

Lent 2021



From the scriptures,
across the ocean,
through a pandemic,
into Lent and the new life of Easter.

Meditations from Members & Friends of

St. Barnabas

Pimlico

The Church of the Holy Trinity

Manhattan

St. Stephen's, Rochester Row

Westminster

Welcome to the fourth edition of our Lent booklet. This year, in addition to our link parish team of St. Stephens, Westminster and Holy Trinity, Manhattan, we delighted to be joined by St. Stephen's neighbouring church and friends from St Barnabas, Pimlico. We look forward to this expanded community of reflection and fellowship as we get to know one another, ourselves, and God, this season of Lent.

Some of us remember well those early days of the pandemic, when we first joined one another's Zoom links or Facebook live streams in order to worship and pray together. We have urged each other on and grow stronger in faith and fellowship, thanks to the comforting patters of Daily Prayer and worship on the Sabbath. There have been times when one city might be in lockdown, but we drew encouragement knowing that our sister parish elsewhere might still be open, or be open in new ways. We continue to learn from one another, to be strengthened, and to laugh. And then laugh some more.

Perhaps now, more than ever, is the time when we should be reading and looking at our Hebrew Scriptures, to reflect on what it might be saying to us in this peculiar time; maybe to even examine some of those awkward passages we would rather skip over or ignore. Please take time to create an appropriate space in your homes or work for prayer and reflection, and carefully read through the piece of Old Testament Scripture set for the day - maybe even beyond. Take a few moments of silence before you read and pray the reflection offered to us by one of our community. Perhaps you might like to conclude by praying the Ash Wednesday Collect below.

And can we take this opportunity to thank you to all who have contributed and help put this publication together for our spiritual journey through Lent.

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may receive from you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

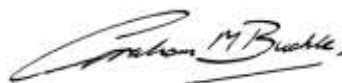
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Ash Wednesday 17 February- Isaiah 2.1–2,12–17

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
2 a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.
12 Yet even now, says the Lord,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
13 rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the Lord, your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
 and relents from punishing.
14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain-offering and a drink-offering
 for the Lord, your God?
15 Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
16 gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
 and the bride her canopy.
17 Between the vestibule and the altar
 let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.

Let them say, 'Spare your people, O Lord,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
"Where is their God?" '

Reflection

Should we be afraid? Should we be scared of God, scared of the day of darkness and gloom? Scared of the great and powerful army that should come? Is that what Lent is about – the fear of God provoking us into ever greater attempts to atone by denying ourselves, by giving up the things we enjoy in order to appease him? No. Lent is a season grounded in hope, that looks forward at all times to the events of Good Friday and of Easter. It is a season in which we set aside time to consider our relationship with God, and try to strengthen it. We may look at our lives and see how we have elevated things to the status of God, turning our faces towards those idols and away from him, and seek to redress that balance. We may spend time in our different ways saying sorry to God, asking for his forgiveness for the sins that separate us from Him and from each other, but we should do so out of love, not out of fear. For, as Isaiah tells us, the Lord our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Isaiah's call to all people, no matter where they are and what they are doing, to come and spend time in God's presence is a call to all of us this Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we are traditionally signed with the sign of the cross on our foreheads – an expression of repentance for what we have done wrong, but also the sign of our certain hope that those sins will be forgiven by the Cross of Jesus Christ. 'Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart. 'May you know the love of God, and the promise of his forgiveness, ever more clearly this Lent.

Rev. Helena Bickley-Percival, St Stephen's, Curate

Thursday, 18 February - Deuteronomy 30.15–end (CHT)

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 20 loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Reflection

My immediate reaction to this reading was one of resistance. The message seemed to be "if you and your family want things to go well for you in life, you have to obey this long list of rules." We all know of people who follow the rules and who still struggle in life and people who don't who do well. But after rereading this passage in context in an old KJV Bible, it clicked – the main message is the importance of loving God above other gods, not all the rules. It reminded me of advice my pastor in Maryland gave when I asked him whether it would be in keeping with Christian practice to accept an offer of a much better job – he said that it was fine for people to improve their standard of living as long as they don't turn the pursuit of material things into a god, but instead use good fortune as a means to follow in the ways of God.

Carol Haley, Holy Trinity (Retired Health Policy Administrator and Biologist)

Friday, 19 February -Isaiah 58.1–9a

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

2 Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practised righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.

3 'Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.

4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

Reflection

As I read this psalm, the first thing that jumped out at me were verses 6-8. These words could have been written today as these same injustices exist. As then there are those having to flee their country to seek refuge elsewhere for example.

To me Isaiah's fundamental message is that God is more concerned in the way we treat other people than in religious observances such as fasting. Within our parish there are rough sleepers, vulnerably housed, disadvantaged. All lives matter and through caring for each other, sharing our

food with the hungry and looking after people who are homeless and hungry. God tells his people that if they do that, he would always be with them to protect them.

To conclude if the above were applied the difference it would make to all people's lives.

Irene Wood, St Stephen's Church (Volunteer at the Second Half Club)

Saturday, 20 February - Isaiah 58.9b–end

9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
10 if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
11 The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.
13 If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honourable;
if you honour it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;
14 then you shall take delight in the Lord,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Reflection

We probably all need help on occasion, in one form or another. Many of us will relate to “the pointing of the finger”. We may have accused, condemned or gossiped about someone, or perhaps we have experienced being on the receiving end. From either side, the feelings that these actions engender can be burdensome and leave us with a heavy weight to bear. God can help to relieve us of this baggage.

We can trust that God listens to us when we ask him for help. He will hear and respond to our prayers; when we lean on him he will support us and lift the burdens that overwhelm us.

Freed, unencumbered and trusting in God, we can open our hearts and be generous to all, in word and deed. Loving others and living in the warmth of God's love nourishes us and gives us all that we need to flourish, grow and be renewed.

The message to live kindly and unselfishly, be true to God and be strengthened by his love, is as relevant and helpful today as it was then.

Ann Townshend, St Barnabas Church (former headteacher of St Barnabas parish school)

Sunday, 21 February (First Sunday of Lent) - Genesis 9.8–17 (John B)

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ 12 God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ 17 God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

Reflection

The bow – rainbow – is a sign of the covenant. A sign of hope. A sign of promise. A thing of beauty.



To me, rainbows are a sign of hope that things DO and WILL get better after rough spots. I love them, and how they show up in literature as signs of hope, peace, comfort, and just plain happiness. I love them when they appear in the sky.

Who could not love a rainbow?

I love poetry. In the “The Creation Poem” from *God’s Trombones* by James Weldon Johnson, the author explains *why* God created. (Just in case you were wondering.) Out of chaos, God creates the universe: the sun, the moon, the planets, the stars, the and all of the creatures that walk the earth. At one point in the poem: “the rainbow appeared, and curled itself around His shoulder!”

To me, the Universe is giving thanks for being created by hugging God with a rainbow.

How cool is that? Being hugged by a rainbow!

The ballad, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” in the movie *The Wizard of Oz* is an expression of hope, belief that there are better times ahead. Yes, life is tough. Yes, a life-changing storm is ahead, but over the rainbow life is better.

“Rainbow Breathing” is a practice of relaxation for anxious children and adults.

A rainbow is a gift from God through Mother Nature. It is an experience, and it only appears after a storm (metaphor: rough time). I love to point out rainbows following a rainstorm. If the sun is shining, and the rain hasn't quite stopped, I will go look for the rainbow. The rainbow is there, even if I can't see it. (Just as we cannot always see the rainbow, the covenant – the promise of God – it IS there.) A rainbow is a reminder to all of us to have faith that better things will come. Often, I find it while I am standing on a corner. In New York City, you can get the best panorama standing on a corner. Because I am in New York City, I can point to the rainbow, and direct the vision to passersby. You can see anything in New York City. Even rainbows! Even God! God keeps God's promises. It is part of the covenant. It's the Rainbow.

Erlinda Brent, Holy Trinity (Parish Secretary & Community Activist)

Monday, 22 February - Leviticus 19.1–2, 11–18

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: **2** Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. **11** You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. **12** And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. **13** You shall not defraud your neighbour; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning. **14** You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

15 You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour. **16** You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour: I am the Lord. **17** You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. **18** You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.

Reflection

The law in scripture which is also found in Exodus 20 against lying, cheating, stealing, taking the name of the Lord in vain by swearing to false God's, injustice, slandering other people, etc are rules that we are taught in our homes from infancy to adulthood. They are not only taught in religious homes but non religious and pagan homes ye, it is amazing how often we fail over and over again. In our relationships, workplaces and business, these virtues are not only taught but expected.

In giving these commands, God begins by saying "be holy for I the Lord your God am holy" (Vs 1 & 2) He also follows each command by reminding us of who he is by saying "I am the Lord, perhaps also as a way to remind us that it is not Moses speaking but God. Have you ever wondered why though gave this command, many still think the only way through life is to do the things God says we should not do. Through the ages, children have always lied to their parents, workers cheat their employers, businessmen deceive their partners, while injustice stares at us in every sphere of life and we appear unable to do anything about it. As children of God we slander our fellow church members. Many of us would know of someone in a parish or diocese that this has happened to and as we have seen, it took the pandemic for us to show love to our neighbours by shopping and talking more as well as showing many other acts of kindness.

As we go through the lent period in this continuing pandemic, it is time to reflect again on God's word to us and the purpose; these commands are to form and shape our lives. On our own, we are unable to keep these commands but our God who is holy, distinct and set apart is able to enable us keep these commands.

Prayer: Thank you that you remind us you are a holy God and you want us to be Holy. Please help us to be obedient to these laws so that through the lives we live, we will be a testimony to our God whose promise in Exodus 34 is I am the Lord God who is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin -----". Amen.

