

Bowled over by the glory of God

Lisa Tulfer *reflects on* Luke 9:28-36



The apse mosaic from St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai

Almighty God, you showed your glory and power to Peter, James and John on the holy mountain. Give us the courage to come into your presence, so that we too may glimpse your divine majesty and praise your glory. Amen.

National Parks

by Jo Jones

Jo Jones embarks on a five-part tour of some of the national Parks of Great Britain.

National Parks were established as part of the reconstruction of Britain after the Second World War. People living in increasingly crowded, industrialised towns craved access to open country – access that was denied by increasing enclosure of land by landowners. In 1932 a mass trespass on Kinder Scout in the Peak District intensified pressure for change. In the 1950s the Peak District became the first

of fifteen national parks across England, Wales and Scotland, established to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of their area, promote enjoyment and understanding by the public and foster the economic and social well-being of local communities.

How often in the Bible the wilderness is the place where God is found. Designed to be in reach, we need to treasure these places, where our souls get a chance to breathe! www.nationalparks.uk

Jo lives near Newmarket, Suffolk and works on conserving the rare plants of the Brecks. 🍷

“The only time my prayers are never answered is on the golf course.”

Billy Graham (1918-2018), evangelist

Today's Gospel reading is the account of the transfiguration – where the glory of God and Jesus' divinity are revealed. This episode has been a favourite subject of icons in the Orthodox Christian tradition for centuries. The earliest known example is at St Catherine's Monastery in Sinai and dates from the sixth century. The convention in icons of the transfiguration is to depict Jesus glowing in shining white robes, radiating rays of divine light, with a golden halo. He is accompanied by Moses, who bears a scroll to symbolise the Law of the Old Testament, and Elijah, who represents the prophets and is dressed in animal skin, reminiscent of the prophet of Jesus' coming, John the Baptist. Their presence is said to indicate that Jesus is

the fulfilment of the Law and the prophets.

The three disciples are shown not standing, but fallen to the ground, bowled over by the glory of God. James, with beard, and John, who is beardless, to indicate his youth, turn their eyes away from the dazzling light. Grey-haired Peter, older and perhaps more able to deal with the majesty of the scene, half looks at Jesus and reaches out to him. In Luke, it is Peter who speaks: "It is good for us to be here."

It is clear that to ascend the mountain and witness the glory of Christ is an awe-inspiring, wonderful and unsettling experience.

Lisa is a freelance writer and translator, specialising in history and the arts. 🍷

Mary Sumner

by Lisa Tulfer

Mary Sumner, founder of the Mothers' Union, is commemorated on Wednesday. Lisa Tulfer looks at her life and legacy.

Mary was born in 1828 into a middle-class family, to a mother who took her faith seriously and held mothers' meetings. Mary married an Anglican clergyman, and started leading meetings herself. In 1876, when her own daughter gave birth, inspired by her memories of how difficult she had found motherhood, she set up a group of mothers of all social classes for mutual support

in bringing up their children in the Christian faith.

In 1885 she was invited to speak at a congress in Portsmouth, and women took her ideas back to their own parishes. The movement soon spread to other dioceses; by 1892 there were sixty thousand members in twenty-eight dioceses. The Mothers' Union expanded into the British Empire and beyond, and now there are some four million members in eighty-four countries. Mary's organisation is now a powerful worldwide influencer on issues of gender equality, poverty and community transformation.

www.mothersunion.org 🍷

Silence is golden

Lisa Tulfer *reflects on* 1 Kings 19:9-18 and Matthew 14:22-33

Noisy weather and other disruptive natural phenomena figure largely in today's readings. The Gospel account of Jesus walking on the water and Peter losing his confidence, is a passage which many will remember from Sunday school. When Jesus gets into the boat the wind dies down and peace is restored.

In our Old Testament reading, too, there are dramatic conditions. Elijah, sheltering in a cave, is told that God will be passing by. First, there is a mighty wind, such as the Met Office might describe as "likely to cause structural damage". Next, there is an earthquake. Finally, wildfire sweeps across the countryside. But God is not in any of these noisy manifestations. In the silence which follows, Elijah hears what the King James Bible calls "a still small voice", and this is when God speaks to Elijah.

Again, the human encounter with the divine comes in the context of stillness. At various points in the Gospels we are told that Jesus went off by himself, away from the crowds, to pray. The monastic tradition values extended periods of silence, and Quakers worship largely in silence. This quality of stillness, an absence of noise and drama, can allow a particular consciousness of God. "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:10). 🙏

Eternal God, you meet us in silence, solitude and stillness. Help us in our busy lives and noisy world to make the time and space to find that place of peace, and to listen for your voice. Amen.

National Parks

Eryri

by Jo Jones

Formerly Snowdonia, this national park is now known by its Welsh name, Eryri, meaning "place of the eagles".

My visits here are memorable for a failed attempt to reach the top of Mount Snowdon, as stormy winds blew me sideways; for a delightful steam train trip up through the hills, followed by a disastrous teashop stop, when my then toddlers tipped over drinks; and for a rain-drenched visit to Harlech Castle.

This dramatically stunning area is said to have been saved by erratic weather from mass tourism. Yet the views of the mountains – particularly when they open up through rain clouds and the sun beams through – never fail to make me catch my breath and shut me up, while at the same time opening up new spaces in my mind and heart. The views of the sea from the mountains or the coastal footpaths bring with them the cry of choughs, kittiwakes, and gulls. I am silenced, wrapped in this audiovisual psalm to our God.

