers like Luke, Priscilla and Timothy, while Jesus valued the friendship and practical support of Mary of Bethany and Joanna.

I hope that learning about these people's lives – whether by reading the book or the articles in *Sunday Link* – will not only provide a glimpse into biblical times, but will also be an encouragement, reminding us that each of us has an important part to play, even if we are not big characters with upfront roles. None of us works in isolation. We are all part of the body of Christ, just as these Christian brothers and sisters before us and, like them, we all have vital roles to play. 🍞

“God loves people because of who God is, not because of who we are.”

Philip Yancey (born 1949), author, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

Characters from the Common Worship lectionary

Monica

by Caroline Hodgson

Monica, the mother of Saint Augustine of Hippo, is commemorated on Tuesday. Born in the fourth century in Thagaste, North Africa, she embraced Christianity as a young woman and married a pagan man named Patricius. It is said that he had a volatile temper and it is well documented that their son, Augustine, was a wayward, worldly youth, who indulged in hedonistic practices. His mother's faith, however,

never wavered, and she prayed ceaselessly for her husband and son. Her steadfast devotion eventually bore fruit, when both Patricius and Augustine converted to Christianity.

Of course Augustine would go on to become one of the most influential theologians and philosophers in the early Christian Church. His mother's story inspires Christians in the transformative power of devotion and maternal love. 🍞

Connecting faith and daily life

Julia McGuinness *reflects on* Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9

The pomp of a royal wedding inspires many a song, including this psalm. The occasion is more than mere pageantry. Kings in the psalmist's day ruled with sovereign power and military prowess, embodying their nation's hopes for peace and prosperity. As a monarch in King David's line, this king is one of God's chosen rulers. The psalmist's praise is effusive. The king is described as god-like in standing – handsome, gracious in his speech. His bride is a foreign princess and his "ladies of honour" include princesses, emphasising his international status.

But this is no self-glorifying tyrant or power-hungry dictator. The psalmist sets this event in the context of God's ultimate kingship. It is always telling to observe whom or what our human leaders worship. This king bows the knee to God, allowing his own rule to be shaped by divine justice and righteousness.

As the psalmist fulsomely sings of God's blessings, we discern another melody. Myrrh, a perfume fit to scent royal robes, reminds us of the magi's gift to the infant King Jesus. The bridegroom king is revealed as a foreshadowing of the Messiah, and the permanence of God's blessing on his reign takes on a whole new resonance. The psalm anticipates the glorious day when King Jesus is united with the Church as his bride – and that really is something to celebrate. 🍷

Wedding celebrations



Lord, we pray for leaders of nations, that they might acknowledge you as King over all. May they humbly exercise the power with which you have invested them, to establish justice and exercise compassion, that your kingdom may come. Amen.

People of the New Testament *Introduction, part 4*

by Caroline Fletcher

Caroline continues her series in which she shares the inspiration behind writing her book.

Stories are powerful, aren't they? Jesus knew that – he taught in parables to grab people's attention. There are other less obvious stories hidden in the New Testament, though, if we dig a little deeper. These are the stories of characters whose lives, though mentioned only briefly, illuminate the world of Jesus and the first Christians. I

chose to focus on some of these in my book.

I took a deeper look at people such as Onesimus, a runaway slave; Joanna a well-to-do woman who travelled around with Jesus and his followers, providing for them financially, and John Mark, who abandoned Paul on his first missionary journey but went on to become one of his most trusted companions.

These are real people who lived in a very different world to us, but whose pains, joys and struggles we can relate to and learn from. 🍷

“Open your hearts to the love God instils... God loves you tenderly. What He gives you is not to be kept under lock and key but to be shared.”

St Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997), Roman Catholic nun and missionary

Finding God on the smallholding

by Jeni Parsons

This is the month for weaning and selling the spring-born lambs, who will be raised to carry on the breeding programme on another farm. My primitive breed birth their lambs in April, so at five months they're fully capable of living on grass, but still suckle if they get the chance. So the decision is made to remove the lambs so the ewes can regain

condition ready to meet the ram in November when the cycle of breeding begins again. Moving lambs on so the breed increases in numbers is important, but at the same time separating ewes from their lambs is tough though often the process has already begun naturally.