Comfort Fearon, St Stephen's Church (PCC Member)

Tuesday, 23 February (Polycarp of Smyrna, c.155) - Wisdom 5.15–20

15 But the righteous live for ever,
and their reward is with the Lord;
the Most High takes care of them.
16 Therefore they will receive a glorious crown
and a beautiful diadem from the hand of the Lord,
because with his right hand he will cover them,
and with his arm he will shield them.
17 The Lord will take his zeal as his whole armour,
and will arm all creation to repel his enemies;
18 he will put on righteousness as a breastplate,
and wear impartial justice as a helmet;
19 he will take holiness as an invincible shield,
20 and sharpen stern wrath for a sword,
and creation will join with him to fight against his frenzied foes.

Reflection

The definition of the word 'polycarp' is 'fruitful' or 'rich in fruit'. This leap of thought took me back over 30 years to a period in my life where I was at art college and producing vast numbers of textile and organic sculptures – a series of which were called, 'polycarp forms' – growths emerging from the ground.

We are formed in the womb, grow, develop and are fruitful or fruit filled in myriad ways. Maybe we are shielded or shielding. We all wear armour of some kind or other. Every living thing has an outer layer, a protective covering, something that preserves the flesh hidden beneath. At times we will feel, or have felt, invincible. At other times we may have re-treated, and sought additional protection or even hidden from the world. Hiding our true selves from others or even from ourselves, but never from God. For God always takes care, if we but allow him to enter beneath our outer shells.

John Pearson-Hicks, parish priest – St Barnabas Pimlico



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Form I, 1989

Wednesday, 24 February - Jonah 3 (CHT)

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' 3So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' 5And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

7Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.' 10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Reflection

Doom. Eat, drink & be merry? Run for the hills, every man for himself? Shoot or shame the messenger? Find a scapegoat! A loophole! A bribe! OR (Who knows!) maybe don't quit before the miracle. Maybe as in Ninevah and 12-Step fellow-ships: Band together, in healthy guilt, busboy to king. Admit & amend our faults; clean up our acts & egos; lead from our hearts.

Like Jonah, (Ch 4), I don't like changes; would rather be dead than embarrassed or wrong (a thinker can avoid error OR seek truth, per Wm. James). I've been given gifts, then looked for rewards. Toxic fear, shame and pride shrink God and turn me, clueless, to stone. Better to stay open. Work. Trust (don't play) God. Not take myself so seriously. Listen to Johnny Mercer! Watch --stem to stern -- Inauguration 2021. Laugh at The Russians Are Coming! .. (1966). God's infinite mercy moves, unstrained. Divine.

Virginia Lambert, Holy Trinity (Member & Community Volunteer)

Thursday, 25 February - Esther 14.1–5, 12–14

Then Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord. 2She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair. 3She prayed to the Lord God of Israel, and said: 'O my Lord, you only are our king; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, 4for my danger is in my hand. 5Ever since I was born I have heard in the tribe of my family that you, O Lord, took Israel out of all the nations, and our ancestors from among all their forebears, for an everlasting inheritance, and that you did for them all that you promised. 12Remember, O Lord; make yourself known in this time of our affliction, and give me courage, O King of the gods and Master of all dominion! 13Put eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion, and turn his heart to hate the man who is fighting against us, so that there may be an end of him and those who agree with him. 14But save us by your hand, and help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, O Lord.

Reflection

There are two versions of the book of Esther, with and without Greek additions which were discovered later. This passage is from one of the additions. The better-known (pre-addition) original version is famous as the only book in the Bible that does not mention God. Esther, a Jewish orphan (whose religion is not openly known) is chosen from a large harem to be Queen, and goes on to risk her life in petitioning the King to prevent a slaughter of the Jewish people in Persia. Her strategy was successful and she saved her people.

One young woman

Little known

Much mystery

Chosen

A product or a victim of her time?

Astute with a wisdom and
courage beyond her years
And eloquence to match
She has learned
 When to speak
 When not to speak
 And how to speak
 For maximum effect.

A brain as sharp
As her body is beautiful
A woman without authority
Who yet understands
 Her power
 Her position
 Her potential.

A woman who embraces destiny
With faith in what is right
And so she uses
 Not just her gifts
 But her circumstances
 To save her people.

So she intercedes
 Not knowing if she will succeed
 Willing, if it must be
 To lay down her life for others.

A woman
 Little known
 Yet familiar
 Chosen
Resonant with one
We know
 All
 Too
 Well.

We should know her better
For she may not speak of God,
 But like that other,
 She shows us God
 With her life.

As we know History
 So we should know
 Her story:
 Esther
 Christa.

Rev Lindsay Meader, St Stephen's Church (Chaplain to the Theatre Chaplaincy UK)

Friday, 26 February - Ezekiel 18.21–28 (CHT)

21 But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. 22 None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. 23 Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? 24 But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die. 25 Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? 26 When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. 27 Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. 28 Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die.

Reflection

Oh, Sentinel Ezekiel, who ate the honeyed scroll,
We read of your days of siege and suffering.
We read of our shame, our disgrace,
How you grasped the burning coals from the wheelwork
so stone hearts might turn to flesh.
We read how you dug through our walls in warning,
how wickedness had warped our way to the Lord!
We give thanks to you, Prophet Ezekiel, for sharing your visions.
We give thanks to God for offering us,
the remnant of the House of Israel,
another undeserved chance through your book.
Yes, God is merciful. God is eternally faithful to our covenant,
even when we were not.
Brother Ezekiel, you are saying that we are individuals
in the eyes of God; you are saying that the sins of our parents,
our tribes, our nations are not our burden forever
and we may lay them down. Thanks be to God for this.
We may still be granted life eternal if we can obey.
Even the worst of sinners who repent are rewarded like all the other saints.
Dear Ezekiel, you told us that we musn't judge the fairness of God's compassion.
This we can do. This I can do on my own.
"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor your ways, my ways, says the Lord."

(Isaiah 55:8)

Later new lessons will expand on your essential truth.
Prodigal sons, hired workers—in another time, another place! Amen.

Ashley Malmfeldt Shepherd, Holy Trinity (Artist & Volunteer)

Saturday, 27 February (George Herbert, 1633) - Malachi 2.5–7

5My covenant with him was a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. 6True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. 7For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.

Reflection

Malachi says that priests are messengers of God. George Herbert was a priest in the village of Bemerton near Salisbury for the last three years of his short life. He was also a poet. I always treasure the following poem, one of his most well-known. I have had a primrose calming growing on my balcony since before Christmas, and it always reminds me of the continuing promise of God's love.

THE FLOWER

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! ev'n as the flow'rs in Spring,
To which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring;
Grief melts away
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

Liz Witts, St Stephen's Church (Poet & Long-term Member at St. Stephen's)

Sunday, 28 February (Second Sunday of Lent) - Genesis 17.1–7,15,16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. 2And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' 3Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. 15 God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'

Reflection

I always have a wry smile when hearing or reading some of the ages of the characters in the Old Testament. Adam dying at the age of 930, Noah building the ark at the young age of 550 and Moses looking on to promised land at the ripe age of 120 and today's patriarch is of no exception. We hear of a 'name changing event' for Abram - A promise of a lasting covenant between him and God, at the age of...99! Well there's hope for us yet! But this is not just restricted to Abraham, for we also hear that his wife, Sarai, is to be included. She likewise has her name changed to Sarah, with the alarming promise, that, from her will rise both peoples and nations. It's little wonder that we read, a few verses later, of Sarah laughing her head off; For this is both an alarming and ludicrous prospect for one at so tender age.

What immediately strikes me when reading this passage, is we are never too old to do God's work, or indeed to be channels for God's missional intentions. And whilst we may think that the real work is done by the professional, eloquent young educated 'men' (sic), the evidence in scripture,

however, often appears to be quite the opposite. Perhaps during this lent, we should create the space and time to reassess and examine our own baptismal covenant with God. To see the miraculous events that have made, formed and fashioned us. And perhaps we might pray that we might rededicate our lives to God's service:

*I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.'*

The Methodist Covenant Prayer

Graham M Buckle - Vicar of St Stephen's Church

Monday, 1 March (David of Wales, c.601) - Ecclesiasticus 15.1–6

- Whoever fears the Lord will do this,
and whoever holds to the law will obtain wisdom.
- 2 She will come to meet him like a mother,
and like a young bride she will welcome him.
- 3 She will feed him with the bread of learning,
and give him the water of wisdom to drink.
- 4 He will lean on her and not fall,
and he will rely on her and not be put to shame.
- 5 She will exalt him above his neighbours,
and will open his mouth in the midst of the assembly.
- 6 He will find gladness and a crown of rejoicing,
and will inherit an everlasting name.

Reflection

The restrictions and difficulties that the world continues to endure in these times of the pandemic have inevitably produced a global re-assessment of life's fundamental values and needs. On 1st March we commemorate St David, underneath whom the ground was miraculously raised whilst he preached to a gathered crowd, 1500 years ago. This is a dramatic image for a man who led a famously ascetic and basic life and whose spiritual legacy can be summed up with his simple instructions "be joyful, keep the faith and do the little things". David, it seems, would have coped better than most in a lockdown, focusing as he did on the straightforward and unfussy sides of life. In the 12th century he was canonised and recognised as the patron saint of his country of birth, Wales. Today's lesson, from Ecclesiasticus, resonates enormously with David's life and legacy: a

(literally) exalted orator, but a humble man whose words were filled with wisdom and learning. We have lots to learn from him all these years later – especially at the moment - and, if you are not familiar with his story, it is well worth looking up.

My short poem, written for today, reflects certain associations with Wales (a certain well-known hymn, for instance...) but aims to remind us of David's life and his legacy within this context.