<https://snowdonia.gov.wales> 🙏

“You show me the path of life, in your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.”

Psalm 16:11



World Humanitarian Day

by Caroline Hodgson

On 19 August 2003, a bomb attack on the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, Iraq, killed twenty-two humanitarian aid workers. Five years later, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution designating 19 August as World Humanitarian Day (WHD). Each year, WHD brings together partners from across the humanitarian system to advocate for the survival, well-being and dignity of people affected by crises, and for the safety and security of aid workers.

The UN points out that in times of great need or disaster, the first to respond are often those affected themselves, before volunteers and professionals from aid agencies arrive to support the ongoing recovery. WHD shines a light on the work of all those who deliver urgent health care, shelter, food, protection, water and much more. Many are Christians obeying God's called to ease suffering and bring hope in the face of devastation.

On Saturday let's make these brave, compassionate people the focus of our prayer.

www.un.org/en/observances/humanitarian-day 🙏

Far from home



Books of the Old Testament *Ecclesiastes*

by Richard Greatrex

Richard Greatrex takes the baton to continue our book-by-book series about the Old Testament.

Ostensibly, Ecclesiastes lays out the life-knowledge of a post-exilic Jewish sage, known only as "Qoheleth", the "Teacher", and so it sits uneasily alongside Proverbs and Job as wisdom literature. Like them, it attempts to make sense of life based on observation and practical experience, offering a path for successful living.

Qoheleth's opening words are startling and memorable – "Vanity of vanities... All is vanity" – spiking our complacency, before coaxing us through twelve short

chapters of collected and at times contradictory sayings that challenge our preconceptions of work, pleasure and meaningful existence.

Written before the possibility of life after death had formed into Jewish doctrine, Ecclesiastes can be perceived as unremittingly bleak. But Qoheleth is no one-dimensional preacher. He chimes with contemporary concepts of mindfulness when he reminds us "Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil", cautioning us to live in the moment and appreciate the life God has given us.

Richard is a rural rector, writer and artist who lives in Somerset, where he chases dragonflies and steam trains. 🐉

“Prayer is a declaration of dependence upon God.”

Philip Yancey (born 1949), author

Lisa Tulfer *reflects on* Isaiah 56:1. 6-8

Today's reading from Isaiah was written in the context of exile. The people of God, abducted by the occupying Babylonians, struggled to preserve their cultural and religious identity far from home. For them, salvation and deliverance were envisaged as a return to the promised land, a restoration of religious practices and an ongoing right relationship with God.

But if we too are being called by God to "Maintain justice, and do what is right," what form might that take today? And what then might salvation and deliverance look like? We live in a world where, like the Israelites in Babylon, huge numbers of human beings are exiled, driven far from home by war, poverty and geographical

disaster. For them, God's salvation and deliverance might be revealed in opportunities to rebuild their lives, either through returning home or in a new place. In our own society, too, there are exiles, marginalised from the wider culture through intergenerational poverty, who teeter perilously on the edge of survival between benefits, food banks and loan sharks. For them, what might salvation and deliverance look like, beyond enough to get by this week?

This, then, is Isaiah's challenge to us. If we are to be the means by which God's salvation and deliverance are revealed to the world, what then is required of us to maintain justice and do what is right? 🐉

Just and righteous God, help us to recognise your children who are in exile. Show us how to maintain justice and do what is right, that your kingdom may come and your salvation and deliverance be revealed. Amen.

National Parks *The Yorkshire Dales*

by Jo Jones

Jesus spent the days teaching, and each evening he withdrew to the nearby hill (Luke 21:37). National parks were set up near large centres of population and part of their purpose is to provide people with access to the beauty of the countryside. They are there for us withdraw to – to have our minds and bodies swept clean by the winds, refreshed by the views.

I stayed in a stone cottage in the Yorkshire Dales in summer. I went to an eclectic range of concerts, part of the Swaledale Festival, in between walking tracks across the high moors, listening as I went to the bubbling calls of breeding curlews, and the plaintive peewit of plovers. In the valleys my breath was taken away by hay meadows rich in flowers, my heart full as I watched butterflies flit between them.

Heaven on earth and – like God – there for us.

www.yorkshiredales.org.uk 🐉

Being the body of Christ

Lisa Tulfer *reflects on* Romans 12:1-8

Today in the letter to the Romans we are given a clear set of instructions about how we should be in relationship with God and also with one another. Firstly, Paul appeals to us to surrender ourselves completely to God. Unlike in the Temple, where live animals are offered to the deity and then sacrificed, we are told to present our own bodies as a living sacrifice. The bodies we present are made new by the risen Christ. We are to open ourselves up to God's transforming power, and to conform our minds to the will of God, rather than to the values of the world.

The way in which we live out the will of God, however, will vary enormously between individuals. In a lively image, we are compared to a body which has many limbs and organs, each with its own function. Through God's grace we are variously assigned our roles and functions, and equipped with the gifts necessary to carry them out. Crucially, however, we are warned about thinking too highly of ourselves and our particular functions. The body of Christ will only work smoothly if all the limbs and organs are working in balance, fulfilling their purpose without envying the activity of the others.

The challenge to each of us, therefore, is to discern the particular function to which God is calling us. 🍷



Holy God, you call us to offer ourselves to you, and to do your will. Help us to hear your call and to discern your will for us, and give us the gifts we need to live out our calling. Amen.