It is one of the main rhythms of sheep-keeping that links me with all the shepherds who have sung the glory of God, from King David through to the shepherds on a starry night outside Bethlehem. 🍷

Connecting faith and daily life

A focused faith



Lord, help us learn to use those moments when anxieties rise to refocus on you. Remind us that there is nothing too big for you to handle, and nothing too small for you to care about. Amen.

St John of Chrysostom

by Caroline Hodgson

St John of Chrysostom (c. 347-407) is commemorated in the Common Worship lectionary on Friday. He was an important Early Church Father and Archbishop of Constantinople. He was among the most prolific authors in the early Christian Church, producing a staggering 700 sermons and 246 letters, plus biblical commentaries, moral discourses and theological treatises. He spoke out against the abuse of authority by both ecclesiastical and political leaders.

He also wrote this beautiful prayer:

Almighty God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplications unto thee; and dost promise, that when two or three are gathered together in thy Name thou wilt grant their requests: fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants, as may be most expedient for them; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting. Amen. ☺

Julia McGuinness
reflects on Psalm 125

Security is a big issue. Nations seek it by stockpiling weapons, patrolling borders and policing communities. At a personal level we might fear for our homes, our jobs, possessions and health. Anxiety for the future may keep us awake at night.

Contrast this with the assured tone of the psalm which is set for today. This is one of a series of psalms known as the Songs of Ascent, or Pilgrim Songs. Here is a song for pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem and Mount Zion. They are on the move but their spirits are settled. Their attention is not on their concerns, nor on strategies for safety, but on

God alone. The way in which they traverse this territory is symbolic of their attitude towards life. A steady, focused trust in the Lord keeps them grounded as securely as holy Mount Zion, rising up before them. The geography completes the picture, with the hills surrounding Jerusalem symbolising the encircling presence of God.

Venturing outdoors, perhaps on a walk, we might reflect on how the very stones under our feet will be here beyond our lifetime. It's a humbling reminder of God's everlasting love. By contrast, the psalmist reminds us that evil outer circumstances, however crushing, are only temporary. Our challenge is to hold our nerve and keep our eyes fixed on God's ultimate sovereignty, even when it feels as though our troubles will never end. ☺

Autumn thoughts

Part 1 - The earth is the Lord's

by Julian Smith

In this five-part series, Julian Smith reflects on autumn from a Christian perspective.

The parish calendar is full of "harvest" events – decorating the church, the festival services and the annual lunch or supper. The date is hallowed by tradition and rousing hymns speak of harvest priorities of a century or more ago.

But things have changed. The majority of people no longer grow the food they eat. Fresh

produce may make the church smell wonderful, but it's hard to dispose of these days. Then there is the minefield of the traditional harvest boxes – who will be insulted to be offered one, who upset not to be offered? Much more practical is to have packets or cans for the homeless shelter or food bank.

Celebrate harvest how you will, the traditional message is unchanged. The earth is the Lord's and all we have comes from God. The world is God's not ours and we have a duty of care, a responsibility, for that world. ☺

“Autumn is really the best of the seasons; and I'm not sure that old age isn't the best part of life.”

C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

Julia McGuinness *reflects on* Psalm 19

From a golden-coral dawn to a jewelled sparkle of stars, the splendid beauty of the skies evokes wonder. In them we sense the signature of the Creator. Our response echoes that of the psalmist. As he contemplates the sun's orderly circuit across the heavens, his thoughts turn to the direction of human lives.

God has set the sun's course, but allows humankind free will to choose our own pathway. Our lives are best lived, not by random self-pleasing, but according to God's order. Through the law, God signposts how we may follow the course for which we have been created. The rebellious spirit of our age rails against this as limitation. The psalmist sees it as liberation. The law is no dry guide. It generates life-giving renewal and rich insight.