Be here dragons breathing fire, stalking this ancient land
Where the anthracite that powered the globe was hewn by Celtic hand
Where once in a bay with tiger's blood the waters raged and rushed
Before the mines and steelworks calmed and the hills and valleys were hushed?
This country blessed with native saint, who rouses, uplifts and inspires
And animates its famous bards and moves its manifold choirs
A humble figure, exalted for neighbours, gathered for his oration
On a hilltop summoned by God above supplying elevation
David, Dewi, Dyfed-born, from tempest wild and turmoil
Whose words and works and way of life suffused his people's soil
Miracle-worker, preacher of wisdom with simple observance of love
Symbolised and immortalised by the Holy Spirit's dove
With bread of heaven and bread of learning, nourish and restore
As your people pray with hope and yearning, to feed them evermore
Your life your nation takes to its heart, inspired and touched it sings
To strive for joy, to keep the faith and do the little things

Dr Kevin Walsh, St Stephen's Church (Teacher at Westminster School)

Tuesday, 2 March (Chad, 672) - Ecclesiasticus 3.17–24

- 17 My child, perform your tasks with humility;
then you will be loved by those whom God accepts.
- 18 The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself;
so you will find favour in the sight of the Lord.
- 20 For great is the might of the Lord;
but by the humble he is glorified.
- 21 Neither seek what is too difficult for you,
nor investigate what is beyond your power.
- 22 Reflect upon what you have been commanded,
for what is hidden is not your concern.
- 23 Do not meddle in matters that are beyond you,
for more than you can understand has been shown to you.
- 24 For their conceit has led many astray,
and wrong opinion has impaired their judgement.

Reflection

The Collect - Chad, Bishop of Lichfield, Missionary
Almighty God,
from the first fruits of the English nation who turned to Christ,
you called your servant Chad
to be an evangelist and bishop of his own people:
give us grace so to follow his peaceable nature,
humble spirit and prayerful life,

that we may truly commend to others
the faith which we ourselves profess;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Extracts from A Seventeenth-century Nun's Prayer

Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself that I am growing older and will some day be old. Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from the craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody; helpful not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom it seems a pity not to use it all, but Thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end.
Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details; give me wings to get to the point...

I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growing humility and a lessening cocksureness when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken...

Deborah Cassidi asked people from all walks of life to choose a favourite prayer or write one for her compilation 'Favourite Prayers' (1998). I thought, when I read her prayer, how much I would have enjoyed meeting this nun. She came to mind as I reflected on St Chad's life and on the verses written by Ben Sira. With thanks to Richard & Elaine for the book, and for their endless kindness and encouragement.

Julia Redfern, member of the St Barnabas Bible Study group

Wednesday, 3 March - Jeremiah 18.18–20 (CHT)

18 Then they said, 'Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah—for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us bring charges against him, and let us not heed any of his words.'

19 Give heed to me, O Lord,
and listen to what my adversaries say!

20 Is evil a recompense for good?
Yet they have dug a pit for my life.
Remember how I stood before you
to speak good for them,

Reflection

What makes Jeremiah so relatable to me is his humanity. He complains (as he's doing in this passage), he questions, he laments, he curses the day he was born...he even wishes ill will upon his enemies. And God remains patient with him...Jeremiah's not perfect. Most of the biblical characters are not, which is such a relief to me.

What make Jeremiah so inspirational is that he keeps going, despite how bad things get, and despite how much he endures. He ultimately keeps his faith. Maybe that's what God wants most from us. It's easier to keep faith when times are good; it's doing so when times are bad that's truly difficult. At one point, God asks Jeremiah "If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?"

This past year has felt like a horse race in many ways.

Joe Lipuma, Holy Trinity (Vestry Member & HTNC Board Member)

Thursday, 4 March - Jeremiah 17.5–10

5 Thus says the Lord:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.

6 They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

7 Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

8 They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

9 The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?

10 I the Lord test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.

Reflection

What is the passion that ignites your heart, or you treasure the most, your loved one, job promotion, or renovating a beautiful home that provides comfort, status and security? What if that you held most dear was taken away? Working in the mental health field, I have seen a lot of breakdowns. For the homeless nation of Israel, God tested their faith in their attachment to the land. Abraham trusted God in leaving his homeland, but disobedience added 40 years travelling time to the Promised Land and repeated exile into foreign lands. We need to embrace the love of God in Christ Jesus, as the treasure beyond which nothing can compare and to put our trust in Him. Trust involves risk, uncertainty and the way of the cross is not an easy path, but we have the blessed assurance of God's abiding presence throughout all adversity. Picture yourself as a Poplar Tree with branches raised to heaven, giving praise and glory to God in all seasons. Poplar trees are known for their strong roots anchoring your heart, soul and being firmly in Christ, as you draw from the stream of Living Waters of the Holy Spirit that flows into the River of Life.

Christina Loughran, St Barnabas Pimlico

Friday, 5 March 2021 - Genesis 37.3–4, 12–13, 17–28 (CHT)

3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.' He answered, 'Here I am.' 17 The man said, 'They have gone away, for I heard them say, "Let us go to Dothan."' So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. 18 They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits;

then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.’ 21But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, ‘Let us not take his life.’ 22Reuben said to them, ‘Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him’—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. 23So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 25 Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26Then Judah said to his brothers, ‘What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.’ And his brothers agreed. 28When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

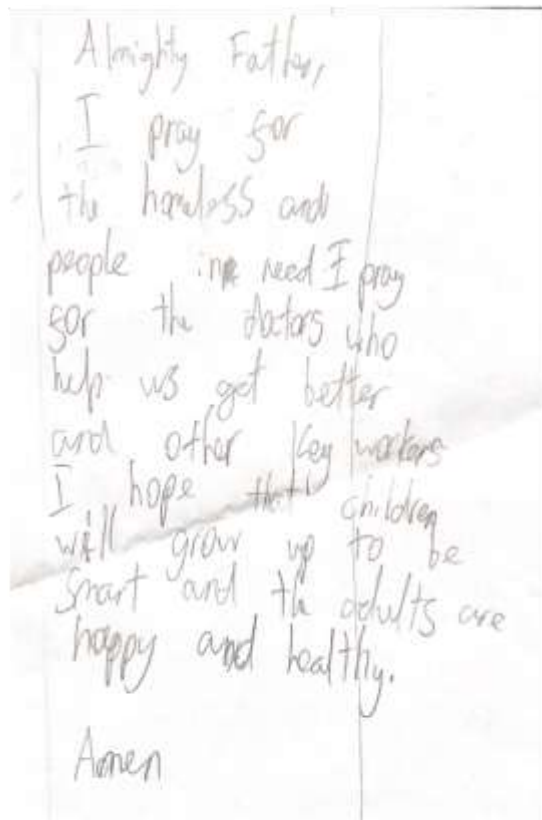
Reflection

Joseph’s brothers resented him for being loved by his father, Jacob. Whether it was the gift of a robe, or something else that finally put the brothers over the edge, everything came to a head at a place named for its two wells, where Joseph found his brothers tending sheep. In what proceeded, I’m struck by the utter contempt that Joseph’s brothers seemed to have for him, even as they talked themselves out of killing him in favor of selling him for a profit. When Reuben spoke up in dissent against the injustice he was witnessing, no one else had the courage to say, “Hey, this is wrong, and it needs to stop.” I wonder how that might connect to what happens (or doesn’t happen) today when we notice someone else speaking out against injustice. May we listen for the Reubens around us and add our voices to theirs.

Paul Chernick, Holy Trinity (Secretary of Vestry)

Saturday, 6 March 2021 - Micah 7.14–15, 18–20

14 Shepherd your people with your staff,
the flock that belongs to you,
which lives alone in a forest
in the midst of a garden land;
let them feed in Bashan and Gilead
as in the days of old.
15 As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt,
show us marvellous things.
18 Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over the transgression
of the remnant of your possession?
He does not retain his anger for ever,
because he delights in showing clemency.
19 He will again have compassion upon us;
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.
20 You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our ancestors
from the days of old.



Amelia & Isabelle, St Stephen's Church (Members of our Junior Church)

Sunday, 7 March (Third Sunday of Lent) - Exodus 20.1–17

Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

3 you shall have no other gods before me.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 For six days you shall labour and do all your work.

10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

12 Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

13 You shall not murder.

14 You shall not commit adultery.

15 You shall not steal.

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

17 You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Reflection

The Ten Commandments are a list of rules, so this passage is all about rules. Not just any rules, these ones are given to us directly by God. Rules make me feel uncomfortable, for a start I never like being told what to do (especially when there's zero consultation). It's like with lockdown at the moment (I had to get it in!): there's a list of rules and restrictions. I know that they're important, but they are annoying and constrain what I want to do. I would rather other people changed rather than me.

This is what I take from reflection on the commandments. God does not, can not and will never change but the change *must* be in me and this change comes in the light of the sacrifice of God's only begotten son Jesus Christ. The commandments then become not a list of rules but a mutual, loving and living contract. They become the bedrock of my relationship with God, whose love is immutable and boundless. These rules become promises and through them I am freed from constraints and restrictions and, far from being uncomfortable, are in fact a comfort and a joy.

Selwyn Leamy, Artist, Church Warden, St Barnabas Pimlico

Monday, 8 March (Edward King, 1910; Felix, 647; Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, 1929) - Ezekiel 34.11–16 (CHT)

11 For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. 14I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Reflection

During the Babylonian Exile, the Prophet Ezekiel speaks of God searching for his scattered sheep, the strays, the lost, the injured, to bring them back to their homeland which will once again flow with abundance.

Ezekiel's words lull us into a blissful tranquility of joy and happiness. Yet, the tone changes when we read that God will feed the fat and the strong [think wicked] "with justice." God's love demands righteousness and justice from his creatures. As I read this, I thought "Yikes, which group will I be in, the good or the fat?" (I am a bit overweight!)

Unsure, I read further, finding my answer in Ezekiel 33:10-20. Here God "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that...[they] turn from their wickedness and live." Turning from "sin and [doing] what is lawful and right...none of the sins...shall be remembered against them." Our God is both just and merciful.