National Parks

Exmoor

by Jo Jones

I cross the cattle grids and I am in open country. I feel my mind expanding and my heart soaring. Exmoor offers vast spaces and huge skies. Farmed for generations, yet here domestic animals get a chance to live freely. I love the sight of Exmoor ponies or traditional Horn sheep roaming the moors at their own pace. At their own pace is perhaps the key: here we can

walk, cycle or – with my admiration – run, or sit and absorb all that comes to us if we take the time to allow it. Binoculars and a bird book help me spot a rare ring ouzel on a distant rocky scree, a hand lens takes me into the world of the lichen growing at my knee and flourishing in Exmoor's clean air.

As with faith, the more time I take in stillness, the more awe-inspiring is everything that I see.

www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk 🍷

“ **What I kept, I lost. What I spent, I had. What I gave, I have.**”

Persian proverb

Animals of the Bible

The snake

by Caroline Fletcher

There are mixed attitudes towards snakes in biblical writings. Asps and vipers inhabited Israel, so it is unsurprising that snakes were feared because of their bites (Amos 5:18-19). Serpents were often called “fiery”, possibly due to the burning sensation their venom caused (Isaiah 14:29).

However, even the snake in the Garden of Eden is not portrayed completely negatively. The Genesis story

reflects a widespread belief that snakes were clever saying “the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal” (3:1). This idea is also behind Jesus' appeal for his disciples to be “wise as serpents” (Matthew 10:16).

Snakes were associated, too, with healing and immortality. In Numbers 21 many Israelites are bitten by snakes and God tells Moses to hold up a bronze snake so anyone looking upon it may be healed. Later, Jesus likens the lifting up of the bronze snake to his crucifixion, which also brought new life (John 3:14-15). 🍷

Letting off steam



Richard Greatrex *reflects on* Romans 12:9-end

In the early eighteenth century one of the first tracts published by a newly formed Christian charity was "The Baseness and Perniciousness of the Sin of Slandering and Backbiting". Sharp tongues and gossip were a problem then, as they are today. They were certainly an issue that Paul came up against in the first generation of the Church.

Today's reading from Romans splits into two sections: the first (verses 9-12) is concerned with the way believers treat their Christian colleagues, while verses 13-21 focus outwards to the whole of society, especially to those who stand in opposition to the Church. Our English translations muffle the strength of Paul's original phrase in verse 17, when he tells his listeners to "take thought" before speaking or acting in response to the words or deeds of others.

Social media provide an instant outlet for all our frustrations about the behaviour of our peers and it has become almost an automatic reaction to tap out an immediate cutting reply to any perceived slight. Such instantaneous responses have caused the destruction of many a good friendship and the escalation of nascent enmity. Paul's concern goes deeper than the poison spread by vengeance, whether petty or profound, because his whole faith is founded on the cross, the ultimate example of evil being repaid counter-intuitively, with a sacrificial act of goodness. 🙏

Holy God, we pray that we might have the courage and wisdom to hold back from instant judgement and, in the face of evil, to offer to the world lives that mirror your ever-loving goodness. Amen.

Foraging Blackberries

by Caroline Hodgson

Are there blackberries in the hedgerows near you? Your answer will depend largely on which part of the country you live in and what the summer has been like. But in most places, even for city dwellers, there will be some sign of blackberries, either in the form of the ripe deep purple fruit, or the smaller unripe red berry.

It's around this time of year that I start to anticipate the end of summer with a pang of regret. Did I take full advantage of the longer days and warmer weather?

Could I have done more walking / gardening / cycling / outdoor swimming? But when I see the first signs of autumn abundance I'm reminded that each season has its gifts and I say a short prayer of thanksgiving. I know that I'll soon be enjoying jams, crumbles and pies, and that a few berries chucked into my breakfast muesli will turn the milk a lovely velvety rich purple – that cheers me up on the bleakest autumn morning!

Always forage safely and sustainably. For more information go to www.nationaltrust.org.uk and www.woodlandtrust.org.uk 🙏

“ I sought to hear the voice of God and climbed the topmost steeple, but God declared ‘Go down again – I dwell among the people.’ ”

John Henry Newman (1801-1890), Roman Catholic cardinal, theologian and poet

National Parks

Loch Lomond and the Trossachs

by Jo Jones

I have not visited this National Park, north of Glasgow – a typical failure to appreciate what is in my own country, when I have travelled extensively in Europe. But looking at photos on the internet I am inspired, wondering if I am fit enough to climb Ben Lomond.

What I do know, however, is that mountains are extremely important for our world. They

supply food and clean energy, and sixty to eighty per cent of the world's fresh water. They cover around twenty-two per cent of the earth's land surface and are home to thirteen per cent of the world's population. They look majestic, yet their fragile ecosystems are under threat from climate change, land degradation and over-exploitation.

In the Bible, mountaintops are "thin" places, where God is met and heard. I think they continue to remind us what matters in life. www.lochlomond-trossachs.org 🙏

What we wear

Richard Greatrex *reflects on* Romans 13:8-end

What we wear can express so much about our personalities – our role, social status, values, aspirations, freedoms, beliefs. As embodied creatures, our identity is, rightly or wrongly, invested in and conveyed by our appearance. So Paul's strikingly powerful image in today's epistle, inviting us to "put on" Christ like a garment, ignites something very tangible in our imaginations. We all know the dramatic effect clothing can have upon us; our attire affects not only our physical bearing, posture and breathing, but also our image of ourselves and therefore how we interact with others. Paul understands that by clothing ourselves in Christ's love we actively define and illuminate our identity in Christ – a timeless, rooted, spiritual identity – being empowered from the outside when our inner resources alone prove insufficient.