The law acts as spiritual sunlight. Under its penetrating rays we can see how we are out of kilter with God's will. Without such light from above, we have only the markers of the behaviour of those around us, and are liable to follow other people's agendas. The law may shine a light on the psalmist's hidden faults, but he welcomes the exposure that enables him to get back on track.

As Christians, we are called to be Son-seekers, allowing the Living Word to guide us for our good, so our lives shine with God's glory. ☺



Son-seekers

Lord, from self-help to sales talk and spin, we are bombarded daily by words that would direct our actions. Help us to treasure your word, allowing its truth to guide our actions and its power to transform our lives. Amen.

Autumn thoughts

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness

by Julian Smith

Was John Keats describing a real autumn when he wrote these words, or imagining an ideal autumn? Real or idealised, such autumns might seem be things of the past. Today's poets might write of heatwaves and forest fires, earthquakes and floods. For some autumn is a season of plenty, but for many it is the precursor to disaster-induced famine. God's world around us is changing fast.

The feeding of the five thousand in John was our Gospel reading at the end of July. John describes it as a "sign", not a miracle, which points to many things. The sign points to Jesus' compassion and his desire for his disciples to be active and practical in their care.

As Christ's body, his hands and feet, we are called to exercise his compassion in practical ways – feeding those who are hungry, sheltering those who are homeless and caring for the casualties of this fast-changing world. ☺

“God is faithful even when his children are not.”

Max Lucado (born 1955), American author and pastor

Books of the Old Testament

Part 29 – Joel

by Richard Greatrex

The book of Joel is short – three chapters full of vivid, at times brutally descriptive language. We know nothing about the prophet, even the dates of his activity are contentious, although many scholars suggest a timeframe between 500 and 350 BC, after Israel has fallen.

Despite its brevity the book of Joel is significant for Christians – being cited by Peter during his explanation of Pentecost in Acts 2 and by Paul to describe

one principal strand of his understanding of the Gospel: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13, quoting Joel 2:32).

In the opening verses, Joel instructs his readers that his words are for all generations, not just his own time. His message of the coming day of the Lord reminds us that no one is exempt from the need for repentance and trust in God, which leads to transformation through divine grace, a message that Paul declares is truly fulfilled in Christ. ☺

Tree hugging

Julia McGuinness *reflects on* Psalm 1

Trees invite us to take time. Anchored in stillness, they patiently stand their ground, quietly confident in their beauty, offering shade, shelter and maybe fruit to all who pass by.

It seems only natural that a tree is rooted at the centre of this psalm, as an image of those whose lives are centred on the Lord. This tree is intentionally positioned by the stream, settled where its deepening roots can be nourished by life-giving water. And it is going nowhere. By contrast, the godless are in motion, wandering off on other paths, blown about by the winds of fashions and fancy. They take their ease only to mock the believers who are going nowhere.

Perhaps, at times, Christians may feel criticised for being unadventurous, or even boring, for simply remaining in place in stable, God-ordered lives. But, like the tree, their glory in God is truly measured over time, not space. A tree does not merely passively channel water; it absorbs it, transforming nourishment into growth, its distinctive stature and beauty ripening to fruitfulness in its season.

The psalmist pulls no punches. Those who presume to live independently of their creator may find short-term pleasure, but are on a course that ultimately diminishes them. Their focus on the self results in lives that are as insubstantial and fruitless as chaff. ☹️

Autumn thoughts

Seasonal eating

by Julian Smith

The change from summer to autumn should mark a change in the things we eat – out go the salads and new potatoes, in come the jacket potatoes and stews. Autumn's abundance should remind us of the delights of eating seasonally.

With the world as our larder the idea of eating seasonally doesn't exist. When nearly everything is available all year round at prices we're willing to pay, why not eat

strawberries in December? But there is a price to pay that goes beyond hard cash and it is paid in air miles.

The issue is far from straightforward, requiring us to balance the harm to the environment with the benefits that the responsible production of "exotics" brings to developing nations and communities. Schemes like Oddbox can help us redress our balance and be more in touch with the world around us. Helping us "live simply that others may simply live". ☺️

“How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow
of your wings.”