Lent in the time of pandemic, as we remain at home with our lives slowed, gives us extra space for the self-examination and reflection to which we are called during this Holy Season. Time to assess our deeds, good and bad, and to turn to our Creator with repentance and joy, knowing that he is indeed a good shepherd, "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...forgiving iniquity." (Exodus 34:6) So after many months when true gratitude has often been hard to muster, let us relish this extra time and this solitude. Let us be grateful!

Helen Goodkin, Holy Trinity (Member & Bible Teacher)

Tuesday, 9 March - Song of the Three 2, 11–20

2 Then Azariah stood still in the fire and prayed aloud:
11 For your name's sake do not give us up for ever,
and do not annul your covenant.
12 Do not withdraw your mercy from us,
for the sake of Abraham your beloved
and for the sake of your servant Isaac
and Israel your holy one,
13 to whom you promised
to multiply their descendants like the stars of heaven
and like the sand on the shore of the sea.
14 For we, O Lord, have become fewer than any other nation,
and are brought low this day in all the world because of our sins.
15 In our day we have no ruler, or prophet, or leader,
no burnt-offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense,
no place to make an offering before you and to find mercy.
16 Yet with a contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted,
17 as though it were with burnt-offerings of rams and bulls,
or with tens of thousands of fat lambs;
such may our sacrifice be in your sight today,
and may we unreservedly follow you,
for no shame will come to those who trust in you.
18 And now with all our heart we follow you;
we fear you and seek your presence.
19 Do not put us to shame,
but deal with us in your patience
and in your abundant mercy.
20 Deliver us in accordance with your marvellous works,
and bring glory to your name, O Lord.

Reflection

As for all for whom making live music is the *raison d'être*, last year was on the face of it disastrous for the Civil Service Choir. We cancelled our Holy Week concert with only three weeks' notice and our main summer and autumn concerts followed soon after. In all we would have had over 20 performances large and small in 2020. All gone.

However, out of these despairing times I have sustained a hope that we shall come out the other side and that it is worth persevering. Instead of seeing the year as a disaster, in some respects it was remarkably successful. We have produced four virtual recordings so far and within guidelines a few of us met for real and sang in St Stephen's for All Souls and for our own carol service. The carol service was viewed by 770 people and overall our virtual outputs have been viewed over 16,000 times. Operating virtually is not sustainable and the choir and I are desperate to return to real activities as soon as these are practicable and safe but undoubtedly there will be longer term benefits from having to adapt, not least in widening participation and our audiences through technology.

Pleni sunt caeli from Ola Gjeilo's Sunrise Mass sung by members of the Virtual Civil Service Choir: https://youtu.be/vRa_xs45dZM with brief footage from the choir's live performance in 2019.

Stephen Hall, St Stephen's Church (Music Director of the Civil Service Choir)

Wednesday, 10 March - Deuteronomy 4.1, 5–9 (CHT)

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 5 See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. 6 You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' 7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? 8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? 9 But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

Reflection

Moses called the people to hear and obey the rules of conduct that God had given them to observe. Successful conquest and full enjoyment of life in the Land was based on submission to God's law. Moses keeps reminding them that their eternal life and their well-being on this earth is dependent upon total obedience to the LORD. The statutes and the judgements are for all of the people. Moses will teach them before they enter the Promised Land, because he will not go into the Promised Land with them. They must go in and possess the land of promise. They must obey God.

The one thing that set Israel aside, was the fact that God had entrusted them with His law.

Israel's obedience to God's law would provide a testimony to the world that God was near to His people and that His laws were righteous. One purpose of the law was to make Israel morally and spiritually unique among all the nations and, therefore draw those nations to the true and living God. They were from their beginnings to be a witness nation. The law and statutes God had given Israel was not just to please God, but to cause Israel to live uprightly.

Deuteronomy stresses the responsibility of parents to pass on their experiences with God and the knowledge they have gained from Him to their children. This law is not just for this generation, but for all the generations to come. They must walk in the knowledge God had entrusted them with. They were to keep themselves holy before the LORD. We are all warned to gird up our mind. Sin begins in the heart and mind of men. Sin is the transgression of the law. Sin brings death. They must live by the law that God gave them. We Christians, must walk in our salvation that we have received. It is important to stay in the Christian walk, after you receive your salvation.

The Book of Deuteronomy restates God's love for Israel, the history of His provision for them, the benefits or blessings of walking in covenant with God, and the consequences for disobeying the stipulations of the covenant. Christians today live in a New Covenant relationship with God, based on the blood of Christ, a covenant written on the heart rather than on tables of stone.

Lydia Colón, Holy Trinity (Member of Vestry and HTNC Board)

Thursday, 11 March - Jeremiah 7.23–28

23 But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.' 24 Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels, and looked backwards rather than forwards. 25 From the day that your ancestors came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; 26 yet they did not listen to me, or pay attention, but they stiffened their necks. They did worse than their ancestors did. 27 So you shall speak all these words to them, but

they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. 28 You shall say to them: This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

Reflection

This is a reading that really speaks to me as a teenager. I feel it is a call to make sure your voice is heard – to speak your truth loudly so that you cannot be denied. I liked how Jeremiah talked about being persistent and how people need to keep trying to be heard. It is hard to keep speaking up when people aren't listening and it can be easy to feel cast aside and not listened to, which is hurtful. As a teenager, I know the feeling of having to shout to feel heard. I think it is important for everyone to make sure that they share their ideas and that they also take the time to listen to other people's ideas. The world is built of new thoughts – we need to be open to them. Our minds are like parachutes – they work best when they are open.

Nell Bates – aged 13, St Barnabas Pimlico

Friday, 12 March - Hosea 14

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.

2 Take words with you
and return to the Lord;
say to him,

'Take away all guilt;
accept that which is good,
and we will offer
the fruit of our lips.

3 Assyria shall not save us;
we will not ride upon horses;
we will say no more, "Our God",
to the work of our hands.

In you the orphan finds mercy.'

4 I will heal their disloyalty;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them.

5 I will be like the dew to Israel;
he shall blossom like the lily,
he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon.

6 His shoots shall spread out;
his beauty shall be like the olive tree,
and his fragrance like that of Lebanon.

7 They shall again live beneath my shadow,
they shall flourish as a garden;
they shall blossom like the vine,
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

8 O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?
It is I who answer and look after you.

I am like an evergreen cypress;
your faithfulness comes from me.

9 Those who are wise understand these things;
those who are discerning know them.
For the ways of the Lord are right,
and the upright walk in them,
but transgressors stumble in them.

Reflection

Below is a photograph of part of our art installation - the stones have been painted by Year 5 & 6 children, depicting images of "growth as we emerge from this pandemic" with each child illustrating on a natural river stone, an image of what they are most looking forward to doing once we have our freedom back.

The images are:

Dove - Peace and Freedom

Beach Scene - visiting friends and relatives abroad

Bowling Pins - going out - to indoor venues

Park Scene - Playing with friends - no restrictions on numbers

Heart - Love and care for others

Grandparent - Giving and Receiving a Hug!

These are all linked to the verse from the Old Testament passage we were given: *"They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine"*



Yvonne Barnett, St Stephen's Church (Head Teacher at Burdett Coutts Primary School)

Saturday, 13 March - Hosea 5.15–6.6 (CHT)

15 I will return again to my place
until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face.
In their distress they will beg my favour:
6 'Come, let us return to the Lord;
for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us;
he has struck down, and he will bind us up.
2 After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
3 Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,
like the spring rains that water the earth.'
4 What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes away early.
5 Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets,
I have killed them by the words of my mouth,
and my judgement goes forth as the light.

6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.

Reflection

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the relationship between God and Israel is a covenant, an agreement between God and God's people that carries obligations on both sides. God will be their God and they will be God's people. God promises protection and salvation. Israel is to remain faithful to God's commandments.

Israel repeatedly violates the covenant through unfaithfulness, idolatry, adultery, and a multitude of other sins. In anger, God threatens to send the people back to Egypt, and to discipline them with pain and suffering even to death. However, God's words of wrath against Israel are not God's final word. God continually beckons Israel to come back, to be restored, and to finally enjoy the fullness of God's promises of enduring love and salvation.

The story of the relationship between Hosea and Gomer is symbolic of the relationship between God and Israel. Gomer is guilty of adultery, yet God instructs Hosea to take Gomer as his wife. No stubborn infidelity on her part will erase Hosea's love, commitment, and promise of his fidelity to Gomer. No matter how unfaithful Gomer is, Hosea keeps his promises and repeatedly calls her to return to him and to enter a new life of love and fidelity.

Our Baptismal Promises are our covenant between God and us through Jesus. God promises new life. We promise to love and serve God and others as ourselves. Yet, we, too, give in to the temptations of idolatry, adultery, and a multitude of other sins.

Lent is a time of the year to reflect, repent, and to be restored to new life with God in Christ. As Hosea did not abandon Gomer, and God did not abandon Israel, God will not abandon us. God who is full of compassion and mercy continually calls us to return with all our hearts.

Rev. Margaret Tuttle, Holy Trinity (Chaplain at the Hospital for Special Surgery)

Sunday, 14 March (Fourth Sunday of Lent) - Numbers 21.4–9 (John B)

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' 6Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. 8And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' 9So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Reflection

The story about Moses and the serpents can at first sound like that "Old Testament" god that so many people want to avoid. The Gospel for today, John 3:14-21, suggests the story has meaning in light of the healing power of the Cross of Christ, which is also lifted up for all to see.

One of my favorite interpretations of the serpent story comes not from a preacher, but a painter, in Cristóbal de Villalpando's altarpiece for the Puebla Cathedral in Mexico. Some of us had the delight of seeing it up close a few years ago when the Metropolitan Museum of Art restored and showed it, before returning it to Mexico.

Villalpando pairs the story of Moses and the serpents not with the crucifixion, but with the Transfiguration of Jesus, the story we heard on the last Sunday just before Lent.

For me, it seems like Villalpando is suggesting that just as in the Transfiguration, the disciples look through a cloud of fear and confusion and see Jesus as the Son of God whose way of love is to be followed. The power of God's transforming love can bring new life out of any painful situation, disease, plague, or even a pandemic.