The "outward vesture" (of prayer, scripture reading, worship) draws out our inner soulfulness, and the more we cultivate and practise the art of "putting on" Christ, the more we will grow into Christ's likeness and transform our way of being present in the world. When clergy who wear vestments prepare for worship, they accompany the putting on of each item – alb, stole, chasuble – with a special prayer relating to that particular part of the body.

May we similarly use our imaginations to dress ourselves in Christ's majesty and vulnerability, becoming more equipped to serve as disciples appropriately fashioned in Christ's own image. 🍀



Lord Jesus Christ, equip us to live as you lived, open to the needs of others as well as the promptings and urgings of your Spirit, that we might keep growing into the people you created us to be. Amen.

Foraging

Crab apples

by Caroline Hodgson

There are several theories about the origin of the name, one being that it derives from "crabbed", referring to its bitter taste. The small apples ripen from late summer into autumn, turning orange-red or yellow-green. But even the green varieties make the most incredible, sunset-coloured jelly. I've made plenty of crab apple jelly but I confess I've never tasted the raw fruit. What a wonderful metaphor that is, though – that something so

bitter-tasting is transformed into something so sweet.

You've probably guessed where I'm going with this – but it's not only a metaphor for the bitterness of crucifixion becoming the sweetness of resurrection. Every unpalatable moment in life, no matter how bad the taste, has within it the potential to transform into something delicious and sweet. Really understanding and living that is fundamental to faith.

Always forage safely and sustainably. For more information go to www.nationaltrust.org.uk and www.woodlandtrust.org.uk 🍀

Holy Cross Day

by Caroline Hodgson

Holy Cross Day, sometimes called Exaltation of the Holy Cross, is celebrated in various Christian traditions on September 14. In Eastern churches the feast dates back to the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in around 335 AD. It was adopted by the Roman Catholic Church in the seventh century and is also observed in various other traditions, including Anglicanism and Lutheranism.

Tradition has it that the true cross was discovered in Jerusalem in 326 AD by St Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was then built at the site of the discovery, using a portion of the cross.

As the universal symbol of the Christian faith, the cross represents Jesus' victory over death. The feast celebrates the redemptive transformation of an instrument of torture into a divine "tree of life", that brings hope to humankind. 🍀

“It is easier to know God than our own soul, for God is nearer than that.”

Julian of Norwich (c. 1343-1416), English mystic and anchoress

Being a whole body



Living Lord, we give thanks for the rich diversity of the Christian faith. We pray that we might grow in unity and understanding with all your faithful people. Amen.

Richard Greatrex *reflects on* Romans 14:1-12

Members of communities, especially religious ones, have a natural tendency to disagree. In today's epistle Paul is addressing just such a situation which has arisen among the Roman Christians. He categorises them as two distinct groups – the “weak”, who tend towards a narrow view of everyday religious practice, and the “strong”, who hold a broader position. The weak take a black-and-white stance, the strong prefer shades of grey. However, Paul judges neither over the other, insisting that a good motive – honouring God – can lead to a variety of responses and that, within certain boundaries, each is equally valid.

The crux of the passage comes in verses 7-9, when Paul reminds his readers that there is no such creature as an individual Christian; we are all part of the whole body. Our entire life, and death, is dedicated to the Lord, and if we are “the Lord’s” then we are part of a body that includes both the living and the dead, a cloud of witnesses encompassing the past, present and future.

As members of the Lord’s community each one of us is ultimately accountable to God. Judging one another is both unnecessary and detrimental to the life of the whole body. Instead we are encouraged to place our faithful diversity under God’s scrutiny and, if we read on to verse 19, to “pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life”. 🙏

Books of the Old Testament

Part 22 – Song of Songs

by Richard Greatrex

The last of the Wisdom texts, the Song of Songs, is a conundrum: like the book of Esther it doesn't mention God by name and, although often titled the Song of Solomon, its language dates from the third to fourth century BC, while Solomon reigned in the tenth. It is the Bible's only love poem, a dialogue between two lovers. She is high-born; he a handsome young shepherd. Her words dominate – this is one of the few occasions in the Bible where we hear a woman's perspective

directly. But both lovers are uninhibited, sensual in their expressions of love, admiration for each other's physical beauty, frustration over separation and the bliss of union.

For Jewish interpreters it is an allegory of God's love for Israel, while for Christians it represents either Christ's love for the Church, or God's relationship with the individual soul. Whether read as an allegory of the soul's yearning for God, or simply a celebration of human love, the Song of Songs offers insights into the vulnerability and vitality of physical, emotional and spiritual relationships. 🙏

“Grace is love that cares and stoops and rescues.”

John Stott (1921-2011), cleric and theologian

Foraging Funghi

by Caroline Hodgson

It goes without saying that any funghi-hunter needs to really know what they are doing. Happily for would-be foragers, organisations like the National Trust and the Woodland Trust organise guide-led walks around this time of year, where you can learn what to look for, what to avoid and how to forage sustainably and responsibly. I now know enough to recognise a few funghi, and I love it. It turns an autumn walk into a treasure hunt, reminding me of

the verse from Matthew 3:44: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field...”

After an early-morning dog walk I love coming home to a foraged fry-up breakfast, or cooking up a wild garlic pasta for supper, with vivid purple amethyst deceivers and succulent bay boletes.

If you say grace before meals, it makes it all the more meaningful to thank God for something you have found and picked yourself.