Psalm 36:7



Lord, we pray for the wisdom of stability. Help us to be as patient as the tree, trusting that, as our roots remain in you, we can weather whatever comes our way as we grow in fruitfulness. Amen.

Walking with Rosie From of old

by Gillian Cooper

It is a lovely late summer day, and the tide is out. Rosie and I join many other dogs and their humans on the beach. Beyond the sand and the rock pools, I can see people bent double over the rocks, and I know they are looking for fossils – large ammonites visible on the rock

surface, smaller fragments to be collected. Rosie is more interested in the seaweed, though even she has to admit it is not really edible.

I think of the ancient creatures whose imprints and echoes I am seeing, and remember how comparatively brief has been the time of human history on our planet. These rocks were here before us, and may be here after us. And behind it all is God, the ancient of days, the originator and life-giver, beyond all time and eternity and yet, astonishingly, intimately involved in our small human and doggy lives. ☺️



A fierce torrent

Julia McGuinness *reflects on* Psalm 124

It's often only when a crisis is over that we can begin to process what's happened. We may feel reluctant to look back on difficult times, but in this psalm David leads God's people in reviewing all they've come through. This is not to relive or romanticise their experience, but to recognise both God's presence in the very thick of things, and God's faithful deliverance from trouble.

Autumn thoughts

God help sailors

by Julian Smith

Autumn is fast becoming a season of devastating storms. The jet stream picks up and deepens Atlantic depressions, hurtling them towards Europe to bring death, destruction and the dislocation of individual and community lives.

While inland areas experience terrible flooding, it is coastal areas that bear the brunt of wind and waves. Erosion threatens homes once far from cliff edges, much-loved beaches are scalped or remodelled and caravan

parks become marinas. Fishing communities are particularly hard hit.

Not only do storms damage boats and important infrastructure, but while fishing boats remain in port no money is being earned and families suffer. Fishing is a way of life passed down through the generations, it is an uncertain way of life but it is a real calling.

The reflection on the weather become a prayer, "God help sailors on a night like this" should be extended to include fishermen and coastal communities. ☺

King David faced the threat of the Philistine army. Our enemies may be different – from bullies or false friends to crushing circumstances of health or livelihood. Like the psalmist, the strength of our emotional reaction may lead us to describe our crisis in vivid images – the monster capable of swallowing us whole and eating us alive, or the merciless force of a flash flood that threatens to wash us away. Our sense of powerlessness can leave us feeling as vulnerable as a bird in a snare.

Yet this psalm is a reality check. However sharp the teeth, fierce the torrent or ensnaring the traps we face, God's redeeming power is greater. As we look back in the spiritual wisdom of hindsight, we start to look up in praise at what God has done. Then we can look forward again with renewed confidence that the one who sees even a sparrow fall not only brings us through tough times, but strengthens our faith in the process. ☺

Lord, help us to trust that you are with us even in the midst of our troubles. As your power protects us and your love restores us, give us discerning eyes, grateful hearts and voices willing sing your praise. Amen.

St Michael and All Angels

by Trevor Dennis

This week is the feast of St Michael and All Angels. Michael is best known for defeating the dragon, the one called the Devil, the deceiver of the world, as the story in Revelation puts it. In countless icons that is how he is portrayed. How we long for evil to be defeated – for this world to become truly the kingdom

of God! Well then, through the grace of God, we had better do something about it. For God needs our cooperation. From start to finish the Bible is quite clear about that. We can't leave it all to angels. We must serve as God serves; we must love as God loves.

That is our calling, and it gives a strong purpose and profound meaning to our lives. May God give us the courage, energy and imagination for it. ☺

“St Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle, be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil.”