The cross represents the victory of life over death, and life over all the little deaths we encounter. With faith, God brings us through any difficulty, even if we have to step on a few snakes along the way.

John Beddingfield, Rector of Holy Trinity

Monday, 15 March - Isaiah 65.17–21

- 17 For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
- 18 But be glad and rejoice for ever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
- 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.
- 20 No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
- 21 They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

Reflection

This reading makes me think of the pandemic, because it is talking about new beginnings and making the world a better place and right now we are stuck in a dismal time but we are all hoping for a better future. We are all feeling that we are a bit stuck in lockdown and it is hard not playing with our friends and going to school the way we usually do. But this reading promises that God is going to hear our worries and help us out when we are feeling down. It is hard to remember a time when we didn't need to wear our masks and stay at home, but soon we will have a new start. Just like in the reading, we will get to eat the fruit of all of our hard work during lock down, which means we will get back to normal. I (Alfie) am looking forward to playing football with my friends again, and I (Imogen) can't wait to hug my friends again and see my grandparents as well.

Alfie and Imogen Bates – aged 9 years, St Barnabas Pimlico



Artwork: Cristóbal de Villalpando, *Moses and the Brazen Serpent and the Transfiguration of Jesus*, 1683.

Tuesday, 16 March - Ezekiel 47.1–9, 12

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple towards the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. ²Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside to the outer gate that faces towards the east; and the water was coming out on the south side. ³Going on eastwards with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. ⁴Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. ⁵Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. ⁶He said to me, 'Mortal, have you seen this?' Then he led me back along the bank of the river. ⁷As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on one side and on the other. ⁸He said to me, 'This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. ⁹Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. ¹²On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.'

Reflection

As we read it, we interpret the river to be a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. Flowing from the temple: something that is easier to walk with, rather than try to cross and walk away from.

At this juncture, it could represent our own Christian faith and the way faith manifests in our lives. We feel supported in our journey, with Christ moving beside us, sometimes even pushing us along and keeping us with his flow. Things have happened in our lives that are too unusual to explain: for instance meeting each other; or finding St Stephen's on moving to the parish. For many reasons, we find life easier to walk with Christ rather than not.

In the daily decisions we make we try to have a Christian attitude and outlook. As the river of our lives continues, those around us hopefully benefit. Equally, as they bear fruit around us, we can be stimulated and nourished by them, rather than our lives stagnate. As the river flows with us, around us, and between us, hopefully a betterment of life can evolve in us and around everyone we whom we interact.

Rob & Nick Davies, St Stephen's Church (Congregants & Local Doctors)

Wednesday, 17 March (Patrick of Ireland, c.460) - Deuteronomy 32.1–9 (CHT)

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;
let the earth hear the words of my mouth.
² May my teaching drop like the rain,
my speech condense like the dew;
like gentle rain on grass,
like showers on new growth.
³ For I will proclaim the name of the Lord;
ascribe greatness to our God!
⁴ The Rock, his work is perfect,
and all his ways are just.
A faithful God, without deceit,

just and upright is he;
5 yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him,
a perverse and crooked generation.
6 Do you thus repay the Lord,
O foolish and senseless people?
Is not he your father, who created you,
who made you and established you?
7 Remember the days of old,
consider the years long past;
ask your father, and he will inform you;
your elders, and they will tell you.
8 When the Most High apportioned the nations,
when he divided humankind,
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples
according to the number of the gods;
9 the Lord's own portion was his people,
Jacob his allotted share.

Reflection

This passage opens with an eloquent plea for help. Help speaking and teaching in a way that will be welcomed, listened to, inspirational and transformational for those who hear it. Exactly what I pray for every time I teach a yoga class. The above exaltation of God is also deeply familiar from church and from the mat--yoga is prayer done with one's body. I'd like to say that to me the "degenerate children" mentioned are the students who dare to talk during class...but that's not the case! We all err, forgetting about God, following our own desires and worse. But we return to the Lord just the way we return to our yoga practice: rejoicing that both are always there for us, that we belong, allowing ourselves to be filled with hope and astonished at the gifts we receive.

Liz Poole, Holy Trinity (Usher Coordinator, HTNC Board member, Yoga Teacher, advertising consultant)

Thursday, 18 March (Cyril of Jerusalem, 386) - Exodus 32.7-14

7 The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 8they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ' 9The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.' 11 But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, 'O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. 13Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever." ' 14And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Reflection

"You shall have no other Gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them". But the Israelites became impatient. Instead of worshipping the God who brought them out of Egypt, the people turned to a god of their own making, that of a golden calf. We see a human reaction from God – someone who displays wrath and threatens revenge. Moses argues with God reminding him of his own promises, particularly to remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel to whom he promised multiple descendants and the land for them, a land flowing with milk and honey.

God's response to Moses tells us much about being faithful. He chose not to destroy his people because of his covenant faithfulness. It also shows us how the free will of humans which can cause suffering and grief may also challenge God himself at times and despite his initial reaction displaying anger, God chooses to embrace the relationship with his people and to love them unconditionally.

It demonstrates that regardless of the thanklessness of God's people, God is willing to forgive and to give them another chance. Let us draw comfort from the times when we fail God and know that his mercy and compassion are always there for us, and let it lead us closer to God.

Fiona Andrews, St Saviour's, Pimlico and St Barnabas, Pimlico

Friday, 19 March (Joseph of Nazareth) - 2 Samuel 7.4–16

4 But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: 5Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?' 8Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. 12When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. 14I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. 15But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

Reflection

What kind of world do you want to build?

King David wanted to build a permanent home for the ark of God, one as splendid as his own new palace. But God reveals to the prophet Nathan that rather than David building a house for God, God will build David a house - a dynasty - that will reign for ever.

In my working life I am fortunate to encounter architects who are great visionaries. We know when we walk in to a glorious building because we can feel it. These spaces are always more than the sum of their parts - more than what is seen.

How often, like David, do we jump to conclusions about the world we want to build, based on what we see from the windows of our own palaces?

How much more glorious the world can be if we allow God to broaden our perspective.

Phillip Dawson, St Stephen's Church (Ordinand at St Augustine's College)



Church of Light by Tadao Ando: © https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Light

Saturday, 20 March (Cuthbert, 687) - Isaiah 52:7-10

⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.
⁹ Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
¹⁰ The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Reflection

I have always loved this passage. It immediately invokes in me memories of Christmas listening to Handel's *Messiah*, but it has always left me with a question: why feet? Surely, if a messenger is bringing good news you might talk about the beauty of their voice, or their words, and to a lot of people feet are a distinctly unappealing body part. It was when singing the hymn *For the Beauty of the Earth* that it really clicked. That which does God's work is beautiful.

God calls us all, in different ways, to use our different gifts to do his work. If you are good with your hands, and use them to help people, or to produce something beautiful, you have beautiful hands. If you use your voice to spread God's word, or bring a word of comfort or healing, you have a beautiful voice. It is not about the world's understanding of what is beautiful – you may go through life thinking you are not beautiful at all – but our creator's understanding of how He has made you. This messenger, who has come to deliver good news, has come from the mountains. A long, difficult and dusty journey. Their feet are probably tired and hot and dirty. It is no wonder that washing feet has such significance in the Bible when you consider how hard peoples' feet had to work! And yet, despite the state the messenger's feet are actually in, they are beautiful, because they are doing God's work. Whatever your gifts, or your talents, or what you actually look like, you are beautiful when you answer God's call.

Rev. Helena Bickley-Percival, St Stephen's, Curate

Sunday, 21 March (Fifth Sunday of Lent: Passiontide) - Jeremiah 31.31–34

31 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Reflection

I often mention today during our services that we change gear liturgically; That there is a shift in both mood and emphasis - Passiontide begins and our attention is directed to the cross and passion of our Lord. This changed in emphasis is also reflected in our Hebrew Scripture today. Jeremiah, often portrayed as the prophet of 'doom and gloom', has spent previous thirty-two chapters condemning the people to their plight of exile and misery. But here, in today's reading, our prophet shifts his attention to a more positive time that awaits the people. A covenant shall be made with the factious nations. But what is unique here, is that the prophet Jeremiah suggests this will not be one written down like some princely edict, but will be written upon their hearts...this covenant is relational. For God and the forgiven people are to be in a relationship with one another. This covenant is to take them to a place and relationship with God.

The Cross which Jesus bears for us, enables us to enter into a relationship. It may not unfold as we might wish or hoped. But the outcome is the same, if we but see it - a covenant of redemption. I hope and trust you journey well through this season of Passiontide. The end is in sight, and like the Israelites, there will be moments of doom, gloom and exile...but may our eyes be firmly fixed upon the cross during these coming two weeks...

The Society of St Francis has a lovely tradition of Cross prayers, perhaps you might like to make it yours too this week:

CROSS PRAYERS

Having in mind Saint Francis' devotion to the passion of Christ
and looking upon the figure of the Crucified, with arms outstretched,
let us pray to the Lord.

(A short silence may be observed with arms outstretched looking at a cross)

Most High and glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of our hearts
and give us a true faith, a certain hope
and a perfect love.
Give us a sense of the divine
and knowledge of yourself,
so that we may do everything
in fulfilment of your holy will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

May the life-giving cross
be the source of all our joy and peace. Amen.

Graham M Buckle - Vicar of St Stephen's Church

Monday, 22 March - Susannah 1–9, 15–17, 19–30, 33–62 (CHT)

1 There was a man living in Babylon whose name was Joakim. 2 He married the daughter of Hilkiah, named Susanna, a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord. 3 Her parents were righteous, and had trained their daughter according to the law of Moses. 4 Joakim was very rich, and had a fine garden adjoining his house; the Jews used to come to him because he was the most honoured of them all. 5 That year two elders from the people were appointed as judges. Concerning them the Lord had said: 'Wickedness came forth from Babylon, from elders who were judges, who were supposed to govern the people.' 6 These men were frequently at Joakim's house, and all who had a case to be tried came to them there. 7 When the people left at noon, Susanna would go into her husband's garden to walk. 8 Every day the two elders used to see her, going in and walking about, and they began to lust for her. 9 They suppressed their consciences and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering their duty to administer justice.