Always forage safely and sustainably. For more information go to www.nationaltrust.org.uk and www.woodlandtrust.org.uk 🙏

The anger of Jonah

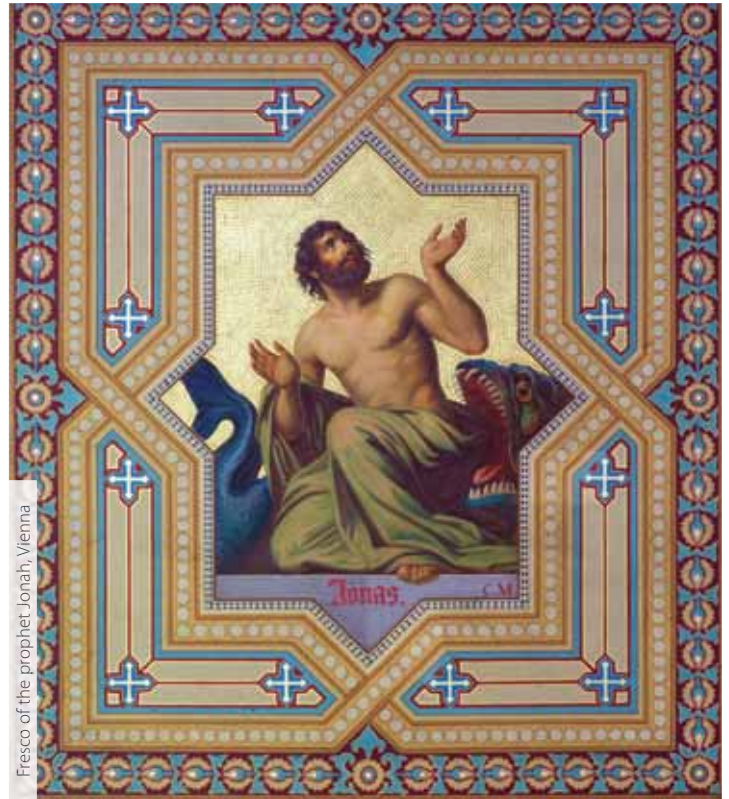
Richard Greatrex *reflects on* Jonah 3:10 – end of 4

Jonah's underlying anger becomes explicit in this passage. He doesn't want the city of Nineveh, the traditional enemy of Jerusalem, to be saved. He initially runs away from God's command to prophesy, before reluctantly journeying into the city from the suburbs and mumbling that Nineveh will be overthrown. But the people listen; they discern what he hasn't told them – that repentance of their wickedness might halt God's judgement – they stop, are publicly sorry, and God relents.

This ignites Jonah's anger, and for the first time he gives his reasons for fleeing to Tarshish (4:1-2). Verse 5 mentions Jonah sitting down twice, an elaborately sulky

gesture of defiance. Even though he knows that the city will not now be destroyed he is going to cussedly sit there until it is. When the scant protection provided by his hastily constructed booth is augmented by the dappled cooling shade that God's miraculously growing plant offers, Jonah feels vindicated. But when that plant dies and a scorching east wind renders his booth useless, his anger boils over. God turns Jonah's own fury back on him. If he can get so passionate about the fate of a single living thing – an ephemeral plant – then he must understand God's concern for an entire city full of life.

The way of the godly is to be slow to anger and quick to bless. 🍷



Fresco of the prophet Jonah, Vienna

Living Lord, we pray that at times when anger threatens to overwhelm us, we might learn to sit back and rest in the shade of your loving mercy. Amen.

Foraging

The elder

by Caroline Hodgson

In the book of Daniel (4:12), King Nebuchadnezzar tells Daniel his dream about a tree: "Its foliage was beautiful, its fruit abundant, and it provided food for all." Elderflowers provide nectar for a variety of insects, while moth caterpillars feed on the foliage. In late summer the lacy flowers turn into deep black-red vitamin-rich berries, which sustain birds and small mammals through the autumn months. People use both flowers

and berries for wine, of course, while the berries can be used for natural dyes and have a whole host of culinary uses, including cordials, wine and jam.

This unassuming tree, which we often take for granted and which thrives in woodland, hedgerows, on scrubland and wasteland, turns out to be an immensely rich source of sustenance for a whole range of creatures.

For more information on safe and responsible foraging, go to www.nationaltrust.org.uk and www.woodlandtrust.org.uk 🍷

Angels

Part I – St Michael and All Angels

by Trevor Dennis

This coming week contains the feast of St Michael and All Angels. Michael is best known for his 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. How we long 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.

Trevor retired in 2010 from his post at Chester Cathedral and now helps out at his local parish church, as well as attending the Chester Quaker Meeting. 🍷

“We are closest to God in the darkness, stumbling along blindly.”

Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2007), American writer

A new heart and spirit



Richard Greatrex *reflects on* Ezekiel 18:1-4. 25-end

Ezekiel is prophet to the Jewish nation in exile, but these exiles have become stuck in their thinking. They have taken God's words in Exodus 20:5 at face value – that if one generation displeases God then that displeasure will be meted out on their descendants and their descendants' descendants. The illustration about the sour grapes turns this into an excuse – it is futile for this generation to attempt to please the Lord, because God will continue to punish them for ancestral mistakes. All that is wrong is perceived as the fault of former generations.