Traditional prayer

Connecting faith and daily life

Kathryn Fleming *reflects on*
Job 1:1; 2:1-10 and Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

In almost any discussion of the Bible, someone will say indignantly, something along the lines of: "I can't deal with the Old Testament God, who's so remote, capricious and sometimes downright cruel." Certainly, the story of Job's trials, sanctioned by God and implemented by Satan, would appear to support this view. It serves, too, to confirm the worst fears of those who, confronted by the problem of pain in a broken world, are quick to declare God a monster. For if God has power to shape the universe, could those who are innocent not be protected from disaster? The message we receive here is hard to translate. If God is speaking, we don't think much of the message.

But that, of course, is not the whole story.

In the reading from Hebrews we hear that: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors... by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." A Son – human like us, one bearing "the exact imprint of God's very being", sharing the divine DNA, but also bearing the pain, misery and indignity of undeserved affliction. One for whom no aspect of our existence is out of bounds, tasting, and swallowing, death for us all. God in Christ goes through suffering before and beside us, transforming desolation by the power of love. God is not remote at all, but with us always, our friend and brother, leading the way home. ☺



Divine DNA

Thank you, Lord, that your Son Jesus speaks your message of love for all to hear. Help us to listen for his voice today and every day, as we follow him through life, through death and to our home in heaven. Amen.

Autumn thoughts

Notes from a small garden

by Julian Smith

Autumn is the time for putting the garden "to bed" for the winter. The secateurs are busy and manuals are consulted to learn what should be pruned when, and by how much. Do we sacrifice the last colourful "hoorah" of bedding plants to make way for spring bulbs, or do we wait another week? Hard work and decisions go hand in hand.

Autumn in the garden isn't a sad, depressing time; it's a time of hope

for the future – a future of daffodils in swathes, "lasagne" planting in pots giving weeks of colour and texture and the first buds on the cut-back roses. Autumn in the garden is about care in the here and now with hope for the future.

Like the autumn gardener, Christians are called to offer care in the here and now fuelled by the hope that God's kingdom of peace and justice can be a reality. ☺

“ I feel like a little tug in a great storm. But I'm fastened to a great ship on ahead. It's going into port and can't lose its way.”

Patricia St John (1919-1993), missionary and writer

Finding God on the smallholding

by Jeni Parsons

October is the month that feels like sabbath, the time God rested from creation and then told us to rest likewise. It's the sabbath month here. The pigs are in the freezer; the ewe lambs have gone to their new flocks while the ram lambs live on here for another year; the ewes are resting and building stamina for a new year of pregnancy, birthing and rearing; the poultry

have mostly stopped laying and are losing old feathers and growing new plumage ready for winter. Even the grass is slowing its growing. And I am resting after harvesting and clearing, preparing and sorting.

And God rests with us through this season of resting and looking towards the next month's task of remembering. Such sabbath-ing is profound and we need it for rest and reflection, for simply be-ing for a while and giving thanks: *Diolchgarwch* in Welsh – thanksgiving and gratitude. ☺

Are you weighed down by possessions?



Kathryn Fleming *reflects on* Hebrews 4:12-end and Mark 10:17-31

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword," says the reading from Hebrews today.

Ouch – I just cut myself on scripture!

Indeed, I do so whenever I hear Jesus' words to that rich young man, who has somehow become possessed by his own possessions and just can't let go. Perhaps, like me, you'd love to be the kind of person who really does put the kingdom of God before everything else, but who struggles to jettison precious inessentials that we seem to take a lifetime to accumulate. On a good day, perhaps we can sit reasonably lightly to our material possessions, but sitting lightly to our relationships is another matter altogether. The prospect of leaving children, in particular, for Jesus' sake is quite simply impossible for me to contemplate. So, what am I, what are we, to do with these challenging, uncompromising words?

Thankfully, we have two comforts in today's readings.

To quote my son in his teenage years "Jesus gets it." Or, if you prefer the words from Hebrews: "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses". No matter how abject and frequent our failures, Jesus understands the tangled middle of motivations and longings that shape our actions, and if we can't order our priorities properly ourselves, there's the immeasurable comfort that "for God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26), even when we can't quite let go. 🙏

Gracious God, when we fail to put you first, when we lean on other things, when we are tempted to give up following altogether, thank you that you understand and love us still. Help us to trust you always. Amen.