15 Once, while they were watching for an opportune day, she went in as before with only two maids, and wished to bathe in the garden, for it was a hot day. 16 No one was there except the two elders, who had hidden themselves and were watching her. 17 She said to her maids, 'Bring me olive oil and ointments, and shut the garden doors so that I can bathe.'

19 When the maids had gone out, the two elders got up and ran to her. 20 They said, 'Look, the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us. We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent, and lie with us. 21 If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away.' 22 Susanna groaned and said, 'I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. 23 I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord.'

24 Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and the two elders shouted against her. 25 And one of them ran and opened the garden doors. 26 When the people in the house heard the shouting in the garden, they rushed in at the side door to see what had happened to her. 27 And when the elders told their story, the servants felt very much ashamed, for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna.

28 The next day, when the people gathered at the house of her husband Joakim, the two elders came, full of their wicked plot to have Susanna put to death. In the presence of the people they said, 29 'Send for Susanna daughter of Hilkiah, the wife of Joakim.' 30 So they sent for her. And she came with her parents, her children, and all her relatives. 33 Those who were with her and all who saw her were weeping.

34 Then the two elders stood up before the people and laid their hands on her head. 35 Through her tears she looked up towards Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord. 36 The elders said, 'While we were walking in the garden alone, this woman came in with two maids, shut the garden doors, and dismissed the maids. 37 Then a young man, who was hiding there, came to her and lay

with her. 38We were in a corner of the garden, and when we saw this wickedness we ran to them. 39Although we saw them embracing, we could not hold the man, because he was stronger than we are, and he opened the doors and got away. 40We did, however, seize this woman and asked who the young man was, 41but she would not tell us. These things we testify.'

Because they were elders of the people and judges, the assembly believed them and condemned her to death.

42 Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, 'O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; 43you know that these men have given false evidence against me. And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!'

44 The Lord heard her cry. 45Just as she was being led off to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, 46and he shouted with a loud voice, 'I want no part in shedding this woman's blood!'

47 All the people turned to him and asked, 'What is this you are saying?' 48Taking his stand among them he said, 'Are you such fools, O Israelites, as to condemn a daughter of Israel without examination and without learning the facts? 49Return to court, for these men have given false evidence against her.'

50 So all the people hurried back. And the rest of the elders said to him, 'Come, sit among us and inform us, for God has given you the standing of an elder.' 51Daniel said to them, 'Separate them far from each other, and I will examine them.'

52 When they were separated from each other, he summoned one of them and said to him, 'You old relic of wicked days, your sins have now come home, which you have committed in the past, 53pronouncing unjust judgements, condemning the innocent and acquitting the guilty, though the Lord said, "You shall not put an innocent and righteous person to death." 54Now then, if you really saw this woman, tell me this: Under what tree did you see them being intimate with each other?' He answered, 'Under a mastic tree.' 55And Daniel said, 'Very well! This lie has cost you your head, for the angel of God has received the sentence from God and will immediately cut you in two.'

56 Then, putting him to one side, he ordered them to bring the other. And he said to him, 'You offspring of Canaan and not of Judah, beauty has beguiled you and lust has perverted your heart.

57This is how you have been treating the daughters of Israel, and they were intimate with you through fear; but a daughter of Judah would not tolerate your wickedness. 58Now then, tell me: Under what tree did you catch them being intimate with each other?' He answered, 'Under an evergreen oak.' 59Daniel said to him, 'Very well! This lie has cost you also your head, for the angel of God is waiting with his sword to split you in two, so as to destroy you both.'

60 Then the whole assembly raised a great shout and blessed God, who saves those who hope in him. 61And they took action against the two elders, because out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness; they did to them as they had wickedly planned to do to their neighbour. 62Acting in accordance with the law of Moses, they put them to death. Thus innocent blood was spared that day.

Reflection

The story of Susannah and the Elders is full of intrigue and steeped in symbolism and patriarchy. Found in the Apocrypha, it is Daniel Chapter 13 in the Catholic Bible, and also in the Eastern Orthodox Bible. It is likely from the First Century BCE; the Book of Daniel is from the Second Century BCE. It takes place during the Babylonian Exile.

Susannah, meaning lily, is pure and innocent; she has a good upbringing and married a wealthy man. In a show of abuse of power when Susannah refuses to lie with them, two men accuse her of adultery with a young man and are believed. We see how justice can be twisted when two people give false witness against a third person declared guilty. Susannah appealed to her God, and he heard her cry. A young Daniel comes forward; he has become a legendary hero. He follows the proper stringency in examining witnesses as laid out in tractate Sanhedrin, in the Mishnah and G'marah. There is vindication, with these two lecherous men not identifying the tree that they say they saw Susannah under in the act of adultery, an act punishable by death. For baring false witness, the two elders were put to death. Thus innocent blood was spared that day.

This story has been depicted in art by famous painters such as Rembrandt, Rubens, and Tintoretto. But an Italian Baroque woman artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, outshines them all with her painting of Susannah and the Elders when she was just 17 years old. Gentileschi's Susannah notices the men and looks distressed. As depicted by male artists, Susannah does not notice the men watch her and is portrayed in a voluptuous, sensual way as if encouraging the men. Gentileschi herself had a similar fate to that of Susannah – she had to endure unwanted sexual advances and was raped by her art teacher. Throughout the ages, the continuing scourge of violence against women must end once and for all. Let us follow the example of the Province of Southern Africa, that our Lenten focus should be on gender-based violence and its elimination.



Artwork: Artemisia Gentileschi, Susanna and the Elders , 1610

Yvonne O'Neal, Holy Trinity (Warden of Vestry, Activist & Diocesan Leader)

Tuesday, 23 March - Numbers 21.4–9

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' 6Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. 8And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' 9So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Reflections

Jenni writes - This is a stern God speaking. Not much sympathy or compassion for the hardships of those on pilgrimage to a better life. It is hard not to look on this passage other than in an allegorical way, given these grim times. Perhaps not a bronze serpent on a pole but the cross of Christ: bitten or not by the virus, we can look to the Cross for relief. Apologise and by the grace of God we move on. Forgive and we will be forgiven. The wrath of the stern God will not last if we keep the faith.

David writes - Cairo to Jerusalem is about 450 miles. Walking 6 miles a day at four miles an hour would take 3 weeks, instead it took 40 years. The Exodus is not only a fascinating, at times horrifying, historical story, it is also an allegory of human life. It tells of dissension, yearning, disobedience, carnage and repentance. And yet at the end of the epic there is the Promised Land; though curiously Moses is only able to view it from Mount Pisgah. One must not presume!

Jenni Hopkins, Church Warden and David Batchelor, St Barnabas Pimlico

Wednesday, 24 March (Walter Hilton, 1396; Paul Couturier, 1953; Oscar Romero, 1980) - Daniel 3.14–20, 24–25, 28

14Nebuchadnezzar said to them, 'Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? 15Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?' 16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defence to you in this matter. 17If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us.18But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.' 19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace to be heated up seven times more than was customary, 20and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. 24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counsellors, 'Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?' They answered the king, 'True, O king.' 25He replied, 'But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.'28Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.

Reflection

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, together with Daniel, were young Jewish aristocrats who Nebuchadnezzar II, King of Babylon in the fifth century BC, had selected as 'young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for any kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace'. They were to be taught the language and literature of the Babylonians and to be fed with food and wine from the king's table. But, to the dismay of the court official responsible for them, led by Daniel their leader, they refused the royal diet but compromised on one of vegetables and water, and as early vegans they finished up looking better nourished than those on royal food. They became favourites of the King, who found them wiser than all the magicians and enchanters of his kingdom, even though they remained loyal to the God of Israel. Daniel in particular excelled at interpreting the King's dreams as God's prophesies, and the King put him in charge of all the wise men in Babylon. Meanwhile Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were made administrators.

Nebuchadnezzar (who seems to have had much in common with Donald Trump) erected a ninety feet high gold image - the Bible does not say if it was of himself - and summoned all the governors, advisers, treasurers and judges to come and worship it every time they heard the sound of music, otherwise they would be thrown into the furnace. But the faithful young Israelites, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, refused to worship the image, and the King was furious. They stood up to him, resolving to face the fire rather than betray their God.

As the furnace was made seven times hotter they prayed to God to deliver them, but - and this is the point this story makes - they vowed that, even if God did not deliver them, they would still submit to the fire rather than betray God by worshipping an image.

And isn't this the proviso that is, or perhaps should be, part of all prayer? Not my will but thine be done? We can pray desperately for the outcome we want, but always knowing - or fearing - that it might not be what God intends. Or is it the fundamental doubt that always haunts some of us? The plea of St Thomas to the risen Jesus: 'Lord I believe, help thou mine unbelief'. As for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, God did indeed give them what they hoped for.

Margaret Duggan, St Stephen's Church (Retired Journalist - Church Times)

Thursday, 25 March (Annunciation BVM) - Isaiah 7.10–14 (CHT)

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11 Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. 13 Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

Reflection

God speaks to Ahaz
as he did of old to humankind
and offers a sign.
Proud Ahaz refuses.
"I will not put the Lord to the test"

Isaiah finds him tiresome
and opens himself to receive
the sign God sends anyway,
The Good News of the birth
of Immanuel, God with us.

Here is his promise that
He will be with us stumbling humans.
Jesus will speak God's truth to us.
For us an amazing prophecy;
But for God, all time is present.