In the missing section of our reading, especially verses 5-20, Ezekiel disputes this logic. Each generation is responsible for its own exploits. The wars of our grandparents' and parents' generations may have set up certain global political tensions, but that is no excuse for us not to work for a better future. The prophet closes by reinforcing his argument that each individual is responsible for their own actions. No matter what has gone before, the consequence of sinful behaviour is that we are cut off from God, and the consequence of righteous behaviour is that we are restored to God. Ezekiel urges his hearers to choose life, turn away from sin and actively pursue a new heart and spirit, because God wants us all to live fully but responsibly. 🙏

Holy God, we thank you for giving us the freedom to choose to do your will. Renew our hearts with your gracious Spirit, that we might take our place as your children, working to build your kingdom. Amen.

Angels

Part II – the Garden of Eden

by Trevor Dennis

There are no angels in the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden. There is no need of any, for God puffs life into Adam and shapes Eve through mysterious surgery; the divine footsteps can be heard, and prayer is as natural as conversation. This is the being-with-God that we dream of. We dream of it, but for the most part we do not experience it. God

seems more remote, harder to hear, and prayer does not always come naturally. The Genesis story says so itself, for by the end Adam and Eve find themselves outside God's garden, and that is where we are, too. So we need go-betweens, angels ascending and descending, as they did for Jacob when he lay down to sleep at Bethel. Down-to-earth angels will do – people, music, animals or birds, that set us on a ladder leading to heaven.

We all have our angels. Thank God for them! 🙏

“When He plans to plant a garden, He starts in the desert.”

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

Grandparents' Day

by Caroline Hodgson

Happy Grandparents' Day! Grandparents come in all shapes and sizes – young and old, those we may not have had a chance to meet, those we are related to, and older people who just inspire and encourage us. Grandparents' Day is promoted by Age UK and aims to encourage people to celebrate grandparents. It's also an opportunity to highlight the needs of older people, who may be affected by loneliness, the crisis in care and a whole range of other issues.

But for all the challenges that grandparents and older people might face, there is plenty to celebrate. Everyone is a grandchild in one way or another, and you can get involved no matter what your own circumstances. So why not celebrate Grandparents' Day by giving a bit of thought, reflection and prayer to the generations that have gone before you? And there's no better way to celebrate Grandparents' Day than by committing to do one thing this coming week, no matter how small, to improve the life of a grandparent or older person. 🙏

Connecting faith and daily life

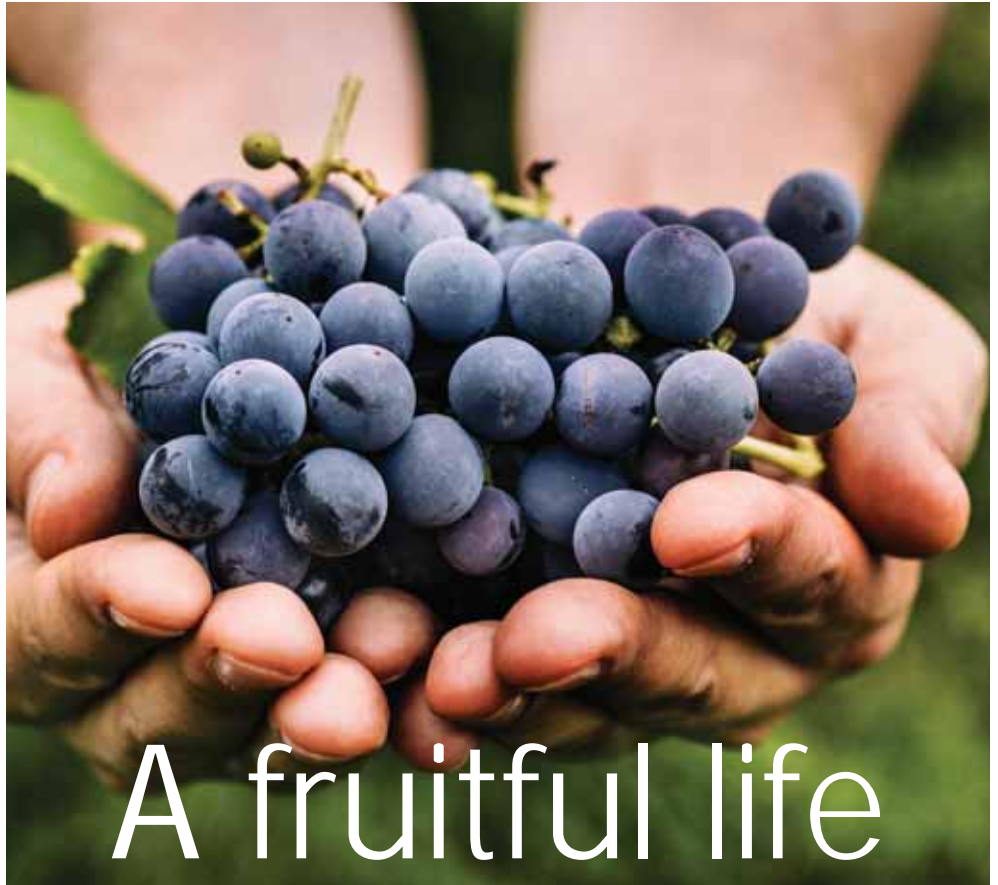
Becky Mynett *reflects on* Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-end

The chief priests and Pharisees were really angered by the time Jesus got to the end of the parable in today's Gospel. We are told that they realised that Jesus was speaking about them. It started innocently enough. Jesus began by describing the vineyard in much the same way that Isaiah had. There is no doubt that his listeners would have recognised the reference to God's anger and sense of betrayal when Israel did not behave justly.

They had heard it all before, of course. In Isaiah's story the vines spontaneously produce wild grapes instead of cultivated ones. In Jesus' story the vineyard produces good fruit, but it is left in the charge of tenants who not only want to keep the produce for themselves, but to take absolute control of the vineyard.