People of the New Testament

Part 5 – Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10)

by Caroline Fletcher

Caroline explains what inspired her to write about one of the characters in her new book.

The author Michael Card has called Zacchaeus "a genuinely bad man". And it's true that to have risen to the position of chief tax collector, he is likely to have been particularly corrupt in a system based upon greed and deceitfulness.

The Law demanded that he repay what he had taken plus a

fifth, although after his encounter with Christ, he promised to repay four times the amount he had embezzled and to give half his possessions to poor people.

Luke's readers would have been shocked at Zacchaeus' wholehearted repentance. Christ's unconditional love melted this man's heart and turned him completely around. And all these centuries later, Christ's love continues to overwhelm and transform the unlikeliest of people, no matter who they are and what they have done. 🙏

“Whatever we do that creates deadness is a sin.”

John V. Taylor (1914-2001), Anglican bishop

Prison chaplaincy

by Heather Smith

Today is Prisons Sunday, which is held each year on the second Sunday in October and marks the start of Prisons Week. For forty years, Prisons Week has prepared prayer literature to enable the Christian community, both individuals and churches, to pray for prisoners and their families, for victims of crime and their communities, as well as for those who work in the criminal justice system.

The aim of Prisons Week is to encourage prayer and awareness. It motivates volunteers to step forward and give their time and gifts, whether in prison or in their own community. It provides an annual focus and reason for Christians to work together, building capacity and motivation to make a difference for people who are out of sight and often out of mind.

We will be looking at prison chaplaincy over the coming weeks. In the meantime you can find out more at: <http://prisonsworld.org> 🙏

Kathryn Fleming *reflects on*
Mark 10:35-45

You do not know what you are asking.”
Is it fanciful to imagine these words floating through the mind of the Almighty as we petition God day by day, seeking to bend God’s will to ours? I’m pretty certain that often our anxious requests are as wildly wrongheaded as that hope of James and John, who had so misunderstood the nature of God’s kingdom that they believed they could solicit seats at the top table for the heavenly banquet.

We stand in one place, with a very limited perspective – and it is from there that we act, think and pray. If Jesus had started the conversation by asking his friends if they wanted to suffer as he was going to, had suggested that they too might have the option of becoming the servants of all, I’m confident that they would have stepped back hurriedly. But they couldn’t see that coming, had no idea where the Jesus story would take them. They’d hoped for something quite different and it’s easy to imagine their incredulous disappointment when Jesus started talking about a life of loving service.

Their route to glory had looked much simpler – an easy win. That’s not God’s way – but though there is a cost, it’s one that God bears for us. We simply have to trust, and pray for God’s will to be done, in us, for us and through us. ☺



Seeing the world upside down

God, whose Son turns the world upside down, turn us upside down as well until our priorities match yours, our ways become your ways and our story taken up into your story, with the perfect happy ending. Amen.

Prison chaplaincy

by Heather Smith

Reading Prison, now closed, is famous as the prison where Oscar Wilde was incarcerated and where he wrote his poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”. On the wall of the waiting room for visiting professionals and volunteers was a quote by Fyodor Dostoevsky: “The degree of civilisation in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.”

While their job is to minister to prisoners, many chaplains talk of the profound beneficial effect

that prisoners – men, women and children alike – have on their own lives. One priest, whose experience is described in Richard Atherton’s book *Summons to Serve*, described spending Holy Week in prison, drawing comparisons with Christ’s passion. Although many inmates had been hurt and betrayed, or were dependent on others, as Jesus depended on Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross, or though they bore the anguish of their inability to look after their families, as Jesus looked down at his mother at the foot of the cross, the prisoners he met were courteous and welcoming, willing to share with him what little they had. ☺

“A comprehended God is no God at all.”