Patsy Weille, Holy Trinity (Poet & Coordinator of Trinity Cares)

Friday, 26 March (Harriet Monsell, 1883) - Jeremiah 20.10–13

10 For I hear many whispering:
'Terror is all around!
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!
All my close friends
are watching for me to stumble.
'Perhaps he can be enticed,
and we can prevail against him,
and take our revenge on him.'
11 But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble,

and they will not prevail.
They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.
Their eternal dishonour
will never be forgotten.
12 O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous,
you see the heart and the mind;
let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.
13 Sing to the Lord;
praise the Lord!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hands of evildoers.

Reflection

I was once told that I was pathologically happy. I think they meant it as a criticism, but that wasn't the way I saw it or took it. Yes, we can look at the world and think – what an awful place it is – or we can look up and out and around and see and touch and feel and taste and hear the wonders of God's world.

Times would have been hard in Jeremiah's era. But probably no less hard than now. Just different. This reading speaks of endless possibilities. Knowing that God walks with us each step of the way, preventing us from stumbling, if we keep our eyes on him.

Ignore that whisperings of the negative, the pessimistic and gloom-sharers. And listen to the whisperings of God in our lives, in our churches and in society. And once again 'Sing to the Lord' our praises of thanksgiving and joy – albeit we can only sing at home!

John Pearson-Hicks, parish priest, St Barnabas Pimlico

Saturday, 27 March - Ezekiel 37.21–end

21 Then say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. 22 I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. 23 They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. 24 My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. 25 They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there for ever; and my servant David shall be their prince for ever. 26 I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them for evermore. 27 My dwelling-place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 28 Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them for evermore.

Reflection

The Seed of David - Ezekial 37.24 "My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd."



The Rossetti Triptych in Llandaff Cathedral
© [Rossetti Triptych \(Llandaffcathedral.org.uk\)](http://Rossetti%20Triptych%20(Llandaffcathedral.org.uk))

I grew up with this painting, my father always served at the 7.30 a.m. Monday mass in St Illtud's Chapel, where it forms the reredos, and I often went with him. It was originally at the high altar but during the restoration of the cathedral, after war damage in the 1940s, George Pace, the architect, replaced it in the small Illtud Chapel. Rossetti had not been happy with the original position - wrong lighting he felt when, after nine years, he finally completed the commission in 1864.

At seven years old, the beauty of the painting was my focus, and in the years I lived in Llandaff and attended the cathedral, I often used the story of David and this painting as a basis for faith, for prayer and for contemplation

David became king over the gathered nations in the mountains of Israel, but he would also be their shepherd and their guardian. The left hand panel is young David, sling in hand, protecting his flock but also ready to slay Goliath. On the right he is king, crown on his head, peacock at his feet and his lyre held gently as one might hold a child. And there is the child, of the line of David, held by his mother with one small hand held out to be kissed - as I did with my own children when they were tiny and people who loved them came to greet them.

The iconography of the paintings is complex and beautiful, forming a visual prayer, drawing us into the extraordinary story of the young boy who was destined to become prince and whose descendant became Prince of Peace. When I read the passage from Ezekiel I am immediately taken back to this wonderful triptych and its many meanings.

Liz Szewczyk, St Stephen's Church (Church Warden)

Sunday, 28 March (Palm Sunday) - Isaiah 50.4-9a

4 The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens—
 wakens my ear
 to listen as those who are taught.

5 The Lord God has opened my ear,
 and I was not rebellious,
 I did not turn backwards.

6 I gave my back to those who struck me,
 and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
 I did not hide my face
 from insult and spitting.

7 The Lord God helps me;
 therefore I have not been disgraced;
 therefore I have set my face like flint,
 and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

8 he who vindicates me is near.
 Who will contend with me?
 Let us stand up together.
 Who are my adversaries?
 Let them confront me.

9 It is the Lord God who helps me;
 who will declare me guilty?
 All of them will wear out like a garment;
 the moth will eat them up.

Reflection

This is one of the four servant songs, and the glory of this reading is in its confidence and gratitude.

Every day, our confidence gives us the ability to support others, to be obedient and open, and to face adversity.



scarlet tiger moth © Ilia Ustyantsev

For this we are thankful – for the strength we gain because the Lord is near, and for the assurance of his support.

The image of the moth reminds us that even the smallest of creatures work in the service of the Lord.

Linda Ulrich, St Barnabas

Monday of Holy Week, 29 March 2021 - Isaiah 42.1–9 (CHT)

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
 my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
 I have put my spirit upon him;
 he will bring forth justice to the nations.

2 He will not cry or lift up his voice,
 or make it heard in the street;

3 a bruised reed he will not break,
 and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
 he will faithfully bring forth justice.

4 He will not grow faint or be crushed
 until he has established justice in the earth;

and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
5 Thus says God, the Lord,
 who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
 and spirit to those who walk in it:
6 I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
 I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
 a light to the nations,
7 to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
 from the prison those who sit in darkness.
8 I am the Lord, that is my name;
 my glory I give to no other,
 nor my praise to idols.
9 See, the former things have come to pass,
 and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
 I tell you of them.

Reflection

“A bruised reed he will not break.”

I have always loved this phrase. It is part of Isaiah’s vision of Israel’s Messiah, the Suffering Servant. Christians came to see Jesus the Messiah as the Suffering Servant who suffered on behalf of sinful humanity. Because he bore the pains of human life, including death on the Cross, Christ can even now share our own suffering. We can bear our misfortunes, Isaiah adds, because God has “taken us by the hand and kept” us.

So, while we cannot expect a perfect existence on earth, we can believe that God will help us to endure the problems that come our way. While these problems may “bruise” us—bruise us terribly, sometimes—they will not break us. For Christ bears our pains with us. The God who is revealed in the Suffering Servant takes us by the hand and keeps us.

The Rev. J. Douglas Ousley, Holy Trinity, Honorary Priest Associate and NY Coordinator (with Graham Buckle) of the Diocese of London – Diocese of New York Link Program.

Tuesday of Holy Week, 30 March - Isaiah 49.1–7

Listen to me, O coastlands,
 pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born,
 while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.
2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
 in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
 in his quiver he hid me away.
3 And he said to me, ‘You are my servant,
 Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’
4 But I said, ‘I have laboured in vain,
 I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the Lord,
 and my reward with my God.’

5 And now the Lord says,
 who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
 and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honoured in the sight of the Lord,
 and my God has become my strength—
6 he says,
‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
 to raise up the tribes of Jacob
 and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
 that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’
7 Thus says the Lord,
 the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
 the slave of rulers,
‘Kings shall see and stand up,
 princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
 the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.

Reflection

A number of reflections crossed my mind when I first read through this reading. I thought, well I was born in Cleethorpes which is definitely on the coast.

‘Made my mouth like a sharp sword’ - You should have met my Methodist Geordie grandmother. She certainly didn’t hide and didn’t need to be hidden.

‘I have laboured in vain’ - I can’t stand moaners, especially those who feel sorry for themselves. Maybe I did inherit that from my grandmother.

God taking the credit for creating Isaiah in the womb as a tool to sort Israel out? - I wonder if the present Israeli government feels the same?

And then I moved onto verse 6 - Definitely sounds like a revolution to me. Very evangelical. He’s certainly given Isaiah, and Jacob, one heck of a job. I think the job speck could have been a bit clearer when Isaiah took it on, don’t you?

Kate McCarthy, Chair of School Governors – St Barnabas CofE Primary School

Wednesday of Holy Week, 31 March - Isaiah 50.4–9a

4 The Lord God has given me
 the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
 the weary with a word.O
Morning by morning he awakens—
 awakens my ear
 to listen as those who are taught.
5 The Lord God has opened my ear,
 and I was not rebellious,
 I did not turn backwards.
6 I gave my back to those who struck me,

and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
7 The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
8 he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
9 It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

Reflection

There are points in life where we are the teacher, and those where we take the role of a listening student. In both cases, there is always potential for wonderful, active learning and growth. For those who teach, in its very broadest form - parent, uncle, aunt, service provider, friend, colleague, manager, professional - the role takes a lot of time, growth and a desire to relate to others in away that improves their experience of the world, and the world around us. This can sometimes be in the smallest, tiniest way - yet I truly believe positive ripples can be sent out that have numerous benefits, sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle. The role of a teacher means staying honest to yourself and conveying your experience and knowledge to those who listen and are inspired. There may be times when things throw you off track, and that's ok, you can re-find your path and continue to offer guidance, love and support - which is at the heart of any teaching. We can all be teachers in this way, simultaneously learning, evolving as students, asking ourselves important questions, that we encourage others to reflect upon. Now that social media is so enormously present, we need to reflect carefully on the words we choose. Follow thoughtful, kind, reflexive teachers, and realise that we all have a responsibility on those platforms. Each and every one of us becomes a teacher when we write, or speak, and so chose your words carefully, create positivity, care and love, because you never know who might read or interpret your words - you can lead by example.

Charles Smith, St Stephen's Church (Yoga Teacher @ St Stephen's)

Maundy Thursday, 1 April - Exodus 12.1–4[5–10] 11–14 (CHT)

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: 2This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. 3Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. 4If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it.[5Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 6You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. 7They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. 8They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. 9Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. 10You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.] 11This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your

staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. ¹²For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements: I am the Lord. ¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴ This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Reflection

The “new normal” is a phrase often thrown around during the pandemic with a mixture of anxiety and hope. While we might pride ourselves on our flexibility, we often encrust the future with past expectations. The paschal story and Maundy Thursday invite us to readiness to move out of anxiety into brave and rooted humble hope. Brave, because resolve in the face of hardship needs resolve. Rooted because the stories and rituals we inhabit help transform simple, ordinary things like meals and water into reminders of God’s love and God’s faithfulness to God’s people. Humble because we do not pretend foreknowledge of what awaits us. But hopeful, because although suffering is real and leaves deep scars, we know it transforms into an expansion and new appreciation of a fuller life integrated with God. It invites us into God’s every expanding and evolving new normal, which moves in us, through us, towards us, and beyond us—even in the most inconspicuous things like food and water.