Many of the priests and Pharisees were probably landowners themselves. They knew only too well what they would do if their tenants behaved like that. And they would realise that Jesus was talking about the way they controlled the Temple, colluded with the Romans in oppressing the people, and used their position to further their own ends.

Jesus tells them they are not fit to rule and will be replaced by people who will produce the fruit of the kingdom. People who will prioritise justice and compassion for those who are oppressed, rather than their own self-interest. 🍷



A fruitful life

Lord God, help us to be good custodians of your kingdom – to work always for justice for the oppressed, to care for those in any kind of need and to listen attentively to your word, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

Finding God on the smallholding

by Jeni Parsons

If there is a heavy dew when I go to check the sheep early in the morning I can see their tracks on the grass telling me where they've been overnight. There's a word in Welsh, "cynefin", which is about familiar paths, the homely feeling of being on the path where you

belong in the landscape, rooted by relationship and history, that fits this early morning experience for me. There's no adequate English translation but I experience what I think it means both in the sheep field and in my sinking into my local Welsh community and in that relationship I have with God here. I follow the sheep paths, seeing where they've stood to eat a particularly tasty weed or where they've lain down and there's no dew at all just a soft hollow in the green. Such rootedness is a slow process, but it leads to abundant life. 🍷

“God sees hearts as we see faces.”

George Herbert (1593-1633), poet, preacher and priest

Angels

Part III – the annunciation

by Trevor Dennis

The most famous angel in the Bible is Gabriel. It's partly because we know what to call him – most of the angels in the Bible are just angels – but mostly, of course, because of Luke's wonderful story of his meeting with Mary. Christmas is still some way off, but when it comes remember that Mary's annunciation is not the only one in the Bible. The first annunciation is in Genesis

16 and begins as an encounter between Hagar and "the angel of the Lord". That messenger is referred to as an angel, but actually turns out to be God, for Hagar "sees" God, and even gives God a name.

Fancy that! Hagar is the first person in the Bible to "see" God, the only one to give God a new name – and she a slave and a foreigner. That says something about God, don't you think? Sometimes we don't need angels. 🍷

Everything is ready – please come



Lord our King, we thank you for your abundant love and generosity to all people. Make us worthy of that love and help us to love our neighbour as ourselves, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Becky Mynett *reflects on* Matthew 22:1-14

In today's Gospel Jesus tells the Temple authorities a parable. He is critical of the way they run things, but he has a message for us too. According to Kenneth Bailey, an expert on the Middle East, it is not only traditional for the host of a banquet to send out invitations some time before the event, so that they know how much food to prepare, but on the day itself to send a message: "Everything is ready – please come."

In Jesus' parable, the guests – who have already accepted the invitation – snub the host and murder the messengers. Jesus portrays the leaders of Israel, whose ancestors made a covenant with God, as the guests. The king's slaves are the prophets that God sends to remind Israel of their promises and to show them a vision of God's kingdom. But the prophets are ignored or even murdered. Now God has had enough. In the parable, the king destroys the murderers and burns their city (a troubling verse that probably refers to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70). God then opens the kingdom to whoever will come.

But this comes with a warning. While we are all admitted to the kingdom, we must still reflect its values or, like the man who is inappropriately dressed, we may find that we are not chosen after all. 🍷

Books of the Old Testament

Part 23 – Isaiah

by Richard Greatrex

Richard Greatrex continues our book-by-book series about the Bible.

Isaiah is the first of a fifteen-book collection of the later prophets. It spans from the late eighth century BC, when Assyria was ascendant, through Babylonian control into Persian rule. It poses scholars questions regarding its formation. Some insist that it is derived from an eighth-century Jerusalem prophet to Kings Ahaz and Hezekiah. Others detect the hand of two authors or editors, while a few even see three. However, although specific themes and styles dominate each section,

many of these are discernible throughout.

In Isaiah God is known as the Holy One of Israel, the Lord who will judge and restore Zion. The prophet insists that the political and religious Jerusalem elites carry a profound ethical responsibility for all those they govern; matters of social justice are high on his agenda. Jesus, who cites Isaiah eight times, also places social justice at the heart of his mission.

Isaiah became so important for Christians that it was known as the Gospel in the Old Testament, teaching vital lessons about faithfulness, service, inclusiveness and social justice as essential elements of a God-centred life. 🍷

“ I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 3:14

Creatures of the Bible

The locust

by Caroline Fletcher

Locusts are only around seven centimetres long, but have always been feared. Even today, they inflict devastation: billions of locusts have recently destroyed Madagascan crops, for instance.

The Bible vividly conveys why they terrify people. One of Moses' plagues brought so many locusts to Egypt that they turned the land black and consumed every single plant (Exodus 10:15). Proverbs describes young locusts marching "in rank", for

they advance like a hostile army devouring everything in their path (30:27). Adult locusts have wings and Revelation likens the noise of flying swarms to "the sound of many chariots" (9:9). In flight, though, they are at the mercy of the wind: the Egyptian plague ended when the swarm was blown into the sea (Exodus 10:19).

The Gospels say that John the Baptist ate locusts (Mark 1:6). Some think this means locust beans, but it is entirely feasible that John snacked on these insects. Indeed, many enjoy eating them today. 🍷

Money, money, money



Becky Mynett *reflects on* Matthew 22:15-22

In today's Gospel Jesus' enemies ask, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" This was a hot topic at the time and they probably thought that it was the perfect trick question. No doubt they expected Jesus to answer no – which would have got him into trouble with the Roman

authorities. It was a win-win for them, so they thought, because if he answered yes, Jesus would lose the support of the crowds, who resented the tax in question.