Gerhard Tersteegen (1697-1769), German devotional writer

Books of the Old Testament Part 30 – Amos

by Richard Greatrex

The opening verses of Amos are set in the peaceful, prosperous reign in Israel of Jeroboam II (788-747 BC), identifying this as the earliest of the prophetic books. Amos describes himself as a farmer, herder and tender of fruit trees from Judah. In the opening chapters he describes God touring the region, judging the surrounding nations for their misdemeanours. The focus then shifts on to Judah, before ending with accusations against the self-indulgent elites of the Northern Kingdom.

In chapters three to six we learn that Jeroboam’s

reign hasn’t brought about a harmonious, integrated nation – gross inequalities abound. This provokes the wrath of the priest Amaziah, who sends Amos packing. Back in Judah, the prophet continues to warn Israel’s leaders that oppressing poor people provokes God’s action against them. The book concludes with a speech addressed to Judah reinforcing God’s judgement and holding out the hope of eventual restoration through repentance.

Amos’ message is clear: justice and righteousness are at the heart of God’s plan; whenever a nation or generation ignores them, they will be judged and chastised. ☺



Clinging on

Kathryn Fleming *reflects on*
Job 42:1-6. 10-end and Mark 10:46-end

As Jesus meets blind Bartimaeus, his opening question might seem entirely unnecessary. “What do you want me to do for you?” he asks. The petitioner is blind. Of course, his prime need would be to have his sight restored. Surely it’s a no-brainer. But actually what he has asked for is mercy. There’s something deeper happening here, just as there is when Job realises that his search for answers will only lead him further into mystery. Though there are many and obvious physical issues to be addressed, the fundamental need for both Job and Bartimaeus is to recognise that God is God, and that in God’s presence we are all alike in need of mercy, dwarfed by “things too wonderful for me, which I did not know”.

Perhaps this might help us to hold on to our faith in hard times (even if those times are, please God, less cataclysmic than those endured by Job). Sometimes healing has more to do with experiencing God’s mercy and recognising God’s greatness, than with sorting out a physical issue. That may not always feel like good news but, as Job reminds us, God’s picture is always bigger, and we glimpse but a corner. Sometimes, wonderfully, like Bartimaeus we receive both healing and cure. But when that is not our experience let’s try cling to God as Job did, and hope to glimpse God’s loving purpose. ☺

Prison chaplaincy

by Heather Smith

Prisons have always existed. Think of Joseph in prison in Egypt, or Peter, rescued from prison by an angel in Acts 12. In the West until around two hundred years ago prison was seen as the waiting room for trial and, if someone was convicted, where they would be held until execution, or where debtors were put until they paid what they owed.

Before the Second World War prisons were filthy, disease-ridden places, and people were often imprisoned for crimes that would not now attract a custodial sentence. It wasn’t uncommon for prisoners to be forced to exercise wearing hoods, or for the stalls in the prison chapel to allow the worshipper to see only the preacher.

Over time, thanks to campaigners like the chaplain of Wandsworth Prison William Morrison in the 1890s, the current model of the prison system developed, until eventually the purpose of prison came to be seen as both deterrence and reform and conditions were improved. ☺

“The mission of the Church is to live the ordinary life of human beings in that extraordinary awareness of the other.”

John V. Taylor (1914-2001), Anglican bishop

Lord, you know our needs better than we do ourselves. Help us to trust you, so that our faith in you may heal us of our fears and bring us to worship at the feet of your Son, Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Walking with Rosie

Words of life

by Gillian Cooper

I talk to Rosie as we walk. People in the village probably think I’m a bit mad. But Rosie is a captive audience for my thoughts and feelings, and she is used to my burbling. She knows when to ignore it, and when to pay attention because I am talking to her. She recognises familiar words and phrases, even if she sometimes ignores them – come, wait, leave it, look who’s there.

All my life I have read and heard the words of the Bible in English, and they are embedded in my brain. Sometimes they are just there, in the background. Sometimes they leap out at me and say – come, leave it, wait, look... Sometimes they inspire, sometimes entertain. They are both familiar and strange, needing thought and interpretation. As I walk the path of salvation, they are a gift for my mind and my heart, never to be ignored. ☺