Calvyn du Toit, Holy Trinity (Theologian and 6PM Musician)

Good Friday, 2 April - Isaiah 52.13 – 53.12

¹³ See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.
¹⁴ Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
¹⁵ so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.
⁵³ Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
² For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
³ He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

9 They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

11 Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Reflection

There are many passages of the Bible which are well known and loved, and which lodge themselves in our minds and this wonderful passage from Isaiah is certainly one of them.

It will have been made more familiar to many through Handel's glorious oratorio, Messiah. There are many reasons why certain passages from the Bible stick in our minds, but this passage invites us to respond on a deep level.

There are different interpretations of who the Suffering Servant in Isaiah is, but it is natural for Christians to see the passage as a prediction of Our Lord's suffering, and to see Him as the Suffering Servant who embraces fully the human condition. Even people who are able to think of themselves as happy, find an echo of their own experience in this passage. No one can live life without some sadness, and for many there is all too much sadness. So it is that in reading it, we find our own experience validated, an assurance that God gives all of us worth, whoever we are. What a wonderful thought for Lent.

Rev David Hobden, St Stephen's Church (Retired priest - Hospital Chaplain)

Easter Eve, 3 April 2021 - Job 14.1–14

'A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble,
2 comes up like a flower and withers,
flees like a shadow and does not last.
3 Do you fix your eyes on such a one?
Do you bring me into judgement with you?
4 Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?
No one can.
5 Since their days are determined,
and the number of their months is known to you,
and you have appointed the bounds that they cannot pass,
6 look away from them, and desist,
that they may enjoy, like labourers, their days.
7 'For there is hope for a tree,
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its shoots will not cease.
8 Though its root grows old in the earth,
and its stump dies in the ground,
9 yet at the scent of water it will bud
and put forth branches like a young plant.
10 But mortals die, and are laid low;
humans expire, and where are they?
11 As waters fail from a lake,
and a river wastes away and dries up,
12 so mortals lie down and do not rise again;
until the heavens are no more, they will not awake
or be roused out of their sleep.
13 O that you would hide me in Sheol,
that you would conceal me until your wrath is past,
that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!
14 If mortals die, will they live again?
All the days of my service I would wait
until my release should come.

Reflection

In this passage Job is considering the grave and afterlife and that the days of man on this earth are short and full of trouble and he despairs that perhaps God demands something of him he is unable to do. He paints a picture of God fencing man in, restricting their movements - it would be better if God looked away so the afflicted ones can rest. Unfairly, for Job, there is hope of resurrection for a tree as new life can sprout out of an old stump. Job's lack of knowledge of an afterlife can be explained as Jesus Christ brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. The concept of the afterlife was at best cloudy in the Old Testament but much clearer in the New Testament. It can be seen that Job is not sure about the afterlife as he asks if man dies shall he live again? In 2 Timothy ch 1 vs 10 we read, 'Jesus Christ who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel'. The question of Job was answered by Jesus and that so completely as to leave no room for doubt. We will be changed into immortality. Death has been swallowed up in victory! (1 Cor. 15 50-53)

Amanda Wright, Art Therapist / Convenor of the Barnabas Bible Study Group.

Easter Sunday, 4 April - Isaiah 25.6–9 (John B)

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.

7 And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;

8 he will swallow up death for ever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.

9 It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Reflection

In the Burial section of the American Book of Common Prayer, the first scripture suggested is today's passage from Isaiah with the summary, "He will swallow up death for ever." While that line certainly encapsulates the reading, the verse that captures my imagination--and causes a lump in my throat when I read it—is the second part of that verse, "Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces."

Can you imagine it? Dare we imagine it? Not only is this a wildly surprising understanding of God, who desires to be so intimate with us as to wipe away our tears, but think for a moment about what it might take for us to allow God to do such a thing.

Am I willing to be so vulnerable as to allow God to wipe away a tear? Would I let God that close? Or might my mind try to take over and wonder, "Well, it seems if God really cared, there wouldn't have been any tears in the first place . . ." Would I rebuff God—out of shyness, fear, or shame--and turn my head away?

Easter promises us that death is swallowed up for ever. May we also have the faith to love God who wants to love away all our tears.

Rev. John Beddingfield, Rector of Holy Trinity

Conclusion

We have come to the end of our Lenten journey with the Old Testament. We hope and pray our reflections have helped you enter into this penitential season with renewed insights and deeper spiritual vigour. Let us continue to support each other in our prayer and action; And please use the Easter collect (at the end) during these coming few weeks of Eastertide, as we proclaim in our churches and local communities that "Christ is Risen...He is Risen indeed Alleluia...!"

I would like to leave the last word to one of our members of our Sunday evening congregants. Easter evening at Evensong we will read:

Ezekiel 37. 1-14

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones,
2 And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. 3 And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. 4 Again he said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: 6 And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord. 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone. 8 And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them. 9 Then said he unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army. 11 Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts. 12 Therefore prophecy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. 13 And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, 14 And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord.

Reflection

The verses in this chapter give us a brief glimpse into the power that lies behind the Lord's spirit which has the power to give and receive life.

The bones are dry and these people have been dead for a long time. The obvious answer is that they can't live. However we do not need to think like that because 'with God all things are possible'- quote from St. Matthews Gospel and also interestingly the motto of the US state of Ohio. In this vision Ezekiel did as he was told and the dead bones became a living nation. It is true to say that if our bones are without spirit we are not alive.

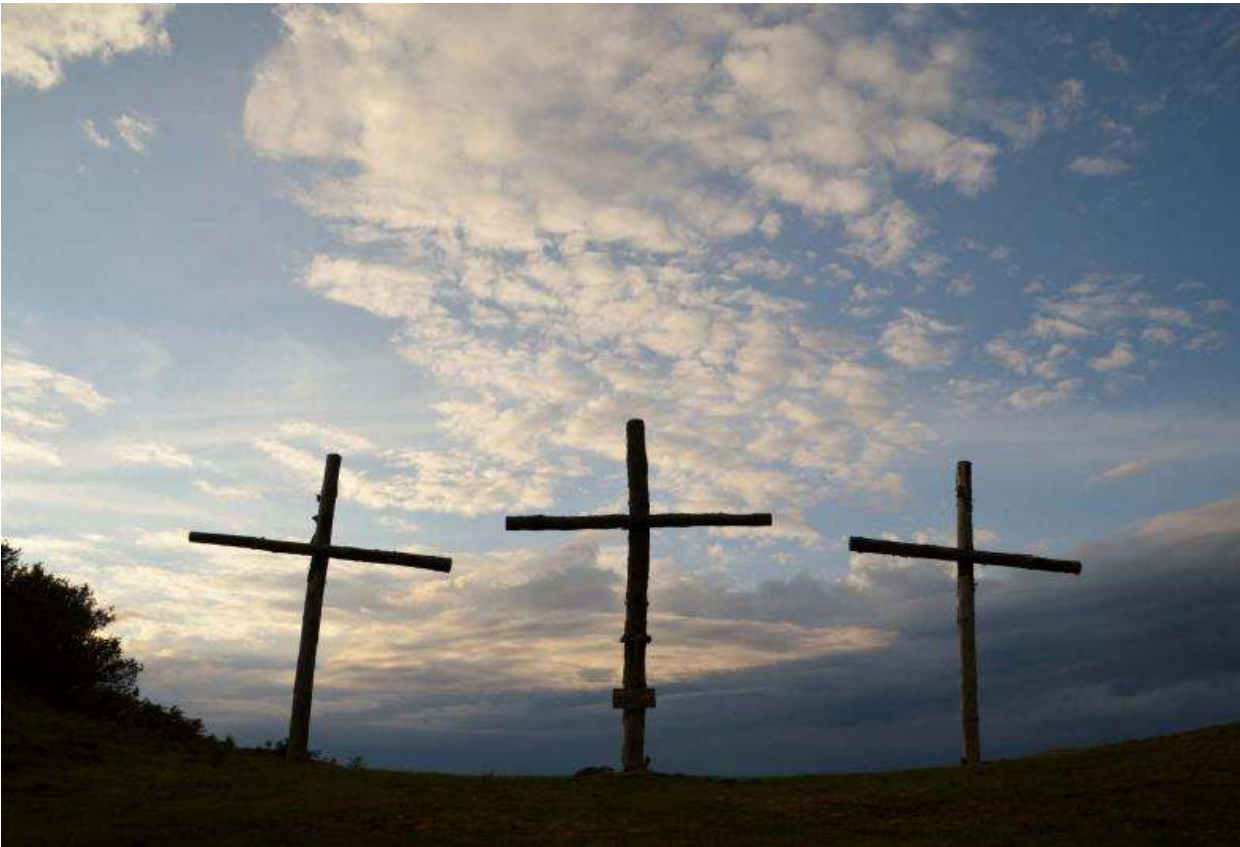
In the latter two verses we can at last believe in the resurrection from the dead which brings us comfortably to Easter Day. Our belief in the resurrection to eternal life allows us to let the spirit enter within us. On Easter Day when we rejoice and hopefully are allowed to sing our Easter hymns and psalms to celebrate the resurrection we can leave behind those dead bones and come alive and say 'He is risen, He is risen indeed'

When Easter day approached my dad could not wait to proclaim, sing and play 'This joyful Easter-tide, away with sin and sorrow'.

This is so needed now in 2021 as we look toward the rest of this year with joy, expectation and hope for a brighter tomorrow.

What our vicar Graham has shown us through this pandemic is that if we watch, wait and pray as a community at St Stephens we shall come through our ordeal surrounded by faith, hope and love.

Sue Taylor, St Stephen's Church (Lifelong member of St Stephens' community).



Lord of all life and power,
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son
overcame the old order of sin and death
to make all things new in him:
grant that we, being dead to sin
and alive to you in Jesus Christ,
may reign with him in glory;
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit
be praise and honour, glory and might,
now and in all eternity. Amen.