Jesus saw through their plan and asked them to show him the coin used to pay the tax. Very devout Jews, such as the

Pharisees, wouldn't want to touch such coins, because they were blasphemously inscribed with the emperor's title, which declared him to be divine. The crowds would have recognised that they were hypocrites for showing him the coin.

So why are they amazed by Jesus' answer? Well, he rather deftly avoids their trap by refusing to answer yes or no. The Romans

cannot object to people being told to give the emperor "the things that are the emperor's". But those in the crowd who object to paying taxes to the oppressive regime of a blasphemous emperor are happy too, because Jesus goes on to say that we should give to God "the things that are God's". Since everything in creation is God's, nothing is the emperor's. ☺

Sovereign Lord, help us to remember that all things come from you. May we use our material resources to further your kingdom and purpose for the world, and always seek to live according to your will. Amen.

The Bible through the week

by Jane Williams

Starting with a six-week series, from time to time we will be looking at the readings for the coming week, from Monday to Saturday.

In this week's readings from Romans, Paul tackles the vexed question of sin. For him, sin is not primarily about individual wrongdoing, but flows from the fact that the world is out of tune with its maker.

Paul's description of the internal battle between right and wrong is

as true today as ever (Romans 7:19-20). He traces this lack of freedom to be ourselves back to Adam's "original" sin (5:12). Our only hope of freedom and life is in the saving action of God in Christ Jesus.

Some of Paul's opponents clearly felt he was encouraging Christians not to mind about sin, since we can't do anything about it for ourselves. But that is not at all the conclusion that Paul draws, as 6:19-23 makes clear. We do have a choice about whether we will be enslaved by sin or "enslaved to God" (6:22). ☺

“You will pray to him, and he will hear you.”

Job 22:27

United Nations Day

A symbol of hope for global unity

by Caroline Hodgson

On Tuesday, United Nations Day marks the anniversary of the UN Charter coming into force in 1945. UN Day, celebrated every year on 24 October, offers the opportunity to highlight the common agenda of the UN member states and to reaffirm the purposes and principles that have guided the UN for seventy-eight years.

The organisation's website claims no other global

organisation has the legitimacy, power and impact of the United Nations. We also read that, "No other global organisation gives hope to so many people for a better world and can deliver the future we want."

Those last words are key – "the future we want". What does that future look like for us? On Tuesday, let's make that the focus of our prayers, and pray that humanity, through the work of organisations like the UN, at last comes together to work towards the kingdom of God. ☺

The golden rule



Lord our King, may we return your great love for us by showing love to others, especially those whose views or lifestyle are different from ours, who are difficult to get along with, or who are marginalised in society. Amen.

Finding God on the smallholding

by Jeni Parsons

Often I'm asked which is my favourite animal or bird on our smallholding, and I usually give a very quick answer that depends on what I'm doing at the time. Watching a pig eat a tomato and get pips in its eyebrows and juice all over its face and front legs

is magic – you can't be gloomy after that! Sheep smell lovely and want to rub their faces on your trousers and nibble the cords of your waterproof coat. Poultry are inquisitive and want to join in with whatever you're doing, including standing in a freshly dug hole where you thought you'd plant a tree. It's so hard to make a choice!

But then why do I have to make a choice? Instead I can rejoice in their differences, handle the awkward times with patience and love them to bits – a bit like God in All Saints' and All Souls' tide. 🍷

“Our love to God is measured by our everyday fellowship with others and the love it displays.”

Andrew Murray (1828-1917), South African writer, teacher and pastor

Becky Mynett *reflects on* Matthew 22:34-end

Today's Gospel reading includes what has become known as the golden rule: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." This principle is found in all major world religions and is widely subscribed to by many people who have no religious faith. Jesus says that this saying (which is part of today's Old Testament reading from Leviticus) is the second great commandment. The first comes from Deuteronomy: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is an exemplary answer. The Pharisees, who were known – and respected – for their adherence to the law and for their zeal for the coming of God's kingdom,

could not possibly find fault with it. But they have misunderstood the nature of the kingdom of God. They were hoping for the rule of a king descended from the great King David, who would overthrow Israel's enemies once and for all. They believed that by following the law and avoiding anything or anyone that would make them unclean, they were submitting to God's kingship. But the Gospel is more radical than that. The Messiah is not merely a king, and belonging to the kingdom is not dependent on following the law or avoiding unclean and sinful people. They, and we, need both to love God and to love our neighbours (including the sinful ones) as ourselves. 🍷

The Bible through the week

by Richard Greatrex

Continuing our look at the Bible readings for the coming week, from Monday to Saturday.

Monday's Gospel (Luke 13:10-17) shows Jesus healing a woman who has been bent double for eighteen years. In Friday's reading (Luke 14:1-6) he heals a man with dropsy and, knowing that the lawyers and Pharisees are watching his every move, he meets them head on. Surely it is compassionate on any day of the week, he says, to rescue a child or an animal from

drowning, or to set someone free from a crippling illness? That stumps them.

That's not to argue with any of the Ten Commandments. It's sensible and magnanimous that time for rest and recuperation should be enshrined in the Law. But a compassionate deed should never be confused with work. When compassion becomes a chore, when our busy schedules don't allow us time to turn our attention to those in need of healing, it's time to ask God to reset our compassion button, and remind us of the joy to be found in reaching out to help others. 🍷